



THE DARK

Don't close your eyes

WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON OCTOBER 15th 2011

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Time is no substitute for talent

There is a well known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and broken keyboard(*). Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

On October 15th 2011, a group of writers from all over the planet pooled their collective talent with the aim of writing a novel in a single day. Twenty-five authors, twenty-four hours. This book is the result.

I hope you enjoy it.

Tim

October 15, 2011

(* - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-15060310>)

PS I suppose I should point out that the contributors were largely unaware of the wider story when writing their individual sections.

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CHAPTER ONE

Michael Bynwater

God knows how long he'd have gone on sleeping if it hadn't been for the bell.

The staff had all gone home, or wherever it was they went when they weren't being staff. Most of the lights were off. Douglas had paid the bill as usual but his parting question had been harsh.

"So what it comes down to is, you left her there. With a fucking madman."

"They got him. Those guys know what they're doing."

"They could just as well have got her."

"They shoot straight."

"But you left her. A hostage. Your own ex-wife. Proud of yourself, is it?"

Scott had sat deep in thought. Not turning the question over in his mind. No need for that. He wasn't proud of himself. Never had been. If one day he suddenly discovered that he *was* proud of himself, he wouldn't know what to do.

What *did* you do when you were proud of yourself? Put in for a promotion? Start boasting? Leave the Force altogether, become a consultant? New suit? New wife? What?

But it wouldn't happen. Not until everything was okay, safe, orderly, fair. Kind, too, if things ever could be kind, which he doubted. Kindness wasn't in nature. Certainly not in human nature. But as for the rest... Was it too much to ask that people kept their hands to themselves, set a good example to each other, that they didn't spend their lives wanting something more? That the dead stayed dead?

Apparently so.

Another bottle appeared from somewhere. He didn't remember ordering it. Later, he didn't remember drinking it. He rested his head in his hands for a moment. The world span around. He'd have to throw up eventually. Meanwhile, he'd might as well make himself a bit more comfortable.

And then the bloody bell. He was going to miss his train. Stood up painfully. He'd managed at some point to take off his jacket and tie, undo his trousers, kick off his shoes.

The bell got louder. Five minutes to get there, through the underpass, left at the Apple Store, up the interminable escalator – why did you have to go *up* to get to the Underground? Who the hell thought *that* up? – then over the bridge, along the catwalk (through which you could see the train poised to go, but not get to it), down the spiral stairs and on and on. Five minutes.

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He fastened his belt, grabbed his jacket, forgot his briefcase, and ran.

The bell woke him.

For a moment he was dubious, woozy, suspicious, as though he had woken into another dream.

It was hard to tell. “Vivid dreams,” they called it. The stop-smoking pills his doctor had put him on after the run-around with Norb, a local villain out Swavesey way. Someone had tipped Norb the wink, told him the plod were descending mob-handed, and Norb had thought it amusing to greet them bollock-naked in the pub car-park, smeared with Mazola. The chase which followed had been caught by Sergeant Barton on his new camcorder: ten coppers chasing Norb round and round but everyone scared to tackle him in case they caught a handful of Norb’s greased-up wedding tackle. Eventually everyone, including Norb, had collapsed wheezing and laughing onto the ground. Norb had agreed to ask for twenty-seven other offences to be taken into consideration, so improving the clear-up rate and cleaning his own sheet; he’d got fourteen months inside; Chris Barton’s video had gone viral; and everyone was fairly happy, apart from DI Scott, who’d been seriously alarmed by the chest pains brought on by the comedy Norb chase.

“Heart’s fine,” the doctor had said; “Olympian. More than you deserve. How much do you smoke?”

“Ten a day?” said Nick hopefully.

“It’s our equivalent of ‘Do you know what speed you

were going, sir?” said the doctor. “We’ll call it forty, and you’re going to stop. There’s a new wonder-drug, just the thing for you.”

Nick had gone away with a prescription for a starter-pack of Champix and a warning of side-effect including vivid dreams and flatulence, and for the past three weeks had spent all day farting and all night in a lurid and utterly convincing fantasy world. When he described some of the less unspeakable episodes to his sidekick, DS Morse (who had heard all the jokes a thousand times but was still known as “Dev,” as short for “Endeavour”), she said the Champix was a serious threat to Second Life and World of Warcraft, and that she’d been meaning to mention it, but could he buy a couple of air-fresheners for the car because, as things were, she’d almost rather he went back to his crafty Rothmans; at least (she added) he had the decency to roll down the windows in those days.

But he was awake, and it was the bell – or, rather, the sleazy Latvian-cocktail-lounge jingle which passed for a bell on his fancy new German landline.

“DI Scott?” said Geoff at despatch.

“Ngh,” said Nick.

“Geoff at despatch here. Sorry to wake you, Nick. It’s four-sixteen a.m., before you ask if I know what fucking time it is, and, yes, you are on call, and, yes, you are top of the roster and, yes, you are needed at a suspected crime scene. Yes, it is urgent, and, no, I am not fucking joking. Sir.”

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“Suspected?” said Nick.

“Fire Brigade called it in. Domestic fire. Reported fatalities, one survivor. Incident commander said it quote looks well dodgy close quote.”

He read out an address. The postcode was somewhere out in the Cambridgeshire fens.

“Fortyfold?” said Nick. “Where the fuck’s that?”

“Out Aldreth way. Some sort of cottage. There’s only two got that postcode, and anyway you can’t miss the smoke, innit.”

“It’s dark.”

“Or the flashing blues.”

“Okay,” said Nick gloomily, the labyrinthine subway system of his dream still weighing on his mind. “I’ll call in when I’m on scene.”

“Do you want me to call Dev? Or will you?”

“Let her sleep,” said Nick, “for now.”

Scott let himself out of his tiny house in Victoria Street and breathed in the cold pre-dawn air. For generations of students the memory of Cambridge autumns would be an abiding joy: the smell of an old frost moon in the air, and privet and grass, and bicycle-oil and, above all, the inexplicable, once-in-a-lifetime smell of promise.

For Nick, it was just cold. And dark. If he’d been to the University, he might feel differently. And he certainly wouldn’t be leaving the house at half past four, unbreakfasted, unshowered and unenthusiastic. If London was a city of villages, Cambridge was a town of walls. Of

walls within walls. Cloistered, gated colleges in which a few lights burned, not of early risers (the University harboured few of those) but of students talking bollocks till dawn, or trying desperately to finish work they should have started days before. Essays. What was the point of essays? Who cared what a nineteen-year-old thought about... about what? About fucking *literature*? He'd never thought about literature in his life, but what he had thought when he was nineteen was bollocks too: be secure, get away from the rough slums of the Kite and his endlessly squabbling parents, become a cop, put things right, make things safe.

It hadn't turned out like that. All you did was mop up as best you could. Even the little house was a reproach; his wife had been so eager for them to buy it, to make a home for their future family. But that was twelve years ago when people like them could still just afford to live in a poxy little two-down, two-up in the centre of town. And before she'd gone off him big time, when they'd found out that... after they'd seen the specialist. As though he wasn't a man, though the problem lay with her. As though he wasn't a fit mate. Now they kept house dutifully and lay together at night, dutifully, as if for warmth. It was only sort of warmth there was between them now. But he hung on. Life had taught him that.

University of Cambridge; University of Life. Fuck-all to choose between them in the long run, when you got down to it.

He thought: thank God there weren't any children, as things have turned out. But, like everything he thought

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about his marriage, it didn't convince him.

As he drove down Regent Street, automatic barriers retracting into the road at an invisible signal from his police transponder, he saw a couple walking besottedly out of Downing College, leaning against each other, their heads touching. He was much older than her. "Don fucking a graduate student," thought Nick, on autopilot. He tried to think "Good luck to him," but couldn't manage it. The guy was older than he was; mid-forties, at least. "Old twat," thought Nick. That would never again happen to him, not now. He was thirty-eight, childless and past it. The best he could hope for was to start *feeling* he was past it.

A few lights were on in upper rooms as he drove through Rampton. Dormitory villages, most of them, now. Men getting up early, heading off up the M11 in the company Audi, doing whatever it was they did all day to keep their families in an over-restored house in the country. Except it wasn't the country, not any more; just a small, competitive, phony version of an equally phony television location. Everywhere aspired now to be like the Midsomer Murders. Some of them made it, some not.

Out in the fens, nobody had made it. They wouldn't be there otherwise. The flat pebbledash house, MOT-condemned cars and mongrel dogs spoke of ready-meals and dodgy credit-ratings, of hovering bailiffs, final demands, cheap booze, the telephone unanswered and the postman feared. A mile or two ahead, he could see a jittery

blue haze in the sky. Why did everyone leave their blues flashing when they'd got there? Didn't used to. Must be something they'd got off the telly. TV imitates us, then we imitate them imitating us. What's real?

But the smoking, stinking wreckage was real, and the six fire engines, and the four ambulances. All too bloody real. Even Champix couldn't come up with that sort of thing.

"DI Scott. Nick."

"Appropriate name. For a cop. Nick," said the firefighter in charge. White helmet, one thick stripe and one thin. An SDO. Nick didn't recognise him. Must be serious, though. A Senior Divisional Officer turning out to a six-engine domestic.

Nick said nothing.

"Expect you've heard it before, that," said the fireman, beaming affably. Always a mystery, that: the average firefighter saw more horror in a month than most cops did in a career, yet they always seemed cheerful, optimistic, almost as if they were happy in their work.

"Geoffrey Payne," he continued. "Geoff. Ex-LFB." A Londoner. "Only got here on Monday. Baptism of fire." He waited. Nick grunted, a short bark of humourless laughter, acknowledging the old gag. "Come and have a look."

They splashed their way through the tarry mud to the shell of an almost completely burned-out house. Steam and smoke rose from the charred wood and rubble; underneath the collapsed ceilings and roof-beams, furniture lay scattered, some of it heartbreakingly unscathed. It was like

those dreams where you find yourself naked, in public, thought Nick. Not that he'd ever had one. But he probably would now, thanks to the wonder drug.

“Weekend cottage,” said Geoff.

“Empty?”

“That’s the bad bit.”

The doors of one of the ambulances slammed and it accelerated away, sirens yowling unnecessarily.

Geoff gestured towards it.

“Survivor,” he said. “Smoke inhalation. Pretty bad. Can’t get a word out of him. Not that makes any sense. Hysterical. Keeps saying ‘Shouldn’t have. Shouldn’t have.’”

“Shouldn’t have what?”

“That’s what we’re wondering.”

“Still. He survived. That’s something.”

“Not much, though.” The fire officer pulled aside a canvas sheet at the side of the house. A stench of crispy-fried pork caught Nick’s nostrils.

Surrounded by medics, paramedics and the paraphernalia of public concern, four corpses were laid out on a tarpaulin, protected with sterile plastic sheeting. The first two were young men. Both smoke-stained, scorched and battered, one with a triangular latic-marking across his thighs and torso.

“The usual,” said Geoff. “They talk about burning to death but eight out of ten, it’s smoke inhalation. Cyanide, carbon monoxide, same old same old.”

“What happened to his skull?” The side of the nearest young man’s head was badly crushed.

“Beam,” said Geoff. “He was trapped under it when we found him. In there.” He gestured to one of the less badly-burned rooms, now filled with a mass of charred wood. “Ceiling collapsed. He was backed up right in the corner there. Wouldn’t have known much about it.”

“But there’s a window right there. Other side of the room. Why didn’t he—“

“They panic. They can’t see. They get totally disorientated. Or if they don’t panic, they try to hide. The other one, we found on a bed. Face down. Probably trying to breathe through the bedclothes. Wouldn’t have worked. Obviously. Smoke did for him, too. Didn’t do for this one, though.”

He pulled back the third sheet.

“Jesus,” said Nick.

“Jesus indeed.”

The body looked like the charred, carbonised shadow of a boxer, vapourised at the moment of striking. Its elbows were bent, fists raised, one protecting the face, the other punching upwards; the knees bent as though crouching to deliver the blow. The mouth was open in a blackened scream of rage. Nick found he could imagine the precise sound his finger would make if he pressed it into what had once been human flesh.

“Male. Late teens, early twenties.”

Nick looked round.

“Morning, doc.”

“Nick.”

The three stood in silence.

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“Looks like this one burned to death,” said the medic. Her face was impassive but she was scratching her ear nervously. Nick thought: it’s no easier for her than for us. Then he thought: not a job for a woman. He reprimanded himself for the transgressive thought.

“Pugilist posture,” he said.

“Yup,” she said. “Heat denatures the muscle proteins. Limbs contract. Often mistaken for a defensive attitude. Dr Hayes. Abby Hayes. We’ve met before, Nick.”

“I remember it. What about this one?”

Abby Hayes pulled the sheet from the fourth corpse: a young woman, naked, glossy and raw, the skin peeling off her limbs and torso.

“This one’s a poser,” she said, “poor girl. Not burnt. Not suffocated.”

“What, then?” said Nick.

“I think she was boiled,” said the medic. “I think she was boiled alive.”

A nearby couple – the SDO had pointed vaguely to what was more or less a shack, a couple of hundred yards away -- had heard an explosion. There had been a sheet of flame. They shuffled – they were elderly, infirm – to the house but the blaze had taken hold. By the time the fire brigade had arrived, the house was destroyed.

“He was the owner,” they said. “Him as was taken to hospital. Come there at weekends, he did. Brought people. To stay. In the house.” They – they completed each other’s sentences, seemed to be one person, not two, as ancient

married couples often are – added meaningfully: “Young. Young people. *Stewnce.*”

“Stewnce?”

“Stewnce.”

“Right - *students.*”

“Ah. *Stewnce.*”

“Anything else?”

“Just stewnce. What else’d they be then?”

“No, I meant did you *see* anything else?”

“No,” they said, and snapped their mouths closed like humped turtles in old shapeless anoraks.

The traffic was building. Cars; people with jobs they had to be at. The students’ bikes would come later.

In the early light the strange double chimney of Addenbrooke’s Hospital – the highest point in this bleak, flat landscape for miles around – knotted Scott’s stomach. It was here that he and his wife had found out that they would never be a family. Here, too, more recently, he and his mother had been told his father’s diagnosis.

Addenbrooke’s had crushed too many hopes. His wife would drive miles out of her way to avoid catching sight of it. Maybe one day she would drive miles out of her way to avoid catching sight of him. Was it on the cards? He hadn’t a clue.

It remained to be seen what it would do to his father.

For now, though, he wasn’t Nick. He was DI Scott. He wasn’t vulnerable, on the break of tears. He was working a case.

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And he had a name.

The old couple, heading for home, had turned and plodded back, so slowly Nick wanted to scream.

They stopped six inches from his face.

“That’s who he was,” they said.

“Who?”

“We remembered,” they said.

“Who?”

“Him. Who he was. His name.”

“Excellent,” said Nick. “That’s splendid. Brilliant. Well done.”

“Don’t fucking patronise us,” they said, “or you can fuck off.”

So now he had a name.

Michael.

CHAPTER TWO

Matt Tobin

The nurse's station was unattended when the detective arrived at the ward. He wasn't first in the queue, either. Two other men were already waiting, tired, exhausted, looking about impatiently.

There is a certain look people get, three or four years after joining the police force, when the excitement is gone and every call out starts to blend into the next, every situation a re-enactment from the previous week. With the relentless intensity and focus, introspection and boredom of a hospital, you get the same look in about three days.

These men had it now, a look that said: *I know how the system works. I know the long hours, the tired looks, the harrowed nurses, and the rare visits from the doctors who float in from their ivory towers and haven't read the patient notes. I know exactly the shit that is about to be pulled on me now, I know I will be passed by, and fobbed off, and asked to please be patient because there are a lot of patients, and they all have to patient, lashed to their beds by tight sheets and crippling injuries.*

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It was the inevitable look of a hospital veteran, acquired the first time a child wet the bed because no one came when they rang the bell for the nurse, or a wife received the wrong diagnosis for a third time from a doctor who had just come onto his shift and hadn't listened to the ten second elevator briefing that was the best the system could manage for patient handover.

And don't send me to the coffee machines either. I know where they are, I know the coins they take, the bitter taste, and that I have another six hours ahead of me for drinking bad coffee in an uncomfortable chair. Right now, I just want one straight answer.

He figured he could flash his badge, jump to the front of the queue if he wished, but it wasn't really his style. Contrary to popular stereotypes, he didn't join the police so that he could big note himself with the badge and the power. It was a perk, sure, back when he was in uniform and needing his bagel, but the world moved too fast for him these days anyway.

Better to sit back and wait his turn.

A trolley came rushing past, pushed by orderlies in those pale-blue smocks that somehow contained less colour than grey. Throughout the ward, a host of machines kept time with an army of rhythmic human hearts.

But enough description. He closed his eyes and waited until the station was manned and the argument in front of him subsided.

When at last it was his turn, he said: "I am trying to find Michael Jones."

"Not here," the nurse said. "You family, or what?"

“Detective Nick Scott,” he said, holding up his badge. “Following up on the fire that put him here. What’s the update?”

“Let’s see,” the nurse said as she consulted her notes. “Says here: third degree burns to his hands, smoke inhalation. He should be fine.”

“And where is he now?”

She traced her finger further down the sheet.

“Transferred to the psych ward.”

The detective raised his eyebrows. “The psych ward? Why?”

“Beat’s me love,” the nurse said. “I only just came on shift and they didn’t write that down. You’ll have to go up there and ask for yourself.”

When he reached the mental health ward, the nurse was already at the desk. No surprise there, he thought. He would be less inclined to spend time among the patients on this ward too.

“You’ll need to speak to the doctor first. The patients here can be a little...” the nurse paused, “unpredictable. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course.”

This was the frustrating part of police work, when doctors and other do-gooders get in the way of an investigation, when their concern for *the patient* is a thinly veiled bid to make up for perceived prior injustices by making it more difficult for police to do their jobs now. *No you can’t speak to the patient, she’s just killed her parents. Very*

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traumatic for her, you understand. You'll have to wait until we have her doped to her eyeballs and her memory has faded tomorrow.

When it came to psych patients, his opinion was divided.

Intellectually, if he could bare to use such a term, he recognised it was a medical condition, deserving of concern and respect and treatment, and not necessarily their fault. You wouldn't punish someone who crashed a motor vehicle mid-heart-attack, so why punish someone who caused injury while having a psychotic episode?

But if the justice system was meant to be based on equal measures of deterrent, protection, punishment, rehabilitation and fairness, he fell much more squarely on the emotional end of the spectrum. Good cops, to him, were meant to protect the innocent and punish the guilty, and all of that *softly, softly* stuff was just a barrier to good men doing good work. And that meant, when it came to psych patients, all that inherent unpredictability makes them a risk to the public. Once a crime is committed, better to lock away one too many than one too few.

As for this current visit, there was no real suggestion that the fire was anything other than an accident, but with four dead and the fifth suddenly dragged off to the looney bin, his suspicions piqued. Still, a good cop shouldn't let himself be prejudiced by such things, and he tried hard to be a good cop.

No, for the time being, there was no crime and there was no suspect, and he'd behave accordingly.

The doctor arrived after a fifteen minute wait.

“Hi, I’m Doctor Warne,” she said. “I’ve been looking after Michael.”

“How is he?”

“Physically, he’s well enough. We’ll keep treating his burns, but other than that, he is fine.”

“And mentally? I assume this is where you tell me he’s had a traumatic experience and I won’t be able to speak to him?”

Doctor Warne looked at the detective intently, and he returned the gaze. He wasn’t usually one to describe appearance, but there was something not quite right about her; something that made her look more like a composite sketch of a mug shot than a real person.

Eventually, she spoke.

“Yes, he’s suffered a trauma,” she said, “but he is lucid and relatively calm, and I was going to say you are fine to speak with him, but perhaps...”

She let her voice trail off, allowing the detective to fill in the blanks.

“Sorry, just my natural defences kicking in,” he said, making his best efforts to appear self-effacing. “I tend to deliver myself the bad news to spare others the bother.”

“Right, so you’re not just another cop looking to exploit a patient’s fragile mental state then? I’m sorry to have misjudged you so harshly.”

The sarcastic tone hung in the air briefly while the detective considered whether he should bite back. It was Sunday lunch, this had only been an accident, and he just wanted to get home. He decided the effort wasn’t worth it.

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“As far as we know, there is nothing to suggest this was anything other than a terrible accident,” he said. “We just want to talk to him to find out what happened. He isn’t suspected of anything.”

“Well, as I said, he is calm enough, and lucid. I will need to be in the room, of course.”

“Of course,” he said. “So why exactly is he here?”

“Acute nyctophobia,” she said, watching the detective’s response, judging whether he would react more negatively to patronising over-explanation or pretentious technical jargon.

The detective looked blank.

“Fear of the dark,” she said.

“Fear enough to light a fire to avoid it?”

Doctor Warne rolled her eyes.

“I hope you won’t feel the need to exercise your spectacular wit to the patient.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said. “You can lead the questioning if you like. Throw in all the jokes you want.”

The doctor led him down a winding corridor towards the patient’s room. After all these years as a detective, he still didn’t know how he would react each time he was in the presence of a psycho. *Who knows*, he thought, *I might get into that room and turn into someone else completely, a real bastard, a product of someone else’s mind.*

He closed his eyes as he stepped into the next unknown passage.

CHAPTER THREE

Olivia Obscura

Dr Lisa Warne was a slim brunette, slightly younger than Nick. Nick shook her hand, briefly, and she led him down the corridor to Michael's room. She stopped just outside the door. Nick resisted the urge to brush past her, his mind was so focused on seeing Michael.

“You must understand, Detective, that Michael has experienced a deep trauma and reliving that night is likely to cause him deep anxiety, perhaps a panic attack. I will need to be with you for the whole interview in case something happens. If it does, I need you to do exactly as I say.” Her eyes held his.

“As far as we know,” Nick said, “Michael is the only living witness to the fire, the only one who can tell us what happened to those kids. Believe me, Doctor, I don't want anything to happen to him.”

Dr Warne opened the door and showed Nick through into the whitewashed room. There were no pictures, no colours, no furniture except what was strictly necessary.

Michael lay on the bed staring at the ceiling.

He was just a kid.

His hair was oily and scruffy. Probably it was usually like that but the week in hospital hadn't helped. His face was still youthful despite the puffy eyelids, the dark creased skin.

"Michael?" Dr Warne said softly.

Michael turned his head to the Doctor and the Detective. The heaviness of the movement brought down the whole room with it.

"This is Detective Scott. He wants to ask you a few questions about the other night. Is that OK with you?"

Michael sat up slowly. He stared from the soles of Nick's shoes to the top of his head. Then, looking right in Nick's eyes, he asked, "Which night?"

"The night of the fire, Michael," Nick said. "Last Saturday. Do you remember that night?"

Michael nodded. He scratched at his left hand. It was heavily bandaged.

"You rented a cottage with your friends. I need you to think about the cottage."

Michael stared at him.

"Can you picture the cottage?"

"There was a creek..."

"That's good. So you went there with your friends... please can you tell me what happened? Who were you with?"

"With Andy, Dave and John. John had Claire with him too, that's his girlfriend."

“Tell me about your friends. How well did you know them?”

“We met at college,” Michael said. “English literature. One of the projects in the first year was a performance of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. I was Caesar. Andy was Antony, my loyal friend. Dave and John played Cassius and Brutus. They stabbed me! It was great fun though.”

“OK,” said Nick. “Now tell me about last weekend.”

“Of course, I was a bit annoyed that my part, though the title role, ended in the first act. It might be called *Julius Caesar* but really the play is about Cassius and Brutus. Did you know that, Detective?”

“No, I didn’t. I’ll have to see it sometime.”

“Dying on stage takes skill though. Lying there. You have to try not to think about not moving, if you know what I mean. The more you think about everyone watching you, and how you have to be careful not to twitch, the more your ankle starts to itch, or your hand cramps up. You have to kind of enter a little zone in your mind where there is no moving and no not moving. Then you can just be still.”

Nick took Dr Warne by the elbow and steered her to a corner of the room. “What is this?”

“He’s stalling. He doesn’t want to think about that night. Like I said, he has experienced a deep emotional trauma and it’s manifesting in terror. He’s going to do whatever he can to keep his mind off it.”

“OK. How do I get anything useful out of him?”

Dr Warne looked away. Nick knew she thought he

should be more caring. Well, tough. Four kids were dead. Someone had better start talking soon.

“You have to ask specific questions. Don’t ask him to relive too much at a time. Don’t let him get off topic. Get what you can, and then leave him alone.”

Nick turned back to Michael, who was still probably dreaming of his performance as Caesar. He was smiling and looked like a twenty year old again.

“OK Michael,” Nick said, more gently. “Let’s think back to last Saturday now. Why were you at the cottage?”

“Just wanted a weekend away,” Michael said.

“Now, I know this is difficult, but do you understand what has happened? That none of your friends survived?”

“Yes,” Michael said.

“It’s very important that we know what happened. Their families are very upset.”

Michael picked up a magazine from the side table and turned the pages.

