



THE DARK

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Don't close your eyes



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

The Dark

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



THE DARK

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Time is no substitute for talent

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

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

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

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

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

Tim

14 August 2021

The Dark

chapter one

Keith Blount

BY THE TIME HE pulled his Mercedes into the sloping gravel drive, the fire was out.

An afterthought of grey smoke still plumed up from behind the trees ahead of him, but it was so faint now that it was hard to pick out against the dull grey of the dawn sky. It would soon be quenched completely by the autumn drizzle.

He followed the driveway downhill amid a swirl of sepia-coloured leaves, then veered right with the bend as it levelled out, and the full scene revealed itself. The cottage - what remained of it - stood in a small clearing, a narrow, serpentine creek winding through a bank of scrappy grass behind it. The building's blackened walls were still standing but its roof - thatched, presumably, which wouldn't have helped - was completely gone, the charred support beams fallen in. It seemed to him as though an enormous, rotten, half-decayed tooth had sprouted from salted earth. Sputtering remnants of smoke drifted up from inside.

He already knew the basics: five occupants and only one kid had got out alive.

Still, a fire in the early hours after bonfire night - it was hardly a case for Columbo, was it? He'd probably be finished here before Bread To Rights stopped serving their bacon and avocado breakfast roll (he'd missed breakfast, and he found something particularly piquant in that guilty sensation of class treachery that he inevitably felt as he sunk his teeth into the green flesh of an avocado).

A single fire engine remained, the firefighters wandering in and out of the ruin, and a police car was parked next to the house, alongside an ash-covered old Golf.

He squeezed his car past the fire engine, swore as he narrowly avoided flattening a squirrel, and pulled up behind the police car. Two uniforms leaned against it, surveying the wreckage with unalloyed boredom. Tugging his coat collar up against the rain, he got out and crunched across the gravel towards them.

He vaguely recognised the officer on the far side of the car, a middle-aged paunch with the hair of a Russian bad guy from an 80s movie (although judging by the bald spot, the Russian had tried to take it back). They exchanged cursory nods. It was the other officer, smaller and younger, who approached him - she seemed relieved to have something useful to do at last. She had narrow eyes and so many freckles on her face and hands that looking at her was like taking a Rorschach test.

"DS Nick Scott," he said, but the uncertainty on her face made him wonder if he needed to clarify that *he* was Nick Scott, not that he thought it was her name. He also wondered whether the nuclear cloud he had just picked out among her freckles spoke in any particular way to his mental health. "What have we got?"

"There's been a fire, sir." She said this as though delivering

the results of months of painstaking investigation.

Nick squinted at her name badge - he had vowed to himself that he wouldn't need glasses until he was fifty, which meant only twelve more years of headaches. "I guess I was hoping that you might have gleaned a little something *about* the fire, though, Officer Cronk."

"It's Cronk, sir," she said, pulling out a somewhat sodden notebook from her pocket. He picked out a unicorn (possibly more worrying than the nuclear cloud) among her freckles as he watched her try to read the damp pages. "Five students were renting the cottage for the weekend, sir."

"Students?" He looked at the smoking cottage. One storey, but spacious, secluded and surrounded by the sort of Cambridgeshire countryside that travel websites described as a "peaceful rural retreat". A bunch of students could afford this and yet the best he and Mary could do was a caravan in Clacton-on-Sea every August. An ancestral townie loathing for students briefly bubbled acidly at the back of his throat, before he reminded himself that four of them had just burned to death.

He shrugged as he turned back to Officer Cronk and nodded for her to continue.

"Four dead." She reeled off the names from her notebook: "Claire Holloway, John Avery, Andrew Phillips, David Wilson. All studying at the university. Holloway and Avery were a couple. All friends on a weekend break."

"And the bodies?"

She looked confused. "Not nice at all, sir. Like the way my uncle barbecues steak. All blistered and—"

"I meant have they been collected already?"

"Oh. Yes sir." Her dull narrow eyes betrayed not a hint of embarrassment.

“And the survivor?”

“A Michael Jones. Twenty years old. He was taken to the hospital for smoke inhalation and minor burns. We couldn’t get anything out of him. He was hysterical.” She looked up from her pad. “I don’t mean funny hysterical, sir,” she clarified.

“Right. I hadn’t assumed he’d be telling jokes, under the —”

“Like mental hysterical. Said some strange things.”

“What sort of strange things?”

“Just, you know, strange, sir. Really strange. Didn’t he, Alan?” She looked across at her colleague, who seemed to be performing a surveillance operation on the tree opposite.

Without taking his eyes off the tree, Alan agreed. “Strange all right.”

“I think the smoke had gone to his head,” said Cronk.

“And he had just seen four of his friends burned to death,” said Nick.

“I suppose so, sir.”

“So do we know the cause of the fire? I assume it was fireworks? Hit the thatched roof? Or a bonfire left overnight?”

“Not sure yet, sir. Fire crew said it wasn’t fireworks, though. They’re still looking for the source. There was a gas barbecue leaned up against the rear wall, so that exploding was probably a deciding factor.”

Nick nodded and glanced in the direction of the older officer, with some feeble hope that he might have something illuminating to add. Alan, seeing that something more was expected of his contribution to the conversation, possibly some nugget crucial to the investigation, rolled his eyes wearily, shook his head, and sagely intoned, “Students.” Then he folded his arms and resumed his observation of the tree,

where a squirrel had just performed a daring leap between branches. "Fuckin' squirrels," muttered Alan under his breath, with not inconsiderable awe.

Nick sighed. He was getting nowhere here. And the thing about survivors was, you had to interview them. His avocado and bacon roll was becoming a distant dream. "Which hospital?" he asked Cronk.

"Addenbrookes, sir."

He let out another sigh - Addenbrookes was in the opposite direction to Bread To Rights - and was about to return to his car when, turning in that direction, he noticed a middle-aged couple lurking at the edge of the trees.

"Who are the rubberneckers?" he asked, still looking in their direction. The couple were watching him, too.

"Mr and Mrs Huxham. Neighbours. Staying up on the hill there." He looked back at Cronk and followed her nod towards another cottage at the top of a hill above the trees. "They're the ones who called the fire brigade."

Their faces and clothes were covered in soot. "They look like they've been through the mill themselves."

"They tried to help. They were looking after Jones when the paramedics arrived."

"I'll speak to them. Let me know if they find the cause of the fire."

"You mean the fire brigade, sir?"

It wasn't even 8am yet.

The couple were lean and wiry - probably holidaying joggers or cyclists here to make life hell for locals who just wanted to get their cars down the lanes at more than ten miles an hour. He introduced himself and asked them if they lived in the cottage on the hill, already knowing the answer.

“Just renting,” said the woman. “For the weekend, I mean.” She looked at the man and reddened.

“Mr and Mrs Huxham?”

“Oh no. We’re not married,” she said.

All three of them looked at her wedding ring.

“Not to each other,” said the man. His eye twitched as though he had thought better of a cheeky wink.

Thirty-eight is too young to yearn for retirement, thought Nick. He should have been a joiner. He’d made a wonderful letter holder in DT when he was thirteen.

“Martin Caselaw,” said the man, offering his hand. His handshake was one of the too-long, too-vice-like variety favoured by the sort of the man that liked to make uncomfortable jokes next to you at the urinal.

“Coleslaw?” said Nick, his stomach giving a twist of hunger.

The man frowned. “Caselaw.” But Nick had heard him the first time. “And this is Holly.”

“Tell me what happened.”

The man let out a long exhalation before starting. “It was about, what? Between five and six a.m. We were woken by a loud bang.”

“An explosion,” interjected Holly.

“It sounded like an explosion, yeah. I thought it was just another firework, but then when I saw the time, I went to the window to see what was going on. The kids down here were pretty loud last night—”

“Music,” added Holly.

“If you can call it that,” tutted Martin. “So I figured they had stayed awake all night and were setting off fireworks in the early hours. I was all set to come down here and give them a piece of my mind.”

“Just like last night.”

“Wait,” said Nick. “You came down here last night to complain about the music?”

“No,” said Holly, “but Martin *talked* about coming down here and giving them a piece of his mind. But then he didn’t.”

“Anyway,” said Martin irritably. “We can see right down on this place from up there, so that’s how I saw that the cottage was on fire. Huge flames, like a burning village in a war film.”

“I phoned 999,” said Holly, “and then we ran down here to see if there was anything we could do.”

“And was there?”

“No.” She looked stricken and old all of a sudden. “That boy was out here—”

“Michael?”

“I don’t know his name. But there was only him, on his own. All of the others were...” She trailed off, looking at the house.

“I tried to go in,” said Martin, “but there was no way. The flames were at the front door by then.”

Now they all looked towards the cottage, at the charred, twisted front door.

“He was just sitting there, rocking to and fro, poor boy,” said Holly. “Right there.” She indicated the edge of a rockery next to the parking area. “His hand was all burned up, but he didn’t seem to notice. In his good hand he had his phone, with the torch turned on. Kept shining it around him as though he thought something was there. Just kept rocking back and forth, muttering to himself and shining that torch. That scared me nearly as much as the fire.”

“Just a stick of a thing,” said Martin. “A puff of wind would’ve blown him away. He was soot black from head to foot. Looked like something from *Apocalypse Now*. I mean,

they recruited anyone back then, didn't they? Even sticks of things."

Nick got the impression that Martin was a fan of war movies.

"It was weird, though, what he was saying," said Holly. "Wasn't it weird?"

Martin grunted.

Nick raised his eyebrows. "What was he saying?"

"Snapped, I reckon," said Martin.

"Yes, but what was he saying?"

"It really was weird," said Holly. "I mean, at first he was just saying, 'They're all dead, they're all dead.' Kept repeating it."

"We were trying to ask him how many were in there, if he was okay."

"Then he said—" She shivered. Nick waited. "Well, he pretty much shrieked at us: 'Stay in the light.'"

"'Stay in the light?'"

She nodded. "And 'It's in the dark,' he said. He kept saying that: 'It was there in the dark.' He asked how long until the sun rose. We said we didn't know, and he just kept repeating, 'It's in the dark, it can't get you in the light, it was in the dark.'"

"What was in the dark?"

"We couldn't get anything else out of him. Nor could the police officers over there. But—."

"Yes?"

"Well, it sounds stupid, but... It was like it wasn't just the fire. He seemed genuinely petrified of something else inside that cottage."

"Barking," was Martin's evaluation. "I bet he did it. Snapped and burned the place down."

"Probably best to leave the investigation to us, Mr

Coleslaw,” said Nick.

The firefighters seemed to be packing up and preparing to leave. Officers Freckles and Paunch were standing before the remains of the front door with a roll of police tape, seemingly not knowing where to begin.

Nick sat in his car punching Addenbrookes Hospital into the satnav - he lost his bearings any more than a few miles outside the city - and thinking about that kid ranting about the dark. Maybe this was a case for Columbo after all. Rather him than me, thought Nick. Still, with any luck, by the time he got to the hospital, Michael would have calmed down - sedatives would help - and he'd be able to get some sense out of him.

It gave him the creeps though - he could feel the icy finger of an old fear at his nape. As a child, Detective Sergeant Nick Scott had been terrified of the dark. He could laugh about it now, but even so, some nights he would still wake up in blackness, certain that something unseen and malevolent was shuffling at the foot of his bed.

chapter two

Anna-Lisa Taylor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Mist team. Now!”

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

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

Khyra blew on her hot chocolate, without any toppings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

on, Michael seemed to be cuddling himself for comfort.

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

Michael nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was safe here. For now.

chapter three

Ann M Beardsley

DS SCOTT PULLED INTO the car park at Addenbrooke's Hospital with a feeling of dread. It wasn't so much that he had to interview the surviving student as it was the hospital itself. A leading trauma centre, Addenbrooke's had pioneered lifesaving emergency transplants for decades, which had given him nightmares when he was a child—gorilla heads sewn onto human bodies kind of thing. He'd been three or four years old when the former hospital had closed and he'd probably heard rumours about it, but the nightmares had persisted into his school years. Scott shook himself as he reached for the car door. This was a new hospital, bright and shiny, not some Frankenstein-like laboratory. He had a job to do and a killer to catch, and he wasn't four years old any longer.

At the main entrance, a volunteer directed him to Dr Warne at CBS, on the eastern side of the campus. Central Biomedical Services, he learned, treated psychiatric disorders.

"Why psychiatric? I thought he was brought in for burns and trauma?"

She shrugged in reply. Either she didn't know, or she knew

and couldn't tell him. He walked over to the smaller building, glad for the chance to be outside. Two runners sped by, tanned and lithe. The air smelled crisp and it wouldn't be long before the cooler weather would require jackets and tights. Maybe he should start running, he thought. He wasn't getting any younger. Maybe he'd go tomorrow.

Inside CMS, Scott found himself directed back to R Ward in the main building, so he retraced his steps.

A short attractive woman in a blue trouser suit waited outside Michael's room. Her brown hair was pulled back of her face, and she gave an air of impatient competence. At his approach, she straightened and held out her hand. "Dr Lisa Warne. I assume you're the detective sergeant here to see my patient. Please be brief, both for my sake and that of the patient. He has severe nyctophobia, and has suffered third-degree burns on his hand. He has trauma associated with the fire and the potential for memory loss. His blood pressure is elevated, he has intermittent severe anxiety, and possibly suicidal tendencies. I don't want him disturbed more than necessary. Does that cover all your medical questions?"