“Please stay with me, Michael.” Nick said. “How did the fire start?”

Michael flicked another page. “Fire.” He tried to connect the word to the event. “Well, we had some candles around. One of them probably caught the curtain.”

“Can you tell me any more about that? Where were the candles?”

“We had lots of candles all around. We needed them for the light. You know those houses where the lights are all in the wrong places and either too bright or too gloomy? That’s what it was like, never enough light. Besides, it’s

good for ambiance.”

“Michael, where were you when the fire started? What did you do?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yes you do. Where were you?”

“I can’t remember.”

“How did you escape?”

Michael took a deep breath and closed his puffy eyes. He was still, and Nick wondered if he was in that place between moving and not moving. Then, gradually, his breathing accelerated until it was coming in short bursts and he was having trouble staying sitting upright. He glanced around the room, peering into every corner, and the look on his face was sheer terror.

“The fire...” he gasped, “smoke everywhere... tried to save them...” his breath was so fast he could no longer speak. His temples dropped into his hands. He slid to the floor. And still the short sharp gasps, squealing with every inhalation.

Dr Warne said, “You need to leave the room, Detective. Wait outside for me.”

She went to Michael and began to comfort him. She pressed a call button on the wall. Nick left the room while two more nurses entered; one of them pushed a small stainless steel trolley with a tray of syringes and medical equipment and a big yellow bottle for waste. Nick stood in the corridor with his back to the wall and waited.

“Dr Warne,” he said when she finally emerged. “The parents of those four dead kids have a right to know what

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happened to them. And if this punk is just going to screw me around...”

“Detective. He was been through a...”

“A severe emotional trauma, I know. What about the families of those kids? What do you think they are going through? Michael is the only one who knows what happened. He’s shutting up for a reason. What little he did tell me doesn’t add up. Candles? Come on...”

“What he said makes sense. He has an acute fear of the dark, believes something in darkness harms him. He is associating the gloomy cottage with what has happened. Maybe it really was an accident.”

“Well, that’s not what my gut tells me. This kid knows more than he’s letting on. Which isn’t hard, because he hasn’t told me anything. Are you going to hold him here for a while?”

“Yes, he needs to continue treatment for some time yet.”

“Do me a favour and keep the door locked. If it turns out the fire wasn’t an accident, he’s going down for manslaughter or worse.”

“I agree that what happened was a terrible tragedy, Detective, but my only responsibility is for the wellbeing of my patient. You’ll need to give me a better justification than that to break protocol. Get back to me when you’re ready to make an arrest.”

Nick turned on his heel and walked down the cold, empty corridor. When he got to the front of the hospital, the sun was blinding.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ioa Petra'ka

The water from the faucet here was unclear, smelt salted, and reminded Nick Scott of an old attic he once knew. He put the glass back on a desk that wasn't his and watched as the water stilled itself. Vowels seeped through the walls, betraying the softer half of a conversation from the other side. Mainly, he was waiting for his phone call. A few of the rounded out words were intact enough to shape the details of a blackened weekend. College students doing what they do with lager and fire. One of them left screaming around what was left of the lining in his throat, strapped to a table in the nutter wing of the local hospital. All drips and drizzles; facts and speculations.

Scott lifted the glass again, water fumes intruded into his thoughts, set it back down. The phone had thus far been sitting black and silent on the back of the desk. Mostly hidden by an accidental palace of ageing paper, this room clearly wasn't used for conversation much. Scott glanced around at the signs of morning. The window pane

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yellowing just so; what birds dwelled here were cutting out hard debate to one another. They might have been aware of the rising counter-babble the humans in the building were engaging in. The sound of a fresh case breaking across a Monday; the forced laughter of it. They said the carpets were still smouldering. They said, maybe mouldering.

The phone rang, causing the toxic water to tremble. Conversation in the other room stilled, and for a moment a rare quiet left a hollow for the phone to sing solo within. Smiling tightly at the invisible hesitation around him, Scott shuffled the smelly old papers aside and lifted the receiver to his ear. A spider web had popped, leaving silk in his collar and an angry eight-legger crouching on the wall, twisting left and right a few times before dropping into the canyon below.

“Detective Nick Scott?”

“Chief, right. Flames, dead people, twisted up house, twisted up survivor pounding his fists and spraying spit all over the holding room. Do I have it about right?”

“As usual. Need you out here. Talk to Lily Pallett from Photos, she has the vehicle and the directions, you’ll be coming in with her.”

Scott set the receiver in the cradle and glared at the glass of water, finger in the collar for scraps of web, feeling spiders on his neck.

Lily Pallett from Photos was a fat, angry looking woman with a triangular head that obscured all traces of neck. She

slashed and pecked at the turns in the road, preferring to drive in straight lines no matter what the curve may otherwise suggest as a route. As the journey progressed, Scott winched himself deeper into the passenger seat. He recognised Pallett as possessing one of the voices that had been softened through the walls. Now clarified and unleashed, Scott would say that it had a certain constant tremble to it, as though emotion always had the better of her. She mumbled and moaned on about bits of her life, alcoholic breath slowly filling the cabin of the car. The flesh that might have been her neck was growing greasy and ill-defined in the rising heat. She had the knob on full blast as though it were already winter. Her black eyes, deeply hooded by a sagging brow, shot queries across the silent detective.

Scott rolled the window down and let the roar of air drown out the stench and noise of her. They were clearly leaving society on one of those roads that repeatedly bends in on itself in an impossible fashion. Lily forking her way through it all where a spoon would have been more appropriate.

She was trying to talk over the wind and kept trying to move the heater knob further up. He glanced over at her vibrating teeth, chin like a soggy slab of cake emerging from a sea of milk. He rolled the window back up slowly. Dead leaves were shuddering in the wipers. He nodded wherever she paused, and that blessedly seemed to be enough to quench her conversational yearning.

Pallett gave one last sharp angle to the final curve they

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were passing through. The house had been mercifully buffered by a generous distance of lawn. This whole forest would have been ablaze had it not. The car lurched and barked once before shutting down. Pallett was already clawing and padding at the edges of her door, acquiring the necessary leverage and inertia to escape.

Scott slipped out of the rocking car and walked to the southern side of the rubble. It was still alive with violence here, but not enough to defer a walkabout. He had never done a fire before, but there was Chief Layland over there all puffed up and striding through rubbish as though he had assembled a crew of crack specialists; facial hair bristling. Scott walked past a nervous caretaker who was talking through his fingernails about how it must have been candles, and how he always warned the youngsters about them.

The Chief was standing beside Scott now, hand grasping his elbow and pointing out over various points that had been besieged by small white signs stuck into the ground with awkward cuts of baling wire. Knots of people moved amongst the remains with notepads and audio recorders. Pallett in the distance, hunkering over clumps of soil and crushed house, everywhere she went it was a war zone of strobe flashes and her clucking voice into a recorder.

“Less I know, the better,” Scott said.

“Initial on site thought it was a hot box; spark from the power line or something typical”, Chief said.

Scott dug his toe in, “That’s not right.”

“Yes, that’s why you’ve been brought up here. When the fire folks stepped off they called me with the wonderful news that they were positive we are looking at five separate sources here.”

“Arson, then.”

“Undeniably at this point.”

“What about Mister Spontaneous Candle Riot over there,” Scott gestured at the sweating caretaker, who noticing the attention, resumed stuffing fingers in his mouth and toeing the dirt around him.

“Indeed,” the Chief had a smirk.

“Well all right, I’ll walk this one out a bit, but I’d like to talk to Michael later on,” he wasn’t sure if Layland heard, he was already hobbling off through blackened furniture, flecks of ash in his hair, but it was no matter for now.

It was the context here that he was trying to fascinate himself with, and so far failing. He set off around the perimeter until he reached a hole in the ground, it looked like an aborted well. A sign declared in a sloppy hand that he was looking at a spa, and behind him a creek was giggling. This was the angle he was looking for, this spot felt right. Turning back toward the middle of the rubble, he watched the various investigators and technicians before him, watched as he willed them to blur out of existence, watched as walls reassembled and merry weekend laughter peeled forth again. Spiders were marching up and down his neck again.

Five sources were marked out, and all but the fifth had a body nearby. The fifth source, that was the one. He

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walked over to it. Something popped and showered what used to be a wall with sparks. Michael's spot, Michael who wasn't a lump of roasted meat at the foot of one of the caretaker's antagonistic candles.

Now that was a fact worthy of fascination.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sue Cowling

Michael stared at the woman opposite him, Doctor Warne; it said on her tag. Call her Lisa; she had said smiling at him, as she had walked into the room. He broke his gaze and looked around him. The room was small, with plain painted white walls, and no window. There was a light bulb hanging on the end of a strand of wire. They sat opposite each other, with a table, a water jug and two plastic cups, half-full between them.

Nothing in the room to distract, it was just him, Doctor Lisa Warne and his memories. Oh and the dark, because he knew that was nearby waiting for an opportunity to pounce on him. Watching and waiting for a weak point in his armour. He knew he had to keep it at bay he had to stay strong.

He cleared his throat breaking the silence, and looked down at his hands clenching the arms of his chair, the pain from the burn shot up his arm as he tightened his grasp.

“Start at the beginning Michael, just tell me anything

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that comes into your mind, we have as long as it takes.” She smiled at him.

He reached for the water and gulped a mouthful; it seemed to wash away some of the rawness. He looked across the table, into Lisa’s eyes, trying to gather his thoughts. Maybe she was part of the dark, how could he be sure. He had to trust someone though.

“It was Claire who suggested we go away, have a weekend off from all the studying, she did it all, found the cottage, got it really cheap too, seemed way too cheap, we were expecting a right dump.” Michael paused, watching as Lisa made notes, a scratching sound coming from the pen on paper. She looked up at him, pen poised.

“Go on Michael, you’re doing great, just keep talking and I will take notes. That is okay with you?”

Michael nodded.

“Claire organised food, the time we would leave, everything. All we had to do is show up on time, which we did, for once. We were waiting outside the Uni, and it was Claire that was late, said she had something important to do.”

Lisa looked up

“Did she tell you what kept her?”

Michael shook his head

He took another gulp of water, and Lisa reached over and refilled the glass for him.

“Did not take too long to drive to the cottage, and when we got there it was defiantly everything we had been promised, like I said too good to be true.

“So Saturday what did you do during the day?”

“Not much really, we just chilled, listened to music, played a few games, chatted about Uni and our work, our families, normal stuff. Then later in the afternoon we started to drink, Claire wanted to go for a walk, but none of us was keen, in the end we did go, all of us. We walked through the woods and up the hill to the next cottage, did not take too long, but we were defiantly unfit, or the drink affected us.”

Michael shivered

“What’s wrong Michael, you have remembered something important?”

“That place; the cottage at the top of the hill, it was dam creepy, felt dark, really dark, and the tree canopy that seemed to engulf it.”

He started to shake, and clasped the arm of his chair harder.

“Andy joked about mad axe men and zombies, running out from behind trees. John and Dave they thought it was hilarious, Claire she was looking uncomfortable, suggested we go back.”

He stopped talking and pushing the chair back, he got up and started pacing the room, like a caged animal.

“It was only as I turned to leave, that I realised...” Michael stared off into space, reliving the scene in his mind.

“What did you realise Michael?”

“It was then I realised that whoever lived here could see our place, had a bird’s eye view of us. They could see our

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every move, know what we were doing, what room we were in.”

Michael could feel his voice getting higher.

“I was freaking, totally freaked out, all I wanted to do was go back to the cottage, it was beginning to get dark, and I needed light. I turned and run and run, kept running until I was back at the cottage.”

Walking back over to the table, he collapsed into his chair, clenching the arms, as if they would give him the support he needed.

“You’re doing great Michael; can you tell me what happened next? It was getting dark, how did that make you feel?”

Suddenly the bulb above Michael flickered, making the room appear darker. He jumped up again, screaming, knocking the chair flying.

“What the fuck is happening, they have found me, they are going to get me too.”

He cowered down, covering his face with his arms, as if to ward off something. At that moment, the bulb stopped flickering and the room was again bright, the light reflecting off the white walls creating a stark appearance.

He looked up, and saw Lisa watching him, and feeling foolish; he picked up the chair and sat back down opposite her. His breaths come in rapid gasps, and he tried hard to control it.

“It’s just a faulty bulb. Tell me what’s going to get you Michael, what did you see at the cottage in the dark?”

Michael ignored her question, carrying on talking as if

nothing had happened.

“I turned every light on. Dave said it was like frigging Blackpool illuminations when they all walked in. They know I have this problem with the dark, my friends,” pausing Michael swallowed, as if he had a lump in his throat. “They were my friends, they are gone, all gone, taken by the dark, and it’s still here, it’s going to get us all you know.”

He had trouble breathing, he could feel the panic rising in him again, and what if they were here waiting for him, just outside of his view in the shadows. He felt the sweat as it slowly dripped down his forehead. He brushed the back of his good hand across his forehead, wiping away the sweat.

Lisa put her pen on the table, and leaned forward towards Michael.

“Tell me Michael, what happened?”

“John lit the barbecue and we had ribs and burgers, we had drunk a few more beers, then Claire opened wine and we got through a couple bottles of that as well, maybe more.”

Michael smiled for the first time. Lisa smiled too, watching his face carefully.

“And?” she asked.

“And we were pissed, pissed as newts, we were singing and laughing, cracking jokes, it was good, man it was good. Then we heard them.”

“Heard what Michael, what did you hear?”

Reaching for his glass, Michael shuddered, before

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taking a long gulp of water.

“We heard them wailing and moaning, it was scary, it came from the woods, from the dark woods.” He paused, remembering.

“It was as if we were surrounded, the noise was all around us. Then the doors to the conservatory, we heard them open; something was in the cottage with us. Something was in the fucking cottage with us.”

He shuddered.

“That is when the lights went out. It was black total blackness. I fucking freaked out. John and Dave had to hold me down, while Claire and Andy stumbled about trying to find the cupboard with the torches and candles. I do not remember them coming back, I was just glad when they lit the candles. It was not much light, but it was enough.”

He was now shaking uncontrollably. Lisa reached across the table, pushing his glass towards him.

“Have a drink. We can stop for a while if you want?”

Taking a gulp, he shook his head.

“No. I am telling you it will be too late, it has to be now”. I am not mad you know. Don’t think I don’t know what you think.”

“What do I think Michael?”

“You think I have Nyctophobia, don’t you? I know it is not that, something in the dark is waiting for me, and one day it’s going to get me. Keeping me here in a small room is not going to stop it happening, and when it comes, it will get you too.”

He watched with satisfaction, as for the first time he saw Lisa's composure falter.

"I don't think anything yet, tell me what happened next?"

"We could hear noises, shuffling. Only two torches worked, so John and Claire took one and Andy and Dave the other one. Told me to stay where I was, I felt fucking useless."

He banged the table with his fists; he felt the pain in a detached way, and watched as the water vibrated in the jug.

"John was first to curse, shouting that his torch had gone out, followed few moments later by Dave's curse. I guessed what was coming before it happened. The candles they flickered and went out. I smelt the smoke before I saw the flames. I think it was at that point I went insane.

"What happened next, try to remember."

The bulb flickered overhead; they looked at each other as it went out.

"That's when things suddenly turned tragic." He screamed.

CHAPTER SIX

Barry Lees

Nick arrived at the morgue a few minutes early knowing that Jenny would be fully prepared. Doctor Jennifer Davis was the consummate professional and very attractive with it. Nick brushed his hair back with his fingers and straightened his collar. No tie, as usual. His suit had seen better days; the jacket misshapen through carrying too much in his pockets - keys, glasses case, two mobile phones, wallet, warrant card, loose change, notebook - perhaps it was time for a man-bag? Not much chance of that though in Nick's world. His trousers a little too shiny and shoes in need of a clean.

Jenny came towards him, arm extended for the gentle hand-shake in greeting. Nick wondered how she would react if he bent and kissed her hand but thought better of it. Unprofessional. She did a gruesome job with style and some humour. Not the gallows humour of some who dealt with death on a daily basis but the professional detachment that allowed her to see the human life before her, now

snuffed out, without maudlin pity. He looked at her handwritten notes, a tiny, beautiful script, not the usual medical scrawl, illegible to most people. He just knew that somewhere was a moleskine notebook perfectly scripted, pages full, of her daily life. Beyond work he knew nothing about her. She never mentioned a husband or children but rarely did he mention his wife or the fact they had no children as yet and all that that entailed and impacted on his marriage.

“Hi Jenny. Are you OK? How’s it going with the bodies. A real mess I think?” Nick liked to keep things informal, but get to the point.

“It’s just unbelievable, four young people all dead in a house fire. Just really starting out in life. It’s tragic. Did you find anything unusual?”

“I think unusual would be something of an understatement Nick. The first thing to say is that this was no accident. I would suggest the fire was only started to cover up what had happened,” said Jenny. “There is no smoke inhalation in any of their lungs which can only suggest they were all dead by the time the fire started. At least three of them were fatally injured in some sort of violent attack. With the fourth it is impossible to tell anything because of the burns but it looks that way for him as well. Let’s take a look, shall we?”

Nick leaned forward, hands on the desk. He had not expected this. Three, possibly four, brutal deaths of young fit and apparently healthy Cambridge students and a fifth currently undergoing psychiatric assessment.

“Yes, let’s get started,” he said, shocked.

Jenny picked up her notes and quickly skimmed through, though, as usual, she knew all the facts without them. She handed him a number of photographs

“The first one I looked at, Claire Holloway, has a fractured skull as well as water in her lungs. It would suggest she was hit from behind with something solid like a steel bar. A crow-bar possibly or a length of pipe. Definitely that sort of shape. After the initial blow she was held under water and drowned. Drowning was the cause of death. Bruises on the back of her neck are consistent with being pushed from behind and held down from waist height.” Jenny looked straight at Nick whose face gave away no emotion. Here was a pretty young girl brutally murdered. They had worked together on a few other cases and she had a lot of respect for his professional approach. He respects the dead, the victims, she thought, he will solve this for them.

“I hadn’t expected any sort of violent death here, Jenny. Possibly arson but this puts a whole new slant on the case. Are we talking four murders here?”

“I think so but can’t be sure of anything with one of the bodies, Dave Wilson. Let’s take them one at a time, eh?” Jenny was always methodical.

“OK” said Nick, “You said she drowned, does the water in her lungs tell us anything?”

“Well, it wasn’t from the lake. It contains soap of some sort. With the bruises around her abdomen I would suggest she was forced down into a bath from the side. A

bubble bath perhaps? The fact that she was fully dressed though suggests that the bath was not for her. Nobody runs a bath for themselves without at least starting to get undressed.”

“Interesting,” said Nick, looking at the photo.

“The second one is Andy Baker. He has been hit over the head a number of times with a something very hard and his skull has been completely caved in. It looks like he was hit once from behind and fell over possibly hitting the right side of his head on something hard as he landed and he was then hit repeatedly on the left side as he lay on the floor. It looks to be a very brutal and frenzied attack. This sort of attack does not suggest premeditation. I would say it comes from uncontrolled rage. There is no doubting the intention and this was not an accident.”

It was not like Jenny to speculate on anything like a motive thought Nick as he watched her. There was something else she wasn't saying.

“No other wounds?” He asked.

“No attack wounds, if that is what you mean” Jenny again skimmed her report, just to be sure.

“Is there something I am missing here, Jenny?”

“Can we come to that later. Lets just go through the details on each victim first”

Nick looked at the student. He had been tall, muscular, obviously fit and, looking at the others, he would have presented an attacker with the biggest threat. Does that mean he was the first? If so did the attacker plan the sequence of attacks? But Jenny had talked about

‘uncontrolled rage’ - that didn’t sound like someone planning anything. Possibly this guy interrupted another more controlled attack and took the brunt of it himself, in anger. But how did that fit with initially a single blow from behind and were any of the attacks controlled at all. This looked like a sheer unprovoked brutal assault, the same as on Claire. An intruder or one of the others?

“Jenny, if you are right about the blow from behind, falling down and then a frenzied attack the angles don’t seem to work unless the killer got down on his knees to continue the attack, in which case a lot of the power would have been lost and possibly not caused as much damage. Or, he didn’t fall straight to the floor. Could he have fallen with his head or shoulders, resting on something raised? A bed, table or a chair perhaps? The attack continued and he then slumped to the floor? Was there any other bruising?

“Not from what I can see. Just the head injuries,” She again looked at the notes. “He was wearing earphones. The little white ones from an iPod. There are broken fragments embedded in his left ear.”

“Now that begins to make some sense. He didn’t hear anything coming. Could he have been sitting? The blow to the back of his head suggests that, it’s almost on the crown, or a very tall attacker! He was though the tallest of the group. The bruise on the right could be the second blow as he reacted and then blows raining down as he slumped on to a table perhaps.”

“Could be but he was found lying on the floor in the kitchen.” She replied.

“OK, lets move on to the next one. John, is it?” asked Nick.

“Yes, John Avery. He is less clear cut than the first two. He is very badly burned so it is difficult to establish what caused it, but what is certain is that he died from blood loss. Some sort of open wound which I have not been able to identify. I can confirm that he was not shot. I have not been able to find a bullet or an entry or exit point. I can only suggest, without anything to support this, a stab wound of some sort”

Nick let his mind wander for a few moments. Another brutal attack, suicide or an accident? An accident while trying to help one of the others possibly. A suicide after killing the others - unlikely as Michael was still alive, though maybe John didn't know that at the time. Or a victim just like the others? He was beginning to see a picture emerge. Claire in the bathroom running a bath, attacked from behind and held under water. Andy sitting at the kitchen table listening to his iPod, attacked from behind and battered to death. John possibly stabbed. This was a quiet evening that suddenly erupted in appalling violence.

“He was only partially clothed Nick. Maybe the bath was for him”

“So lets just say John was getting ready to have a bath, Claire was running it for him. Andy was listening to music sitting at the kitchen table. A fairly settled domestic scene. So what happened next? Does number four tell us anything at all?”

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“Sorry Nick but no it doesn’t really tell us much. The fourth body is Dave Wilson but the burns are too intense to give any indication of the cause of death other than the fire. The only thing I can say is that he was curled up, foetal position, which possibly suggests he was being attacked, like the others. As I said when you arrived there was no smoke in any of the lungs so he was dead before the fire started. It is not too much speculation to suggest he died a violent death just like the others but how he died is unknown at the moment but I am not sure what more I can do.

Jenny stared at Nick and then again looked down at her notes, needlessly as she knew exactly what she was going to say.

“One final thing Nick, and this is very disturbing. Each of the bodies has a number carved into the chest. Claire is number one, John is number 2. Dave 3 and Andy number four.” She placed four photographs on the desk displaying, in order, the four crudely numbered bodies. Nick felt his heart jump.

“Oh my God Jenny! What are we looking at here?”

CHAPTER SEVEN (Unsubmitted)

Unfortunately, chapter seven was not submitted. Think of it as an opportunity to see what kind of brief people had to work with...

Tim

The basic premise is that there was a fire in a remote holiday home where 5 students were staying. 4 are dead. 1 Michael is now in the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital.

SECTION DETAILS: (narratives are indicative only of the kind of things to get across in your scene)

MONDAY - AFTERNOON

Doctor continues therapy session with Michael.

Doctor - so what happened then.

Claire pissed off with John wants time by herself. Grabs candles and runs bath

John wakes up and knocks on door. Told f off

Hear a "shit" and a thud - John asks 'you ok in there?'

Claire: "leave me alone" John rejoin us

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Couple of hours later - investigate when not come out and not respond to knocks. John breaks down door - find Claire - smacked head on wall and slumped face first in bath

Doctor: Why not call ambulance or police?

Michael - no phones. No signal out there and no way of getting into town. Clearly dead and at that time no reason to think it more than accident.

John was devastated.

Ends with: Doctor ending the session

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dianne Margaret Williams

Nick ran up the front steps of the police station and pushed open the front door. In the waiting area there were the usual rag tag bunch: a youth sat slumped on one of the chairs looking like a refugee from the hippy movement, bare feet scuffing the lino. A middle-aged woman sat looking cross, her handbag on her lap, her back ramrod straight with a young boy still dressed in his school uniform hunched in a miserable ball next to her. Nick could almost see the thought bubbles over their heads: 'Just wait till your father hears about this' and 'Muuuuuuuummmmm, it wasn't my fault'. Thank god, he and Jane didn't have any of that to deal with.

And there was an older man standing at the counter giving the desk sergeant a piece of his mind. The sergeant looked like he would prefer to be somewhere else but he was being polite and patient, nodding along even if he couldn't get a word in edgeways. Nick was glad he'd never had to have a stint on the front desk. It was the front line

but the front line for all the tedious little cases that usually didn't have a happy ending and which weren't quick to solve and which just got up every copper's nose - lost dogs, thoughtless neighbours, minor domestic disputes.