Scott blinked. "I might need you to repeat all of that or at least send me a report." He wondered briefly what nyctophobia was, but dismissed it. He was here to get the facts, not question a diagnosis. He held out his hand. "I'm DS Scott. Please let me assure you that my only purpose here is to find out what happened to kill four people. Your patient is the only survivor and as such, I need to talk to him." He handed her a business card.

She stared at him for a long moment, as if trying to judge his worth, and Scott fought the urge to squirm. Finally, she nodded and opened the door. "His parents are due to arrive soon. It would be best if you were finished before they arrive,

since I'm sure they'll have a lot of questions."

As do I, he thought.

A pale young man lay on the bed with his eyes closed. Scott estimated his height at about six feet, judging by the way his feet hung over the end of the bed. Outside the covers, his left hand was bandaged and he showed a slight bruise on his temple, thought that might have been shadow from bright overhead lights. He grimaced inwardly. Mary would have told him to turn off the lights and open the window, else the power bill would overwhelm their budget. Life wasn't easy on his salary, but they were doing all right.

Over the bed, a monitor recorded the young man's vitals, the regular *beep, beep* the only sound in the room. The window blinds were lowered and the television set was on but muted.

He turned his attention back to the patient. Michael was a slender young man, with short wavy brown hair. A pair of glasses lay on the table next to him atop a book entitled *Medieval Writers and Their Work*.

"Michael? Michael Jones?"

The young man opened his eyes.

"I'm DS Scott, sent to investigate what happened at the rental cottage. How are you?"

Michael groaned. "It really happened, didn't it? I really killed them all?"

Some small part of Scott gleefully whispered inside his head, *Well, that was easy. Maybe I can solve this case and get home in time to have dinner with Mary*. But all he said out loud was, "That's what we're here to find out. Can you tell me what happened?"

"I...I don't want to talk about it."

"But you must. It's for the report, you see," he added gently. He could sense Dr Warne behind him, ready to yank

him out of the room if her patient became distressed. “I have to find out what happened. Tell me about the rental cottage. You had dinner there, yes? What did you eat?”

Michael tried to smile, failed, tried again and almost burst into tears. “Pizza. With anchovies. Claire insisted we’d all love them and, well, we’d—most of us—do anything for Claire.”

“So it was you and Claire. What’s her last name?”

“Claire Holloway. She’s...” He paused. “She was in my class, and she and John—John Avery—are—were—hanging out together.”

“And the other people?”

“Dave Wilson and...and Andy Baker.” Michael sniffled. “Dave was in my class and Andy was studying natural sciences. That’s why we were there, you see. So remote, untouched. So Andy could work on a project he had and the rest of us could just hang out for a bit.”

“Whose idea was it to get the cottage?”

“John’s, I think. Wait, maybe Andy’s? I’m not sure.” Scott made a mental note to find out which one of them had reserved the cottage.

“And after dinner, what did you do?”

“We played cards. Talked. Drank wine. Well, Dave had beer and the rest of us had wine. But not a lot. We all worked hard to get into Cambridge and we weren’t going to risk our careers on alcohol this early in the term. Unless John...well, he likes to party.”

Dr Warne moved to the other side of the bed and took hold of his wrist. She held up two fingers, which Scott interpreted to mean two more minutes. Or maybe two more questions. He nodded.

“I didn’t like the anchovies. They smelled fishy. And that’s why I lit the candles. They must have caught the curtains on

fire. But we were all asleep. So it was me, I must have killed them all. Oh, God! I did it.”

“Let’s back up a minute. So you’re all students together. All of you at Cambridge?”

Michael nodded.

“What did you think of the others?”

“They’re all right. Claire is awesome, the smartest one in our class. We all envied John but she had eyes only for him. I’m probably closest to Dave and Claire because we all take... took... a couple of classes together. John was there because he’s with Claire, and Andy grew up with Dave.”

“So no major antagonisms or strains among you?”

“No, not that I knew of. We’re a pretty laid-back group if you ask me. Were. I guess that means I’m the top in the class now that Claire’s...gone.”

“So you were competing with her?”

“It was a friendly competition, but we were both going for the Winchester Reading Prize.”

“Was she going to win?”

“Nah. Sebastian Delorme, a third year, will win. But we figured it was good practice for next year.”

“You said John liked to party?”

“He did. I think it’s because he hung out with a bunch of track guys, you know, the athletic ones. Most of them get by because they can win on the field. And they can be a bit smug about it and like getting their own way.”

“What was Andy like?”

“He was quiet, secretive almost. But maybe that was him just being shy. He didn’t know how to talk to girls, except for Claire. She liked everybody.”

“And Dave?”

Michael was quiet for a moment. “I guess I would have

said Dave was my best friend, even though I'd only known him a few weeks. We clicked, you know. It felt like I'd known him forever." Michael turned his head away.

"Did you have any visitors over the weekend? Somebody come to deliver wood or fix anything?"

Michael shook his head. "No, just the five of us."

"Did you go out for the pizza?"

"Oh, yeah, the pizza delivery girl. She came, we asked her to stay but she had more pizzas to deliver."

"Anybody else? Think back. It might be important."

"No, nobody else."

"You brought the beer and wine and food with you?"

"Yeah. Andy liked to cook and John brought the beer and wine. Dave drove his car, Claire said she'd clean up."

"What was your contribution?"

"I was supposed to help anybody who needed it. And I brought the cards."

Dr Warne held up one finger.

"Tell me what happened last night. What woke you up? Did you smell smoke? How did you get out?"

"Something must have awakened me, I don't know what. It was dark." His eyes got huge and he stared at something in the distance. "It was dark and there was... I don't know. I was scared, but I don't know why."

Dr Warne held up a hand. "That's enough for now."

He looked at Michael. "Just one more question. Tell me what you remember, Michael. After you played cards, talked, and went to bed."

"John and Claire went off to their end of the cabin. At our end, there were three bedrooms, and we each went into our own. I don't know about the others, but I read for a bit and then turned out my light. I suppose we all forgot about the

candles in the sitting room. It had been a long day, what with classes all day and then driving to the cabin.”

“Did you leave your bedroom door open?”

“No, I’m pretty sure I closed it.”

“And the others?”

“John and Claire closed theirs because they were...you know. I don’t know about Dave and Andy, but I’d guess they did.”

“And when you woke up? What happened?”

“It was dark. I don’t...I can’t... It hurts!”

“Michael, you must. I’ll just have to keep coming back until you tell me.”

“That’s enough, DS Scott.” Dr Warne interrupted, anger erupting in her voice. “Michael is my patient and you’ll be interfering with his recovery if you continue to threaten him. I’m placing him on a seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold under Section 5(2). You can resume your questioning later if needed. Now I will see you out.” She turned to her patient and said much more gently, “Michael, I’ll be back in a moment.”

She marched to the door. Scott stood, followed her lead, and, without realized what he was doing, flipped off the overhead light, thinking that it might save some energy.

Instantly a scream rose from the bed and caused them both to jump.

“No, no! Don’t! I can’t see! Turn on the lights!” Michael thrashed under his covers, held in place by his left arm attached to the railing. “Make it light! God, do something! I don’t want to die! Don’t kill me too!”

Dr Warne reached over to turn on the light and she grabbed Scott’s sleeve. “I told you he had nyctophobia, you moron! Wait here.” She re-entered the room and closed the door behind her.

Scott heard soft murmurs and debated leaving the premises. He had other people to see, things to do, and if he was cut off from his prime suspect for seventy-two hours, it was even more critical that he establish the facts that had led to the killings. Not for the first time, he wanted a partner so he could be in two places at once, but so far the powers that be hadn't assigned one to him.

Dr Warne closed the door softly behind her, then grabbed his sleeve again and tugged him down the hallway.

"You imbecile!" she hissed. "What part of nyctophobia did you not understand? You could have thrown him into acute cardiac distress!"

Scott apologized. "I should have asked what it was. I heard you say it, but I didn't know what it meant. Still, it's pretty convenient, don't you think? He's a perfectly normal kid with no fear of the dark until he somehow survives a fire that kills his four friends? People he met at the beginning of Michaelmas term, just five weeks ago? If it wasn't an accident, he could be charged with manslaughter or worse."

She shook her head. "You have a pretty lousy view of humanity, don't you?"

I suppose I do, he thought. *Occupational hazard*. "I have a question for you, Dr Warne. When I was questioning Michael back there, you moved to his side to take his pulse. But it was showing on the monitor about his head; you didn't need to do that. Why did you?"

"Touch, DS Scott. Many patients find it reassuring to be touched, a simple recognition of their humanity. We don't torture our patients here. We don't subject them to more stress than necessary."

Unlike policemen was the unsaid statement. Without saying anything, he turned to go, then looked back. "So if he was

brought in unconscious in the wee hours this morning after the fire, how did he manage to bring a textbook with him? Maybe he's not what he seems."

She gave him a half-smile. "Or maybe he is. I lent it to him this morning. My cousin is studying English at Oxford. Sometimes, Detective Sergeant Scott, there's a logical and humane reason for things, and people are just like they appear."

That might be so, he acknowledged as he walked down the hallway. But something had happened last night that killed four people, four young lives snuffed out. And he was determined to find out why. And who.

chapter four

Katie Quintero

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

"DS Scott," he whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s the address?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Farthington nodded toward the fuse box.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

chapter five

John Walters

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

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

Get away. Leave me alone. I beg you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael shakes his head.

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

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

Michael nods, biting his lip.

"Walk me through Saturday."

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

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

He nods. "The others and I — "

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael smiles.

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

about?”

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

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

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

“What role is that?”

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

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

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

“Why’s that?”

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

“I see.”

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

“A whoosh?”

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

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

“Are you OK to continue?”

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What did you smell?”

“I *smelled* — “ He inhales deeply.

“What, Mr. Jones?”

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

“What?”

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

“What?”

“The hot tub.”

“You didn’t say you used it.”

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

“Detective Scott said you didn’t use — “

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

“What? What was there?”

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

“Was it one of the others?”

“No, I’m sure of it.”

“Why?”

The red eyes staring back at me.

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

“Too late?”

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

The orderlies rush in as Dr. Warne stands up.

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

chapter six

Nick Calvert

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

"Yes?"

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

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

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

on fifteen years.”

“Close on, yeah. So you’re a DS now?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I didn’t mean...”

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

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

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

“It’s Su Lee. I’ll buzz you through.”

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

“Doctor Lee,” Nick said and smiled.

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

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

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

“Are you okay, Su?”

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

“Should I suit up?” Nick asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the usual hissing and whirring, she brought the

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

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

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

"What! None of them?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Presumably?" Nick cut in.

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

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

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

"And none of them died in the fire?"

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

"Go on."

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

"What!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you have any idea of timeline?”

“No, sorry.” Su said.

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

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

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

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

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

“This is Claire Holloway?”

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

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

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

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

“Andy Baker?”

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

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

“So...” Su said.

“Yeah. Let's hope he stops at four.”

chapter seven

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?”

The hell does she want now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How is your hand?”

“What is that?”

“What is what?”

“That.”

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

“We need to discuss Claire Holloway.”

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

“What about her?”

“Michael...”

The sternness of her voice brought his attention to her.

“What happened to her?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

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

He took a deep breath.

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

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

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

“Teased him about what?”

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

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

something onto the legal pad she's holding.

"Don't you get the joke?"

She didn't respond, Michael rolling his eyes.

Bitch.

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

They're all gone.

"Go on."

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

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

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

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

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

"It's supposed to be calming."

"It looks dark up there. Is it?"

She brought her head up.

"I suppose so."

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

"You don't believe that, Michael."

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

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

“Back to the cottage.”

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

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

Michael’s eyes darted to the lights.

“Why is it doing that?”

“Doing what?” Dr. Warne asked.

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

“What will happen if it does?”

Michael narrowed his eyes at her, clenching his jaw.

“You know what will happen.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Then what happened?”

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

Michael sighed.

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

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

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

“She was what?”

“Gone.”

“Do you mean dead?”

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

Uses the term “gone” rather than dead.

“Sure.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

He began pacing the small room.

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

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

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

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

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

He stopped to glare at her.

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

The pacing resumed.

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

“Was it?”

He narrowed his eyes again.

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

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

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

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

Right on cue.

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

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

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

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

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

“How the fuck would you know?”

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

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

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

“It’s coming for me.” He whispered.

“The darkness?”

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

chapter eight

Ioa Petra'ka

THE WATER TASTED LIKE home. Julia set the cup down too sharply, and flinched at the hard ring of glass on granite. Overheard, the familiar metronome of her father pacing across the creaking floorboards paused, leaving a heavy moment of embarrassed silence that was softened by the white noise of mother washing her hands, again, through a closed door. These two sounds also felt like home.

With both Michael and herself now aloft from the nest, their parent's recently found loneliness had turned into a clamour of attention that made visiting an emotional burden. She found it increasingly difficult to connect their genuine feelings with the clumsy social rote that seemed their only mode of communication. Their questions never dug deeper than what didn't matter, and laced through nervous backtracking regarding the state of the lawn this year, or whether the Rawsthorne family next door would be welcome to visit, as they oh so ever did want to meet her finally. They were always pushing their friends on her, endlessly discussing how wonderful they are. The answer was never other than the

sort of denial one ritually gives out with shuffled feet and loosened bangs in across the face. Julia didn't take to new people easily, and less so when it meant being obligated to participate in polite charades.