He moved quickly through the area with just a quick nod to the sergeant and waited with a hand on the door for the sarge to buzz him in. He took the stairs up to the first floor two at a time and ran his swipe card over the box to let him in the detectives' area. It was pretty quiet, most of the rest of them were either out working this case or out on another one that had come in at the same time. With resources stretched so thin, Nick was just glad he wasn't the one in charge of making sure the numbers lined up and everything was covered. He nodded at the few detectives who were in there working at their desks.

Nick's desk was over near a window where at least there was a bit of light to go with the fabulous view of the car park. Someone had left a pile of telephone notes on his keyboard. He pushed them to one side, sat down and logged into his email account. One of the other detectives, Sam, was in the kitchen area making a coffee and he brought one over to Nick.

"Thanks." Sam was the middle aged office gossip, a detective who wasn't going any further up the ladder and he liked to know what was going on with everyone at all times. It was annoying but on the other hand he did know how to make a great cup of coffee. Nick took an appreciative sip.

"How's the case?"

“Going nowhere fast. If this case doesn’t grow a new lead soon...”

“If there’s anything I can do...” Sam didn’t really mean it, Nick knew that. But as there was no information to be had, Sam’s currency of choice, Sam wandered back to his own desk.

Tapping his fingers against the desk, Nick thought about the interview he’d just done with Michael. Was the kid crazy or just plain cunning? If Nick left it to the experts to figure it out they would couch it in some medical jargony gobbledygook and he might never find out the real facts of the matter. Getting two experts in the room always provided at least three opinions in Nick’s experience. He frowned at the screen. He didn’t know which way to jump. His famous gut wasn’t giving up any hunches and he was stuck firmly on the fence. He really had no clue if Michael had done it or not, and if he hadn’t, then who else could be in the frame. At least it made the case interesting. And if Michael was guilty, Nick was going to make sure he went down for it. And if he wasn’t, who was?

He opened his inbox and checked the email quickly. Some follow-up was required on some of his other cases just to finish them off, nothing relevant to this case or anything he couldn’t deal with later. He grabbed the phone messages. The plods had been out canvassing door to door. They’d tracked down some witnesses who had seen the group the night of the incident. They’d been in to the village pub and had been drinking but not excessively. They all looked happy to be in each other’s company. John

and Andy had had a go at the darts board, Claire, Dave and Michael egging them on. Not exactly a rambunctious group. And totally unremarkable. No smouldering looks between Claire and any of the other guys. No smouldering looks between any of the guys. No-one looked jealous or angry or impassioned in any way at all. There was nothing to go on there. To all reports the group was a rather quiet example of the British student at play. And the messages added nothing to that picture.

Someone must have seen something. Nick crumpled the messages and threw them in the bin hard. He sat back in his chair and put his head in his hands. This case was going nowhere fast.

The phone rang. It was his boss's secretary telling him that Detective Chief Inspector Langley would like a moment of his time. Nick patted his hair down and went upstairs. DCI Langley hated to be kept waiting and he particularly hated it if you kept him waiting and looked like you had been dragged through a hedge backwards. It was just one more thing that he could have a go at you over if you weren't careful. Nick didn't care a great deal but he wanted the focus to be on the case rather than on his personal habits.

The secretary waved him towards the door with a smile and Nick knocked on the DCI's door. He popped his head in. "You wanted to see me, boss?"

The DCI was at his desk his head bent towards his computer screen doing a great impression of an important man hard at work. Without looking up from the screen he

waved Nick to a chair and Nick sat and waited. The DCI finished what he was doing and turned away from his screen and looked at Nick. He steepled his fingers and looked at Nick over the top of them. Nick wondered if there was a management handbook that told the higher-ups that this was a good look for the wise boss. It just made him look a bit silly in Nick's opinion. He was one of the fast-tracked university graduates. Around Nick's age, late 30s, nicely greying hair, posh accent and a DCI. Who'd never spent any time on the streets or on the beat or doing any real police work. And who seemed to view all his workforce who had spent their time doing the hard yards with a faint suspicion. Well, right back at you, mate.

"Where are we at on this arson?" DCI Langley gestured at the newspaper on his desk - the front page showed the burned out house with the body bags coming out to the waiting ambulances. "I've got four dead kids, their families ringing up every five minutes wanting some answers and someone to blame. And I've got the landlord and his insurance company breathing down my neck wanting to know when they can get back onto the property to start the clean-up. And I have nothing to tell them." He stood up and leaned on his desk looking down at Nick. "Well?"

"Sorry, boss. I've got nothing." Nick didn't like people leaning over him.

"It's been a week, what am I meant to tell all these people? They expect answers."

Nick was getting a little hot under the collar. DCI Langley seemed to think that if he just leaned in an

impressive way and looked stern something would happen, some new bit of information would break free. He needed to be out there doing the hard yards and then see how easy it all was. “I don’t know what you can tell them. If there’s nothing to tell them, there’s nothing to tell. Much as you might like it if I manufactured some fabulous bit of evidence from out of thin air, there’s nothing. I don’t know what you can tell them. Lie to them.” Nick left the ‘that’s your job, not mine’ unspoken. Nick was doing his best. There wasn’t any more he could do to get answers.

DCI Langley could see that Detective Scott was irritated and calmed himself down a bit. He sat back down and folded his hands on his desk. “I’m getting pressure from all sides on this one, Detective Scott. What do you need? There’s a little more funding suddenly being offered from all sides. Do you need more people on the ground? Support staff? I can squeeze some out of somewhere.”

“It won’t do any good. There’s just nowhere to go on this one. I can’t see a way out or a way forward.” Nick rubbed his head with his hand. “We’ve basically got a locked house, four of the five inhabitants dead and the only one left who knows anything can’t be trusted as a witness or is a suspect with a rock solid insanity defence. And good luck finding out which it is because there’s nothing to go on. No history of bad blood between them, no arguments, and no-one who knows anything at all.”

DCI Langley paused for a moment. “There has to be something you’ve missed. Go back over everything you’ve got. Do whatever it takes. I need you to find something.

Dianne Margaret Williams

And I need it now.” The phone rang and the DCI answered it. Nick got up and let himself out of the office.

CHAPTER NINE

Don Mitchell

As Nick was driving to the Avery's place he was aware – as he always was, on small streets where the houses shouldered up against each other and people hadn't drawn their shades against the night – of the flickering light from the television sets that hadn't been turned off after the news programmes.

Why did the incidental light from a television always seem blue? It always seemed to Nick that TV light sat squarely on one part of the spectrum only but that was impossible. Probably there was an explanation. Perhaps it was technology, perhaps perception.

And of course perhaps he was completely, absolutely wrong. Perhaps he was the only person in all Cambridgeshire, no, in the whole UK, no in the whole damn world! who perceived a TV's incident light as blue. A sobering thought. And a ridiculous one at that.

“Drawing shades against the night,” he said to himself, because that's how he always thought of it. Not to keep

the outside world from looking in, pruriently or covetously, but to keep whatever Bad Things were Out There from seeing how to Get Them. Probably another silly thought never thought by anyone else in all Cambridgeshire, no, in the whole . . . No! Nick, stop it! Especially stop the mental capitalization. He thought perhaps next he'd try mental italics or mental underlining. That would be a good exercise.

And yet Nick knew very well that thinking thoughts that perhaps no one else did was what made him a good detective. It wasn't his physical ability, although he'd subdued a few lawbreakers. He'd never enjoyed that in the least. A bit of adrenalin rush, finished. It couldn't compare to the interviewing room, whether the Station's room or an ad hoc one, such as the one he was about to create. Nick knew himself the master of them, all the more so because he was always careful to hide his mastery.

Nick parked the car a few doors down from the Avery's. He pulled John's photo from the folder and looked at it. The streetlight yellowed it. John, sitting on the ground against a wall, looking up to his left. His expression was uncertain, even questioning. It seemed to him a passive pose, perhaps even an accepting one. What had been outside the frame? Nothing immediately dangerous – the hands and crossed feet told him that. It was as if John were being instructed, having something explained to him, perhaps by a superior or someone he respected or even feared.

Nick didn't think the photographer had suggested the

pose or the expression, and he didn't think that John had either. He felt confident that John had been caught in that pose, with that look on his face, and it occurred to him that unlike the images he and the other detectives were routinely given – family mug shots, basically, though never with identification numbers – this one might itself hold some clues. He'd need to discover who had taken it, if he could.

Nick had seen many times how respect bled into fear, and the reverse. He'd seen the mawkish over-sirred caricature of respect too many times. Had anybody ever tugged at a forelock? Probably never, but no matter. It was the same. And when that happened, the fear was never far away. And John, he thought, had been in that state or very near it.

“At least I don't have to tell them he's dead,” Nick said to himself as he waited for someone to answer the door, “but I hope I don't have to endure any ‘with Jesus in heaven’ nonsense either.”

Of course he couldn't let on how he felt about that, which was that it only got in the way. People would believe what they wanted to. Nick was tolerant, but the issue wasn't tolerance. It was that Jesus, God, heaven, sin and redemption didn't solve crimes. Bringing them in only wasted time. At least as much time as was wasted by being told how wonderful a person the dead one was. A paragon! So fine!

A young woman opened the door. She identified herself as John's sister Julia. After the introductions they sat in the

parlour. Nick refused a drink or tea. It was clear that no one in John's family had been refusing drink that evening. But at least they weren't pissed. No one's speech was slurred, but none of them was entirely right. That might make it easier. Sometimes it did, if the family didn't start weeping and blathering about the dead one.

Nick didn't know whether the constable had told them that the circumstances appeared suspicious. Damn. He should have asked. Well, nothing to do but get at it.

"I'm here to learn more about John," he said, and when three sets of eyebrows were raised, he quickly added, "because a fire of this nature requires explanation beyond physical facts."

"What do you mean?" Julia said, "a dreadful accident, wasn't that it? And a survivor, isn't there? What does he have to say?"

"We're not able to talk to the survivor just yet, because he's in hospital, and it may be many days before he's speaking."

The mother and father made noises and shook their heads, but said nothing.

"Did you know John's companions?" Nick asked.

John's mother said, "We didn't, but our daughter did. John spoke highly of them. They were first-rate students, he said, and they all studied together, went out together. A family, he said, just like a family although they were all equal . . . But no Mum to keep them safe," John's mother said, and began silently weeping.

Her husband shifted uncomfortably and put his hand

on her shoulder. It didn't seem a loving gesture to Nick. Did they disagree about John's companions? Julia got up and walked to the door and back again.

"She's nervous," Nick thought, "she's got something to tell but isn't ready to do it." He wondered if he should try to get her alone, away from her parents, maybe away from the house. No, better to set them against each other – assuming he was correct – and see what happened. It was worth the risk of having them lodge a complaint of insensitivity against him.

"We believe the fire may well have been of suspicious origin, you see," Nick said, watching Julia closely. Her shoulders slumped and she exhaled loudly.

"Suspicious!" the father exclaimed, and the mother's weeping became less silent.

Julia shook her head. "I knew it, I knew it. Those boys, that girl."

"Whatever can you mean?" the mother said loudly, looking at her daughter, anger replacing sorrow, or building on it.

"They've had this conversation before," Nick said to himself, "it's nothing new."

John's family looked at each other. Angry sorrow on the mother's face, resignation on the father's, excitement – yes, that's what it was, Nick thought, excitement – on Julia's. But no one spoke.

"No one is asserting homicide," Nick said, "but we are considering the possibility that the fire was set deliberately in such a way as not only to destroy the house, but to do

harm to those who died.”

“Well done!” Nick thought, “those who died. I’ll be surprised if Julia doesn’t pick up on that,” but although she fixed him in an intense stare, she said nothing.

Nick decided to go ahead with what he usually said in cases like this. He addressed John’s mother but meant it for Julia. “Of course you love and admire your son, and I understand how you feel about his companions. I must say that in police work we appreciate those sentiments and respect them but generally they are not helpful to us in our inquiries.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” the mother said. Julia was again shaking her head.

“Under the circumstances you must excuse me for saying this. Your son and his companions weren’t killed because they were the most wonderful students in the shire. They were killed because they made someone angry enough to kill them.”

They all spoke at once. Murder! Murder! Surely you aren’t suggesting murder?

“Nothing can be ruled out,” Nick said, feeling the satisfaction he always did when stirring the pot, “Arson can be directed against property or against persons. It’s no good pretending otherwise, and in this case there are four deaths that require an explanation.”

They looked at him.

“I am inclined to believe the students were the target,” Nick said, “I will apologize for being so blunt. But surely we must all work together in this? I cannot think you do

not wish an explanation and beyond that, for someone to be brought to the bar in this matter.”

“I knew it,” Julia said, and Nick inclined his head towards her.

John’s mother made a noise. “I’ll speak my mind,” Julia said, “Mother, you were blinded by appearances. That crew was hardly a pack of degenerates but they were no seminary students either.”

“Especially not Claire,” Nick thought, but he said nothing.

“I saw John two weeks ago. I met him at the pub and we drank. Or I should say he drank, and drank, and drank more.”

“Impossible!” John’s mother said, and Julia said, “No Mum, not impossible. I was there, and as he drank more he passed from being happy to maudlin to angry. When he started saying, ‘I’ll show them,’ I asked him what he meant, and he said, ‘Never mind details, I’ll show them I don’t need a sodding degree to make my way in the world, and it’s a fool who thinks the world’s best taken straight on, unveiled,’ and I asked him what he was going on about because although I understood what he was saying, that was clear enough, I didn’t know what he meant.”

“And?” Nick said, “Your thinking here would be valuable.” To Nick it was as if no one else but Julia was in the room. The mother, worthless. The father – well, most likely he knew nothing. So it was Julia.

“He changed the subject. He wouldn’t talk about it, but he made a point of saying that he couldn’t talk about it.

‘I’m not to discuss this,’ were his exact words, and I asked him if it was the drinking or the way-making he couldn’t discuss, and he said it was the way-making, that something was underway, that plans were being made, instructions given, but that no amount of drink could make him tell even his sister what they were.”

She paused, almost theatrically and looked Nick in the eyes. “I think what you must be thinking, that he was not going to complete his degree because something else was more important, that others must be involved, and that he either feared it or couldn’t make himself comfortable with it, and thus had been trying to escape his emotions through drink. As if that ever works.”

“And did you believe him?” Nick asked, “He was drunk, after all, and he’d hardly be the first older brother to try to impress his sister with his worldliness, with unseen and barely-mentioned dangers or plots.”

“I did and I didn’t,” Julia said. “I’m young but I understand all that. My brother was always a bit of an actor, putting on the mysterious when there was no mystery. He could well have been masking something like depression and mindless drinking by imagining an explanation I might accept. Or that he might accept, indeed. If you’re asking me to tell you whether my brother had turned into an alcoholic and was rationalizing it either to himself or hoping to convince me, I’d say that it’s possible but, Detective, I don’t think it’s likely. You’re asking my opinion? My opinion is that there was something to what he said.” She paused.

The Dark

“Something,” Nick echoed.

“Something. I don’t know what it was. My brother appeared to be in the state I’ve described but in truth I don’t know that he was. All I know, and I’d stake my life on it, is that something was wrong and that it had to do with that crowd, all of them. Not one. All.”

John’s mother looked at Julia, and back at Nick. John’s father’s head was down. No one spoke.

“I’ll be taking my leave, then,” Nick said. He gave his card to Julia. “Ring me if anything else comes to mind, please.”

Then it was only a matter of hand shakes and pleasantries – how strange, Nick thought, it’s all been very unpleasant for them but one knows how to behave properly always.

CHAPTER TEN

Elizabeth Mead

Nick pulled his car into the only free parking space and drank the last dregs of his morning coffee. Dr. Warne wasn't expecting him and he preferred it this way. It was much easier to control an interview when your subject wasn't prepared. It wasn't as though he expected the shrink to put up a great deal of subterfuge, but you just never knew. Most of the psych docs he had dealt with in the past were completely invested in the victim-hood ethos of all their patients.

“Poor schlub. It wasn't his fault. He had a crappy childhood.” Just once, he'd like to meet a shrink that didn't live in a values neutral world. It would be such a breath of fresh air to hear one of them say, “Oh, yeah. I can just tell this guy is blowing smoke. He led a privileged world with too little parental supervision and too much money. He's scamming. Fry him.”

Of course, this wasn't exactly Texas, and there was no death penalty in the UK.

As he approached the hospital's reception desk, Nick tried to frame the questions he would ask Dr. Warne. Although his primary purpose of this visit was to try to get a second interview with Michael, it wouldn't hurt to get a firmer grip on what was going on in Michael's world. Nick knew that the only way to get into an interview with Michael was through his psychiatrist, so he focused on what he knew about her already.

Interesting that both the Doctor and Michael had the same type of upbringing. Good schools, lots of vacations abroad, country homes for weekend get-a ways. Chic money. Not the money one made from hard, honest, get your-fingernails dirty work. Money that came from some other generation, passed along to the progeny, with each generation getting softer and weaker.

Great. Now I'm sounding like some dumb asshole with a chip on my shoulders. Nick knew who he was and where he was from, and he liked his life and loved his smart, beautiful, publishing researcher wife, Jane. And he was doing the one job he'd always wanted to do. *I may not believe in God, but I sure as hell know that this time on earth is for getting the guilty bastards and nailing them to the wall.*

Work the puzzle. It always came down to putting the pieces together like some wonderfully intricate jigsaw puzzle. Sift through enough pieces and it would eventually all come together. Each bit of information would eventually add to the bigger picture.

"I'm Detective Scott," as he flashed his credentials and badge. "I need to speak to Dr. Lisa Warne. I believe that

she's about to go on break right about now.” *Love that bright eyed-wife, Jane!* It had been her idea to find out the good doctor's schedule so that he could be here at a convenient time. Not for the first time, Nick was again grateful that Jane had run out of gas at precisely the time he had been driving down that quiet country road on the night they had met.

The receptionist's name was Angela. At least, that was what the name plate said. “She's probably expecting me. Mind if I just go right to her office?” Before Angela could sputter a word, he was walking briskly down the short hall to Dr. Lisa Warne's office just as Dr. Warne was coming out through the psychiatric ward rooms.

“Detective Scott. What are you doing here?”

“Please. It's Nick. Dr. Warne, I just have a few questions I need to go through. I know you're just starting your break and I thought I'd share a cup of tea or coffee with you.”

“Excuse me. You know what time I take my break?” A slight frown started to form.

“Please, Dr. I've got a lot of ground to cover and I need your help. Sometimes it helps to speak to people when you know they aren't under the gun, so to speak.”

“Very well. What is it that you want? Shall we just sit down in my office? And do you really want a cup of coffee? I'd think that you would have just finished a mug on your way over here.”

“How'd you know?” Oh, right. You're a shrink and you probably understand people's routines as much as a police

detective.” *See, Doctor, we’re both in the figuring out people business. Only I put the bad guys in jail and you figure out a way for them to scam the system by pleading insanity.* “Well, yeah, let’s get right down to business. I need to get a better grip on this whole situation.”

As Nick walked past her to settle himself in the chair across from her desk, Lisa raised an eyebrow slightly, rolled her eyes slightly, and thought, not for the first time, that being crazy didn’t mean you had done anything wrong — it just meant you were crazy. Or sad. Or just temporarily broken. And her job was to help her patients reconcile what they felt versus what was real. And after only a day and a half with Michael, she had more questions than answers.

“Detective, how can I help you? Don’t you feel that it’s a little too soon for me to have a full work up on Michael?”

“Nick, please. Michael was the only one who made it out of that house alive. He was catatonic when we first brought him here to the hospital,” Nick was only slightly worried that he might insult Dr. Warne. Sometimes that unnerved a subject and made them say more than they intended, and he knew that he didn’t have much time.

“Well then, Nick, why don’t you just tell me what you really want out of this interview.” Better to let him show his cards and know what the police were thinking. The information help her unravel what was going on in Michael’s psyche, and God knew, this was going to be a long, drawn out mess from what she had already deduced

in just this short of a time with her patient. She picked up a pen in her right hand and edged the notepad closer to the edge of the desk.

“Doctor, the medical examiner has already determined that all four of the victims were dead before the fire started. Michael was able to make it out with just a few minor burns. That pretty much leads me to believe he knows exactly what went on before and we couldn’t get a single coherent word out of him on Sunday night. He’s a witness. In fact, he’s our ONLY witness. And we’ve got four grieving families that want to know why their kids are never going to spend another holiday with them.”

Dr. Warne leaned forward slightly, tapping the pen rapidly against the notepad, and asked, “Are you telling me that Michael is a suspect?”

“As I said, he’s our only witness. And yes, we always have to take a closer look at the last man standing in a crime like this. And by the way, I figure it’s your normal M.O. to ask the probing questions, but right now I need answers and information. And I need to speak to Michael. And something tells me that you already know that those four kids were dead before the fire started.” He’d noticed her slight, subtle agitation when he’d mentioned the medical examiner’s report.

Lisa abruptly put the pen down and placed her hands face down on the notepad. She drew in a breath and tried to determine how much she would say. On the one hand, she needed to protect her patient. That was her first priority. On the other hand, she was horrified by the fire

that had engulfed the country home she knew and had even visited in the past.

“I want to help you, Nick. I just don’t know if I can. Michael has been back and forth in quasi-delirious states for the last twenty-four hours. He was catatonic when you saw him because of the meds he had taken the night of the incident. I still haven’t gotten to the bottom of it, but I believe he got a severe overdose of the Vyvanse, Prozac and Guanfacine that he was routinely taking. We also found significantly elevated blood alcohol levels and that’s a powerful cocktail of mood altering substances when combined.”

“So you’re telling me he was a junkie?”

“No, it’s not that. He has been taking those three doctor prescribed prescriptions for quite some time. Vyvanse, while it is originally prescribed for epilepsy, is also used for anxiety. Prozac, as I’m sure you know, is used for depression, and the Guanfacine is used to tone down mood swings. When you add alcohol, the mix becomes somewhat volatile. And if you double up on the dosages of the drugs, you’re going to be pretty zoned out.”

“Doctor, do you think I could talk to him? Could he handle some questions now? I’m not out to pin this on him. I just need to see if he has any information that can help us.”

“We’ve dialled back his meds to tolerable levels. And, while he seems to be stable, I don’t know if he will speak to you. I can barely get him to speak to me. And he certainly wasn’t making much sense last evening, but this

morning,” she paused, wondering if she should add this next statement, “he does seem to be fixated on Sunday afternoon. In fact, he was rather looping on this, even though none of it makes much sense to me yet. He kept looping about the rabbit’s clock.”

“The rabbit’s clock?” Nick raised his eyes and looked toward the office door. “Doctor, is Michael rational enough for me to talk to him right now?”

Lisa gave a slight shrug of her shoulders, “Crazy? That’s pretty much a relative term here. Crazy is sometimes a temporary place where we all go when things don’t make sense. And yes, in this case, I would say that Michael is ‘crazy’ in that he doesn’t really understand those things that don’t make sense to him. But I don’t know if the fire is what made him crazy or if he was already in that place to begin with.”

Leaning forward in earnest, Nick again pushed, “So, Doctor Warne. Do you think we can give it a shot? Talk to Michael to see if there is any information he can give us? It’s my only lead right now.”

Lisa sat back from the desk, pushed her chair away and got up on her feet. “I may be doing this against my better judgement, Nick, but perhaps it won’t hurt to have you talk informally to Michael. But I warn you,” and she looked sternly into Nick’s eyes, “If you start badgering my patient, I don’t care what he says, I will have you out of there so fast your head will spin and you will never, I repeat, NEVER get a chance to talk to him again as long as he’s in my care.”

The Dark

Nick sprang to his feet and quickly opened the door for Dr. Warne. “Whatever you say, Doctor. In fact, maybe it would help if you’d ask some of the questions. I can just be a fly on the wall. Or maybe I will just be another Psychiatrist with you, you know, an additional consult — do you have a spare white coat?”

The two of them walked in silence down the hall to the psychiatric ward.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Pete Becker

The hospital room didn't have the usual subdued lighting. It was bright enough for surgery. All the lights were on, including some lights on floor stands. The door to the bathroom was open, and the light in the bathroom was on, too.

Doctor Warne spoke first. "Michael, you've been through something awful. You're scared, and with good reason. I know you don't want to talk about it, even to think about..."

"They're all dead. All of them. Dead."

"Yes, Michael. It was a terrible thing."

"I don't want to talk about it. Please don't make me! It was horrible! They're all dead!"

"Yes, Michael. I know you want to forget it. And in a little while you'll be able to. But first, we have to find out what happened."

"No. No! Nothing happened! It was all a dream! That's it. Just a dream. A bad dream."

“Michael, it’s important that you talk to Detective Scott. He needs to know what happened.”

Michael’s eyes flicked toward Nick, then shifted to Doctor Warne, then to the door to the bathroom, then back momentarily to Nick, never settling on any one spot for as much as a second. Nick spoke.

“Michael, your friend Claire drowned, and the house ...”

“No, it was a dream! Just a dream!”

“It was not a dream. Claire drowned, and the house ...”