But this time was different. Blinking back into the moment, Julia tried to glue together the fragments of story she had gathered so far from her strangely quieted parents.

Michael hasn't returned our calls since Friday evening, mother had conveyed over the phone near midnight. Her voice was dry, hollow, like she'd recently gone back to the smokes. She probably had.

Julia's mind stuck in that moment, phone uncomfortable against the cheek, unable to understand how to respond before gradually realising that this lack of communication was unusual for them. This piece of information overshadowed what had been said initially, for she had never suspected they kept in frequent touch. It opened a door into a possibility that she hadn't considered, that the quiet little Michael she carried in her mind would carry a conversation beyond his typical grunts and lengthy sighs, preferring to push potatoes around on a plate to talking about his day.

I'll be over in an hour, maybe two, she'd managed, at least recalling the original statement. A flurry of routine questions and answers covered their mutual awkwardness in the moment. *Do you need me to stop by the store for anything?* Of course not, she was admonished, *just be here* came the plea.

And now she was here. How many years had it been this time? Old wood stove scented the room, and triggered familiar lineages of childhood memories. Tasting the water that, until she moved out seven years ago, had been her only frame of reference for what water tasted like. It was earthy, prehistoric, she caught herself thinking in cycles as she often did. Avoiding

the moment, digressing in an ever deepening spiral of speculation and mental bookmarks for future research. The well should probably be tested, she recalled, as well as remembering that she always forgot moments after remembering.

The sound of the running tap had ceased, she realised, and turned to see her mother wringing her hands through a damp towel. The skin of them was raw and tight, grey and cracked around the knuckles, decades older than the rest of her.

“Well?” mother asked.

“Well what?”

“Did you get an answer yet or not?” she jerked her hand at Julia’s forgotten phone on the counter.

Julia thumbed through her contacts and tapped on *Stink Bean* in the list, smirking as she often did. Poor little Michael.

The connection turned to a brief moment of static, clicked in her ear, followed by the message service tone, and finally the mocking of a synthetic voice telling her the number was unreachable. She swiped the screen off and looked up, shaking her head. “His phone is still off, it seems.”

“I tried calling the Bakers. You remember the them, dear? They had a boy named Andrew, or was it Andy he went by, he used to come around before they moved away back in the '90s... has it already been that long—”

“Yes of course mother, and they said they hadn’t heard from him either, you already told me this.”

Julia regretted the sharpness of her tone as her mother tuck her head into an aborted nod, as if trying to simultaneously hide and make obvious the pained expression on her face. She always did that when Julia didn’t think upon why a thing was being said before answering.

“Don’t you think... mother...”, she felt her voice catch on

the back of her tongue, which had grown thick and clumsy, “maybe it is time to phone hospitals?”

The floorboards grumbled as her father completed another circuit of pacing above them, and as she stood—eyes up toward the ceiling, mother fluttering her hands together in her peripheral vision (she needs to wash again, Julia realised idly)—the softened bark of a heavy car door out front broke the necessity of the question being answered.

She turned back to the kitchen window and lifted aside the drapery. Only the rear fender and boot were visible, but that was all she needed to see to know that all the little spaces between the fragments not yet dared, all the unset glue that nobody would speak aloud, was about to get a whole lot worse.

A whole lot more real.

Probability was collapsing from vast unknowns into a few sharp points that left her momentarily breathless.

“It’s the police,” Julia whispered, hot breath lofting the delicate white drapery. She whipped around to look into her mother’s shock-widened eyes, tongue working wet and red behind her teeth. Julia dropped her gaze as she always did, to the chin, to anywhere else. She so rarely ever saw her mother’s eyes, and somewhere in a distant parallel track of her own shocked mind, she became certain that this is how they would be remembered forever more.

Julia stomped to the base of the stairwell and yelled up into the darkness, “Father! Get down here.”

Booms and creaks traced his hurried progress from the back room, down the hall, around the bend and through a rush of moments that slipped below her awareness, she found him standing to her left, mother to the right. There they stood as three in a silent bracket, staring down the shadow that

loomed beyond the pebbled glass panels of the front door.

The bell rang again, followed by a knock. Answering the door would mean the glue would begin to set. Nobody wanted to be the one to open that door, to collapse hopeful possibilities.

“Well, get on with it,” mother said to father. He shuffled to the door and paused, a startle across the shoulders as the bell rang loud again through the moment. And then it happened, the door was opened, and Julia felt her mind drifting away from the expected tones of conversation. The *Mr. Jones, I presume?* the *How may I help you?* the prattle of the familiar over the horror of unknowing.

The door had closed behind a man of average height and sharp features. A man who had introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Nick Scott.

“Please come in, this is my wife, Jo Jones,” mother took a polite step forward, “and our daughter, Julia.”

Hat in hand, the man, this *detective*, held out his other hand in a calming gesture, “I wish to reassure you. Your son,” he paused and nodded in Julia’s direction, “your brother, is fine. He sustained only a minor injury.”

Mother sobbed loudly into her fist, then choked and swallowed it whole in an abrasive, guttural squeak.

Julia caught herself letting a subtle smile play across her face, as for once she recognised nuances of form, of the sob being not of sorrow entirely, but of the expectation of sorrow, punctuated by the greatest of relief that one has yet to find faith in.

Cocking her head as a puppy might, she stared in wonderment along the side of her mother’s head, through escapees of her typical bun, those strands of greying hair which billowed into light like spider silk.

When she looked back up, she noticed the detective's gaze locked upon her. The depth and potency of his attention was stifling.

"What... why has a sergeant been sent," father faltered.

Scott broke his observation of Julia, and gestured to the side, "May we?"

"Yes of course," mother clucked to herself and ushered the guest into the sitting room, "I apologise for the state of things, it's been—" her voice trailed off as she ran out of energy to continue pleasantries.

Together they sat around the low wooden table and for a moment the only sound to be heard was the rustling of fabric and the dry rasp of mother wringing her hands.

"There was an accident, a fire broke out at a rental cottage that Michael was apparently cohabiting with four others." Scott left the statement trail off, inviting anyone to pick up the thread.

When no one did, he continued with a nod to father, "You are correct Mr. Jones, ordinarily you would have been informed by telephone," there he paused, examining his fingernails for a moment. Julia leaned forward, hoping to better see them as well, and then caught herself.

Detective Scott continued, "There were however irregularities, you see. The ah... what was left behind by the fire showed clear evidence of having been deliberately set. I'm sorry to say, but your son was the only survivor."

A strange feeling boiled from the bottom of Julia's throat and travelled down into her belly, as though a burp had gotten lost and took to the wrong direction. A fragment had moved from one position in her mind to another.

"Oh dear," mother stifled into her hand, "oh dear. They were friends of his you say?"

Scott shifted in his seat to pull a notebook from his coat pocket, and flipped idly through its pages, almost as though it were more a prop for his thoughts than a reference. “Well that is a question that I intended to ask you.”

“Oh of course, please, maybe we know who. Can you tell us?” Julia knew the reason for the worry in her voice. They knew that Michael had rekindled his childhood friendship with Andy recently, and with his phone offline as well, the three sunk despondent in their chairs.

Scott found a suitable page to stop his rifling, and slowly repeated the names, while the three of them slowly shook their heads at each. “A John Avery, Dave Wilson, Claire Holloway, and an Andy Baker—”

Father sighed a sad note through teeth, and stole a glance at the whisky decanter behind Scott.

“Andy, we knew him when he was just a boy. We kept the number when they moved away, and we only just spoke with the Bakers a few hours ago. They hadn’t heard anything from him either.”

“Yes, I’d imagine they would have been informed by now. We try to... well, time these things you see.” Scott closed the notebook in his lap as he gave time to let the news settle among them.

Mother rose suddenly and rushed to the guest room, followed shortly by the sound of running water. Julia felt embarrassed, but slowly understood that from Scott’s perspective, it was probably not unusual for someone to run off to hide their emotions after hearing of a family friend’s death, and that it wouldn’t know how she did it. She turned back to her own fingernails, trying to ignore the quiet, perfectly still gaze of the detective. It felt like being watched by a snake, where what thoughts roiled behind those eyes

could only be madly speculated upon, save for the certainty of their predatory inclinations. Mother's return to the sofa granted a form of comfort that she was unused to.

"Did Michael have a larger circle of friends, did you know any of these in particular well?"

"I...", mother started, "we only recognise Andy, and like I say it was a long time ago. They were just boys."

"Did he refer to having friends in a general way, perhaps, without names?"

"I knew Claire," Julia said, "she's younger than me, but... well, I would not have thought the two of them would get along."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's obvious," she said sharply, and then felt mother's hand on her knee.

"You'll have to pardon Julia," mother said, "she sometimes forgets herself."

Scott's eyes darted between the two of them, and then down at the rawness of mother's fingers.

"What I meant is that Michael was never the sort to party, and Claire, well... Claire is a. I'm sorry, she *was*—"

"It's okay, I think I get the picture you are drawing for me."

Scott turned to father and asked, "So would you say Michael was reserved?"

Father's knuckles whitened in his lap, and mother took over, "You could say Michael and my poor Greg here share a burd... a *preference*, yes, for the quiet life."

"And how are his studies going, does he speak of it?"

Julia laughed, and then stifled herself under the collected gaze of the other three.

"He's a good student," father blurted out.

"Well," Julia's voice was still edged with inner mirth, "well,

the last time I spoke with him—it was around a week ago—he said he was feeling tired of it all, always so very tired.” She fiddled with her fingers in her lap as the humour drained out of the sentence, “I think he was considering dropping out.”

“I won’t hear of it,” father said, and mother continued in a reassuring tone, “that doesn’t sound like Michael.”

Julia glanced up to see Scott scribbling in his notebook. She felt the dirty sensation of having betrayed her brother somehow.

Scott broke the silence, “I see, well we will consider that open for debate. This is difficult to phrase in a delicate way, but it is something I must ask: is there any history of mental illness, either in the family or with Michael?”

Father’s knuckles went even whiter in his lap, and mother said, “I should say not. And I don’t see what this has to do with anything.”

With practised ease, Scott shrugged his shoulder and smiled, “You’ll have to humour me, sometimes we have questions that are a matter of routine, it is not an accusation as such.”

“There’s just one thing though, maybe a better way of putting it, and then I will see about whether we can arrange a visit for you all. Did Michael have any strong fears, either growing up or lingering? Was he afraid of the dark, by way of example?”

“Well, what child isn’t afraid of the dark now and then,” mother said, and snorted dismissively, “though you might say he carried it longer than most. But we all have our quirks.”

“Quite right,” Scott again fell silent as he wrote in his book. Julia watched the end of his pen looping silently, casting unseen symbols over the surface of the paper. She looked up and saw his eyes focussed on her mother’s peeling hands. The

calculating adder.

A pattern was forming behind her eyes. The glue was hardening, and the fragments were forming a network of thoughts that felt like a hard crust of bread stuck in the throat. Before she could even assemble what it meant in concrete terms, she stood abruptly, “I’ll have no more of this, I don’t trust you.”

Scott lifted himself politely from a seated position as she stood, the eyes of a predator in the sedge, watching her every facial twitch.

She ran to the stairwell, inter her old room, and slammed the door behind her. Hands in fists, she sat on the edge of the bed in the dark. It still smelled of her childhood, all of these years later, she thought as she rocked quietly, allowing the thickness of the door and the shape of the house to mellow out the voices below.

She waited, eyes bright in the dimmed room, arms wrapped around knees as though she were a child again—waiting for the slam of the door, the deep roar of the car’s ignition, the cautious creaking of wood as someone ascended the stairs, the sound of running water.

Michael, she thought, burning the unholy pattern the detective had unwittingly woven into her mind. *Michael, what have you done?*

chapter nine

Chelsea Fuchs

DETECTIVE SCOTT SHIELDED HIS eyes from the reflection of the harsh overhead shining off the freshly waxed floor. The smell of antiseptic stung his nose and the brewing headache threatened to take over.

“Dr. Warne, may I speak with you?” he asked as he saw the busy psychiatrist walking down the hall. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he willed the headache away.

“Detective.” Her voice was terse. Detective Scott needed to play his cards right if he was going to get access to Michael Jones. He was the key to unlocking the mystery of the horrendous murders.

He followed her until she stopped, plopping down a stack of patient records. Leaning on the counter of the nurse’s station, Detective Scott offered his best smile. “May I speak to Mr. Jones?”

He watched as her back stiffened. “Why? Is he a person of interest? A witness or a suspect?”

“We believe he has critical information to the deaths of the other students.” Not a total lie. “Time is of the essence. We

need to reassure the public that there is not a madman running loose. His recounting of the night could be critical to gaining information we need to close this case.” This more of the truth.

“You will not be interviewing him. If I allow you to sit in on the therapy session, it will not be an interview.” Dr. Warne never slowed, flipping through one chart, scribbling something down and then moving to the next chart on the overfilled stack of patient records.

He nodded his head in agreement. He’d take whatever he could get.

“And he’s not a suspect.” It was a statement, not a question and Detective Scott felt no need to correct her assumption. “He’s a witness.”

He inclined his head, neither agreeing or disagreeing.

“Very well,” Dr. Warne said as she grabbed another file from the station. “Come with me.”

He didn’t feel bad about the misunderstanding that had just occurred. He needed to talk to Michael. He was the only suspect they had at this point. They could at least pin the fire on him. It was Detective Scott’s job to get enough evidence to pin the murders. Sitting in a therapy session might not be as good as an interview, but anything that could help crack this case would be worth his time.

He followed Dr. Warne into a comfortably furnished room with two chairs and an overstuffed couch. Windows allowed natural light to flood into the room, and yet there were still a few overhead lights on.

Michael had deep circles under his eyes and stared at the wall, a vacant look to his eyes. His street clothes had been swapped out for the Addenbrookes Hospital attire. His shoes were slip on sandals, no shoelaces in sight.

From by her place at the door, Dr. Scott spoke in a calming voice. "Michael, how are you feeling?"

He turned his head, acknowledging her voice but not speaking.

Michael played with the raveling wound wrapping that protected the burn on his left hand. "Michael, look at me."

Complying, he turned his head and made eye contact. The haunted look intensified. "Dr. Scott." His voice was barely a whisper. Clearly the man had not slept since coming to the psych ward. Or if he had, it had been unrestful at best.

"Do you mind if Detective Scott sits in on our session?"

Michael nodded his head in agreement, but his words were less certain. "I guess."

Dr. Warne guided Michael to one of the seats on the couch, and took a seat in the chair across from him. Detective Scott took a seat in the other chair and pulled a notebook out of his pocket. Dr. Warne shook her head indicating that he should put it away.

Tucking the book away, Detective Scott leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

"Michael, can you talk me through that night?" Dr. Warne asked.

"Is there any way we can turn on more lights?" Michael asked as he rocked in his seat.

"Sure." The doctor waved at one of the orderlies and bright light flooded the room. "Is that better?"

The young man nodded his head as he pulled his knees to his chest.

"I know it's hard, but can you tell us what you remember from that night?" Dr. Warne asked. Her kind voice filled the over bright room with a calm in marked contrast to the anguish radiating from the young man.

Michael began to rock. "It's the dark. The dark got them."

“What do you mean, Michael?” the doctor asked when the silence had stretched for an uncomfortable amount of time. “The dark?”

“John was inconsolable after Claire’s death. The darkness, you have to understand. It got Claire. We didn’t know. We didn’t understand yet.”

His rocking intensified as a shadow crossed over the sky, diminishing the light streaming in through the windows.

“Please,” he said, desperation tinting his voice. “We need more light. It will get us all if you don’t. I can’t leave the light. You have to understand. You can’t let the darkness in.” Michael wailed as he jumped up from his seat. “It will get us like it got them.”

“Who got them?” Detective Scott asked as he uncrossed his arms and leaned forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his knees.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. It lives in the darkness. It’s coming for us. It’s coming for me.”

Dr. Warne stood and moved to comfort Michael. “That’s enough for now. Why don’t you get some water and we’ll try again in a little while.”

Michael nodded and followed the orderly from the room. Dr. Warne turned to the one remaining person in the room. Crossing her arms, she stood to her full height of five feet and five inches. She was a half foot shorter than the detective but the steel in her voice made all the difference.

“You are in this therapy session because I allowed you to be here. You will not interrupt again and you will not upset my patient. He is not a suspect. He is not under interrogation. Right now, he is being treated for nyctophobia, and he could very well die if we don’t fix this so he can sleep. Do you

understand me?”

Detective Scott nodded.

“Very well. This is your last warning. Next time you will be asked to leave and will not be allowed back in.”

Michael came back and resumed his seat on the couch.

“Michael, you don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. But I can not do my job if you don’t allow me to help. I need to know what you’re afraid of, so I can help you develop tools to overcome your fear.”

Michael nodded his head in understanding.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Michael’s feet were planted on the floor, his hands grasped together, his head hung low.

“Claire had that slash across her chest.” He ran his hand across his chest, remembering the gory details. “John thought it looked like a number one. He decided to go for a walk outside. We agreed it was a good idea. He left and when he came back, he came back with a two on his chest.”

Michael paused and took a shaky breath. “We assumed he was losing it. That he’d done it to himself. He insisted—” Tears began to form in Michael’s red eyes. “He claimed it just appeared when he went into the dark bathroom.”

Michael hopped up from the seat and began to pace the room, tears streaming down his face. He turned and started to speak several times before he took his seat again. “John panicked. He ran outside to go get help. It was pitch black. The dark got him. We didn’t know it, but the dark. The dark got him.”

Michael covered his face and began to wail. His body shook with a fear that permeated the room. “We should have known. He was in no shape to go outside. He didn’t know what he was up against. None of us did.”

Silence filled the room as Michael's silent fear took over his mind. "Dave went out to get him. We were too far to get help on foot. We needed a vehicle. Dave went to get him, and when he came back he was crying. He was carrying John's body. He was covered. He was covered in John's blood. He's wrists were slit. John's wrists were slit and he was dead. Dave was carrying John's dead body."

Another shaky breath before Michael continued. "Dave felt a sharp pain on his chest. He put John down and opened his shirt. It was there. Carved into his skin. There was a three there. Dave didn't do it to himself. His face. There was such a look of horror on his face as he looked down and saw the number carved into his chest. It was the dark. Please," he begged. "Please, don't let it get me, too."

chapter ten

G.B. Retallack

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

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

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

morning.”

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

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

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

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

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

“And what’s that when it’s at home?”

“Fear of the dark.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“OK, I guess.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why?” DS Scott interjected.

Doctor Warne shot him a dirty look but remained silent.

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

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

"Why did you say 'Dave too,'" Scott inquired. "He was with you and — Andy is it? — wasn't he?"

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

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

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

"All right. Don't get excited. I'm just trying to understand what happened exactly."

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

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

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

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

“Dave? You returned and found Dave?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Does it matter?"

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

eyes.

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

“It’s possible, isn’t it?”

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

“But you don’t believe it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Can you prove it?”

“With enough time, I think I can.”

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

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

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

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

chapter eleven

Conrad Gempf

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

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

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

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

fallen victim to the dark.

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

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

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

“Can't Denny give you just a few...?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What time did you arrive?” Nick asked.

“Six-ish,” she said.

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

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

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

“Hey, Nick,” said Greg.

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

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

“Anyone move the body?”

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

strength,” chuckled Greg.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hal.”

“Nick. It’s a strange one.”

“Got a cause of death for me?”

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

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

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

“Like a screwdriver? A ballpoint pen?”

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

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

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

Nick nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

chapter twelve

Dañiel Garcia

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

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

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

administrator wants to speak with you first."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, great Scott!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

chapter thirteen

Mujie

NICK CHECKED HIS WATCH. This was gonna be bad. Really, really bad. His captains were gonna be furious. He heard a buzzing. His phone. Great. Something to distract from his inevitable firing. He took his phone out of his pocket. A missed call from Antonio. Damnit, what did he want now? It had been 6 years since the fight that had torn them apart and now after all this time, Antonio wanted to call? Unknowingly, Nick had clenched his fist. Well, at least there was something worse than getting yelled at by his bosses.

Once Nick entered the police station, he took the elevator down to his captains' office.

The captains' office was huge. Well, it was only appropriate. The office was shared by three people. Ever since the budget cuts, Nick and two other police stations were merged. They couldn't decide who should stay on as the captain so for the time being, there were 3 captains.

The office was probably the size of Nick and Mary's house. Nick had no idea how far down the office was, he just knew that he couldn't see the ceiling. It was more of a cavern

than an office, but it still had decorations. It had statues of all 3 of the police captains: All life sized. Nick did not enjoy coming down here.

Captain Luna waddled right in front of Nick. She started sniffing the air.

“Smell fear,” she said. “Be better.” Nick nodded quickly. “You good cop. Look forward to update.” Luna patted Nick on the shoulder. Luna was a good captain. She was short and quite stocky. Her English was broken, but she hadn’t been in Britain for very long. She only moved here when the police stations were merged. But she was sweet and friendly. Luna was the first wolf-person Nick had ever met and she gave Nick a really good impression of them.

Actually, Luna was the first magical creature Nick had met. He had only met two though. Both of them were in this room right now. The merger wasn’t a simple merger. As it turned out, the other two police stations involved in the merger had ties to another realm. There were only two magical creatures staying on Earth: Luna and his other captain, Bob. Before the merger, Luna stayed in the captain’s office of her old police station pretty much permanently. Apparently she even had a bed there. Nick couldn’t see a bed in the cavern, but then again, he didn’t even know where the cavern ended.

From what Nick understood, two years ago, the prime minister summoned a demon. The demon was furious, and said that a door to the human realm hadn’t been opened in 1,000 years. The demon threatened to start a war, but luckily Bob and Luna came to the rescue. They were detectives in the magical realm and convinced the demon to stop the war if the prime minister allowed them to become police captains. Nick had no idea what kind of power Bob and Luna had over the demon but the prime minister agreed and for 2 years, the only

people that knew about Bob and Luna's existence were their respective police officers.

This cavern had been here 2 years, though only Bob's statue was older than a month. Nick looked around nervously. He couldn't see Bob, which only made him even more frightened.

A roar. It sounded like it was coming from afar, but it was getting closer. Nick was really glad he had gone to the toilet earlier, or it would not have been a pretty sight.

Suddenly, a giant, majestic dragon flew across the room and landed right in front of Nick. Nick couldn't help himself, he fell down. Bob laughed.

"Pathetic human. In our realm, detectives are the toughest of the tough." Bob talked a tough game, but he still offered a wing to help Nick up. Nick didn't want to take it out of pride, but his fear was stronger. He took the wing and stood up.

"Where's Captain Taylor?" Nick asked.

"I ate her," Bob said, grinning and baring his teeth. Nick looked horrified at this. Bob noticed and pouted. "I can't believe you actually believed that. I'm a civilised dragon: Not like those monsters up north."

"I don't think Detective Scott would survive Britain's north, let alone your realm's north." Bob was scary, but somehow Nick's original captain managed to trump even that. Every time Captain Taylor spoke, it sent a chill down his spine. "Hello, Nicholas."

Captain Taylor's face was scarred. There were more scars than the last time he saw her: She must have been to the magical realm again. She was the only human allowed there. She was fearless even before she found out there were dragons, now it felt like she was the most powerful woman alive. She snapped her fingers. Bob put one wing on the

ground in front of Captain Taylor. She took off her shoes and stepped on the wing. It shone a beautiful red. Bob lifted his wing up and she towered above me:

“Now. Your report, if you please.” Nick took a gulp,

“Michael... He... He escaped.” Bob roared and let out a small breath of fire. Thankfully, Nick was nowhere near it.

“So you were wrong. You trusted the witness and he betrayed you. Bob’s right, you are pathetic.” Luna patted Nick’s arm to try to comfort him. It wasn’t very effective, but Nick smiled at Luna for the effort. “If you don’t want to get eaten, you’ll find Michael. He’s a suspect now.” Bob looked horrified at the thought of eating Nick. Nick was kind of offended at that. Did he look like he’d taste bad?

“I’m a vegetarian, Lady Taylor.” Captain Taylor motioned upwards. Bob lifted her to his face. She started stroking his cheek. Nick turned away.

“Oh, but you’d make an exception for me, wouldn’t you?”

“Please... Don’t make me.” Captain Taylor stopped stroking his cheek.

“Fine. He’ll just get fired if he fails.” Captain Taylor turned to face Nick. “Got it, boy?” Nick nodded his head rapidly. “With your words.”

“I will find Michael, Captain.”

“And if not?”

“If not, I’ll get fired.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight.”

Nick’s first port of call was the hospital. Michael had lied to him, he had lied to everyone. And Nick had to know why. Or how the doctor could have let Michael get away with faking mental illness. The receptionist let Nick right in and Nick went straight to Lisa’s office.

“Did you know?” Nick was yelling. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a security guard at the door to his side. She was looking at Lisa as if to ask ‘Should I do something?’ Lisa shook her head, but the guard stayed at the door.

“What are you talking about, Nick?”

“Michael. He lied about having nyctophobia.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“He escaped from the hospital. He clearly faked his fear to avoid us suspecting him of the murders!” Lisa sighed and walked past Michael to sit at her desk.

“I’ve spent a lot more time with Michael than you. I don’t believe he was lying.”

“How long have we own each other, Lisa?”

“At times like these, I think it’s been too long.”

“You’d better not be lying to me.”

“Are you threatening me, officer?” Lisa faked collapsing on her desk, which made Nick smile a little, but he quickly put his poker face back on.

“Do you have any idea where he might be?” Lisa stood up, and patted Nick’s shoulder, which made Nick blush slightly. He’d forgotten how beautiful Lisa was. And with all the problems with Mary, he was almost tempted to...

“No, I don’t. Now go, before you do something you’ll regret. Not again.” Nick looked down, but obliged and left Lisa’s office.

On his way back home, Nick turned on the radio of his car. He had contacted a local radio station to put out a BOLO for Michael. It should be playing right about now. He sat back and listened. It was also being broadcast on TV, but Nick wasn’t rich enough to have a TV in his car. A few minutes later, his phone buzzed. Antonio. Again. Nick should really have

blocked him, but this time the message intrigued him.

‘I’ve seen that guy the news said you were looking for. Meet me at our old spot in half an hour.’

It was weird that Antonio had contacted him before the BOLO as well, but Nick wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the face.

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Nick got to the park 5 minutes early. Surprisingly enough, though, Antonio was already there, on a picnic blanket. With food. And Nick’s favourite dessert. Fuck. This was a set-up. Nick marched over to Antonio and grabbed him by the collar.

‘Oh, you know exactly what I like, don’t you? You always did.’ Realising that Antonio was unfazed, Nick let go.