“Not a dream? Not a dream? No, not a dream. Not a dream. Claire drowned. Yeah, Claire drowned.” He looked abruptly at Nick. “How do you know that Claire drowned? You were watching!”

“No, Michael, we found her ...”

“Found her? You were looking for her? Why? Were you looking for John and Dave and Andy too? Looking for us? Who are you?”

Doctor Warne spoke calmly. “Michael, it’s all right. Relax. This is Detective Scott ...”

“Detective? Detecting what? I didn’t kill them! I didn’t! Why is he here?”

“Michael, we talked about this. He’s trying to find out what happened ...”

“Find out what happened? Why? They’re all dead! They all got numbered, and then they died! Look at me! I’m number five!” He tore open his shirt, and on his chest was the number ‘5’, red and oozing blood. “It’s going to get me! It won’t stop until it gets me, too! Don’t let it...”

“Michael! Try to calm down. Detective Scott wants to help you. He ...”

“Help me? It’s too late! It’s going to get me! Nobody can help! They’re all dead! And I’m next!”

Doctor Warne reached for a valve on Michael’s IV line and gave it a small twist. A few seconds later Michael stopped talking. His gaze drifted up toward the ceiling and his head settled back against the pillow. The muscles in his neck and face relaxed.

Doctor Warne turned to Nick. “I knew this was a mistake. You’ve accomplished nothing, except to get him overexcited and maybe jeopardize his recovery. I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“Sorry, ma’am, I can’t do that. He’s the only eyewitness to this horrible crime. We have to find out what happened.”

“Detective, this young man is my patient. As you can see, he’s been through a very traumatic experience, and making him relive it so soon afterwards could damage him permanently. I won’t allow it.”

“Doctor, whoever did this is still at large, maybe looking for someone else to kill. Your concern for your patient is all well and good, but I have to worry about future victims as well. I know it’s risky, but you have to cooperate. For their sake. The longer this takes, the more chance someone else will die.”

Doctor Warne pursed her lips and gazed past Nick’s shoulder. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through her nose. She glared at Nick.

“All right. You can continue questioning him. But if he gets too worked up this interview is over.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Nick turned to Michael.

“Michael, I know this is hard. Take your time. Tell me what happened to John.”

Michael’s eyes were closed. He spoke slowly: “John? John was my friend. We were on holiday, him and me and his girlfriend Claire and ...”

“Yes, Michael, we know all that. How did he die?”

Michael slowly shook his head back and forth. After a few seconds of silence he spoke: “Shouldn’t I have a lawyer? I know I’m supposed to have a lawyer. You didn’t read me my rights. Are you going to read me my rights?”

“Michael, you’re not a suspect. We’re just trying to find out what happened. You were there. Tell us about John.”

“Mmm hmm. John. And Claire. John and Claire. Claire and John. Claire drowned.”

“Yes, we know that. What happened to John?”

“John? Oh. John’s dead, isn’t he? I saw him. He’s dead. Yeah, he’s dead. John’s dead.”

“Yes, Michael, John is dead. You were there. Tell me what happened.”

“What happened? What happened. Yeah, tell you what happened. You’re going to stop it? ‘The Dark’? You’ll stop it? You’ll make it stop?”

Doctor Warne gave Nick a look that would have wilted a large plant. Nick gave a small shrug and turned back to Michael.

“Yes, Michael, I’ll make it stop. But I can’t do that until I know what happened. Focus, Michael. Focus. What happened?”

“What happened. Claire drowned. Claire and John. Met at University. Odd couple, nobody thought it would last. Been almost a year, though ... they’re still together. Umm. Were still together. Until Claire drowned.”

“Michael, what happened to John?”

“John. John. Claire and John. Claire drowned... We found her, drowned in the stream, found her with a slash across her chest. Huh. Nice boobs. John was so lucky. Nice boobs. With a slash between them.”

“A slash?”

“Slash. What we thought, maybe a cut from a rock. In the stream. John said it looked like a number ‘1’. Oh, god, she was the first. And John was second, after he got his number.”

“He got his number? What do you mean? What happened after you found Claire?”

“After we found Claire? Number ‘1’? What happened? Umm... We still thought it was an accident. Yeah, accident. John started drinking. Guinness... Guinness... He brought a case, and it was in the refrigerator and he started drinking... Then he had to take a piss.” Michael’s head rolled slowly to one side.

“Michael, stay with me. Michael! What happened to John?”

“John? Oh. John. He had to take a piss. He went down the hall to take a piss. Down the hall to the bathroom. No

The Dark

lights in the hall. Down the dark hall. He was pretty drunk. Yeah, pretty drunk. We thought he'd done it to himself."

"Done what, Michael? What did John do?"

"What did John do? What did he do? Carved a number '2' on his chest. Yeah. A number '2'... He was drunk, did it to himself in the bathroom. That's what we thought. He was drunk. But he was scared, too. Ran out of the house, yelling that he had to go get help. Pitch dark out, he shoulda stayed in the house. He was so scared. Had to run. Dave, too. Scared. Had to run. Dave ran after John."

"What time was this?"

"Time? I don't know. ... Dark outside. Pitch dark. No moon. Not midnight yet. Pitch dark. Eleven? Maybe?"

"So John and Dave went to get help. That left you and Andy?"

"Went to get help. Yeah. Pitch dark. They shoulda stayed with me and Andy. We were safe there, in the light."

"We found John's body in the house. How did it get there?"

"How did it get there? John came back. Came back, yeah. Came back with Dave. He was dead. John was dead. Dave was crying, covered with blood, carrying John. Blood dripping from his wrists. John's wrists. Still dripping blood. All over Dave, all over the floor. Blood everywhere. John was dead."

"What did the rest of you do when Dave came back with John's body?"

"John?... John... Yeah, John's dead. Dripping blood. Blood all over everything. Shouldn't have gone out in the

dark. Dave, too. Shouldn't have gone out in the dark. It's after me, too! It's after me!"

"Michael, this is important! Stay with me! Michael! What did you guys do?"

"Do? What did we do? Dave! Dave started yelling! Not just crying. Yelling, too. Said his chest hurt. Pain in his chest. Ripped open his shirt. Still yelling. There was more blood. On his chest."

"Blood on his chest?"

"Blood. On his chest. Yeah, blood on his chest. Carved in the skin on his chest. Number '3'."

CHAPTER TWELVE

R. Dale Guthrie

“Seemed genuine,” said Detective Scott.

“What?” said Dr. Warne. She had already begun to mentally compose her notes on Michael’s mental state as they walked from the guarded psychiatric ward to the offices and back exit. It was one of the coping mechanisms she used to remain objective when confronted with the pain of another human being, but delving into clinical analysis did tend to distract her from observing other people around her.

“Seems genuine,” he repeated without further explanation.

“Michael? Yes, his distress is real, just like the burn to his hand. Why? Do you think he’s responsible for the, er... incident?”

“Too early to tell. I’ve got some other leads to track first. I don’t like jumping to conclusions this early, but my instincts tell me he’s properly upset. That doesn’t tell me if he’s bothered that his friends died in a fire, or if he’s

unstrung on account of killing them his self.”

“Hmm,” Lisa said, letting the noncommittal noise stand in for agreement or disagreement. It wasn’t her place to assign guilt or innocence, but to help the poor boy process his shock as healthfully as possible.

“Well, I’ve got some phone calls to make, Doctor. Same time tomorrow then?”

“Ah, right. I suppose a night’s rest could put some more distance between Michael and his trauma, and that distance may allow him to process it a bit more thoroughly. Just don’t expect to get a great deal more from him tomorrow. Can’t it wait another day or two?”

“But you just said a good night’s sleep...”

“Is neither a panacea nor a guarantee. Confronting him with his trauma too aggressively can cause a greater delay in his recovery and any hope of collecting any coherent facts. Give me some time to help him process his trauma, and he’ll make a much more useful witness.”

Nick opened his mouth to argue, but now wasn’t the time. He would come back tomorrow, and every day for the next month if necessary, and there was nothing that she could do about it. He had the authority to interview the primary witness, and the duty to mete out justice no matter how broken up this Jones boy might be. But there was no point in antagonizing his doctor.

“Right. I’ll see if I can put off the next interview, but no promises. Fair?”

She sighed in resignation. So far the detective had been as reasonable in his interrogation as could be expected, but

his approach was a hinderance to her work. Still, he had a duty to do, just like her. “Please, do what you can.”

“Will do. Take care, Doctor Warne.”

“Detective Scott,” she said by way of salutation. Lisa watched him shuffle down the hall toward the exit, his shirt collar twisted at the nape of his neck, poking above his rumpled grey jacket. There was an sharp mind underneath his disorderly exterior, but it was on just one track. She would have to guard carefully against his bullish tactics for Michael’s sake. Even if he did do the crime, no one was helped by his current mental state.

She passed by the nurse’s station where Timothy was on the phone finishing up directions to the hospital. He caught her eye and held up a finger for her to wait a moment, finished confirming the last two street names, and hung up.

He shook his sandy blonde head as if to dislodge one thought to make room for another waiting in the queue behind it. She found the gesture endearing, but immediately dismissed the thought as unprofessional.

“The parents of your patient, Mr. Jones, arrived while you were in the Dr. Warne. They insisted on seeing the doctor in charge of him right away, so I sent them to your office,” he wrinkled his forehead and tilted his head down like an errant school boy and finished with, “I hope that was alright?”

Adorable. “Yes, that’s fine. Can’t have distress parents disrupting other people’s business. You did just fine.” She resisted patting him on the head, but only just.

Lisa headed up the stairs where most of the administrative offices were, and could see her door was ajar from all the way down the hall. She passed a few of other doctors with whom she was acquainted with, giving friendly nods as they went by. When she approached her own door, she steeled herself for what was almost surely going to be a highly emotional scene.

Her office always felt a bit cramped with just her in it; she only had the one rather short bookshelf to keep all of the periodicals, reference materials, notes, and in-progress patient files, as it sat beneath a tiny window. She might have gotten a bigger set of shelves, but she refused to give up the natural light that they would block. Her desk was of moderate size, with a computer occupying far too much of it's surface.

At the door, she surveyed the complete lack of available space. A woman in her early forties sat in one of the two ancient metal chairs that came with every office, no matter the size. The woman's hair style looked as if it had been picked from a magazine twenty years ago, though her makeup was done with a tastefully light touch. Her apparently waterproof mascara did not run, but it was evident that she had been crying from the puffiness of her round eyes.

The other person, presumably Mr. Jones, was standing behind her desk, reading the framed certificates and diplomas which hung there. He wore no tie, but it was obvious from the cut of his suit that his normal attire included one. It was the everyday sort that office workers

wore, reminding Lisa of Detective Scott's; neater, but still a bit ruffled from what may have been a long trip. He started right off, "Are you the doctor seeing to my son?"

"Yes, I am Doctor Lisa Warne," she said from her doorway, "would you care to have a seat?" she gestured to the other empty guest's chair.

Mr. Jones looked down at her desk as if only then realizing that he might not have been welcome where he was. He rounded the desk, thrust his hand forward and said, "Greg Jones, and my wife, Jo," he tilted his head toward the woman. They shook hands and then he said, "How is he? I want to see him."

"Is he badly hurt?" said Mrs. Jones, leaning back in her chair to address Lisa from behind her husband. "He's going to be alright isn't he?"

"Please, Mr Jones, have a seat," Lisa said, standing her ground until he began to move. *This one's gong to be a handful*, she sighed inwardly. She had long ago learned a number of methods for taking control of a situation where men did not seem to heed the authority of women. Judging by his introduction, she was going to need to employ a number of them. Lisa perched on the edge of her desk, rather than sitting in her own chair. Physical elevation sometimes lent greater weight to her opinions with men like this.

Mr Jones sat on the edge of the chair, leaning forward. His posture was an unconscious reaction to her cues of authority. *So far, so good*, she thought.

"The police said Michael was in a fire. But you're a therapist..."

“Psychologist,” she corrected, “and yes, he was in a fire, but only sustained minor burns to one hand and some smoke inhalation. What he is being kept here for is the psychological treatment that he is in dire need of.”

Mrs. Jones eyes widened, but just as she opened her mouth to say something, her husband jumped in.

“What do you mean ‘dire need’? My son is not some kind of crazy person. He’s just had a terrible shock is all, and will do just fine at home, thank you very much.”

“I’m afraid that Michael is not just suffering from shock, Mister Jones, which would normally be enough for us to keep him under observation in any event. The trauma he has experienced has cause him to exhibit a number of symptoms of post traumatic stress syndrome.”

“Like the soldiers coming back from the wars?” said Mrs. Jones. Her lip quivered and tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes before she regained her composure.

Lisa felt a twinge of guilt for having to be so forceful with Mrs. Jones’s husband. It was obvious the woman was distressed by the whole situation, and a confrontation over her son was not helping to alleviate that anxiety. She moderated her tone and addressed them both, “I’m afraid he might be a danger to himself or possibly others until he has been guided through the trauma and begins to deal with it in a healthy fashion.” Looking directly to Mrs. Jones, she said, “You want him to get the best care possible, don’t you?”

Mrs. Jones nodded her agreement.

“Then let us help him and keep him safe while he

heals.”

“That’s all well and good, but we need to see our son,” Mr. Jones said.

“I’m afraid that won’t be productive at this point.”

“Not productive? I don’t give a flying f...”

“Gregory!” said Mrs. Jones, hiding her outburst with her hand.

“I don’t care,” he continued, emphasizing each word with an irritated burr in his voice, “if it’s productive. The boy needs his family, and you can’t keep us from him.”

“It’s not as simple as that, Mr. Jones. What is more important... your son’s emotional well-being, or your desire to comfort yourself by taking him where he can’t be kept from harming himself?”

“Harming himself?” Mrs Jones said, her eyes so wide they looked as if they might not fall out of her head.

“Yes, he’s a danger to himself, as I said earlier. Possibly others too.”

“Nonsense! He’d never harm a fly,” said Mr Jones, and his wife straightened her back giving a nod of agreement to his point.

“I’m sure that when he’s fully himself, there would be no danger of him harming anyone, himself included, but in his current state, he may not be able control his impulses. What he feels now is confusion and pain that he can’t manage yet...”

“We’ll help him manage just fine, thank you. We’ll keep a watchful eye on him; He’ll never be alone.”

Mrs. Jones added, “He’s a good boy, a good Christian

who would never take his life or hurt an innocent person.”

“I’m afraid that’s not the point. He’s not himself right now, and...”

“And it doesn’t matter! He’s our son,” Mr. Jones said. “We know what’s best for him, and that’s getting him out of your loony bin, away from your quackery and back home where he can rest in peace and quiet. I’ll have our priest come over to council him if he needs it.”

Lisa knew she was losing the argument anyway, but the insult to her profession was a step too far. “Mister Jones,” she said, her tone firm, “we have already detained your son under the Mental Health Act. It is for his own safety, and I cannot and will not compromise his safety or well being, not even to comfort his obviously overwrought parents.”

“But you can’t...”

“I can and I have. You can bluster and insult me all you like, but Michael’s welfare is my top priority. When he is ready, and not one jot before then, I will invite you to visit with him.”

He went quiet at Dr. Warne’s outburst, but his face turned a bright shade of pink. Between clenched teeth, he spaced out his words. “You can not do that. He hasn’t done anything wrong, and I won’t have him jailed like a common criminal.”

“No one is saying he has done anything illegal, that is not my purpose here. His confinement is for his well being,” she replied, trying to sooth the man. Lisa cursed herself for losing her temper in the face of understandably

worried parents.

“It’s not right,” Mrs. Jones said. Once again, her back was straightened, and her eyes were clear, her gaze direct. “You must release him. We know what’s best for our son. He needs us.”

“I can’t do that, I’m sorry. Won’t you please just calm down and consider this rationally?”

Mr Jones jumped from his chair, fists clenched and his arms rigid at his sides.. “Rationally? Rationally! You want rational, I’ll give you rational -- a very rational phone call from our very rational solicitor,” and stomped his way to the door.

Mrs Jones gave a sharp nod in agreement, and then confusion muddled her stern expression. “We have a solicitor?”

From the doorway, Mr. Jones let out an exasperated sigh. “We’ll be hiring one directly.” He turned to Lisa and said, “Expect his phone call tomorrow,” then turned and left.

“Come along Jo,” he said from the hall.

Mrs Jones stood, clutching her purse in front of her. Her shoulders were slumped and she tilted her head much like Timothy had when he apologized for letting them into her office. Somehow though, instead of seeming contrite, she gave the impression that she was reasoning with an errant child.

“I know you mean well, but nobody knows Michael like we do. We really can take care of him.”

“Mrs. Jones, I promise that I’ll do everything in my

power to help him, but I cannot...”

From the door way, Mr. Jones barked at his wife, “We’re leaving. Now, Jo,” then turned to leave once again, his angry footsteps echoing down the hall. Mrs. Jones gave Lisa a weak smile, and then followed quickly after.

Brilliant. It’s always lovely when the lawyers get involved. I should have handled that differently. She let out a long, frustrated sigh. “Nothing for it, suppose,” she said to the empty office. “Best to just get on with your day, Lisa.”

A trained psychiatrist talking to herself. Now that’s a good sign.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Claire Woodier

“Before we go in,” Dr Lisa put her arm across Nick to stop him from entering the room. “just watch him for a moment, I want you to tell me what you see.”

Nick’s eyes recoiled from the violent halogen light that had been temporarily installed in the interview room.

“Fuck me!” he said, blinking to acclimatise. “What’s with the romantic lighting?”

“Forget that for a minute.” Lisa was impatient. “*Watch* him.”

Michael Jones was sitting on an institutional chair at an institutional table in the middle of the room. His fingers and feet were tapping manically, his eyelids were heavy and his eyes were rolling upwards into his skull. Nick knew what that felt like.

“He’s nodding off.” Nick said.

“Yes, but *look!*” Lisa was impatient. Michael’s head was giving in to gravity now, and he was drifting off into sleep. Suddenly his whole body convulsed himself up from the

chair, every vein in his head was instantly bloated, and he was reddening rapidly with the silent scream that was emanating from his open-stretched mouth and eyes. He slammed his head against the wall and was using his fist to punch the side of his skull repeatedly into the brick like a pinball machine. Lisa and Nick moved quickly.

“Some help please!” the doctor shouted up at the gods as she fumbled with the keys.

“Give me those.” Nick snatched them from her trembling fingers. “You sort out the syringe or whatever.”

“We *can't* sedate him!” she said as they moved through the door towards Michael, who had now settled his continuing self punching into a steady rhythm. They lowered themselves around him, like he was a cornered animal.

“There *is* no syringe for Michael.” she whispered. “We couldn't send him back to darkness.” She pulled her eyes away from Michael and focussed them intently on Nick. “Look what happens.”

Nick felt a ball of panic fall from his chest into his backside.

“So how do we...” Two men hurried into the room behind them.

“Get control of this situation?” Lisa finished Nick's question and continued with her own. “For whose benefit? Yours? Mine?” She gestured towards the two men who were now restraining Michael, each holding him with both hands by his wrists, opening out his arms away from his bloodied head. This movement made his body go limp,

and the patient gave into his Restrainers. The doctor's eyes continued to ask Nick the question.

"Cause sedation is the last thing he wants." Nick answered, shaking his head.

The industrial light they had installed in there had been prescribed by the doctor. Michael's Nyctophobia was so severe he required the most aggressive of lights to make him feel at ease. The only problem was that now, his paranoia had progressed to include his own darkness, and sleep was now his enemy too. The doctor continued with the detective whilst the men tried to settle Michael back into his chair:

"He has a form of Narcolepsy now. Most of us don't dream when we're nodding off because we're entering the initial stages of the sleep cycle. Michael enters the REM stage from the second he closes his eyes," She nodded with an eye-blink at the two men leaving the room. "Which amounts to a pretty horrifying cocktail of neuroses. Michael suffers from instantaneous Night Terrors."

The men had struggled to get Michael's limp limbs back onto the chair, so they left him slumped and exhausted on the floor sat against the wall. He was staring at his knees. Nick noticed that the room suddenly felt incredibly silent.

"Listen Michael," He moved off his own chair and onto the floor. Nick was on this guy's level, but out of his eye-line. "I *have* to talk to you today about your friend Dave."

Michael was motionless. Nick looked at the doctor who was watching Michael intently from her seat at the table. He blew out an imaginary candle to catch her attention.

Get on the floor, he said with his eyes, and understanding the logic, the doctor complied. Michael began to tap his hands and feet again.

“Dave Wilson is dead.” Michael uttered the words but didn’t look up from his tapping.

“We know this Michael,” Nick said, glancing at Lisa. “we have a body. We have a mutilated body, *Dave’s* mutilated body at the morgue.”

The tapping stopped. The silence was intensified by the oppressive light. Nick found himself holding his breath.

“I know. I was there.” Michael resumed his tapping, and Nick finally exhaled.

“You were there?” Nick couldn’t hide the exhilaration in his voice. “Did, did you see what happened?”

The tapping paused again.

“We both did. Andy and I.”

“You and Andy both saw what happened to Dave?” Nick wanted to fast-forward through this coaxing. “Did you see what they did to him?”

Michael looked up with only his eyes at Nick. His face terrifyingly still, his voice incredibly restrained. He was clearly angered by Nick’s enthusiasm:

“I saw what IT did to him.”

Lisa, fascinated by the shift in Michael’s mood, stepped in.

“Michael, do you believe that Dave was maimed and killed in this way by *something*, not *someone*?”

Michael’s demeanour shifted up another notch:

“He was stupid! He was panicking. Crying and

snivelling over that number.”

“But wouldn’t you have been worried Michael?” asked the Doctor. “The others had numbers carved on their chests and they had already been murdered.”

“Precisely! He needed to get a grip. If we hadn’t been preoccupied with calming his ass down and hiding ourselves away, we might have been able to figure out that the fucking thing LIVES in the dark! That’s where it lives! We could have beaten the system and saved him.”

The Detective was flicking through the file again, now opened out on the floor, morgue photographs placed around as horrifying visual aids:

“But you were the only one without a number Michael! As much as Dave was panicking in that situation, you should have been feeling safe, because YOU had no indication that you were to be a victim.”

“*it didn’t matter! Don’t you see?*” Michael screamed, jumping up suddenly, flailing and shuddering around the room: “It *lives* in the *dark!*” Nick and Lisa were transfixed as Michael continued pacing, laughing mockingly at his own semblance of stupidity: “We were hiding in the fucking basement! The *basement* for fuck’s sake! You head for the dark when you hide!” Michael froze, “*but it was the darkness that killed him.*” and flared his nostrils with disgust at Lisa and Nick’s naivety.

“We watched the Darkness; the Night; Mr Black, who the fuck knows, *pull Dave’s skin apart.* Great gashes opened up on his arms, *like he was being ripped open.* We could hear the tearing Detective. We watched him scream so hard we

thought his insides would come out of his mouth, and then we watched it pull that screaming mouth open until it wrenched his jaw right off.” Tears were rolling down his face. “So you’ll pardon me if I didn’t count too much on getting off lightly.”

The Doctor and the Detective were looking up at the defiant twenty-year old kid from their positions on the floor. He was upright and breathless with adrenalin. They were stunned.

“I think we ought to leave this here for now.” said Dr Warne, taking Michael’s pulse with his wrist as Detective Scott picked himself and his file papers up off the floor. “We’ll come back to this another time.” She motioned to the door, and the two men from before came in and led the flushed and bloody kid away. The Doctor switched off Michael’s Halogen lamp. Nick moaned quietly with relief as the room suddenly became much easier to be in.

“Could he be faking that Doctor?” Nick asked, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands.

“Could that level of fear be manufactured?” she clarified. “No. Not in my opinion.”

Nick opened his shirt collar and loosened his tie. He was sweating; it had been hot in that small room with the powerful light on.

“But has he always had this paranoia?”

“You mean, did he suffer with this before the events of this weekend?” Lisa raised her eyebrows as she contemplated her answer: “Difficult to determine I’d say.”

Nick sighed, exasperated at the amount of blanks he

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had to fill in.

“But,” the Doctor continued. “I certainly don’t think it could have helped.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Montree Whiles

“Me-Oh-My-Oh!” Lisa said to herself after a long sigh.

She slammed the car door shut once she was in and white-knuckled the steering wheel. Resting her forehead on the wheel, she breathed deeply and sighed occasionally. A while later she sat up with resignation then removed her chignon to let her brown hair fall freely about her shoulders.

“Okay, where to Jeeves?” She said out loud to herself then chuckled.

Receiving no answer from within the empty vehicle, she inserted the key into the ignition and turned it. The quiet engine of her car came to life and an orchestra resumed playing a piece from Haydn on the CD player. She pulled out of her parking spot and guided the car towards the exit. Pulling out onto the lane she gradually speeded up to the limit. The lovely oranges, reds, and golds of Fall foliage lined the road on either side and the centre divider bloomed with Rudbeckia, Eupatorium, Dallas Blues, and

Switchgrass.

“I think the mail should be first. I hope I get something good today.” She said to herself.

The drive to the post office was uneventful. The sky’s palette of purples, pale oranges, and light blues were a soothing backdrop on her journey. As she pulled into the parking lot of the post office she noted absently the Royal Mail logo designating their suite in the office park. Alighting from the car, she pulled her satchel out behind her.

The darkening interior of the post box area wasn’t dark enough to trigger the overhead lights but sufficiently lacking in light to make her pause to allow her eyes to adjust. Walking slowly to the bay in which her box was housed, she shouldered her satchel and elbowed it in tightly against her body. She smiled briefly to herself as she noticed her gesture of habit.

“Old habits never die.” She whispered to herself.

Arriving at her box she flipped her keys through her fingers and then stopped at a small silver coloured key. She slid this into her box, rolled up on tiptoe and peaked into its interior. She sighed.

“No love today.”

Turning on her heel after closing the door and relocking it, she walked towards the entrance. Her pace quickened at the sound of another box closing further down the row of bays. She gasped as she passed through the doors and moved quickly to her car. Pressing the button that locked her doors before closing the car door, she shrugged her

bag into the passenger seat and then inserted the key into the ignition. The car purred to life and she backed immediately from the space after a quick look-see behind her. As she was drawing close to the exit she saw someone exit the post office suite; a woman in sensible shoes, a dark skirt, blouse, and sweater.

She passed a few pubs, storefronts, and parks on the way home. Few people were out in the nippy evening air. It was dinner time for most folks.

“Next on the list would be the makings for dins. I haven’t seen Mrs. Peebles from the corner market for a while. I wonder what’ll be in the goody case.”

When she arrived at the little market around the corner from her house, the evening had definitely progressed to night. Bright lights shone in the parking lot and the lights through the storefront windows also promised warmth. As she was getting out of her car, she could see a few people shopping inside. She grabbed her shopping bags from the back seat and locked her doors before heading in.

“Hullo there, Mrs. Peebles.” She said to a plump middle-aged woman behind the counter checking out a customer. Mrs. Peebles paused long enough to waive.

Heading to the far left of the store she browsed amongst the vegetables and fruits. Selecting what she needed for a casserole and some fruit for breakfast, she headed for the goody case. Mrs. Peebles did the baking for the store with the help of an assistant. Being the end of the day, the case was quite bare.

“Oh, phooey.” She murmured, disappointed. Starting to

turn the basket away, she paused just as Mrs. Peebles hustled over as quickly as her stout little legs would carry her.

“Lisa. I saved a tray for you behind the counter. You know we always take care of you here.” Reaching behind the counter she pulled out a covered tray and set it on the glassed in counter top.

“Mrs. Peebles you don’t have to go through so much trouble. You and Mr. Peebles are too good to me.”

“It’s the least we can do after you helped our grandson. He’ll be here over the holidays you know. You’re a good person, Lisa, with a kind heart.”

Lisa perused the tray for a moment.

“I’ll have the cookies, and both loaves of bread. The baklava looks scrumptious. Two pieces of that for my tea tomorrow, please. Hmmm, a few scones for breakfast. That’s all my waistline can handle right now. Thank you so much Mrs. Peebles.”

“What? No Rugulah? I was thinking of you this morning when I made them.”

“Oh, Mrs. Peebles, I can’t. If I do, I’ll put on weight and have to replace all the clothes I own.” She said laughingly.

“Lisa. You’re too skinny. How are you going to marry a nice man when you’re all skin and bones? I suppose this means you don’t want any of my mother’s famous bonbons either?”

“How am I going to marry a nice man if all my clothes fit poorly and I look like a ragamuffin?” Lisa countered.

She rolled her eyes and laughed.

“The best of men like a woman who can keep warm in the winter so they don’t have to be an ice cube!” Her eyes twinkled.

“Mrs. Peebles!” Lisa stammered as she blushed slightly.

“Okay, Sweetie. You finish your shopping and I’ll package this up for you. It’ll be at the register when you’re ready.”

Lisa added a few more items to her cart before heading up to the check. She unloaded her basket on the conveyor belt while Mrs. Peebles finished with an elderly man in front of her. He turned to smile at Lisa as he placed the last of his packages in the cart.

“Doin’ alright Lisa, are you?” He asked.

“Doing fine Mr. Berenstein. Need help getting your groceries to the car?”

“No, thank you. I can get ‘em..” He replied. He nodded to Lisa and Mrs. Peebles before heading for the front door.

Mrs. Peebles set Lisa’s shopping bags on the work space next to her register and began ringing up Lisa’s items. She filled the first bag with the vegetables and fruit and set it aside once it was full.

“How’s Mr. Peebles doing? Is he still having problems with arthritis?” Lisa asked as she placed the first bag back in her cart.

“He’s fine. He has a new doctor now. It’s the first time he’s gone to a woman doctor, but he really likes her. I think knowing you made it easier for him to accept a female doctor.” Mrs. Peebles rolled her eyes as she

continued to ring up Lisa's items. She placed the box of baked goods in a bag. Lisa put the bag in her cart. The weight seemed heavier than it should have been for what she'd selected from the tray.

"Tsk, tsk! What am I gonna do with you Mrs. Peebles?" Lisa scolded smilingly.

Mrs. Peebles said nothing but smiled while she continued the task at hand. Sliding the two loaves into paper sleeves, she placed them in another bag on its side. Lisa put this in the top, front of the cart.

"So your grandson is coming for the holidays? Something special going on?"

"He's in the final stage of his internship. We want to have a small celebration. He asked specifically that we invite you and not take no for an answer." Mrs. Peebles' blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Oh, really now? Well, let me know as soon as you set a date."

Lisa placed the last sack in the cart which contained two bottles of sparkling white grape juice. She paid with plastic and passed a few more minutes conversing with Mrs. Peebles. When she got out to her car she was careful to watch and be aware the whole time of people or vehicles nearby. She unloaded everything into the passenger side quickly, returned her cart to the caddy in front of the store, and got into her car. She locked the door before she belted herself in. The drive home was quiet as she'd turned off the CD player before pulling out of the parking lot.

Her little bungalow was quiet and very dark as she

drove up. The well-groomed yard consisted of low beads and bushes snuggled tightly against the house which didn't allow for anyone to find cover. She saw Mr. Bo in the large picture window shortly after she drove up. Before getting out of the car she got her keys on the ready. She left the headlights on to shine on the door and reached just inside with her left hand to switch on the entry and interior lights. Stepping inside the door, she heard the jangle of Mr. Bo's collar as he bounded towards her.

“So Mr. Bo, did you have a good day?” She asked.

“Murr,” He purred in response. The brown cat followed her out to the yard and went off in the direction of the far fence. She got her sacks into the house and was carrying the last of the bags in when Mr. Bo returned to walk by her side.

Pulling the door to as she walked in, she immediately felt a sense of security as she locked the door behind herself. Looking around the interior quickly, she walked about ditching her shoes by the shoe rack, and hanging her coat on the coat rack in one corner. She turned the heater on low to take the chill off and slipped her feet into a pair of slippers just outside of the area of the bungalow that functioned as her kitchen.

“Mr. Bo, I got you a treat at the store tonight.” She said as she began unpacking groceries and putting them away. As she had suspected Mrs. Peebles had added the unselected items from the tray and she saw a few other things she didn't recall seeing on the tray as well. He rubbed against her legs in response.

The Dark

She put the items for dins out on the counter and selected several utensils and placed them on top of the work station in the centre of the small “U” which designated her kitchen area. The last item she selected was a small casserole dish which she placed atop her apartment-sized range. She selected a temperature and turned the oven on. Reaching for the apron hanging on the refrigerator door, she tied it on and got working. She listened to her voicemail with the phone set to speaker phone while she worked. Mr. Bo hovered about her feet. He found a space on top of the counter from which to watch her work.

After an hour she had a chicken divan casserole baking in the oven and the kitchen had been returned to some semblance of order if not completely cleaned. She went over to the corner of the house that was hidden from view by a Japanese shoji screen. Behind this was a bed, wardrobe, and a couple of highboys. Taking her cell phone with her, she called the first person to whom she owed a return call and placed the phone on the top of one of the dressers after setting the phone to speaker. She got voice mail on the first call.

“Jontrée, this is your bff calling you back. Where are you? I’m in and will be here for the rest of the evening. Call me back.” She ended the call and called the next person. Mr. Bo settled himself on the bed and watched as she got ready for a shower.

“Andrew! When did you get back in town? Yes, of course we can get together. I’ve got evenings free next

week and the following weekend.” She hung up after leaving her second message then placed a last call to her mother.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Hello, Dear! How was your day?”

“Long, Mom. Very, very long! I’ve got a new case that’s pretty difficult.” She said as she wrapped a towel around herself. She sat on the bed while she talked to her mother for a few minutes.

“Well, Dear, I’d love to go out to eat with you on Sunday.”

“Great, Mom. I need to get in the shower. Dinner is almost ready and I still have a few things to do before bed.”

“Okay. Let’s talk on Friday about where we’re going to eat and what time. Did you want to go to church with me? We have a guest preacher.”

“No, Mom I don’t think so. But, let’s talk on Friday and make plans.” She ended the call a few minutes later.

She carried her shower caddy over to table which sat just outside and to the right of the shower and set it down then let her towel drop to the floor just outside before stepping in and closing the glass door. About 10 minutes later she was towel drying her hair when the buzzer sounded on the stove. Dressed now in a pair of her favourite flannel PJ’s and her slippers, she went to the kitchen and removed the casserole from the oven.

She set the table with two bowls on top of a placemat for Mr. Bo and a plate and flatware for herself. She carried

on a light banter with Mr. Bo while she got ready for dinner. He contributed the occasional kitty comment as she continued on.

“Mr. Bo, this new case with Michael baffles me. Not only have I not seen so severe a case of nyctophobia before, I’m not sure the usual approach to dealing with Michael’s disorder is an answer. I really don’t think the usual flooding sessions will help. The key, I believe, is in the tapes. I’m going in early tomorrow so I can listen to the recorded sessions we’ve had so far a few times without interruption.”

“Murr, murr.” Mr. Bo purred his agreement. He settled down to his place at the table.

Lisa brought in a wineglass full of sparkling grape juice and a dessert plate with a selection of goodies Mrs. Peebles had sent home with her. After bringing the casserole dish to the table and Mr. Bo’s small plate of treats she seated herself at the table too. Having forgotten to turn on the CD player, she got up again to turn it on. When she returned she removed the cover from Mr. Bo’s food bowl. Around mouthfuls of food, she ran her ideas for the case by Mr. Bo. He reciprocated in kitty fashion while he enjoyed his meal.

Later that evening having cleared the table and straightened up the kitchen, she retired to her easy chair. Mr. Bo settled in on her lap and was rewarded for a time with a scratching of his mismatched ears. Along with one black ear and one white ear, he had four white paws, and a tail tipped in white as well. A bit later she pulled an

Montree Whiles

embroidery hoop from the needlework bag by the side of the chair. Still pondering the case she worked on her embroidery and listed to Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Major, Op. 8. As the final strains came to a conclusion, she nodded off in her chair.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Keith Blount

In retrospect, he'd been expecting it: the call, Dr Warne's breathy staccato as she struggled to find the words. All night he'd been restless, flitting between sudden wakefulness and fitful dreams of dark shapes slithering in shadowy corners, and it was only when the phone rang that he realised he had been tensed and waiting for it all along.

Even so, the timing could have been better.

It had been breakfast time. When Jane came down the stairs, Nick was chewing the first mouthful of a bacon sandwich and trying not to think about Michael and the fire. He watched as Jane's feet came into view behind the balustrades, the white paint flaking like eczema; her skinny ankles, her toenails painted black—the last remnant of the angry, punky girl-in-black he had fallen in love with all those years ago—each step languid but somehow careful. And then the hideous, cerise-pink, Terry Towelling dressing gown.

As she passed him on her way to the kettle, she leaned over and planted a perfunctory kiss on his unshaven cheek, as much a habit now as pushing her hair behind her ear when she was nervous. Then she reached across him and turned his mug of coffee several degrees clockwise, watching for his reaction. He waited for her to turn away, then moved it back, carefully angling the handle so that it pointed towards the corner of the table: his own personal battle against chaos.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder. “You’re so weird,” she said, with an indulgent smile.

By this time, his tension and unease—which he had put down to lack of sleep and three cups of black coffee—needed an outlet, and his wife’s playfulness this morning told him she was in a good mood, and that she probably wasn’t in a rush to get into work for a change. He made a grab for the back of her dressing gown and pulled her onto his lap.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth,” she said, pretending to try to wriggle free. “And you smell of bacon.”

He hooked his thumbs around the lapels of her dressing gown and tugged it open. She rolled her eyes. He was disappointed to find a decaying grey T-shirt beneath, old toothpaste stains down the front.

“Sexy.”

She pouted. “Well *sor-ry*. What, after twelve years, you really expect me to wander around the house in frilly lace underwear, just in case you get a spare moment away from your job? Hoovering in my stockings and suspenders

perhaps? Sorry, love, you're out of luck." She turned her face from him in mock outrage.

He tried to remember if there had ever been a time when she had worn lace underwear, stockings, the things he'd imagined of a wife from his 'Seventies upbringing, too many episodes of *Dallas*. He remembered trying to unfasten dungarees, waiting for her to unbuckle and unlace elaborate hiking boots, fighting with stripy tights; but no lace, no stockings.

She turned back to him and tilted her head to one side, considering him before apparently arriving at a decision. "Come on then," she sighed. "Shall we go upstairs? My period's finished and I don't have to be in work until ten, so I suppose we could do."

"And they say romance is dead." But this is what he loved about her: she was pragmatic and always said what she thought. There was no drama or artifice about her: in other words, she was everything his job was not. She took his hand, and he cast a quick longing look back at his cooling and congealing bacon sandwich. A quick mental calculation told him it would still be warm enough to eat when he returned, and he followed her up the stairs.

He was on the fourth step, his heart already quickening with anticipation, when his mobile phone rang. He plucked it from his jacket.

"Detective Scott?"

He stopped walking. "Yes."

"This is Lisa Warne. Doctor Lisa Warne. We met at the hospital yesterday?"

“Right,” he said, although he’d recognised the voice immediately. Jane stopped at the top of the stairs, and looked back down at him expectantly.

“You - you told me to call. If anything...” He could hear the strain in Dr Warne’s voice, the deep breaths she was taking to calm herself. Shock.

“Yes. Yes - what’s wrong, what’s happened?” There was a pause as she took another deep breath. Jane was tapping her foot. “Dr Warne? Is it about Michael?”

“Yes. Yes, Michael. He’s gone.”

“Gone? Right, of course, I’ll be straight over.” Jane rolled her eyes at him for the second time that morning and stomped back down the stairs. As she pushed past him, it occurred to him that, as unsettling as Michael was, his disappearance wouldn’t cause Dr Warne such distress as was evident in her voice. “Wait, what else?”

A pause, and another deep breath. “He’s... He’s killed one of our nurses. Not just killed...” She fumbled for the right word. “*Mutilated*. I - Police are on their way, but I think you should come down here and see for yourself.”

Doctor Warne was waiting outside the hospital when he arrived, sitting hunched over a cigarette on a green-painted bench, its metal frame perforated like a sieve. Her hair was in a loose ponytail, and she looked tired. When she saw him approaching she started, as though caught smoking by a parent, and stubbed out her cigarette on the edge of the bench with the finality of a full stop.

“I don’t smoke,” she said, standing and shaking his

hand. “I mean, I gave up.”

He nodded. “Today must have been a shock.”

“Yes. It’s been... I don’t know what it’s been.” She tried to smile, but gave up. “The medical examiner is here. She’s waiting for the police photographer to finish.” As she spoke, her hand went to the small silver cross she wore around her neck—it hadn’t been there yesterday. “Shall we?” She gestured towards the main entrance, and he followed her inside.

On the phone, she had told him what had happened: Callum Darlow, one of the nurses, had been found dead in a corridor not far from where Michael had been kept. The nurse who had found him, Debbie Garland, was badly traumatised—Callum was covered from head to toe in “strange wounds”, although Dr Warne hadn’t elaborated any further. While they had been waiting for the police to arrive, someone realised that Michael was missing, and the last time anyone had seen him was when a nurse had checked on him at 3am.

Dr Warne led Nick through countless swinging doors, through the smell of bleach and disinfectants, past patients in pyjamas shuffling between toilets and wards, orderlies pushing grey patients in wheelchairs, trailing drips and the smell of urine. Past visitors with brightly-coloured flowers, incongruous against the sickly green walls, congregating around vending machines and floor guides. That hospital sound: a low murmur of hushed discussions, doctors

keeping their voices down, visitors speaking quietly, a conspiratorial clamour; the clinking of cutlery and the murmur of breakfasters from the inevitably grim café. Fluorescent strip-lights blinked overhead, even though it was barely 9am.

On and on through a maze of corridors, without a word passing between them. He tried to think of something to say, small-talk, but nothing came to mind that didn't seem facile, so they continued in silence. Once or twice, she sighed. The coffee he had bought on the way to the hospital burned his hand through the flimsy polystyrene cup, and he wondered why, pumped full of caffeine as he was, he had bought it in the first place.

Eventually, she said, "Oh. The hospital administrator wants to see speak to you."

He nodded. "Is he at the scene? I mean, is he there, with—"

"No. He's squeamish. I'll take you to see him afterwards."

"The hospital administrator is squeamish?"

She gave the best *I know* smile she could manage, tight-lipped, and they lapsed into silence again.

Finally, they came to the ward on which Michael had been kept. Around the corner, the double doors to the corridor beyond were flanked by two police officers. One of them seemed to be involved in some sort of debate with an old lady wearing a green hospital gown and leaning on a Zimmer frame. "I'm eighty-two, you know," she was saying, as Nick and Dr Warne approached. The officer was

patiently trying to explain why she wasn't allowed past, but it didn't seem to be going well. Nick showed the other officer his badge. The officer glanced at the old lady, rolled his eyes, and pushed the door open. It swung to a close on squeals of indignation from the old woman, who took to stating her age again.

The corridor was dimly lit. The overhead strip-lights had been smashed, so the only light came from two small windows on the right at either end, and borrowed light pouring in from a door halfway along the corridor on the left which lead off to a bright office.

Aside from the handful of people scattered around the corridor in sundry uniforms and the broken strip-lights, nothing seemed unusual or out of place. Nothing else was broken, nothing tipped over or smashed. No trails of blood.

Just the dead body lying face down in the morning light.

Even from here it was clear that Callum was a big man. From Nick's end of the corridor, the nurse looked like a large animal felled by a hunter. It took Nick a moment to realise why a zebra had come to mind, but then he noticed the stripes: Callum's body was covered with them. They looked like tracks across his corpse, as though he had fallen asleep on a French road during the *Tour de France*.

The photographer, an angular, thin-lipped man, was finishing up, squatting next to the body. Dr Warne stayed back, close to the doors, but Nick moved a little closer,

careful to keep out of the photographer's way. As he did so, he slipped, the sole of his shoe catching on something. He lifted his foot: a small, translucent plastic button lay on the tiles, the sort of button you found on cheap shirts, frayed cotton twisting up through its holes. Another lay nearby. He looked once more at the body, to see where the buttons had come from, and that was when he saw the cause of the stripes. The nurse's body had been perforated, thousands of times it seemed. The stripes were really neat rows of small holes, punched through his shirt and trousers and into his flesh, each row about two inches wide. They weren't quite as parallel as they at first seemed, either - the rows tapered in towards the outside wall, as though pointing to the closed door that Nick now noticed was set into it, vertical bars running its length. Behind the bars was a solid metal panel, allowing no light through.

Standing to one side, also waiting for the photographer to finish, was the medical examiner, a young woman with a nose ring and green dye in the ends of her black hair, which was pulled into tight pigtails. Nick had worked with her before—Penny, if he recalled correctly—and from her awkwardness it had occurred to him then that she was better suited to working among dead people than living ones: something about her set people on edge. That was probably why he liked her.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” she asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

As the photographer left with an “All yours” to Penny, she puffed up her cheeks and blew out a long sigh, then

moved over to the body to start her work.

Nick crouched down next to her and looked at the victim. Callum was in his forties. He had clearly worked out when he was younger but had started to go to seed. Again it struck Nick how big he was, much bulkier than Michael—if Michael had done this, then it was difficult to imagine how he had overpowered the nurse. He must have snuck up from behind, hit him with something. And yet there was no obvious bleeding, no trauma to the back of the head.

Penny looked at him pointedly. “Actually, this will take a little while,” she said.

He stood up. “Right. Sorry.” And then, realising that a detective probably shouldn’t apologise quite so much: “I mean, of course. Let me know when you have something.” Even he cringed at the line.

She raised her eyebrows. “Absolutely. I’ll be sure to do just that.”

He always felt like part of some morbid parade at a crime scene, like a mourner at a coffin waiting for his turn with the deceased, so while he waited for Penny to examine the body, he headed into the small office. Inside were two policemen and a middle-aged nurse who was quietly sobbing into a rolled-up cardigan. Nick recognised both of the policemen from the station; they nodded at him and the three of them gathered into a huddle in the corner of the room, out of earshot of the weeping nurse, so that the officers could bring him up to speed. The

distraught nurse, it turned out, was Debbie, the one who had found the body. She was the closest thing they had to a witness: no one had heard or seen a thing, and no one they had questioned so far had noticed Michael leaving. This perhaps wasn't too surprising in a ward where most of the patients were heavily sedated, and there had been an emergency elsewhere in the hospital that had called many of the staff away in the early hours, but even so, it wasn't good news. The policemen had dusted what they could for prints, including a broom handle they figured had been used to smash the lights, but that was about all they had.

After checking that patrol cars had been alerted and were looking out for Michael, there wasn't much else to do but wait for Penny to finish. Nick attempted some small-talk with the policemen but he was no good at it—he had never been one to hand around cigarettes outside the police station and he knew nothing about football. So he shuffled from foot to foot in the doorway and sipped at his now-tepid coffee, which smelled and tasted like gravy.

He couldn't stop looking at those wounds, how the cotton of the victim's shirt puckered into his flesh. Nick thought of a blunt pencil pushed through paper.

At last, Penny called him over.

"So," he said, crouching next to her, "What do you think?"

"Nothing yet." She glanced at his neck. "Aren't detectives supposed to wear ties?"

"What can I say? I'm a maverick." His stock reply. He

wondered how times he was going to have eyes rolled at him today, vaguely considered keeping a tally.

“Give me a hand,” she said, indicating the body. “We need to turn him over now.”

Dr Warne had wandered closer, and without thinking Nick passed his cup of coffee up to her. She instinctively took it, and there was a moment of embarrassment as they both realised that she was now holding his coffee for him like an attentive maid.

Together, Nick and Penny turned the body over. It was heavy—the term “brick shithouse” came to mind—and once more it struck him how unlikely an assailant Michael seemed for such a colossus of a man. Callum’s face seemed bruised, but Nick knew it was just lividity: the blood that had been pumped around his body in life had, in death, succumbed to gravity, drained and pooled at the parts of the body closest to the floor. The purple blotching covered his chest too - his shirt had been torn open, which explained the buttons. Nick stood up and took two steps back to get a better look. And that’s when he saw it.

Carved into the nurse’s chest, its top bar cleanly slicing his nipples like split jelly baby heads, was a ragged, bloody, “5”. He heard Dr Warne’s sharp intake of breath.

“Michael.” He said the name quietly, to himself, like an invocation. He rubbed the back of his head and looked around, as though he expected to see Michael hiding somewhere.

Other than the carved numeral, there were no obvious markings or wounds on the nurse’s front, nor were there

any punctures on this side of his body.

Penny spent a few minutes prodding and gliding her hands over Callum's voluminous torso, his tree-trunk legs, before sitting up heel-to-haunch, arching her back and pressing a hand into the small of it, then releasing a heavy sigh.

"Right," she said at last. "You've got a weirdo on your hands, for a start. This is... An odd one. Like I said before, I haven't seen anything like it, but it only gets stranger. There are no signs of a struggle, no head wounds, and no stab wounds deeper than the puncture-marks across his back. The puncture wounds seem to have been made by something small and blunt about the size of a finger."

"You're telling me he was *poked* to death?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Hardly. That's the other strange thing. For a start, these wounds aren't deep enough to be the cause of death, especially for such a rhinoceros of a—" She looked at Dr Warne and checked herself. "I mean, especially for such a large man. And besides, from their careful arrangement—"

"In stripes."

"Right, from their careful arrangement in stripes, and from the lack of blood in the punctures, I'd say these were made post-mortem. And not straight away, either."

"You mean whoever did it came back?"

"I think so. It's also possible that he wasn't murdered at all, of course. That he just died of a heart attack or some other natural cause, and that someone came across the body and... Well, just thought they'd mutilate it."

“But it’s not likely.”

“It doesn’t seem so, does it? But hey, that’s your job. On the other hand, he could have been poisoned. But there’s no way of knowing that until we get the toxicology report.”