‘Let me guess, you lied about seeing my suspect?’ Antonio overacted, as he always did, and put his hand to his chest, making a face as if he was offended.

‘Don’t pretend you didn’t want to see me.’

‘I’m married. Happily. And I swore to you that I’d never get back with you after you cheated on me.’ Now Antonio was actually angry. He wagged a finger at Nick.

‘You’re one to talk. I know you slept with Lisa when you were already with Mary.’ Nick must have looked surprised, because Antonio followed that with ‘She’s my friend too, you know.’ Nick said nothing. ‘Do you love her?’ This time it was Nick’s turn to get angry.

‘Yeah. Of course I do. We’ve had our problems, but we love each other. We’ve been married for 3 years!’

‘So you told her about Lisa?’ Nick hesitated, and that was all Antonio needed to pounce. ‘You’re a coward. At least I told you what happened. But you never did, did you?’ Nick readied a punch, but Antonio interrupted: ‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you, officer. Look at all the witnesses. You’re in

uniform.” Antonio was right. About more than one thing actually.

Nick turned to leave. He had shit to do, and Antonio clearly didn’t know anything.

“Wait,” called Antonio. Against his better judgment, Nick turned round.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, I lied about seeing your suspect, I thought I might have a chance. And I’m sorry I cheated on you. Me and... Well, I know you don’t like hearing his name... We didn’t last. We broke up pretty much as soon as we got together. I’ve been going therapy. I hate how badly I hurt you, even know. Please forgive me.” Nick turned back and started heading back towards his car. “I was hoping we could be friends again.” As Nick reached the car, he turned around, tears in his eyes:

“Not today. Maybe someday I can forgive you, but not today. I still hate you.” Antonio nodded slowly. He deserved that. Nick got in his car and closed the door. He didn’t start driving until the tears were clear from his eyes.

Captain Taylor was standing on top of Bob’s body. Well, she doubted she’d be a captain much longer. How can you be a captain of a police station that doesn’t exist anymore? She pushed a big red button on her phone. The explosives set around the police station up above would likely kill everyone inside. Good. She always hated being a police officer. Luna she had some regret about killing Luna, but her death served an important cause. Taylor would get what she always wanted, the destruction of the human race.

After a lot of searching, Taylor had finally gotten her hands on the ritual that the prime minister used to summon

the demon. As she recited the ritual, the demon appeared. Taylor had been all around the magical realm, but had never met a demon. She bowed to the demon, though she had no sense of loyalty to him.

“Why do you call me here?” he asked, although it felt more like the demon was in Taylor’s mind. Taylor spoke out loud though, as much out of spite as the fact that she didn’t know how to communicate telepathically.

“One of my police officers killed Captains Bob and Luna, and blew up the police station.”

“What? This was supposed to bring peace between our realms!”

“I know. That’s why what Nick Scott did was so despicable.”

“What do you propose we do?”

“Nick Scott’s not the only one who would kill your kind. Humans are evil as a rule. I heard you wanted to start a war.”

“And you want to join our side.” Taylor nodded. “Very well, we shall build an army, and when it’s ready, we will destroy this planet, and you. You will be by my side as we destroy every last human on this planet.” Taylor smiled. “I like you, woman. What’s your name?”

“Taylor. Christine Taylor.”

“Well, then, Christine Taylor.” The demon offered a hand to Taylor. “Take my hand. Come back to the magical realm with me. You can be my queen if you wish. And tell me all about the evil human Nick Scott. It might take us a few months, but when we return to the human realm to start the war, I will kill Nick Scott myself.”

Taylor smiled and took the demon’s hand. They both disappeared and the explosion from the police station finally affected the cavern. The rubble fell down into the cavern,

covering Bob and Luna's bodies.

Nick was driving past when he saw the explosion. It appeared to be the police station. Oh god, it was the police station! It looked like it was collapsing! As the rubble from the building started falling towards him, Nick sped up, trying to avoid it. He managed to escape, but when he looked back, he saw a lot of people who didn't. And he looked back at the crater that used to be his police station. So many dead officers, so many dead **people**. Nick couldn't help himself, he threw up.

After he finally recovered, he got back in his car. This must have been Michael. He'd have to wait to tell Mary the truth about him and Lisa. Right now, he had to find Michael. He wasn't going to let him get away with this. He had to get revenge on that bastard. No more sympathy. He'd make sure Michael got what he deserved...

Whatever the cost.

chapter fourteen

Ian Philpot

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pardon?” Lake responded with a confused tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uncle Dan’s.”

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

“An alarm clock,” Lake replied.

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

“They said it was priced at £400.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So you’re uncle Dan?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And how did that go?”

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

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

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

“What direction did he run?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

escaped, is that right?”

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Maybe a flashlight,” the doctor replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So he had a history of this nyctophobia?”

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

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

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

“So what do you think brought it on?”

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

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

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

“Anytime,” the doctor replied.

Scott ended the call and immediately placed another call.

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

chapter fifteen

Cindy Pinch

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

“It smells good.” He says.

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

“I could. Thank you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing." Mary says.

She shakes her head and takes another bite of pasta.

"It's obviously something."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nick pauses to collect his thoughts.

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

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

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

Mary sets down her fork and leans forward. Nick can tell

she's trying not to look too eager even though she's clearly interested. He's surprised that she never joined the police force. She would have made a great detective. Her attention to detail and her inquisitive nature would have been a great asset to the unit.

"There was an incident in Cambridgeshire. Four kids died and we're not sure what happened. Although 'kids' probably isn't the best word. They were in their early twenties. Young enough to just be starting out. Too young if you ask me. There was one survivor, a kid named Michael."

"Did he kill his friends?" Mary asks, her voice hushed as if someone might overhear.

Nick looks up at her and shrugs his shoulders.

"I wish I knew. You see, things just don't add up. He's either the only witness to a horrendous murder, which begs the question of how did he alone escape. Or, he himself is the murderer. I can't make heads or tails of it. There's something about him. I'm not sure if it's the way he talks or the look in his eyes when he recounts what happened, but he's definitely hiding something. I just wish I knew what it was."

Nick picks up his whiskey and takes a sip. His hand shakes a little as he sets the glass back on the table. Flashes of his earlier conversation with Michael run through his head and he feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"The problem is," Nick starts up again. "Michael is deeply disturbed. Mentally, that is. We had to admit him to Addenbrookes Hospital. The doctors said he's suffering from acute nyctophobia. They were supposed to hold him for three days. They were supposed to keep him safe. As it is, he's a danger to himself and others. Or, he is until we can rule him out as the murderer."

"What's neeco-, what was it that he's suffering from?"

Mary asks.

“Nyctophobia.” Nick sounds out the word. “Basically, he’s afraid of the dark. Although, that kind of minimizes his behavior. Michael would jump at his own shadow if he noticed it behind him.”

“But you said they were supposed to hold him. What changed?”

“He escaped.”

“Escaped.” Mary repeats.

It’s not a question and Nick can see her puzzling it over in her mind.

“Now, my only lead is missing and I have no way of beginning to know how to track him down.”

“Do you think he did it?” Mary asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What does your gut tell you?”

“It’s hard to say. It seems like Michael is telling the truth. If he is, then there’s a madman on the loose and Michael might be his next target since he’s the only one who survived the cottage massacre. If Michael’s lying, then I have been in the presence of the most terrifying murderer I’ve ever encountered. Either way, I need to find Michael and sooner rather than later.”

Nick’s phone rings in his pocket and interrupts their conversation. He pulls it out and pauses long enough to register that it’s someone from the dispatch office before he swipes to answer it.

“Hello,” he says, putting the phone to his ear.

“D.S. Scott? This is Emily from dispatch. I know you’re off the clock but I was told to call you.”

“What’s happened?” Nick says.

He presses the phone closer to his ear, even though he can

hear her just fine.

“We just received a call from the manager at that 24 hour supermarket in town. He says there’s a man loitering and he needs police help to remove him from the property.”

Confusion knits Nick’s eyebrows together.

“I don’t understand why you called me. That seems pretty routine.”

“It does, sir.” Emily says. “But the loiterer has short brown hair and a slight build. And there’s a bandage on his left hand. In short, his description matches that of your missing perp Michael Jones.”

“I see.” Nick says as realization dawns on him. “Thank you for letting me know. I’m on my way. Tell the other officers to stand down. Do not engage until I get there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nick hangs up the phone and closes the screen before he slides his phone back into his pocket. Standing up from the table, he offers an apologetic glance at Mary.

“Sounds like we’ve got a lead.” Nick says. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He kisses Mary on the head before heading toward the door the night is dark as Nick makes his way towards his car. He climbs in and puts the key in the ignition. The engine starts with a low rumble. Backing out of his driveway, he glances up at the house and sees Mary standing in the window. She raises her hand in a wave as she takes a sip of her wine. Nick waves back, though he’s not sure she can see him, before heading up the street and towards the supermarket.

chapter sixteen

Sam Pynes

THE DARK ISN'T A physical thing, just like cold isn't really anything: it's just the absence of something else. Light and heat; without them you have dark and cold: space empty of those mysterious photons and excited electrons that make a space livable and navigable.

Crazy might be a sort of absence, too: an absence of hope.

Red light fell like a pool of blood onto Detective Scott's car as he parked near the tall lighted sign in front of the market where someone fitting Michael's description was making a commotion. The sign cheerily announced that the market was 'open 24 hrs,' underneath the vertical red letters spelling out 'Abners.'

Fluorescent lights streamed through the long row of windows showing the Tuesday specials in chalk, throwing a soft protective halo of light in an arc around the store.

Nick gave the window a second look as he considered the fact that it was Wednesday.

He squinted and blinked as he entered the store: day or night Abners was brilliantly lit. Scott suddenly realized why

Michael was here: it was never night in a twenty-four hour market.

The manager, a no longer young, but not middle-aged, man with bleach-blond hair and a nametag reading "Tim" was waiting for him near the registers.

"You better be here for the nutter, because I've had enough of him."

"Hello," Nick looked at his nametag, "Tim, I'm Detective Inspector Scott. I've come about..."

"Right," the clerk interjected, "He's in aisle five. We get some of his sort every couple of weeks, and usually we'd just take care of it, but this one's making a mess, and I've only a skeleton crew on the overnight."

Nick had already walked past the manager as soon as he had indicated the aisle marked breakfast cereals. "You were right to call, this fellow may be unstable and is wanted in connection to an investigation."

The blond man stopped walking and and looked uneasy. "What, is he dangerous then?"

"To a fine specimen like you? I shouldn't think so."

The manager nodded uncertainly before heading off toward the office. "I'll leave you to it then, shall I?" Scott waved off the manager with an 'I'll deal with this' gesture.

Michael was indeed among the breakfast cereals in that he had knocked dozens of boxes off of the shelves and had stacked them into columns, blocking the aisle in either direction. The wall was two boxes thick and nearly seven feet high. Everything from Weetabix to Cherrios.

He approached the wall cautiously. The student hadn't seemed like much of a threat before, but there were still a lot of unanswered questions, and there was another dead body back at the hospital.

Through a crack in the wall, Scott could see Michael lying under a pile of football jumpers on some floor mats, with his head resting on a bag of flour. He had made a circle of what must have been every torch in the supermarket, each switched on and pointing up, presumably to create a protective circle of light in case the bright overhead fluorescents went out, like some sort of druidic summoning circle. Michael appeared to be in a light sleep, with just his head and his bandaged left hand, now covered with an oven glove, sticking out of the pile of sweaters. Lying there he looked even younger than twenty.

“Hello there, Michael.” Nick spoke quietly and cautiously. He didn’t know whether the escapee had collected any weapons as well. “It’s Detective Inspector Scott. I need you to get up and come with me, please.”

Michael’s eyes immediately shot open and he started breathing heavily. “I can’t go back there, detective, they don’t understand.”

“Michael, they are just trying to help you.”

“But not you! You think I did it! You think I murdered them! And they don’t believe me either.”

“No one is accusing you of anything. I’m just doing my job, and part of my job is to keep you and everyone else safe.”

“But you don’t get it, do you?” Michael was getting increasingly worked up as he sat with his back to the shelves. His voice started coming in choking gasps as he ran his hand frantically through his brown, wavy hair. “I’m NOT safe! Maybe nobody is!” He expressed this with a wave of the oven glove, knocking over a few more torches.

“You’re safe while you are with me, I’ll promise you that. I just need you to come back to the hospital with me.”

“I can’t go back there! It found me!”

“What found you, Michael?”

“The Darkness, the thing in Darkness that carved the numbers and killed....Ohhhh...” He sobbed into his hands.

This was not going the way that Nick had hoped. Michael was getting increasingly agitated and he was going to have to humor him if he was to calm down and leave with him.

“You say the thing carved the numbers and then killed in that order? We found an nurse with a ‘five’ carved on his chest. It’s horrible, but doesn’t that mean you’re off the hook? See? It’s over. They ARE keeping you safe: he took your place! Is this any way to honor his sacrifice?”

Michael’s sob turned into a gurgle, and then, more disturbingly, into a chuckle, and finally into a hysterical gasping laugh. Suddenly he picked up one of the heavy torches and chucked it at Nick’s face before bursting through the wall of boxes on the opposite side. Nick ducked, and could see Michael darting away through the falling cereal.

“Michael, stop!” Detective Scott leapt over the piles of boxes in chase. Michael led him around the perimeter of the market, knocking off bags of crisps and a pile of oranges in his haste. When he reached the front of the store, with its large broad windows and the one cashier helping the one customer, he stopped and turned to face Nick. His was the face of defeat. Outside, it was too dark to see much beyond Nick’s car. Perhaps he had hoped that he had slept through the night.

“Michael,” Scott wheezed, “you need to stop running and come back with me to the hospital where they can help you.”

Michael wasn’t even breathing particularly hard. He was just standing there in defeated agitation. “He did take my place, sir. I’m not number five anymore. But I’m Not SAFE!” He shouted as he opened his jacket to show the red, bloody ‘five’ on his chest, now three days old and crusted over. But to

the left of the number was a fresh new vertical gash, turning the 'five' into a 'six.' "He might have taken my spot but I just get the next place in the queue!"

The old lady paying for her groceries dropped her purse in shock.

"And if I go back out there it will get me too!"

Nick considered his options. If Michael hadn't killed the nurse then there was something out there that had. Maybe this was as safe a place as any to wait until morning. In his excitable condition it probably wasn't worth forcibly removing the kid from the store anyway.

After a few minutes Nick convinced Michael that he wouldn't force him to go outside and soon they were both sitting in the manager's brightly lit office. A panel of security cameras displayed the inside and outside of the store, including the destroyed cereal aisle and the darkened carpark. The disgruntled Tim was replacing the bent boxes.

Michael curled up on a chair, hugging his knees to his chest and dozed. Detective Scott was tired, but his time in the service had inured him to sleepless nights.

Looking at the security screens Nick felt like the captain of a vessel traveling through the cold dark of space, the hazy street lights like distant stars.

Scott's hindbrain told him that there was something out there, a lingering doubt that an actual something, and not an absence, waited in the shadows beyond the carpark halo. Was the monster out there, or was it in here with him? Was insanity the absence of sanity, or was what looked insane just a reasonable reaction to something that other people couldn't see? He chalked the feeling up to lack of sleep. It wasn't a good feeling, and he felt pity for Michael who seemed convinced that the darkness would eventually find a way to

him, wherever he chose to hide.

Daylight was coming, and with it hope of figuring out this mess before anyone else had to die. Hope is sanity, and not a one of us is completely sane.

chapter seventeen

Ron Ward

MARY PULLED A GREEN parrot feather away from her face like a veiled dancer. Leaning over she whispered it along Nick's neck as if she were slitting his throat. Turning the feather Mary scribbled a love note behind his ear with the pointed tip. Scott knew this from the expository narration his wife was providing of her attempted seduction.

"Nick mumbled, pretending to be deep in the throws of sleep," Mary said.

"Mary remained unconvinced. Mr. Scott had a long history of playful obfuscation. She seemed determined, adding her best cooing dove impression to her arsenal of come-hither suggestions as she drew the feather over his ear and across his lips. Nick remained still this time, giving her no hope of eminent intercourse. Unbowed Mary turned the feather over using the tip to inscribe a long scratch from his collarbone to the top of his ear at the edge of his recent haircut." Mary said, a mild reverb adding to her allure.

Nick opened his eyes ready to give up the sleepy-boy game so they could begin the next phase. His lips betrayed his intent

by being simultaneously leering and stuck to the desk by an impressive pool of drool. He did not see his lovely wife. It was not their anniversary. They were not in his bed playing a bad cop dutiful wife routine.

Instead, a pair of men's pants giving off sweaty musk filled his entire field of vision. Reflexively he pushed back away from the pants. The chair was on rollers and close to the filing cabinet behind. The resulting crash had three distinct phases as chair met cabinet, which jostled the golf trophy coated in dust, but ever on display. The trophy teetered finally deciding to take another dive. Michael caught the falling trophy in his free hand.

The young man stood over him holding a letter opener in his right hand, the rescued trophy in the left hand. DS Scott's drool pool mocked from a distance.

"This is how I go out! This can not be the end of Nick Scott!" It could be though, easily, all the boy had to do was strike. Nick registered surprise that he was so accepting of the probability. That he had fallen asleep in the presence of a suspect seemed reason enough for the universe to cancel his subscription.

Michael did not look vengeful or what was that old word for it, 'crazy'. The blade did not have much for an edge it being the kind of tool found in the local office supply shop. The trophy did have a bit of heft but the boy looked calmer than usual.

"Dr. Lisa is here, see," Michael said pointing out the observation window of the manager's office. Nick found it difficult to take his eyes off the boy. Nick gaged that if he glanced he would be able to offer much the same defense as staying motionless, he took the peek. Dr. Warne was indeed walking up the aisle below and waving a coffee.

“The sun is up too, we made it Detective Scott,” Michael said sporting the happiest expression Nick had so far seen on the young man’s face.

“I took the liberty of buying you both a coffee.” Dr. Warne said as she walked into the room. Her eyes were darting taking in the scene. If she were not so fluffy in her ideas of justice she would make a devilish good detective.

“I believe we are all late for an appointment.” Dr. Warne said. Not letting up for a second both men were rounded up and headed for the door coffees in hand.

“I will take Michael in my car if that is alright with you Detective Scott,” Lisa said.

Nick was not fully awake but he was not about to be separated from his quarry again. Not unless he favored being back on the plod.

“A counter offer Dr. Warne, I will ride in the back seat while you and Michael talk. I can finish my nap.” Nick said.

“What about your car?” Lisa tried.

“Detective Scott kept the lights on so we were safe. I let him sleep a little, but The Dark stayed far away from all these lights.” Michael pranced as he walked lovingly pointing out the vast array of lighting in the store.

“I will take a cab, an officer will give me a ride back to the store. My car will not be a problem.” Nick said falling in behind the other two as they walked toward the exit.

Nick waited for the door lock to pop then opened the doctor’s car door. He began to pick up a ten-centimeter pile of folders from the back seat. “Let me get Michael settled and I will move those for you.” Dr. Warne instructed DS Scott.

Nick waited while she checked Michael’s seatbelt, removed the pile of folders Nick had begun to resettle, and then removed the pile behind the passenger’s seat and both piles

from the floorboards of the back seat. Having shifted all four piles to her rear storage she dropped her arm like a hand model with a new phone. "Please be seated, DS Scott."

Nick leaned in to take his seat. "What is that scratch on your neck, Dr. Warne asked? "It looks new?"

"I might have done it waking him up this morning," Michael said without looking back. "He was dead asleep. I had to try three times to wake him up."

"You could very well be dead." The doctor's eyes said building a frozen fury. Lisa kept her face hidden from Michael's view but lambasted the Detective Sergeant with a sustained violent stare.

Nick translated her glare. "We do not know the extent of this boy's trauma. He has certainly been exposed to a murder's wrath in the last few days. No matter if he is a victim or perpetrator his balance has been altered. All that needed to happen was a flicker of the overheads and you would be lying on the floor of that office with a letter opener in your throat. Number six inscribed in the flesh of your chest. Do you remember the nurse?"

"Where are we going, Doctor?" Michael asked?"

Nick did not move. Unsure of his welcome.

"Get in Detective, you are my new good luck charm," Michael said.

"Well," Dr. Warne said breaking off her stare. Nick walked around and settled in behind the doctor. This morning was unpleasant enough without having to endure the emasculating stares of the lady doctor all the way to the hospital. She slid deliberately into her seat only looking back to check when the detective's seat belt clicked.

All respect was lost once again. Just when it mattered most, again. The Chief Inspector would have grounds to reprimand

him once he heard about his falling asleep in the presence of a wanted person of interest. The boy could have legged it and no one the wiser. The doctor would report the incident with all her other misgivings about the Detective Sergeant. His mismanagement of suspect interviews, the agitation of his only witness. Losing the only witness to four murders, maybe five. Finding the boy but not forcing him to return to the hospital. And then finally falling asleep in a room full of murder weapons. The boy could have just wandered off leaving him completely embarrassed. The maniac could have carved a crude six into the flesh of his chest. Thank the blue heaven that did not happen. How could he have done so many things wrong in so short a time?

With this pile of failings mounting hour by hour. It was no wonder he was ready for the blow, the gateway to the promised land, the release of all his stress. His first action upon waking up was not to subdue the boy. Even though he had begun to think of Michael as the suspect rather than the witness. No, he was awakened by the suspect. Once awake did he subdue the suspect? No, he bashed into a file, knocked over a trophy, and finally, sat cringing in the manager's chair body akimbo awaiting the fatal attack.

His misery was multiplied by the doctor's skill in controlling this volatile person. Michael did not want to return to the hospital. The Dark had found him there. He had escaped with his life but likely witnessed the murder of the nurse assigned to protect him. Yet every time the subject of destination came up. Dr. Warne deflected the question into some avenue for exploring the young man's history. Nothing about death, nothing about The Dark.

When finally the hospital came into view and their destination was certain she began with a description of the

extraordinary lengths the hospital staff had gone to, to provide Michael with the safest possible place to hide from his nemesis. They practically had to race the boy through the corridors to reach his newly remodeled safe place before the sun set.

“There was a lot of dark in those halls,” Michael said. All three stood panting in the flood of light. The extra illumination made it necessary to install an air cooler in the room as well. “It was in the corners did you see it? I bet not, no one ever looks in time. I saw some in that room with no lights on at all, the corridor that went left right out of the elevator was infected with Dark.”

“I am going to excuse myself, I have to find water.” Nick dreaded this next part. He had to interrogate a madman and find enough truth to build a case. Five grieving families wanted answers. All the answers were locked in a lunatics fevered brain. Finding water proved much easier than forcing his feet to start back in the direction of Michael Jones. “You can’t let the bad guys chew on your brain so much Nick!” The wisest words that were ever spoken by his wife. So what if she was shouting at the time. “Come on old boy you can do this, one step at a time.” Leaning forward to force a step Nick began his journey back to the over illuminated room.

Nick was about to knock on the door when he noticed that Dr. Warne had Michael half sitting, half leaning, on his bed. “Looks like they started without you,” Nick said. “Better get in there bud.” He said in reply.

Nick turned the door handle, pushed the door open, sidled in, turned, re-turned the door handle so that it would close silently, and turned once again to see Lisa smiling at him. There were signs that she was amused but not caustically. He’d take that these days.

“Michael you have been bathing in the light for a few minutes now. I do not think we can truly flood you with light, protect you fully without taking one more step.” Dr. Warne said. “I need you to close your eyes.”

“They won’t let me, the things in the dark, I can’t close my eyes.” Michael stood up straight chewing on an already minuscule thumbnail.

“Do an experiment with me, Michael.” Dr. Warne began not addressing his posture yet. “Look up toward the light bank, but just before your eyes hit the super bright ones close them and then turn your face immediately.” We can discuss what you see after the experiment. Now, remember only a moment Michael, close your eyes for only a moment.”

“Red, I saw red, a few different shades,” Michael said.

“I was hoping for that.” Dr. Warne said. “Red is not dark is it Michael. Red is life, red is human power, Red is your power, Michael.”

“Yes, Dr. Lisa red is my power!” Michael fell back against the bed staring into construction lighting with his eyes lightly closed.

“Now Michael so that DS Scott can finish his work and leave us alone, we need you to finish telling us what happened at the cabin.” Dr. Warne said.

“DS Scott is my good luck charm.” Michael began

“Yes, he kept you safe last night. Then we brought you to this very safe place. The Dark is near but under no circumstances can it enter this safe place. The whole staff of the hospital worked to make this a place where you can feel safe.” Dr. Warne lower both the volume and the pitch of her voice. “If I remember clearly Claire, number one, Claire died in the bathroom.”

“They were too noisy, John and her too noisy grunting,

Uh, Uh, Uh, they woke up 'The Dark.'

"I remember they were inconsiderate."

"They brought it all down." Michael opened his eyes. Looking for DS Scott.

"Michael, look into the light and breath it in, deep into your lungs. Hold it in, hold it, let it out now Michael. Let's do that again should we Michael. One more time Michael, please." Dr. Warne said.

"I can feel the heat all the way deep inside. It is working doctor." Michael replied.

"Number two and Number three are both dead now too. No use talking about the dead. Only you and Andy are still alive. Andy knows the truth, he believes you. What happened then, when you and Andy were the only two left." Dr. Warne said.

"The Dark broke all of Andy's lights, his lamp, the light in the ceiling. His room was full of dark things, all waiting. Andy came to my room. I said we should stand back to back, The Dark can not sneak up on us that way.

We did that for a while until Andy said this won't work. I asked why not. He said it won't work I can't stand here like this all night. I think it might have worked if he had tried it. I don't see how the dark can sneak up on you if you have eyes in the back of your head. But he said no, I need to get some lights. In case the dark breaks your lights to Michael. If it does that neither of us will make it out of here. I begged him to watch with me but Andy wouldn't do it. He said I have the four on my chest. I am next. We do what I say. I begged him to stay in my room, in my light, help me watch.

Andy said, am going to run to the storage closet and grab some extra torches in case the dark gets your lights too. Those light bulbs break easy, he was pointing at my lamp.

I want to argue about my lights but they do break easy. Andy might be right I thought. I stopped begging him to stay. I followed him to look out, watch his back.

Andy got to the door of the storage closet. He opened the door but the dark was not waiting like I thought it would be. The light in the closet worked. I got excited we might make it I could picture the sun rising.” Michael did not smile.

DS Scott felt his leg going to sleep. He started to stretch the leg but Dr. Warne put up her whole hand in a violent shushing motion. The policeman froze mid stretch. He allowed his weight to settle. The offending leg felt tingly. He must have done enough to restart the blood flow. Small victories add up, Grandmama Templeton used to say.