“Time of death?”

“I’d say he’s been dead two or three hours. Four at most.”

Behind them, Dr Warne coughed. “Where— Where are his keys?”

Nick and Penny looked up.

“Callum always carries - *carried* - a large set of keys on a chain. You know, on his belt.”

Nick looked down at the body. No keys. “Are you sure?”

“You could always hear him coming, jangling. It was like an early warning system. I don’t like to talk ill of the dead...” She fingered the cross around her neck again. “But, well, to be honest, he wasn’t the most popular member of staff—he had a habit of chewing your ear off—and if you heard those keys jangling, you had time to duck into a side room somewhere or look busy.”

Penny lifted the corner of Callum’s shirt and took one of the belt loops between finger and thumb. It had been ripped away at the top end and was hanging loose.

“Could a key have caused these injuries?” asked Nick.

Penny bit her lip for a moment, thinking. “I suppose so. There are no lacerations, though - I would have expected a key to do more damage. But then, the arrangement of the

wounds is so careful that... Well, it's not impossible that a key was used. But, I mean, that would be a pretty odd implement to choose. Which is another thing. The angle of the injuries suggest that each puncture was created individually. No matter what he used, that would take time. How come nobody came through here and saw him?" No one had an answer to that. "I'll know more when I get the body to the lab, but let's just say that I'm glad I'm not the one who has to work out *how* he did it."

Nick stood up and stretched. As he did so, he caught sight of the barred door next to the body again. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a thought began to crystallise. He thanked Penny and turned to Dr Warne, who was still holding his cold coffee.

"Are you finished?" she asked.

"I think so," he said, although he wasn't so sure.

They turned their back on Callum's mutilated corpse and as they walked towards the doors, he sensed the tension in her start to fall away, and realised what a struggle it had been for her to come back here. She didn't show it, but she was finding this just as difficult as poor Debbie.

"I'm sorry if I seemed..."—she searched for the right word as though picking through onions in a supermarket—"unprofessional. Obviously I'm used to all sorts of horrific wounds, and of course doctors and nurses get attacked from time to time. It's just..."

"Nothing ever like this. And not to someone you

know.”

She nodded.

“You don’t need to apologise,” he said. It sounded patronising, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Once more he looked back along the corridor, at the barred door, and at the two windows at either end—also barred, he now noticed. The sun had come out again and he looked at the way the light fell through the bars and across the floor in long, close stripes. The thought that had been troubling him rose to the surface of his mind like a bloated cadaver in a lake. He stopped walking, and so did Doctor Warne. “No.” He said it to himself, telling himself it couldn’t be, but still he looked back at the body, where two men who had been hovering at the edges of the corridor were now trying to lift it onto a body bag they had laid out next to it.

He took out his phone from the inside pocket of his jacket, opened the compass app and waved the phone around as though it were a geiger counter. “GPS,” he said in response to Dr Warne’s and Penny’s questioning looks, as though that explained anything. He went over to the barred, closed door in the outside wall and waved his phone there, too. “East,” he said, nodding to himself.

“What?” said Dr Warne and Penny in unison.

But Nick didn’t answer: he was already in the doorway to the office, where Debbie was still sobbing into her cardigan, one policeman sitting next to her making half-hearted gestures of comfort, the other sitting at the desk and talking into his radio.

“Excuse me. This door.” Nick waved towards the door in the corridor. “Was it open?”

Debbie, her face still blotchy from crying, joined him in the doorway, considering the barred door opposite. “Yes. I’m pretty sure it was.” She sniffed. “Only the door, though. The cage part, the bars, they’re fixed to the wall, so they don’t open. We leave it open to let the air in, but the patients still can’t get out, you know. But yes, I’m sure it was open when I... When I found him.”

The policeman who had been on the radio came over. “Yes, it was definitely open. I closed it when we got here, so that anybody walking past through the square wouldn’t see in. Why, shouldn’t I have?”

Again, Nick didn’t answer. He just stood in the doorway, vaguely aware that everyone was watching him, waiting.

“I was just thinking about Michael,” he said, ostensibly to Dr Warne but more to himself. “You remember what he said? How he was afraid of the dark, terrified of it? He believed that this... This *thing* could only get him in the dark.” Penny looked from Nick to Dr Warne, but Dr Warne didn’t take her eyes off him. “That door faces east. He was killed at, what? Six, seven at the latest. Just after sunrise. Just when the first sunlight would have been creeping in through that door, through the bars.”

There was a dull thud and a splash. Dr Warne had dropped the cup of coffee she had been holding for him all this time. The polystyrene cup rolled back and forth in lazy arcs across the floor. “The dark,” she said.

The Dark

Penny's brow was knitted into a confused frown. "Sorry, but what?"

"Every part of him that was in shadow when he died has been mutilated. But *only* the parts that were in shadow. The strips of him that were in the dark."

Dr Warne was shaking her head, but seemed unable to speak.

He took her elbow in a way he hoped was consolatory. "I think we should go and see your administrator now."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Katherine Williams

“So tell me, doctor. How many patients have you misplaced this month?”

“Detective, that’s enough.” Doctor Warne and Detective Scott had been snarling across his desk for the last ten minutes. Having finished reviewing his email, his golf schedule, and a very intriguing invitation from his wife, hospital administrator Steve Davis decided it was time to step in. “Doctor Warne, it’s a valid question. Just how did an acute nyctophobe wander off in the middle of the night?”

Lisa’s voice had been rising steadily, but she stopped, took a breath, then another. Her voice was tense, but controlled, when she finally spoke. “I wish I had an answer for you, Detective. When I left last night, he was begging the night nurse to leave the light in the hallway on, too. We had to promise to lock him in before he would calm down.”

She suddenly realized she had been fidgeting with the

paperclips on the desk. She dropped them with a bit of a start, got up, and began pacing in front of the window. “I don’t think he left on his own. He couldn’t have. He wouldn’t have.” Rain lashed angrily against the glass.

“Was there any kind of security on the ward, besides the locked door?” Detective Scott asked.

“Just the nurse, but the nurse was gone.” She hesitated. “He died in the night. We don’t know when or how — the morning shift found him. Didn’t the other detective tell you?”

Now it was Nick Scott’s turn to pace. “No, he didn’t. Please excuse me for a moment.”

He slipped into the hallway, where they could hear him urgently talking into his phone. Lisa leaned on the window sill. “I’m worried, Steve. It looked like the nurse had a heart attack, but now I’m not so sure.”

Out in the hallway, Detective Scott’s voice was rising. “Sparky! Hey, old pal, I wish you’d told me about that dead nurse this morning. Yeah, who else were they gonna send, right? Anyway, turns out there’s a missing patient out of the same ward, our friend Michael Jones from the cottage fire last week. Better put out an APW. And send someone by his parent’s place, too.”

Lisa pulled the door closed. “You and I both know it’s the budget cuts. A psych ward needs more than one nurse and a couple of cameras.”

“It’s not a prison, Lisa,” he said. “If a patient wants to discharge himself, there’s not much we can do to stop them.”

Her control was starting to slip again. “I told you, there is NO chance that Michael Jones wanted to be anywhere except his room last night.”

Detective Scott came back in. “Sorry about that. I guess we’ve all had a rough morning... my partner did say the nurse’s keys were missing. Have they turned up since?”

“Not as far as I know,” Lisa said.

Davis snagged his desk phone out of its cradle. “I’ll check with Security... Yes, this is Steve Davis. Has anyone turned in a set of keys? The night nurse’s set from the Psych Ward has gone missing. Bother. Okay, let me know if they turn up. And another thing. Get someone to pull the security videos from last night. The whole ward, to start, plus the other cameras on that floor. As soon as you can, thanks.”

“He wouldn’t have left on his own,” Dr. Warne repeated, almost to herself. “The dark would have stopped him. He hasn’t let anyone turn off the light in his room since the fire. He wouldn’t have gone from a bright room to a dim hallway, much less out of the building.”

“What about closets?” Detective Scott asked. “Maybe a closet felt safer than his room?”

“Good lord,” Davis said, “there must be two dozen closets on that floor alone!”

As if on cue, the desk phone rang.

“Davis. Doctor Warne and the Detective are here, let me put you on speaker.”

He hit a button. “Go ahead, Chief.”

The security chief had to shout over what sounded like

a washing machine. “Housekeeping says a set of keys turned up in the laundry. They aren’t sure, but they think they were in with the sheets from Psych Ward.”

“Bingo,” Doctor Warne said. “The laundry closet on that floor is right across from his room. Chief, is there anything else unusual in there?”

“I don’t see anything. You know sheets, towels, hospital gowns. But what have we here? I’ve got a patient wristband for one Michael Jones. Looks like it was cut cleanly, like with scissors or something.”

“This is Detective Scott. What all was on that key ring? Was there a fancy fob, or anything like that?”

“Just hospital keys, it looks like. No car keys, that’s for sure. The fob says ‘Psych Ward,’ but that’s it.”

“So the nurse’s ID card is missing, too?” he asked.

“I don’t know if it’s missing, but it’s not here.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Davis said. “Let us know if you find anything else.”

“There are no scissors in Psych Ward,” Doctor Warne said. “Safety hazard. And if the keys were in the laundry, how could he have used them to unlock the door?”

“What if he didn’t?” Scott suggested. “What if he just hid in the closet overnight and slipped out with the morning shift? When do they come in?”

Light dawned in Dr. Warne’s eyes. “About 7:00. It’s daylight by then, and they would have been distracted when they found the nurse. And we know the nurse was fine at 5:00, when security made their rounds. That makes more sense.”

“And that means I’d better get downtown. It sounds like we’ve got a pretty sneaky mental patient roaming around. Might be best to find him before it gets dark and he starts looking for another closet to hide in.”

The Detective hurried out the door. They heard him chattering into his phone as he made his way down the hall.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wendi Porter-Coffman

By the time the knock came on his door senior detective Langley was so annoyed with the pile of paperwork on his desk that he was looking for any excuse to turn his attention elsewhere. The knock rocked loudly through the small grey office. The sound of it caused Langley to glance up at the clock on the wall and frown. He had been expecting the detective a while ago, the sheer fact that he was only showing up now only annoyed him even further. Shoving the paperwork aside, the older grey haired detective looked to the door and narrowed his eyes slightly as he channelled that irritation at the new target.

“Enter.” The tone of his voice was low, but the sound carried well regardless.

Outside the door, Nick frowned slightly. That tone was a clear indicator that this conversation was not going to go well. Pushing his hair back carefully he glanced down at his shirt making sure that it was clean and tucked into his belt neatly. Running his hand down white shirt once just for

good measure, he rolled his shoulders as he stood tall and turned the handle on the door.

“Seriously Nick? This had better be good.” Langley stated flatly as the detective stepped into the small office with him. Leaning back in his chair he crossed his arms and waited for the detective to explain himself.

Nick frowned slightly as he turned and pushed the door closed quietly. Turning back to his boss he shrugged.

“I am not really sure what happened.”

“You lost the main suspect in a triple homicide and arson case, that’s what happened.” Langley frowned deeply at the detective as his irritation increased. The man looked like he hadn’t slept in two days and despite the clean grey suit, he looked like hell.

“We don’t have proof that he is a suspect yet sir.”

“Oh I don’t know.” Langley cocked his head to the side slightly. “He escaped from a psyche ward. At the very least that proves he’s not an entirely innocent witness.” Leaning forward in his chair, Langley placed his elbows on his desk and looked hard at the detective. “You had an officer on the door, right?”

Detective Scott frowned even deeper as he lifted his hands and slid them into his pockets.

“Well, no sir.” The answer was fairly quiet and the look on Nick’s face made it very obvious that he knew he had screwed up.

“But the door to the room was locked?”

“The wing is always locked just in case, but no sir, his room was not locked.” Shaking his head slowly, Nick

attempted to averted his eyes avoiding the stare of the angry man sitting behind the desk. His gaze settled on a large poster on the wall of Paris, France that his boss had brought back from one of his many wine tasting vacations.

“Nick...” Langley allowed his voice to fall off as he narrowed his eyes at the detective.

“The doctor said he was mentally distressed. There was nothing in his behaviour or in the doctor’s report that told me I should look into it further.”

Langley took a deep breath and sighed loudly. His jaw clenched slightly as he dropping his hands onto the desk with a soft thud. He hated sloppy police work more than anything and it didn’t get much sloppier than this.

“Damn it Nick, you get paid to suspect everyone and catch criminals! It’s basic policing 101, Never take a possible suspect at face value, you know better.” Langley snapped at the man his voice filled with irritation.

“Sir, Michael was very convincing.” Nick shrugged pulling his hands from his pockets as he did so.

“I don’t care what the excuse is. You had better hope that you find him wandering aimlessly in the isle of a grocery store mumbling to himself.” Langley stood slowly and leaned over his desk at the detective. “Because at this point we now have a fifth body, a missing witness and a detective that dropped the ball so hard that it has indented the asphalt.”

Nick rolled his head slightly and grimaced as he realized that his boss probably had a point. At the very least it

didn't look good for him to lose the main witness, it would be even worse if Michael ended up being the primary suspect as well.

"He was in hospital clothes and without shoes, he can't get too far." Biting the inside of his cheek Nick tried to think of where the kid might go. "I will check the local shelters and halfway houses to see if he turns up."

"He played you damnit." Langley smacked the heel of his hand roughly on the desk then took a long deep breath as he attempted to calm down. "Stop treating him like a nutcase and treat him like a criminal."

"Put myself in his head," Nick mumbled quietly. "I will look into who he knows in town rather than looking for the random." Detective Scott stared at the poster as he considered where to go from here. At this point he had to throw everything he knew about the boy out the window and start from scratch. There was a fire at a summer home where five kids were staying and now they had four crispy corpses. The fifth kid managed to get himself committed, but it was looking more and more like that had been some sort of ruse. Now they had a fifth body of a nurse on the ward with missing keys and a missing witness that was turning out to be more likely a suspect than an innocent bystander.

"Nick?" The voice of his boss drew his mind back to the present.

"Yeah?" Looking back to the older man he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Why are you still standing in my office?" Langley

The Dark

pushed himself off his desk and sat in his chair slowly.

“Um, Should I go check the hospital again?”

The older detective frowned.

“I don’t care if you go get in your car and drive around till you find him...” Langley narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Just find him!”

“Yes sir!” Turning and opening the door Detective Nick Scott stepped out of the small office and sighed heavily.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kaylie S. Addams

To be honest Detective Scott was glad when his wife woke him, his phone clutched in her hand as she gently shook him. He had known the minute he sank into his favourite chair that sleep was coming, and that it would invariably end up somewhere he didn't want to be. The dreams always plagued him when he dared to sleep during the day, dreams of past cases. No matter how well the cases had been brought to a close the faces of men and women long past kept resurfacing in his dreams, begging him to right the wrongs done to them. The fact that he had not control over these dreams bothered him, yet he never mentioned them to his wife, she would only worry and start telling him about his control issues again.

“Honey?” Jane shook him again. “It's Officer Blake.”

Sleep dissolved instantly as his well trained senses kicked into gear. He recognized the name and knew whatever had caused the officer to call him would be important.

“Officer Blake, Detective Scott here, what can I do for you?”

“Calling to report a possible sighting of your APW. A shop downtown just reported a burglary. He apparently knew exactly what he was going for.”

“He got away?” Detective Scott reached over to the coffee table and snatched up the black pad he kept there, flipped it open and began jotting notes down. He paused just long enough to quickly ask Jane to get him his coat.

“Yes sir. The guy was in and out almost faster than the owner could set the alarm off.”

“Did you get a description?”

“The owner got a pretty good look. Lanky kid, shaggy brown hair, brown eyes, didn’t hardly even glance at the owner. Said he looked to be in his late teens, perhaps early twenties.”

“Give me the address, I’ll head over there now and talk to the owner.”

Ten minutes later a dark car pulled into a sparsely occupied parking lot and pulled into a space under the gaudy, blinking sign. A quick surveillance of the street offered nothing out of the ordinary as he pushed open the door and stepped into the dim interior of a small electronics shop.

The shopkeeper straightened up from where he had been cleaning up the last few fragments of glass from under the shelving unit and shot a frazzled, slightly nervous glance toward the door. A few teenagers eyed the detective curiously before returning their attention back to

the CD rack.

“I’m here about the robbery.” The man snapped open a wallet and flashed an ID. His blue eyes were as cool and businesslike as his tone.

“Police already been here.” The sound of glass clattering into the wastebasket failed to overpower the sounds of the local country station blaring through the store. Patrick eyed the detective sullenly, mouth pursed to show his disapproval.

“You guys got nothin’ else to do than coverin’ the same thing? Be better off out lookin’ for the kid than botherin’ me all the time.” He sniffed his displeasure and reached for a battered looking coffee mug near the register. Obviously the red lettered sign above his head forbidding food and drink on the premise did not apply to him.

“Wouldn’t count on findin’ him any too soon, though,” Patrick continued, half to himself as he watched the woman from the back fidget with her purse before slipping out the door. “Them odd lookin’ ones always find a way of hidin’ away in places you cops never think to look.” The disappointment that he hadn’t been able to get a response out of the detective showed in his face as he retreated to injured silence.

The teens shuffled up to make their purchase, still eyeing the detective as they squeezed past him to reach the register. By the time the purchase had been rung up, paid for, and the noise of the bell had been drowned by the background music, Detective Scott had decided his next course of action.

“What, specifically was stolen?” He asked, gesturing toward the shelf Patrick had been sweeping up around when he had walked in. It was enough of an oddity that Patrick’s injured demeanour shifted and a spark of interest flickered in his eyes.

“That’s the thing. This here is an electronic store, chock full of expensive pieces of equipment.” He gestured toward a camera and laptop display. “But the one thing he grabbed was a clock! A regular old alarm clock!” If the detective thought it was unusual he didn’t show it, instead he asked if there was anything else Patrick wanted to add to his description of the young man.

“Nope, can’t say there is- wait! Yes there was one more thing, I just chanced to glimpse it when he stuffed the alarm clock under his jacket.” He lifted his left hand and waved it in the detective’s face. “Left hand was bandaged up pretty good, must’ve been in some kinda trouble before.”

Detective Scott returned to his office a half hour later, only to turn around and head out toward a park a few blocks away.

Collar pulled up to shield his face from the nip of the wind he began a contemplative walk around the winding paths, eyes focused somewhere distant and far removed from the damp earth and vibrant leaves that skittered across his path. His wife liked to call them Nick’s Tangled Walks, for he seemed to think better as he walked along the twisting, tangled paths of the park. It became easier to sort the information running through his brain, allowing

him to see things more clearly.

He ignored the steaming cup of coffee waiting for him when he returned to the office, instead reaching the phone to place a direct call to Doctor Lisa Warne.

“Doctor Warne’s Office, may I help you?”

“This is Detective Nick Scott. I need to talk to the Doctor about one of her more recent patients.”

“Please wait one moment.” The mind numbing sound of tinny elevator music echoed through the receiver as the secretary put him on hold. Half the cup of coffee was gone before she returned to tell him she would transfer his call.

“This is Doctor Warne, how may I help you Detective?”

Even before she had finished her greeting Detective Scott could picture her, sitting in a spacious office designed to create a soothing atmosphere, while just outside her door was a hallway that led to stark, bare corridors and rooms, full of people lost somewhere in the recesses of their own minds. He gave himself a mental shake and returned to the task at hand.

“Doctor Warne, I need some information about your patient, Michael Jones. We had a robbery in one of the downtown shops earlier this afternoon and suspect it was Michael. You have had sole responsibility for Michael since he entered the hospital have you not?”

“Yes I have.”

Lisa Warne shifted in the chair, her finely manicured eyebrow raised slightly. She waited for what was to come, a

barrage of questions, no doubt, and all covertly pointed in such a way to place all the blame of Michaels escape on her. The voice on the other end of the line continued in a clipped, even tone.

“Is there any particular reason why Michael would steal an alarm clock?”

She relaxed ever so slightly. This detective wasn't calling to question her about the rumoured lax of security then, or her job, it was about Michael.

“An alarm clock.” Eyes closed Lisa shifted again and rested her head against the back of her chair. “As you know Michael has suffered severe trauma from the fire and loss of his fellow students. He is currently struggling with Acute Nyctophobia and, in result, is extremely afraid of the dark.”

The sound of bubbling water from her ambience machine seemed deafening until the detective cleared his throat.

“Yes, I am aware of his phobia. What I am trying to find out is why he would steal an alarm clock. Did he ever say anything that would indicate his interest in time?”

Lisa bristled at the comment, noting the intended slight to her diagnosis of Michael. She bit back the hot words that came to mind, settling instead for a cool monotone.

“People with this type of phobia often develop different characteristics to help them deal with their fear.” She leaned forward and tapped on her keyboard, bringing up the crisp lines of a file. “There was nothing he said that would indicate his need of an alarm clock.”

She bit her lip thoughtfully as she skimmed a few lines in the file on her computer screen. An idea came to her, so simple she was surprised she hadn't thought of it right away.

"It is possible that he is even more afraid of the dark than we realized." She finally said. "If that is the case he might be trying to sleep during the day."

"And he would want the alarm clock so he could be up before the sun went down." The detective filled in, again rustling through the stack of papers on his desk. This time Lisa heard a distinct, but muffled, scratching, as though notes were being taken down. When he spoke again he sounded distant, as though his mind had already finished the conversation and was already somewhere else.

"Thank you for your time Doctor Warne, it has been very helpful."

Quarter to five the phone in the police station rang. A large, sturdy looking officer answered it and for the next several minutes carried on a quick, clipped conversation with the detective. Mere minutes later a message was broadcasted.

"Attention all cars, this is an Alert for one Michael Jones. Keep your eyes open for a dark haired man, early twenties with bandaged left hand. Most likely places will be locations that remain open all hours. Check all casinos, airports, gas stations, hotel lobbies, supermarkets and video arcades."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ron Ward

Nick walked toward the light, after hearing a spoon ricochet around in the sink. Jane pattered in the kitchen, her sanctuary, the one where the world made sense. The cinnamon in the rack the cereal in the cupboard above the fridge because then it was close to the milk. Never mind the bowls were across the room near the drain board. Detective Scott once tried to point out some of the inconsistencies in the arrangement. A box of tissue and half a dozen long stemmed roses later the man of the house vowed to never broach the subject again.

The indomitable Mrs. Scott did not deserve the coming storm. Nick fought to push the night's events out of his mind, before he dropped the full load on his unsuspecting wife. Walking down the hall to the kitchen Nicolas even remembered he had forgotten the cream Jane requested.

No doubt his very capable spouse had procured a backup knowing Nick's schedule might keep him far into the night. At least there was an apology available to steer

the conversation away from roast children and madmen. One of whom was on the loose because of the policeman's dereliction.

"Ice cream?"

"How did you know it was me not some evil doer bent on perpetrating vile acts? What flavour is it?"

"You don't pick up your left foot all the way off the floor when you walk. There was no crash because you did not kick the toolbox you leave in the hallway as if that is its proper place. A burglar or rapist would have stubbed their toe on that for sure."

"Got me I'll need to practice my footwork."

"The kind you like, cold not melted, not Butter Cream."

"You know me so well" Nicolas kissed his wife gently on the cheek. Large male arms surrounded the petite woman. The hug was deep long full of promise. Carefully Nicolas turned his wife's face up to so he could kiss that spot between the eyes she loved.

"Sit down I'll make tea. It cannot be as bad as all that." Detective Scott took a step back away from the busy woman. He watched as she filled the kettle for the tap. "Sit down; tell me everything before you explode."

Not for the first time the policeman thought his wife would have made an amazing detective. Every motion calculated for efficiency. Four steps to the stovetop, left hand turns on the gas while the right hand reaches for the teapot. Three steps back to the table, teapot placed on trivet, sugar bowl checked for level of contents. One hundred eighty degree turn, two more steps, the cupboard

door is open two tea cups and saucers deftly balanced. About face forward march table set; Jane lifts one then another sugar cube into her cup anticipating the tea to come.

“You heard the firemen leave the station.” Jane nodded eyes prodding for more of the story. “Did they have anything on the late news?”

“Not one thing, you know what that’s like?” Jane’s finger kept darting into the out the handle hole. “Nothing Nick the reporters must be under tight wraps to not report this at all. I know all those sirens were not just fire trucks one of them was you. So spill it give me the grisly details your mind works better when you are talking.”

“I had him Jane then the little bastard fooled me. I gave him an inch and he took a powder” Jane laughed, looked at my face and then repeated cautiously, “took a powder, who are you Mickey Spillane?”

“You don’t get it Jane you were not there, four kids deceased. Not just dead burned to death, worst way you can go. The only witness is this jittery kid named Michael. There he was the crazy little bastard then I let him con me. If I catch him trying to get on a plane I am going to crush his skull myself.” Nick punched the open cabinet. The polished wood slammed into the cupboard behind then came dancing back hanging a little off centre. Nicolas carefully closed the door trying to make the frame line up and hold itself in place. “Why was that open?”