Michael stopped talking and Dr. Warne sent DS Scott another sharp stare. “Michael you are feeling good. Andy has the light on in the storage closet and you are picturing the sun rising. What happened next?”

“He found more than torches, he found candles, and kerosene lamps and a can of kerosene. Andy brought them to my room. There is more stuff in there he said, he went to get the rest.” Michael stopped talking again but didn’t stand up. He stared into the bright lights eyes closed feeling his power juicing up for the big push.

“Michael?” Dr. Warne prompted.

“We had enough to last he should not have gone back. I told him but Andy never listened, none of them ever listened. I watched it happen. Andy got close to the storage closet and a whip of Dark slipped out of the corner. The Dark loves corners.” Both members of his audience held their breath.

“The whip of the dark had Andy by the throat. Michael began unprompted. “I heard him choking like he was right next to me, so loud. Gaaagruah Gaakk.” Michale began

making gagging sounds and thrashing his upper body. DS Scott stood up but Dr. Warne held him back with her magic palm of stop right the fuck now.

“The door slammed, then the sound got worse. The light from under the door went out. There were more of those Dark whips in the closet. They were beating him, choking him. I banged on the door, tried the handle, it only turned but never caught, round and round it turned but never caught. Andy was thrown against the door, at least that is what I think happened. He fell against the door and The Dark beat him. Like the sound of mama hammering steak. Thunk, thunk, amplified by him leaning on the door. Some bottles fell off the shelves, crash tinkle bang his body slammed against the door. More beating how much could he take. I tried the door again this time the handle caught and the door flew open. Andy stood there bleeding, purple. I reached for him but The Dark thrust Andy’s head back into the storage closet. I flashed my torch inside the closet. The fuse box was covered in blood, maybe brains too probably brains too. I reached for Andy. I missed. The Dark hit him one last time right into the main fusebox. Sparks danced in the dark, the history of the universe in a moment. I stood transfixed by the mystery then, the whole house went dark.”

chapter eighteen

Sue Cowling

THE RING OF HIS phone was a welcome relief for DC Nick Scott, he needed a break from this madness, he felt his shoulders relax as he exited the interview room with some haste and an apologetic smile to Michael and Dr Warne.

That Dr Warne was an intense woman, he was sure that ten minutes alone in a room with her and she would know all his deepest secrets, not that he had many, still it was a scary thought, and just for a moment he had an image in his mind of Michael as a terrified mouse cornered by an extremely satisfied cat.

He felt a brief stab of pity for Michael, but just brief, there was something dark going on in that kid's head. Medical staff had to leave his room lights on day and night, because Michael was convinced that if the lights went off something would come and murder him. This was the person that had probably murdered four of his university friends and showed no remorse for doing it.

The door clicked close behind him and he was thrown into the sudden gloom of the corridor, with poor lighting and

sludge-coloured walls. A complete change to the brightness of Michaels well lit room with its stark white walls. He walked briskly along the corridor and through the psych ward security doors, back into the main hospital and the entrance, glad to have left the secure area of the building. His phone had stopped ringing, but he guessed it was someone back at the station wanting an update, it could wait. The phone ringing was a good excuse to get out and get some air, have a coffee, maybe a snack and then call in.

He just needed some fresh air first, and as he exited the building he breathed in a huge gulp of air, trying to rid himself of the smell of the hospital that seemed to linger in the back of his nose and throat, a mix of chemicals, piss and vomit. He knew it was probably all in his mind, but it happened every time he had to go into a hospital building. Perhaps an early childhood memory lingering in the back of his mind. He was sure Dr Warne could analyse that for him. He chuckled to himself, feeling more cheerful already.

There was a vendor just across the street and he walked over there, taking the time to get a coffee and a ham roll. He was bloody hungry now; he needed to eat; they could wait a little longer for that update.

He found a bench to sit down and stretched his legs out, taking another deep breath. After devouring the roll in a couple of bites, he started on his coffee, watching the constant flurry of movement in and out of the hospital. It was nice to watch for a while, just people going about their lives.

He would ring his wife; he needed some kind of normality, just for a moment. Mary answered almost immediately, as if she knew he was going to call, they had that sort of relationship where they seemed to know what the other person was thinking.

“Hi, love I thought I would give you a call before calling into work, how is your day going?”

Mary laughed, “It’s all the better for hearing from you Nick, everything okay?”

Nick sighed, “I am finding this case difficult those four kids, just starting out in life, and their families, what a bloody mess it is.”

“Why don’t we go out tonight when you finish work, take your mind off it?” Mary suggested.

“That’s a great idea love, will look forward to it, got to go love, phone is telling me another call incoming, love you Mary stay safe love.”

As he ended the call the phone rang again, he took another sip of his coffee, pulled out his notebook ready, and answered the call.

“Hello DC Nick Scott speaking.”

“Ah DC Scott, finally. Was there a problem with your phone, or maybe your just too busy that you are just not answering it?” His chief asked with a sarcastic tone.

Nick swore to himself but kept his tone neutral.

“Sir I was just finding a place outside where we could talk in privacy, hospital is a busy place, especially the psych ward, and I know how you like to keep things confidential.”

The Chief laughed at that comment, and Nick found himself relaxing a little more.

He still sounded irritable though as he carried on speaking, “So Michaels parents are here at the station, they want to know if they can have access to see him, very insistent they are, and I have no idea what to tell them?”

He paused as if waiting for some input from Nick but then continued, “I am assuming that Michael is there at the hospital? I mean how does a patient dam well escape from a

secure unit?”

This time he did stay silent expecting a response from Nick.

“Yes sir, he is safely locked up now. I was sitting in on the interview when the phone rang first time. Dr Warne calls it therapy, but either way she is very thorough, actually felt some sympathy for the kid just for a small moment.”

The Chief sounded slightly happier, “Yes, that would give me something to tell them, and at least we don’t have to tell them their son is wondering around out there, doing who knows what. How is the kid by the way?”

Nick did not have to look at his notes to answer that question.

“He is okay he has some burns on his left hand, they have been treated and are bandaged up. He has been diagnosed as suffering from acute nyctophobia apparently brought on by the events from last weekend.” Then he added quickly, “That’s a fear of the dark sir in case you were not aware.”

“I am fully aware of what acute nyctophobia is DC Scott, most children suffer from nyctophobia when they are small, it’s just a part of their development, but it’s when it gets out of hand and becomes extreme, we end up with the situation we have here.”

He defiantly sounded irritated now. Nick sat up a bit straighter on the bench.

‘Okay so enough of that can you tell me what the current situation is, I need you to give me a full update?’

Nick was expecting this, he opened his notebook and flipped back a few pages to check his notes,

“Sir, it looks at this stage as if it was defiantly arson, and with four dead students, and no other suspects, the natural suspect to the crime has to be Michael...” his Chief

interrupted him,

“That’s good news surely? yet you sound hesitant, why is that?”

“No Sir, it’s just there is no actual evidence that Michael is responsible for the deaths of the four students, Claire, John, Andy and Dave. What we do know for sure is that all four of them were dead before the fire started. So, we have to presume the fire was to try and cover the murder of them.”

Nick knew his Chief was waiting, expecting more information, so he continued,

“Evidence so far suggests that Michael has an absolute cast iron insanity plea, so his mental illness is going to get him off a murder charge. I am sure the bastard knew what he was doing though, and I would like to carry out some further investigations?”

The phone was silent, except for the ruffle of papers, and Nick waited, he did not have to wait long.

“DC Scott looking at the paperwork so far and the information you have given me I can find no reason to carry on flogging a dead horse, it’s a waste of police time and resources, this case is not going anywhere, that nutter is going to be locked up for the rest of his life in a mental institution. In the meantime, we have cases piling up, real problems that you need to be out there solving. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

Nick cleared his throat before answering. “Yes sir, you want me to wrap this case up?”

“I want this case wrapped up, put to bed, buried and forgotten, and I want it done quickly one way or another, is that clear?”

“Yes sir, I am right on it, anything else sir?”

The phone had gone dead, so Nick guessed that was a no

then.

Nick finished his coffee and walked over and threw his rubbish in the bin. He could not delay this any longer he had to go back into the hospital, he walked a lot slower this time, reluctant to return. The security passed him through to the secure unit, and he walked back along the gloomy corridors towards Michaels room, he paused outside preparing himself for another long session.

He did have his evening with Mary to look forward to and the fact that once this interview was finished, he was basically off the case and could put it behind him. It just did not make it any easier when there were four kids who would never finish University, have that first job and families of their own. Then there were the families of those kids how do you explain to them that the person likely responsible for their deaths was never going to serve a sentence for what he did.

He took a deep breath, tapped lightly on the door, and entered the room, startled by the lightness after the more subtle lighting in the corridors.

chapter nineteen

Julia Pierce

THE THERAPY ROOM WAS bright but warm and stuffy - hospital standard temperature, thought DS Scott, wishing he hadn't spilt coffee down his shirt earlier and had to keep his jumper on to hide the stain. Sweat beaded on his upper lip - four bodies and a sole survivor, now having a psychotic break - that sort of thing didn't happen every day out here in the sticks. The local news were all over it, camped out on the Station doorstep demanding answers - and he'd seen a Sky News van on the road through town. Clearly bad news travelled fast. Then there was the angry landlord, ringing up to moan about all that lost holiday income and when were the police going to give a definitive cause for the fire to the insurance so he could get some compensation? Scott was starting to realise that the more years he put in on the force, the less he liked people, on the whole.

Michael Jones sat on an orange chair, one hand bandaged in his lap and the other repeatedly pleating the hem of his sweatshirt, crushing it, twisting it then letting go and starting again. Young looking for his age - like a child sent to the

headmaster, Scott thought - though in fact he was waiting for the session to restart after a short break.

“How’s the burn?”

The boy looked up, startled away from his thoughts. “Oh, it’s going on okay... well, actually, it’s really sore. I don’t like taking the painkillers... they make me feel a bit out of it. Some people probably queue up for that but it’s a bit weird - I don’t feel *me* when I’m on them. Like my body isn’t quite mine and everything’s out of sync?” He screwed up his face.

Well, that’s a no to DC Hemmings’ drugs theory, thought Scott. The officer had told him that the boy had been ranting about the dark on the way to the hospital - the result of bad mushrooms or some new designer substance, Hemmings thought - and demanding they move his bed next to the nurses’ station. Most people wanted to be as far away from the lights as possible so they could get some sleep but not this one. If not drugs, Hemmings had him down as a psycho.

Still, the lad seemed pretty calm now, Scott thought, trying to reconcile the slightly built student with the ravings of earlier in the day. Nervous, but you would be with four dead friends, your holiday rental turned to charcoal and no sensible explanation for how you’d been the only one to walk away pretty much unscathed.

The doctor, who had been searching about in some paperwork, was now looking around and smiling, signalling that she wanted to begin. Well, after the last set of revelations this was going to be interesting.

“Right Michael, the idea here is for you to work through events and remember some more things.”

Memories of more *things* were probably not what the boy needed, thought Scott.

“I know you’ll be expecting us to want to know more

about what happened with the presence you just described and the fire but I'm going to put that to one side for a bit so there's no pressure and you can gather your thoughts. It sometimes helps with the remembering. I just want to start with your feelings on what the monster you talked about might be. Now, going back to the beginning I can see that when you came to be with us you were concerned about the lights being on and being away from them made you quite upset. Have you always been afraid of the dark?"

The boy starts picking at the fabric of the chair with his undamaged hand instead.

"I'm not afraid of the dark - I told the nurses. I told YOU. I'm afraid of *it*."

Scott can see Dr Warne hesitate and look over to him, then look at Michael with a bland smile.

"Well, that makes perfect sense. A lot of people have that fear - not of the dark itself but of what they think might be in it. Freud said it was to do with separation anxiety but that's considered a bit of a niche belief now. So, can you tell us a bit about what you think's threatening you, if it's not the dark itself that's triggering your fear? I know you said it was a monster but I want to dig into that a little more. Fear can feel monstrous..."

"I told you this already. I know it sounds ridiculous, believe me, I know..." his voice rises and he becomes agitated. "It isn't someone or something and it isn't in my head - it's just pure evil. And it's coming for me - I cheated it but it knows where I am and it's waiting till I make a mistake. If I go out of the light. I can feel it waiting..." He starts to sob; Dr Warne offers tissues and some whispered words of comfort that Scott can't pick out for the other side of the room where he sits, trying to make himself inconspicuous.

“Okay” says Dr Warne, brightly. “I’m sorry about that Michael - I didn’t want to make you upset. The idea was to talk about something a bit more abstract so we could ease our way in to the trickier stuff. But that’s okay - maybe it’ll be better for you to go back to where we were before. You were alone in the dark...”

Michael raises his head, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“It marked me. That’s how it knows where I am. That’s how it’s waiting. Till the lights go out and it can have me. Number five of five - the complete set.” He gives a choking laugh, then draws a deep breath and steadies himself.

“It carved a five on my chest - as I stood there in the dark. It slashed at me. Top, stem, curve to complete the number. I could hear it laughing the whole time. I didn’t know where I was and I couldn’t work out how to get away - it was playing with me. Maybe it’s still playing now - with the tracking. I think it likes me being afraid.”

“Okay - but Michael, the doctors who examined you when you arrived said your t-shirt was torn but your chest was unmarked.”

“How am I meant to explain something like that? I’m just telling you what happened. What shape were the rips? Did they think to look at that?”

Dr Warne consults her notes. “Well, it hasn’t been documented...”

“It was so painful... like my chest was on fire. And then I thought of it. Fire. The place must have had power cuts all the time - we found piles of candles and torches in the utility cupboard near the bedrooms when we were having a poke about on the first night. Claire borrowed some for her bath. I realised I was next to it. I’m just glad Claire hadn’t taken the lot. But there were still some candles inside, and with the

candles were a load of matches. I still had a can of lighter fluid in my pocket - we'd been trying to have a barbecue at lunchtime but it had been raining and the fuel bricks were damp."

DS Scott leans forward to hear better - this is what he needs to understand.

"Okay Michael, take your time," says Dr Warne. "I think we all know what happened next, but it might help to talk it through."

"Help? Oh you have no idea. It was all around me. That awful laugh... but then I opened the bedroom door, gave the can a squeeze, lit a match, and suddenly it wasn't - I had a bit of breathing space." He laughs again. "Ironical really, as I was choking on the smoke. But at least that bastard wasn't chuckling in my ear for a minute, threatening to suck the life out of me. The curtains had gone up - god knows what the wallpaper was stuck on with, but for a damp cottage the fire was really taking hold. I held on there for as long as I could. I didn't want to go back into the hall. Because it was dark..."

"Right. And you were afraid."

"Of course I was afraid. I could feel it lurking out there - it knew I'd have to retreat at some point and it was just biding its time. Licking its lips, almost. But I had an idea. The duvet - I threw it into the hallway, lit it, then jumped over it before the fire had a chance to take hold. I think the thing was so surprised that it didn't take its chance. I just knew I had to keep lighting things up; keeping the dark away until the morning when I could get away. Because I knew that if I ran out of the door it would follow me. It lives in the shadows - and it was pitch black in all these trees."

"So you worked your way through the house?"

"Exactly. The fire - it scared it off. I worked my way

through, a room at a time, until it got too hot or smoky and I had to move on. I tried not to think about what would happen when I ran out of rooms.”

“And did you?”

“Almost. The whole place was on fire by then - except the back bathroom, down the horrible dark corridor. It had a tiled floor so I thought it wouldn’t burn so well and I might have a chance of hiding there - I dragged a burning tablecloth with me to keep the hallway light and grabbed some torches from under the kitchen sink for the room. Just as I got there, something must have fallen on the propane tank that fuelled the place - at least, something went up with a massive bang. I lay down on the floor thinking I was going to die then, one way or the other. But I must have passed out - next thing, the firemen were there.”

“You had a lucky escape, then?”

Michael looks up, catching DS Scott’s eye. “There’s nothing lucky about it. I should have just walked into the flames when I had the chance.”

chapter twenty

Bertrand F. Ionescu

THE COSTA COFFEE HOUSE bustled with activity at lunchtime. The constant dinging of the door with patrons coming in and out, the buzz of voices placing or picking up orders, and loud chatter competed with the echo of machines whirring in the back.

Dr. Warne sat in a corner, at a table up against a wall, unfazed, staring intently at the image on her smartphone. Detective Sgt. Scott's avatar, and upside-down teardrop tagged with his chiselled face and a million-watt smile, glided smoothly across the lines of the map displayed on her glossy screen. At times, it would stop, then pick up speed again, turning this way and that, slowly closing in on her location.

She couldn't stop her heart from beating harder the closer his avatar got to hers. When his avatar sat on top of hers, she fixed her hair and straightened out her clothes before looking around to see if she could spot him. Sure enough, he was walking up to the entrance of the coffee shop. She raised her hand and waved to him.

A smile flashed across Detective Scott's face when he

spotted her, and he hurried to her table. "The welcome here is warm, but it seems the mac & cheese you ordered is not."

"No, not anymore," she replied.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting. There was an accident on the way and—"

"Yes," she interrupted. "I saw on the maps. You know..." she paused, taking a moment trying to find her words, "you don't have to share your trips in real time with me anymore. I don't expect you to do that."

Detective Scott looked a little crestfallen, but quickly bounced back. "I know I don't have to. It's become a habit now. I actually share my trajectories with anyone with whom I make appointments." Leaning toward Dr. Warne, he added, "It is probably one of the few good things that came out of—"

"Don't!" she cut him off. She could see the longing in his eyes, the way his gaze traced the contours of her face, and lingered on her lips. "How is Mary doing?" The question immediately served its purpose. Dr. Warne could see the burning passion behind his gorgeous eyes extinguish itself.

He appeared to come out of trans and sat upright in the chair. "Hm. Mary... Well, quite naturally, she has changed. She's much colder toward me these days, looks for opportunities to bury herself in her work, and she continues to ask many questions about...well you know...about us; when we started, where it started, how often we met...questions I've answered a million times, so, were not exactly out of the thorns."

Dr. Warne couldn't look at him while he spoke. Instead, she pushed her mac and cheese around its cardboard container, hoping to distract herself from the feelings of guilt bubbling up in her chest. That question turned out to be a double-edged sword. It was her turn to sit up straight and adopt a professional posture. They were, in fact, meeting to

discuss Michael's case.

"So, what do you guys have on this kid? Is he going to prison?" she asked.

"It doesn't look that way," detective Scott admitted. "Chances are, even if I can get the charges to stick, his final destination will be a mental health institution."

"Is the evidence conclusive against him?"

"No. Not at all. For starters, his skin and hair samples came back from forensics with high concentrations of smoke and soot, but his clothes showed concentrations that were too low for someone to have been at the cottage while it was burning."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't. He was definitely there when the cottage was burning, but his clothes were not. Which means, he could have been wearing something else and ditched those clothes somewhere before authorities made it to the scene."

"Why would he do that?" Dr. Warne asked.

"If there was some kind of incriminating evidence on his clothing, he might be motivated to get rid of it before the police showed up. Who knows? I have a team combing the grounds around the cottage as we speak, but nothing looks promising. At the end of the day, the most I can do is charge him with arson."

"And how are you tying that back to him? How can you be sure it wasn't anyone else?"

"Because the fire started in his room. And his lighter is what started the fire."

"His lighter. About that..." Dr. Warne leaned in a little closer. "The kid completely unravelled last night when he discovered it was no longer in his possession. He insisted he needed it to stay safe and fought tooth and nail to leave the room for it. We had to sedate him."

“We need to know what happened that night,” detective Scott insisted. “You need to get this kid to some functional state of mind so that we can get answers.”

“No guarantees. Whatever he went through, it was profoundly traumatic. It could take him years to recover from it. And trust me, I’m doing my best. I know his day in court is around the corner.” She looked at her watch and immediately started consolidating her leftovers, serviettes, and paper cup. “I have to go. I’m going to be late.”

Detective Scott helped to gather the trash and reached for her tray without being solicited. His hand landed on hers. The warmth of it sent a wave of emotions straight to her heart and caused a hitch in her breath as she tried to speak.

“Please. Let me,” Detective Scott said.

She let him take the tray, thinking she could quickly collect her purse and be gone before he could turn around, but as she darted for the exit, he caught up to her. “Lisa! Wait up!”

She felt his hand brush the back of her arm. It would be childish of her to run off, so she spun around. “That’s doctor Warne to you!”

“My apologies, doctor Warne...Will you call me later? To keep me posted on any new information the Jones’ kid reveals?”

“Yes.”

“And Lis— I mean, Dr. Warne...would you just level with me here? I have a case to work, and it seems like this, this energy between us is causing you pain. I don’t want that. I wouldn’t hold it against you if you assigned the Jones kid to someone else.”

“Look, Nick,” she said in a harsh whisper. “I’ve done a lot of things this year that I’m not proud of. I’m working really hard to forgive myself for my part in it, and I just can’t. I have

an opportunity here to build up another human being rather than tear one to shreds. Just, let me get on with the business of being a psychiatrist, and I'll let you get on with the business of being a detective. Don't concern yourself with my pain. Worry about Mary's."

She spun on her heels and away. She sensed that Nick was still standing where she left him, taking in her figure as she rushed back to her office. The session she had planned for Michael Jones could easily backfire, cementing his fears rather than dispelling them. Going into it, distracted by her personal turmoil, could cause her to mishandle the timing of her plan. For her sake and Michael's, she had to get this right.

The room Dr. Warne chose for Michael's therapy session was spacious and unencumbered by furniture. The walls were off-white and bare. There was but a single table and two chairs placed at the centre of the room. Per Michael's request, Dr. Warne had two large fluorescent floor lamps brought in to brighten the space. Overall, the room looked cold, sterile and devoid of any nook or cranny in which something frightening could hide.

Warne was sitting at the table, slightly hunched over with stylus in hand, jotting notes on her tablet, when she heard the door open. She immediately sprung to her feet.

"Good afternoon, Michael," she said, hurrying to his side. "How are you feeling today?"

"Tired."

She walked alongside Michael as the guards escorted him to his chair.

"Please, have a seat."

While Michael sat, the guards retreated to positions behind him, out of his peripheral vision. That was by design. He was

meant to forget they were even there.

"I can understand that you feel tired," Dr. Warne started. "You've been through a lot. I want to assure you, today's session is not about discussing the cottage. We would like to help you overcome this fear of the dark. Would you like that?"

Michael glanced around the room.

"You're a kind lady...and I would really like that, but you can't help."

"Well, we could give it our best shot. If it doesn't work, things stay the same, but what if it does? What if we are able to help? Isn't it worth it to try?"

Michael nodded.

"We're going to start with a few questions to help me understand the context of this fear. Answer them as best you can."

"Sure."

"Do you remember how old you are, when you first experienced fear of the dark?"

"No."

"But you were pretty young?"

"I guess, I was in primary school. Most kids in primary school were scared of the dark anyway."

"And do you remember how old you were when you stopped being afraid of the dark?"

"I was about 10 or 12, somewhere in there."

"And what got you to stop being afraid?"

Michael paused. He seemed to be searching for an answer.

"It's okay if you don't have an answer," Dr. Warne added. "Don't feel the need to create one."

"I don't know." Michael start. "I think one day I just got sick and tired of being afraid. I realized the dark was everywhere, that it wasn't harming anyone else. A few of my

friends spoke about being afraid of the dark as well, and it just dawned on me that we all thought we were each thinking we were the only one hunted by monsters..."

"And?"

"It just seemed stupid to me."

"And that was enough to help you?"

"Not at first, but the more I thought about it the more it made sense. And then I would play with my light switch. Turning it off and on, and off for longer periods of time, each time. Until I was no longer afraid of the dark."

"Wow, that is very brave of you and very insightful for a 12-year-old. Did you experience fear of the dark as an adolescent, even once or twice?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Well, I have an interesting proposition for you. It's a form of therapy that is similar to the way you rid yourself of this fear as a child."

Michael looked at Dr. Warren with suspicion in his eyes. His story about the light switch might've caused her to come present her proposition too soon. She was about to blow this.

"You're not talking about doing something like they do on that show...the one where they put people in pits filled with things they're afraid of?" He started fidgeting in his seat. Both his hands pressed firmly on the table and his elbows were raising as if he was getting ready to bolt for the door.

"No! Not at all. Here, let me see if I can get you to understand a little bit better. I would like to lead you into a visualization exercise. I promise you that you are safe. I promise you that these lights will all be on the entire time."

"Can I visualize my eyes open?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine."

"So, this form of therapy is a lot like jumping into a pool. Have you been swimming before?"

"Yes."

"Good, then this should be a breeze for you." Dr. Warne placed her table on the table. "If it's okay, I would like to play some soothing music while you do the visualization exercise. Do I have your permission to play the music?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

Dr. Warne lead Michael to visualize himself about to get into a swimming pool. She indicated to him that the pool water was slightly on the chilly side. She instructed him to imagine himself dipping his big toe in the water. "How does that feel to you?" She asked.

"I imagine it's pretty cold," he answered.

She continued to guide him through the visualization, indicating that he should see himself jump into the pool. At first, the water would be extremely chilly, but he would begin to feel a refreshing calm overtake him. Rather than chilling his body, the cold water would invigorate him, make him feel stronger and more confident. He would enjoy swimming from one end of the pool to the other.

"Now," Dr. Warne said, "I want you to get out of the pool and think about how lovely that swim was. Any time the water feels too cold, just tell yourself to jump in, and you will feel strong and confident and comfortable."

Michael looked like he was in a trance. The doctor's exercise was working. It was a two-fold procedure meant to implant hypnotic suggestions while illustrating the concept of Flooding, a behavioural therapy technique which calls for exposing individuals to extreme fear-provoking situations to desensitize them to the thing they fear the most. Given Michael's age, this technique could either heal him or hurt him.

Children were more predictable and easier to help, but the older the individual, the higher the risk of causing irreversible trauma.

Just then, a knock at the door caused Michael to snap out of his trance. Dr. Warne immediately looked at her watch.

"This will only take a minute," the therapist said. She glanced occasionally at Michael while talking to her colleague to see that he was still calm. He was.

The therapist motioned for the two guards to come over to the door as well. At that point, Dr. Warne noticed that Michael narrowed his eyes. This was problematic. Her colleague had shown up too early, but she had no choice but to go through with her plan. After handing a remote for the floor lamps to her colleague, she gradually slid her hand toward the light switch.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Michael called out, as though finally catching on to the doctor's plan. "Wait! Wait! You don't know what you're doing! You can't turn those lights off. They'll come in here!"

"It's time to jump in the pool, Michael."

Darkness swallowed the room.