“Don’t you dare start in on me Nicolas Scott I wasn’t there at the scene but I am here now; I can see the wild in

yours eyes. You screwed up the captain will be expecting explanations in the morning. You need him back more than you want your next breath.

You are a good man my dear husband if you find Michael on the gangway to Katmandu you will explain his rights tighten the cuffs a bit tighter that necessary perhaps but no one's head is going to be crushed. Not mine, not yours, especially not a suspect.”

“Going to take a short shower get out of these stinking clothes. Smells like campfire on the beach. I like campfires on the beach.” Detective Scott shambled toward the bath. Not thinking about any of the steps it took to get there.

Jane stood up her hand shaking a little as she examined the cupboard door. The policeman's wife walked over to the refrigerator noted glue under laundry soap. The loose hinge could be easily repaired with a stick match and a smidge of carpenters glue. The crack might be a larger problem. Nick fretted over the tiniest thing. Jane hoped they caught the boy guilty or not just so the damaged door would not be a constant reminder of failure on her husband's part.

The phone rang, Nick was still in the shower; the water shut off before the first ring had time to stop. Jane waited longer than she wanted then lifted the handset. “Not a positive ID sir however a fair match. You know store clerks they all think they see everything but the blood starts pumping makes them make silly mistakes.”

“What is he doing? Are there any hostages?”

“No sir the Manager said the kid is just walking up and

down the aisles. The suspect is putting stuff in his cart then taking groceries back out then setting them in the wrong place.

Sorry Nick, Mike is telling me now the store manager told him that the boy is taking products that are in the wrong place then leaving them in the right place. Mike's shaking his head yes, that's what the clerk said, our guy is organizing their shelves."

"Don't tease me Gidry not in the mood."

"No one is messing with you Detective; I am telling you the best information available."

"Gidry give me that address again. No need I have it on this envelope, I really hope this is our guy."

"Maybe this guy is just a nut simple as that."

"Damit Gidry there is never anything easy about crazy people."

"No sir your right not sure what I was thinking."

Jane replaced the headset relieved that the police had a solid lead. Nicolas flew into the kitchen looking ready to work. How do men do it only seconds ago Nick was naked dripping water on the bedroom carpet? Jane received a quick peck on the cheek and a smile. "That was Gidry down at the station looks like we have Michael spotted. I am going to get him"

The sound of the car's engine reassured detective Scott about the nights coming endeavour. Nicolas checked the address again then pictured the place in his mind. Not far away the kid with the answers was lining up soup cans making the rows look pretty for the shopper's eye. Nick

stepped on the gas listening to the sound of his well-tuned auto mobile. “Please don’t be crazy, by all that’s holy don’t be cracked” Nick laughed “Holy there is nothing sacred in this world. By Da Vinci’s left nipple then, don’t be a 21th century schizoid man.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

V.D. Griesdoorn

Detective Nick Scott parked his car in the side street loading bay. The family-run supermarket was located on the corner of a sizable residential shopping street, but had no customer parking. Windows covered most of the building's facing and life-size signs advertised 2-for-1 on cucumbers and cheap beer discounted to a price that made you ashamed to drink it. Behind the registers were five aisles stretching out in plain view.

Scott stood in front of the immovable slide door and looked at his watch. 11.13pm. The inside lights were dimmed and the shop looked closed for business. Scott waved his hand in the direction of the motion detector. The door stayed closed. He gave a rap on it. On the far end of the shop, at floor level, Scott saw a head peer around the aisle front. Just for a moment.

In the back, a door opened and a woman walked out. She jumped as if startled. The person, who sat hiding, scuttled across to the next aisle, making sure to stay low to

the ground. The woman walked down the length of the shop, stopped where she was centimetres away from Scott and reached to the left, out of sight. The slide door opened.

“Hi. Thanks for coming,” the woman said with a glance behind her. She must have expected the stray to make a run for the open door. In vain.

“I’m detective Nick Scott.” Scott shook the woman’s hand. She had warm hands, soft skin, friendly eyes and a jaw-length dark brown do. She was slightly overweight, maybe from taking up too many beer offers. Or liking the pizza selection. Apart from the beer fascination, not an unpleasant person. “I was told you have a tenacious customer in here?”

The woman glanced behind her again. “Yes, he’s hiding behind the second aisle front at the moment.” She lowered her voice. “I think he can hear us from over there.”

“That’s fine. We have nothing to hide.” *And if he’s acting as strangely as described, he might not be lucid enough to listen in.* “Is the owner here?”

“My husband, yes. He’s in the back office. He’s a nervous git, so I told him to stay in there.”

Priceless.

“Why don’t you go back to him and I’ll talk to your customer.”

“Sure.” The woman turned around and started off up the aisle. Scott moved to her left, taking up a protective position, in case needed.

At the end of the aisle, Scott held out his right arm for

the woman to halt. He peered around the aisle front. The man was still sitting where he had been. Scott motioned for the woman to go into the office.

The man got up. He looked at Scott uncertainly and moved into the third aisle.

It was Michael, alright. The man was in his early twenties, but at the moment looked like he had lived a lifetime. Michael had a fearful look in his eyes. Confused but not drug-addled. That was a relief. His left hand was still bandaged up, but the wrapping was clean of blood; no additional damage.

“Did you come to shop?” Scott moved two steps forward, reaching the second aisle. “You know the shop is closed?”

“Yeah,” came from behind the shelves.

Scott walked on and found the man sitting around the corner, with his back against the shelf, peering toward the outside windows.

The man swiveled his head around and jumped up. He ran towards the other end of the aisle, but stopped. He dropped to the ground and slid close to the shelves. *It must be dusty under there.*

“Michael? The shop manager called us to say you were here.” Scott walked a few paces down the aisle.

Michael turned and looked at Scott. “I’m not going. I don’t want to go.” The man looked more like a boy in that moment. Fear etched into his face, he scabbled to his feet, ran towards the registers and headed up the next aisle.

Scott heard Michael’s footsteps passing. *He’s gone back*

up to the aisle front.

“Okay, Michael. Let me come talk to you.” Scott moved into Michael’s line of sight. “Is this okay? Can I talk to you?”

Michael sat with his legs drawn up. He looked away from Scott, eyes darting around. “Sure.”

Scott lowered himself to Michael’s level against the shop wall. “You know this shop is closed, Michael.” The detective motioned to the office door. “These people would like to go home. Enjoy the rest of their evening.” Michael didn’t look at him and said nothing. “I spoke to Addenbrooke’s Hospital. They’re worried for your safety.”

“So am I.”

“Okay. Well, why don’t I take you back there--“

“No! No, I’m not going.” Michael drew his legs closer, wrapped his arms around it. He favoured his left hand, gripping his wrist instead.

“The hospital is there to help you, Michael.”

“They can’t help!” Michael rubbed his good hand over his arm. Eyes still darting back and forth.

“Why don’t you let them try?”

“I’m not going. I’m not leaving!” Michael shouted.

“You can’t stay here.” Scott got to his haunches and reached out to take Michael by the arm.

“NO!”

Michael wasn’t quick enough. Scott took his right arm and twisted it behind Michael’s back. Michael turned red and blew air through his tight lips. He went down to the ground. Bucking and panting, Michael tried to get up,

leaning on his left hand. He yelped. His arm buckled and he landed face-first on the floor again.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Scott eased the pressure on the right arm. “I also don’t want to arrest you. And I won’t have to if you cooperate.”

“NO!” Michael kicked with his legs, trying to get purchase on the floor. His movements exaggerated, becoming frantic. He bobbed his head up and down, hitting it into the floor.

“Okay. I’ll let you up and then we’ll go. Okay?” Scott lifted Michael upright by the armpit. Michael jerked out of Scott’s grasp and was off.

“I’m NOT going!”

Scott sighed and rubbed his forehead, eyes closed. He looked around for a drink. This was the toilet paper aisle. The signs above directed him to the second aisle. Scott followed Michael down that end. He grabbed two cans of Coke and a large bag of crisps. He was done playing cat and mouse.

“Michael. You’re hiding, I see now.”

No answer. No sign of him. He must be in the first aisle.

“I’m going to talk to the manager and ask if you can stay in the office, okay?”

“Okay,” came a weak voice from behind the shelf.

Michael sipped his can of Coke. The bag of crisps laid open on the table between them.

Scott had sent the two shop keepers home for the

night. They hesitated but decided if they couldn't leave the store to a cop, their presence wasn't going to make things any better.

Michael looked up at the bright, fluorescent lights and smiled vaguely. He reached out for the bag and took a hand full of crisps.

"Are you okay?" Scott rested on the table with one arm. He took a sip of his own Coke. Michael's eyes darted to the office door. "Do you want to leave?"

"No!"

The word came out more vehemently than Scott expected it.

Michael adjusted his volume. "No. I was checking the door is closed," he said around another mouthful of crisps.

"Are you afraid it isn't?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"I think you are," Scott said.

Michael snorted. "Mind tricks."

"Why do you say that?"

Michael pulled a face. "You're just trying to get a reaction out of me." He stuffed his mouth with crisps again.

"Okay," said Scott, as he leaned in, "let's play it straight then." Michael looked up at Scott. "Why are you here?"

Michael lowered his hand full of food. "Can't I go to a shop?"

"You're supposed to be at Addenbrooke's. But, yes. I suppose you can."

Michael rubbed a salt-covered hand on his trousers.

“Well, then,” he said, before lifting the can to his mouth.

“Any reason you went into this shop? Did you need food?”

Michael put the can down and resumed eating. “Not really.”

“Then why this one?”

“It’s open late.”

“It’s not open now.”

“No.”

“Then why stay?” Scott sat back in his chair and motioned around. “It’s not like it’s the most stunning place there is.”

“I can’t go.”

Scott sighed inaudibly. “The hospital really isn’t that bad. It’s there to help.”

Michael grimaced. He chucked the remaining crisps back into the bag. “It’s not just the hospital.”

“What then?”

“I can’t go out.” Scott frowned. “It’s there,” Michael continued, raising his voice. “Out there.”

“What? Outside?”

Michael took a deep breath. “It’s the Dark.”

Scott sat forward in his seat. “But the hospital has lights. Why did you leave if you don’t like the dark?”

“It’s there too. The Darkness. I saw it.”

“You saw the darkness?”

“Yes. The Darkness took a nurse.”

Scott hesitated. “Wait a minute.”

“It took the nurse and I knew I had to leave.”

“You make it sound like Darkness, with a capital D.”

“It’s not safe out there. Only here.” Michael pointed at the fluorescents overhead, the echo of a smile back on his face. “Here, where there is enough light.”

“Okay-y,” Scott said, the word drawled, with a tone of deep irony.

“We can’t leave here.”

Scott stretched out a hand in reassurance. “Michael--“

“You can’t protect me. You can’t protect me out there!” Michael stood up with force. The chair he sat in toppled over backwards. Michael pulled up his shirt.

Scott recoiled.

On Michael’s chest was a wound. A number 5 was carved into his flesh. The mark looked a few days old, the edges curled out. Blood coated the numeral, dried into a deep red dullness. A downward gash stood out. Brighter than the rest, less healed. *Recent*. The addition made the carved number 5 into a lopsided 6.

Scott stood up. “Michael--“

Michael pointed to the door. “It’s there.”

Scott raised his hand to his cheek. He stood in thought for a moment. Then reached into his pocket and sat down. He leaned on his elbows, while he dialled his phone.

“I’m telling Addenbrooke’s we’ll be here for a long while longer.”

Michael lowered his arm. He smiled. “Good plan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

James Ravan

“Nick.”

The voice sounded far away. For a moment he wasn't sure who had said his name. But then he heard it again, with more urgency.

“Nick.”

It was his wife. He was sure of it. He had lost her somehow. No, that wasn't right. He was lost. That was it. He had gotten lost in this damned dark place and she was trying to help him find his way back.

“I turned on the lights, Nick,” she said.

He tried calling out to her, but he couldn't make a sound. For some reason, he couldn't open his mouth. And he was having trouble breathing. If he didn't find his way out of here quickly, he would suffocate.

What the hell had happened?

He started running toward the sound of her voice. But it was such a long way back he was sure he wasn't going to make it. Too many rooms. Too many hallways.

Completely lost.

And Something was... was...

He woke with a jolt. It was like holding the bare ends of an electric cord. He hated the feeling. Usually meant his psyche was forecasting a bad day.

Michael stood over him, shaking his shoulder and calling out.

“Nick, wake up. I turned them on, you know, the lights. Just in case.”

Then he remembered what happened last night after they had found Michael in the supermarket. Nick had come into the manager’s office looking for any evidence that the place had been disturbed. He had been wondering about Michael’s state of mind, what reason had really sent him to the market. If this nut job was just looking for money, Nick would have seen signs of the search for it, but nothing seemed amiss. Nothing appeared to be out of place.

He had been in the manager’s desk chair, leaning back, thinking about Michael and the other students and what had happened to them, trying to piece it all together. Trying to get his head around Michael’s story. And he must have nodded off.

A slip up like this could cost him his job. Dammit.

But seeing the look on the kid’s face, he was pretty sure of at least one thing—the kid was not thinking about running. Nick wasn’t sure why, but Michael wasn’t leaving.

But he was scared. No, he was somewhere beyond scared. Somewhere Nick himself had never been. It was as

if echoes of those events kept playing in that head and Michael couldn't shut them up.

Nick hated that electric feeling, the gut punch of adrenaline that felt like lightning up close. But he was becoming convinced Michael had felt it as well. Felt it that night. Only Michael couldn't let go. He was still holding the bared and frayed ends of his emotions. And they wouldn't let him go. They might never let him go.

Nick took his feet off the desk, leaned the chair upright, stood and turned toward the window behind him. He shook his head slowly, bemused. Michael had certainly turned on the lights in the office. All of them. But not before he had opened the blinds as well.

It was early morning, dim and hazy outside. The day's bustle of traffic was beginning and confirmed Nick's guilt at having slept the night away. He wondered if Michael had gotten any sleep. Something in the kid's eyes convinced Nick he hadn't slept much, if at all.

"She's here," Michael said.

Nick only raised his eyebrows in question. He was awful before that first cup of coffee. Words were not worth the effort until then. He noticed an electric pot, complete with ready made packets and some water on a side table. The fellow who ran this place was organized.

As Nick began preparing the coffee, Michael continued, "The doctor. From the ward. Dr. Warne. Says it's alright if I want to call her Lisa. Her."

The detective breathed an inward sigh of relief. He assumed that he and the doctor would be spending the

next couple of hours asking the kid to finish his story. He wondered if she would want to take the lead. She would ask different questions and in ways that Nick wouldn't or couldn't. Maybe Michael would be more at ease, more forthcoming.

It was her job to worry about Michael's state of mind. In a sadly detached way that Nick had cultivated during his years on the force, he realized he was now free to concentrate on the question everyone expected him to answer.

With Michael in tow, he took his coffee and headed out to meet the doctor.

Michael might be crazy. Michael might be sane.

But was Michael also a cold blooded killer?

Nick looked out at the view from Michael's hospital room. The traffic was thick this morning. The traffic light immediately outside caught his attention. He expected some driver to ignore it because they were late for an important meeting or something, but the drivers were more patient than he was at the moment. He finally turned from the window filled with a frustration close to boiling.

He was used to having his answers after a bout or two of intense questioning. Or if not answers, then at least some leads. If things got tough, he'd just give the perp a little time in a holding cell to think things over. Most suspects would slip up in some trivial way, get their facts confused, and Nick would catch them on it. Then he'd use that inconsistency as a lever. And they'd fall apart.

But this interview had just been, well, nuts. Crazy. Loco. Insane.

Dr. Warne had insisted that she be the one to ask Michael about what had happened to Andy. That had seemed a reasonable thing for her to do since this was the hospital where she worked and Michael was her patient.

But her questions were often vague.

“Michael, do you enjoy being at university?”

Who the hell cared?

“What television programs do you watch?”

Nick was certain that she held little interest in what had actually happened, that she was more concerned how Michael felt about what had happened. The facts were immaterial.

And she had only asked a few questions about that night. Most of the time she was asking Michael to describe his classes or his friends or where he ate his goddamn lunch.

And most frustrating of all, Michael hadn't said a word in at least ten minutes. Dr. Warne was reading a magazine, for crissakes. And the goddamn traffic light kept blinking every minute or so. The red light was bright enough to throw a reflection on the opposite wall of Michael's hospital room. Nick found it hard to concentrate.

Nuts. Crazy. Loco.

He looked at Warne with an intensity that he expected would upset her. She wouldn't want Michael disturbed in any way, so he intended to get her out in the hall and...

She wasn't looking at him. She was looking at Michael.

And Michael was looking at the reflection on the wall. Then he slowly turned his head and stared out the window.

She saw something. Something in his eyes.

In a very controlled voice, she said, “It’s red, Michael. Isn’t it?”

Michael started talking. His voice was far away, flat, drained. But he was still holding those live wires, feeling that electric adrenaline. The memories were etched deep in the lines on his face.

“Andy was number four. He knew he was number four. I knew he was number four. He said he couldn’t remember much about having the number carved on his chest, just the pain.

“He would be okay for a while, you know, then he would just freak. Really freak. Scream and shit. Just start screaming. I hit him once just to make him shut up. But he gave me this look, this weird look, like I was his only friend, how could I do that?

“He started talking about all the girls he’d shagged, right? He was really popular, you know, really popular. He was all smug about how cool that was. And then he’d look around and I’d think he saw something that I couldn’t see ‘cause he would just start screaming. But he couldn’t do it for long because it was real loud. So then he would just cry, you know. It was all he could do.

“We knew by then that whatever it was couldn’t stand the light, that it needed the dark to do its work. So we had turned all the lights on. Every one we could find. But Andy, he was still scared. He was convinced that the lights

The Dark

were going to go out. He was worried that a car was going to hit a pole, or there'd be a sudden storm or something. Crazy shit, you know?

“So all at once, he gets up. He gets really close to my face and he screams ‘It should have been you, goddamn it. You should have been four. But it doesn’t matter now, ‘cause we know who’s number five. We know who’s number five.’

“Then he starts in again about the lights going out. And he remembers there are torches in the utility cupboard off the kitchen. And he says we have to have them in case the lights go out. And I tell him not to risk it. I do. I tell him it’s too risky, don’t to it.”

Michael started crying.

“And then, he jumps up. He jumps up and he hits me real hard. I mean real hard. And he’s screaming, he says ‘If you were number four, you’d get them. You just want me to die when the lights go out. You just want me to die.

“And he runs into the kitchen. I hear the door of the utility cupboard open and slam shut. And I think Andy’s getting the torches. But then I remember.

“I remember that I should follow him in there just in case something happens. I mean, it’s crazy to be alone when we’re the only two left alive. But if we’re careful and make it until morning, we’ll be okay. We’ll be okay. We’ll be okay.

“So I get up and I run into the kitchen. And the door to the utility cupboard is closed. And I remember that the fuse box is inside. But I can see light coming from under

the door. There's light under the door. There's still light.

"But... But... But..."

"But there are these noises coming from inside. It's like something is throwing crates around in there. There's noise of cans falling and glass breaking.

"And I can hear Andy. But he's not screaming. I wish I could hear him scream. But now... now all I hear is a grunt or a moan or a gasp every time something crashes.

"And I'm standing there. I'm just standing there. I can't move. I don't want to move. I don't want to be number five. I don't want to be number five.

"But finally I do move. I still hear crashing now, but I think maybe Andy can get patched up. We have a first aid kit, I think, maybe, in the car.

"There's still crashing and banging. So I think there still must be time. So I run to the door and I pull it open."

Michael stopped and didn't say anything for a long while.

"And I see Andy's body hit the fuse box. His skull, really. His skull hits the fuse box. It sort of disintegrates. Shatters. There's blood everywhere. Everywhere. It's red everywhere. Everywhere, it's red.

"And the lights go out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Phil Sheehan

“Sir, parents of that Jones lad are here.”

“Good grief. What did you tell them?”

“Won’t talk to me, sir. Insist on someone at command level.”

“Well, that would be me, wouldn’t it?”

“Right, sir.”

“Any word from Scott?”

“Not recently. Still at hospital. Talking with Jones and the psychiatrist.”

“Jones? He’s definitely there, on the ward, right now?”

“That’s my information, sir.”

“Get Scott on the line for me, and tell the Joneses that I’ll see them in ten minutes.”

“Sir.”

Langley hung up, leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath, and shook his head. Hard enough to console the families of victims. Still harder to explain to families of the survivors, particularly as now, when the survivor looked to

be responsible for the death of four others.

His phone rang again.

“That you, Scott?”

“Sir.”

“Jones is in custody?”

“Just been talking with him sir, and the doc.”

“How’s he look?”

“Ragged. Some burns and bandages, but physically, he looks all right.”

“Physically?”

“What I mean, sir, nothing medically wrong with him that a pot of ointment and a couple weeks of rest won’t fix. But he’s a nut case, no question.”

“A nut case. That’s the psychiatric diagnosis?”

“No sir. Exact diagnosis... a moment, got it here in the notes... exact diagnosis is nyctophobia.”

“Fear of the night.”

“Fear of darkness is what the doc said.”

“A common feature of the night.”

“Sir?”

“What’s your take, Scott?”

“Sir?”

“Did he set the fire?”

“No question in my mind.”

“Motive?”

“As I said, sir, he’s a nut case.”

“What about the psychiatrist? Is he firm in his opinion, or have we some leverage there?”

“Her opinion, sir. Name is Lisa Warne.”

“Oh no. Bleeding heart, is she?”

“Sympathetic to Jones I believe, sir, but not very, what you’d call, not terribly feminine, if you get my meaning.”

“Wearing a pant suit, asks a lot of questions, upper-class accent?”

“That’s her, sir. Do you know her?”

“Know the type, Scott. Related to several. But to the issue. She thinks Jones is incompetent to stand trial, to recognize the legality of his actions?”

“Very firm in her opinion that Jones is incompetent.”

“So if he’s charged...”

“He’ll walk. Right sir.”

“Ah well, I suppose that will be some comfort to his parents.”

“Very like, sir.”

“Thank you Scott. Wrap up out there, and check back with Grissom. Good chance the arson team will want your input.”

“Right, sir.”

Langley hung up again. Nothing for it now but to deal with the parents.

“Wakefield, show the Jones family into my office.”

In they came, husband leading, wife trailing. Clean clothes, neat but right off the rack. His chin set, her make-up smeared a bit around the eyes. They paused, glancing first at Langley, then at the stiff-back chairs beside his desk.

“Please, do sit down, over here where it’s more comfortable.” He walked with them to the couch at the

window side of the office. They sat. He stayed on his feet.

“First, let me assure you that your son is safe and sound at the hospital, where he’s in the care of a highly-regarded professional.”

Mrs. Jones looked up, trying to smile. Mr. Jones squared his shoulders, looked up at Langley. “Safe and sound you say. You mean he’s in good health.”

“Exactly what I mean. I’ve just been talking with one of my detectives, who’s been interviewing your son and the attending doctor.”

Mrs. Jones let the smile appear. Her shoulders relaxed. She clutched her handbag, but less tightly than before. Mr. Jones nodded briefly, then looked again at Langley. “The attending doc. That’s a medical man, or what?”

“Doctor Warne has a degree in medicine, yes.”

“Well they all have degrees, don’t they? What kind of specialist is he, that’s what I’m asking.”

“Doctor Warne is a psychiatrist.”

Mrs. Jones sniffled and began rummaging in her purse. Mr. Jones nodded his head once more and leaned forward. “You think my boy’s a nutter, is that it?”

“Your boy has been through a severe physical and emotional ordeal, Mr. Jones. Hospital staff wants to attend to all possible problems.”

“Let me tell you, that lad may have s problem or two, I mean, don’t we all, but he’s not a psycho, nothing wrong with him except he’s had to watch his friends burnt to a crisp, and that would twist anybody’s head around.”

“We heard he was missing a while.” Mrs. Jones small

clear voice. "I worried he would do something, well, something unseemly."

"Unseemly, Mrs. Jones?"

She bit her lip, looked down. Langley regretted not having sat down with them, wished he could see her face more clearly. As if in answer, she looked up at him. "He was always so willing to shoulder the blame, to take responsibility for what others did. He's been a good lad, such a gentle soul. I worry the world will be too harsh for him."

"Nonsense." Mr. Jones stood up, turned to look out the window, then back to Langley. "He's a strong boy, and a good one." He took a small step back. "Let's stop beating round the bush, Inspector. Why is Michael in police custody, and why aren't we allowed to see him?"

"Four persons died horribly in a fire which may have been deliberately set, Mr. Jones. Do you think the police ought not to investigate?"

"Well of course you ought to investigate. But my son was damn near a victim as well, was a victim, come to that, and you're treating him like a criminal."

"We are treating him like the only person who may information about the deaths of four other persons. That does not make him a criminal. And as I told you, to which you agreed, he has been through the most intense psychological trauma, and is therefore in need of the most advanced care which can be provided."

Mr. Jones nodded, sat back down, and said nothing further. Mrs. Jones clutched her handbag tightly once more

and said, “That being the case, Inspector, it might help for him to have time with his parents. We would dearly love to see him, to hold him, to know in our hearts that he is all right.”

“I understand, Mrs. Jones, and I hope you will believe me when I say you are absolutely right. We will make every effort to see that happens as soon as humanly possible.”

She paused a moment, then said, “You are going to arrest him and charge him with arson, aren’t you.”

Mr. Jones started to speak, then cradled his head in his hands and began, softly, to cry.

Langley looked again at Mrs. Jones, this time with new eyes. “Mrs. Jones, I honestly do not know. I wish I could give you a definite answer, even if it were to say, yes, we will. But I do not know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Brian Beker

There is a sound - one sound - that all the hospital corridors of all the world have in common. It is not a sound like that of a patient shuffling along in an untied gown and disposable slippers, or of the wobbly wheels of the IV stand he ushers up and down on nurse's orders. It is not the clank of a pair of scissors and some blood-caked gauze being dropped onto a metal tray out of sight somewhere. That feeble voice down the hall pleading for help is not a component of the sound, nor is the general sobbing and crying, the coughing and moaning or the retching or the fear - fear it can of course not be, because fear has a sound all its own. And the squeaking of rubber-soled white shoes on the way to attend has nothing to do with the sound. All of those sounds, and all the rest of this quiet din, are mere background to the unhearable deep-earth hum of death itself.

To Dr. Lisa Warne, emergency psychiatrist, sometimes the damned corridors seemed like the worst part of the

hospital. The corridors stretched on and on.

As she walked she listened to the steady, business-like knocking of her heels on the linoleum, sure that she could hear something over her footsteps, something she had been hearing, had been attuned to, for the past year or so. It was convenient to self-diagnose this as a minor stress-induced tinnitus, two mg. Valium, one glass of Chardonnay, as needed.

Detective Nick Scott was leaning against the wall a few doors down from the one to Michael's room. His back was to Lisa, his head down, thumb and forefingers in a pincer at his temples. Clearly he had been working all night. When he heard her approach he straightened up.

"I appreciate your waiting for me, Detective," she said.

"I just got here. A moment ago." They shook hands. It was the same kind of handshake people tended towards when they ran out of ammunition in a trench, or appeals on death row or some other form of short time.

Dr. Warne moved towards the door of Michael's room and looked through the vertical safety-glass panel above the door handle. What she saw didn't seem like anything much at all - a young man lying quietly under the woven white cotton blanket of a hospital bed with its back raised, that was all... or that *was* all until the onset of a sudden and determined tremor, one that originated deep within at the spine and started hard and shook for several seconds and then stopped. Much the same as the way a dog who has been accidentally shot by his owner after trudging through a cold stream with a bleeding duck in his mouth

shivers on the banks before he dies. Or the way that same dog might react to a generous electric current being run through him for good measure.

Michael was staring straight at the glass pane in the door, as if he was expecting someone to appear there. His eyes were the only two clearly fixed points in his shaking head. The shaking made him seem slightly out of focus.

“Paralyzed,” Lisa said, without moving her lips.

“Fear,” Nick said, in the same low tone of voice.

Gingerly, Lisa opened the door and stepped into the room. Nick was behind her and tried to keep it quiet, but the door closing mechanism took over at the last second and slammed the door securely with a loud brass and steel *klbunnk!*

Michael recoiled at the sound and the approaching figures. An unseen hand added another thirty volts to the juice the dog was getting and Michael’s eyes stretched into bigger discs in his head.

A grey overcast outside allowed only a trickle of thin, pale light to enter the room, and all the electric lights were on. A blinding examination light was positioned over Michael’s head, shining directly on his face, highlighting his anguish and turning him into a ghastly succession of shadows and blood vessels and oily skin.

Nick made a soothing palms-downward gesture and said, “We’ve got to talk some more, Michael,” as he approached the bed. When he got there, Michael’s eyeballs were rotated all the way up, staring at Nick’s silhouette above him in the examination light. His trembling was taut

enough to snap pencils. Nick turned off the light, and for one good second the room was returned to the flat light of the overcast day mixed with the room lights.

Michael said, “T-t-t-turn the l-l-l-light back on b-b-bef-f-fore it gets me!”

Dr. Warne stepped over and switched the light back on. The harsh glare fell onto his red face with a crash like that of a bottle being smashed by thugs in an alley. But somehow he stopped trembling. Maybe it was the light, maybe it was just the way the shaking came and went.

“Michael, you’ve got to let us help you.”

“Help? You think you can help? Against *it*?”

“It, Michael? What is this *it*?” Dr. Warne asked.

“What did it do, Michael?” Nick asked.

The questions brought on some more shivers, but they ended quickly. Michael was able to close his eyes, shutting them hard.

“You know what it did! It comes out of the dark to kill! Everyone’s dead.... Oh, my god, I can’t believe it, everyone’s dead, dead, dead...”

The trembling set in again, this time so convincingly that Dr. Warne removed a syringe from the pocket of her lab coat and slid the needle through the latex diaphragm of a small glass vial. As she pulled the plunger back she said, “I’m going to give you the good stuff, Michael.”

The effect of the drug was like that of a hot soup on a freezing winter traveller. In moments the state of Michael’s being was improved to the point where it no longer seemed like he was going to shake himself to pieces.

The Dark

When finally he said something it was: "I can taste that stuff in my mouth."

"Are you feeling better?" Dr. Warne asked.

Michael shuddered.

"It cut me. It came out of the dark to cut me. It cut me and it cut me over and over again. We were asleep. The lights were off, and it came from the dark to cut me."

"But who cut you?" Nick asked.

"You haven't been listening to me. No one listens to me. It's the same at university. It's the same with Mum and Dad - no one listens to me."

"We're listening to you, Michael," Lisa said. "I promise you we are."

"Who cut you? Did you see him?"

"Him? Did I see *him*? The question is, did *you* hear *me*? It's not a him - it's an it. It is a thing that lives in the dark. The dark everywhere. The dark at the house, the dark here, the damned dark in Madagascar if you go look there. It's the worst thing in the world."

Michael began to sob. "The others were already dead by the time it got to me. I was going to be Number Five. I had to listen to them screaming as it tore them to pieces... the screaming - you've never heard anything like it, horrible, god-awful shrieks... I was frozen with fear... I couldn't move, I couldn't bring myself to move at all..." The sobbing took over, and Michael couldn't continue.

"It's best you tell us what happened," Dr. Warne said.

"It cackles at you, it laughs and yelps while it carves you up! Like a whole little pack of hyena puppies squirming for

their mother's milk! Whimpering and laughing, cooing at you, all of it from the dark, all of it while it pins you down and holds you there, and - oh, god...."

Michael's body shook with the force of his sobs. Dr. Warne looked at Nick and nodded as if to say, "Leave him for a moment, good thing he's letting it out."

Nick said, "Michael, I have to know what happened. Someone else could be killed. You have got to try to tell me more. We must go over every detail."

Michael stopped. A high anger took over. His bloodshot eyes looked like they would be better suited to some distant planet with sulfuric acid in the atmosphere.

"Tell you more? More? You'd like some more, would you? I've told you everything - it lives in the dark. The dark is its abode, its home, no, it's what it's part of. You don't have to believe it. It doesn't live in a house or in a flat or in a nice little rental cottage down by the creek where John can just boff Claire any time he likes while the rest of us are out in the sitting room having to listen to it - it lives in the dark. In all of the dark. Do you understand me? And it killed everybody - Andy and John and Dave and, oh - poor, poor Claire! How she was sliced up! Like a tomato! Like a little pickle!"

Michael's racking sobs took him over. This time Lisa Warne placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. He practically killed himself recoiling from her touch. She withdrew her hand.

"And then it came for me! I knew, I knew, I knew - I *understood*, you see, that it was coming from the dark.

The Dark

Think about it! It's all so obvious, isn't it? The dark! That's all you need!

“Everything was pitch black, no light, none at all, as dark as the grave, and I heard it laughing and cackling and the more it killed everybody - and poor Claire! - The more it hacked away at her the more it made this sickening little chuckle. No - it was more of a gurgle than a chuckle, like there was too much wet blood in its throat as it chuckled - *glugglugglug* - like that.

“But I'm smart, you see, I'm not like one of those Asian kids at school. They're like you,” Michael looked at Nick the way a defiant prisoner might look at his firing squad, “Asking me WHO killed everybody , ' when I'm telling you it was an IT, IT, IT!”

Suddenly Michael threw his covers aside.

“I'm burning up here. Is it hot in here or is it me?”

Nick said, “Go on - let's hear the rest of it.”

Michael jumped up from the bed and began a strange re-enactment, prancing and pouncing up and down, moving on the tiptoes of his long, bony feet.

“I understood that it came from the dark. So I tried to get a light on before it got to me. That would have done it, wouldn't it? But there were no lights! The power! Of course! Don't you think that's the first thing whatever lives in the dark would think of? The power was off - dead, nothing. Not a volt.”

Lisa made a signal of assent, a technically human gesture taught on psychiatric faculties and then left up to individual students to refine over a lifetime and into a

career. The prime psychiatrist's gesture the quality of which more or less determined the student's future earning potential. She wondered if Michael - who, it seemed, could see into the dark - saw through it.

"I tried to light the kerosene lantern, the one we used when we sat outside, by the creek, just earlier that evening. Just earlier *last night!* But I was scared - that's not my fault. Everyone was dead or dying - I could hear Claire - I could still hear her. Her screams stopping short every time she got hacked - 'AHHH - AHHH - AHHH! And then it stopped and there was only that cackling, that fiendish chuckling with the blood down its throat...."

"I needed light - what could be simpler than that - I needed LIGHT! LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT LIGHT! The answer was obvious - Right? A fire! There was no power, so the only light could be from a fire. I was scared, and it was hard, and I could barely bring myself to move, but I managed to undo the cap on the kerosene lamp - and it was a good thing that I was the one who filled it up, because I knew there was oil in there, and that gave me a little courage."

Michael noticed a glaring reflecting bulb recessed in a ceiling fixture. It induced in him a small reverie. His eyes went up to it, he stared into straight into the light, and he seemed to gather some comfort from it.

"Oh, Michael, you mustn't do that."

"Yes, yes, I know, I know...", Michael said. Slowly, and with a calm that no one could have expected a few minutes earlier, he closed his eyes. Some resolve seemed to settle

The Dark

itself over him, and he began again to relate his story.

“The curtains - what better to light on fire than the curtains. I managed to get some of the kerosene sprinkled out on the curtains. Oh - I was moving fast. If you ever want to move fast just wait’ll you’ve got that thing from the dark getting ready to slice you up like a turnip on an infomercial. But do you think fast’s any match for the bloody bastard of a thing?”

“Then it was there - I felt it pin me down, It was like being pinned down by a leaking garbage bag full of guts and gristle and tripe and blood from the butcher’s. But I held onto the only hope I had - I held onto the lighter like it was life itself. It slammed me down on the floor and pressed me down. The force of the thing was terrible, it was all over every bit of me, like wet snow under an avalanche. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. What would you have liked me to do? My shirt was torn off and I felt the point of something sharp on my chest, and the thing, the - the - the - the *it*, whatever the hell - the *hell* - it was, that thing in the dark was doing that sick little chuckling thing and saying, not saying - saying it sort of directly into my head - like when an alien talks to you - I just knew what it was saying - saying, ‘Five... five... five... Your friends have used up Numbers One through Four so it’s the Number Five for you! Ready for your tattoo, boy?’ And it started carving the five into my chest. That’s not a feeling I’ll be forgetting any time soon.”

The memory made Michael clutch at his chest, as if he had just discovered leeches stuck to it. He shuddered for a

moment and then stopped. He opened his eyes and glared at Lisa and Nick.

“I found a well of strength. I don’t know where, but I found a deep well of strength. It wasn’t much - just enough to flicker the lighter in my hand. Just once - I got my thumb on the wheel and got one little flicker out of it. And what did it prove? It proved everything! Didn’t it?! It proved right away that that thing lives in the dark, because for that one, little tenth of a second, the time it takes for a lighter that won’t catch to flickadee-flickadee-flicker, it was gone. But then it got dark and it was back. Instantly. Oh - and it laughed and laughed and started carving me harder and harder. I felt that blade, some kind of serrated blade, or maybe a broken piece of plastic, something catching on my skin and plucking it up and tearing it as it sliced, breaking the skin, pulling it apart more than cutting it, digging jabs, picking at me.... It enjoyed the torture, it savoured it. The pain was beyond belief.

“I managed to keep flicking the lighter, though, didn’t I? My own little bolts of lightning. Just enough to get just enough time in between the cutting on my chest to wiggle closer, ever closer, to the curtains. And when I got there, POOF! I don’t know how - I got them to catch, and finally, some light, some wonderful, beautiful light! Just like the light that God gives, the light that God made first and above all other things. I knew what to do - I needed to let there be light!” Michael broke off into a strange combination of a panicked laugh and a querying look at Nick and Lisa, the look of someone going over the side of

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a fast ship into icy water, a look that insists upon some last and pointless question that will not be answered before the heart stops.

Michael stopped and caught a few breaths. “I don’t really remember much more. I know I couldn’t let the light go out. That was the main thing. It got smoky. And hot. I couldn’t stay there - but the next room was dark, so I had to light that one up, too, and then the next, and the next. I had to have the light, can’t you see that?”

“Where was the, the, well, the *it*?” Nick asked.

“Gone. Gone with the wind. The lighted wind of the trusty kerosene candle. Gone - but only for the moment. Back as soon I would’ve let the dark back in, and now the thing was going to be enraged - right? Wouldn’t that be it - now that its little dark space, its little place where it could just hack Claire and the others up as it pleased, had been lit up? Ohhh, noooo... I understood. I knew the only thing that could be known about this, this thing - that it lived in the dark. I could keep it away as long as the fire would burn.”

Michael seemed to be running out of energy. The collapse that had been in progress when Lisa and Nick had entered his room began again. Michael dropped onto the bed, hung his head down into the palms of his hands. He had a sheen of oily sweat on him.

“And then, Michael, how did you get away?” Lisa asked.

“All I remember was some kind of big BANG! Outside.”

“What kind of bang,” Nick asked. “A gunshot or an

explosion or something falling? Be more specific.”

“Can’t be. That’s all I remember. That’s really all. I think I lost consciousness. The next time I saw anything, it was the firemen. And they brought me here. And soon, it’ll be dark again. It will be here, too. It will be everywhere. We can’t stop it. It’ll come out of the dark.”

Michael rolled over onto his side and with his hands over his face, he began to sob again.

Lisa looked at Nick and motioned towards the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tim Rogers

Nick sat in the hospital canteen and basked in the grim glow of environmentally friendly low energy light bulbs against the mid tone mustard coloured walls. It was a decor that would normally make him sick to his stomach but it was a welcome contrast to the brightness of Michael's room, and provided a much needed break for his eyes which he rubbed and scratched and rubbed again, and basically just gave punishment until they stopped complaining. He shuffled in his chair and the thin metal tubes holding the seat gave a groan. "Sorry dear," he muttered instinctively to his wife before he realised where he was.

It was twelve thirty, which spelt lunchtime in anyone's book and yet – despite it being the only place to buy anything more substantial than a Snickers bar without getting on a bus – the restaurant, if you could call it that, was practically deserted. The tables were scattered seemingly randomly throughout the available space,

populated with only a couple of nurses, some pained looking patients and a single visitor with a nervous smile and a bouquet of cheap flowers. Nick looked up from his lunch and saw Dr Warne by the cashier. She had a bag of salt and vinegar crisps clenched in her teeth and a bottle of Fanta wedged up into her armpit as she stopped to help a guy with one hand in plaster try and remove and squeeze out the teabag from his drink without spilling it all down his front. If only she'd arrived 3 minutes sooner.

Nick raised a hand to politely say hello when she turned round and spotted him sitting by himself watching her. Warne dropped the Fanta out from her armpit and without looking caught it in the same hand in one smooth movement. She attempted to do the same thing with the crisps when they fell straight past her hand, into the oncoming knee and slid across the floor to rest at Nick's feet.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Please," said Nick as he picked up the bag of crisps from the floor and placed it on the table in front of her with a smile. *Does she know I'm married*, he wondered trying to remember if it's come up at all over the past week. He left his left hand on the table where the gold band is clearly visible. *You can never be too careful*. One of the nurses got up from the next table and the left hand instinctively fell under the table again. *Jerk*, he thought to himself.

"How's the cuisine?" asked Lisa as Nick diverted his attention back to his pre-packed sandwich. He was two bites into the limp looking slabs of bread and about ready

to give up. “Pretty much the same as it looks.”

“You know, I think this is the first time we’ve had lunch. Look how we’re growing.”

“It feels like this is the first time I’ve eaten since I took the case.” Nick slapped the sandwich back on the table and looked at it with disgust. “And I still can’t face it.”

“Are prison canteens any better than hospital ones?”

He looked up. “Can we... I don’t want to be rude, but can we skip the small-talk part? I’m tired, hungry and this sandwich is only making me more irritable.”

Lisa smiled and leaned back in her chair. *Her chair didn’t squeak*, thought Nick and glanced down at his waistline. *Not so bad, must be my chair*. “So what’s the topic?” asked Lisa. “Deforestation in the Amazon?” She had a silly smile on her face. “But seriously, though, what’s going to happen to Michael? Will he get charged?”

“With deforestation? Unlikely”.

“Shut up.”

“From a criminal prosecution standpoint?” Nick laced his fingers behind his neck. “Well, you’ve got your four dead bodies. Of those, Claire could easily have been an accident; an unlucky trip and fall. The boyfriend could have been suicide. It sounds like he was steaming drunk, his girlfriend died while he listened and did nothing, and according to his family he’s flunking out of University.”

“He could always have joined the police.”

Nick ignored the jab and carried on. “Dave? Well we have no physical evidence to say what killed Dave, except we know that it *wasn’t* the fire. We’ll have plenty of luck

making that stick.

“Andy is a different story. He was definitely murder with his skull caved in like that. Add that one to the mix and any other coincidences start to sound less coincidental to a jury...” Lisa managed a scowl

“...But the closest we have to evidence against Michael is that he was at the scene,” continued Nick, “and he had a perfectly legitimate reason to be there. You can’t win a murder trial against someone just because you couldn’t find someone more plausible to fit the cuffs.” Another scowl from Lisa. “Okay, it’s possible, but it’s not my style.

“One thing we can prove is arson. The report from the fire inspector is clear on that one. That fire had multiple points of origin and there was possible use of spirit alcohol as an accelerant, although vodka all over the place in a student rental is pretty much a given.”

“We do have Mike’s admission, but...” Nick straightened himself in the chair, and ignoring the squeak adopted an exaggerated lawyer-in-court tone “Tell me, Doctor, in your professional opinion was the defendant of sound mind when he made the admission to the Detective?”

“Nope, he was loony toons.”

“Quite.” Nick shook his head. “The best I can get him on is stealing a fucking alarm clock, and frankly I’d pay the five quid myself to save the paperwo...”

He stops and listens for a second before pulling his mobile phone from his trouser pocket. Nick silently mouths *one minute* before standing up and answering the

phone.

“Scott here”

“Hey, Scott. It’s Geoff. .. Geoff at Dispatch”.

“Are you going to say ‘Geoff at Dispatch’ every time you call? You’re the only one with this number and you’ve worked there for five years.”

“A body has been found in the river Cam, down near the Anchor pub. Can you get down there to check it out?”

“It’s got a number on its chest?” Lisa looks at him with wide eyes.

“No. What are you on about?”

“Sorry, Geoff. What makes you think it’s got anything to do with the Jones’ case?”

“Nothing man, but everyone’s busy. You go time to take this one or not?”

Nick looked at Lisa. “Yeah, I guess I do. Email me over the details will you and I’ll read them on the way over.” He snapped the phone shut with a flourish.

“Email?”

“Yeah, it’s the fucking Noughties now.”

“No it isn’t. Not for nearly two years. And do you always stand to attention when you’re on the phone?”

Nick sat back down and stole a crisp. “So what do you think really happened?”

Lisa sighs. “No idea. Honestly, I don’t think Michael does either. Sometimes he’s lucid, others angry, others he’s basically a child. Sometimes he tries to rationalise it and others it’s just A Thing. But that’s good. He’s starting to look for rationalisations and we can build on that.”

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“So we might never know?”

“Unless someone else dies.”

Nick stands up again. “We’ve run hot and cold this week you and me, but you’re alright, Warne. You take care of that kid of yours.”

“He’s not my kid.”

“He is now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Maria Dascalu

Lisa sat at the table, her hands folded over her clipboard. They faced each other, Michael staring at his hands, frowning. He cleared his throat and looked up at Lisa.

“Do you think Detective Scott could charge me for arson?” he asked, his eyebrows crinkling in the middle.

Lisa pushed some hair out of her face and shook her head. “No,” she said, “you’re safe on that count.”

Michael seemed reassured on this point, but his eyebrows remained crinkled.

“What about the alarm clock?”

Lisa smiled gently, “I think compared to arson, stealing an alarm clock is nothing. You’ll be fine.”

Michael sighed in relief and looked around the room. The alarm clock was there, ticking away, providing an oddly comforting sound. It sounded like a heartbeat, ticking away like that.

Michael smiled at it, but obviously was not thinking of

it. Lisa studied him. His eyes had an oddly gold light now, so that instead of looking a dark brown they now had a golden brown tint to them.

“Now, let’s get back on track.” Lisa said, unclasping her hands and turning to her clipboard. She flipped up the top page and then pursed her lips as she read what it said.

Michael turned his head back towards her, his eyebrows raised as if he was telling her that he was waiting impatiently.

Lisa reread the words, trying to find the right way to tell him so that he wouldn’t get scared and ruin what she was going to try to accomplish.

She closed her eyes for one, two, three moments, and then opened them and looked straight into Michael’s dark brown eyes.

“Here’s the thing.” She said to him, leaning forward, “You’re not well.”

“I know that.” Michael said, nodding. “You’ve all told me lots of times.”

“Yes.” Said Lisa, nodding, and readjusting her hair so that it wouldn’t come into her face. Things were going well so far. They weren’t all going to blow up in her face like the last person she’d had to do this to.

“Now, what do we need to do? Do you remember that?”

“We need to restore logic and order.” Michael rattled off. He’d been told this too.

“Good. Good. We have to make you better.” Lisa looked distractedly around the room.

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“You’re making me nervous.” Michael told her.

“I apologize.” Lisa said, taking a deep breath. “I forgot you know all these things very well.”

“Yes.” Said Michael, looking at his bandaged left hand with a slightly detached air. It didn’t hurt much, but it was interesting every once in a while when the pain shot through.

“Alright, let me get back on track.” Lisa said, “Basically what we do to get rid of phobias is something called ‘flooding.’”

Michael raised one eyebrow expectantly and tapped his fingers on the table.

“It’s a cognitive behavior therapy, and it’s had great success in the past for many different types of phobias.”

Michael frowned. “I think I’m starting to understand.”

“Do you?” she asked.

“Yes. You want to plunge me into the Darkness.” He said, frowning.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

Michael’s knuckles were white as he clutched the table. “There are things in the darkness.” He said, frowning.

“There’s nothing in the darkness that will hurt you. You’ll be completely safe, Michael.” Lisa said, frowning. “I wouldn’t do it if you weren’t going to be completely safe.

“You’re not going to do it no matter what.” Michael said.

“Michael, I am the doctor. I think I know what I’m doing.”

“But you don’t *know*.” Michael argued. “I refuse to be

plunged into the darkness.”

“Then you won’t be.” Lisa said, smiling. She had it. He’d not be afraid, because he wouldn’t let himself. Wasn’t that what he was saying?

“Good.” He said,

“You’ll be in the darkness,” Lisa continued, “but you won’t be *plunged* into it. It’s completely safe.”

“NO!” Michael shouted, standing up so fast the chair fell out from underneath him. “I won’t!” He slammed both hands on the table, then winced terribly and cradled his bandaged hand.

“Are you alright?” Lisa asked gently.

“I don’t want to do that.” Michael said, now calm, turning around and picking up the chair to set it down carefully and sit down.

“You *have* to.” Lisa said, smiling at him. “It’s necessary. And it’s had great success rates.” She said, smiling at him.

“Not now.”

Lisa widened her smile, even though it was almost painfully wide now, and said, “You are not going to be hurt or attacked or anything. I promise you.”

“You’re trivializing this! There’s *things* in the dark!” Michael said, sitting up straighter so that he could properly explain to her, “You don’t understand!” he said, jumping up and pacing the room, “I was attacked by something in the dark!”

“That was the fire.” Lisa explained to him patiently.

“No,” he said seriously, “that was one of the *monsters*.”

Lisa sighed.

“Do I absolutely have to?” Michael asked. “I want to be cured, but... but not this way. Can’t we just do therapy?”

“This *is* therapy.” Lisa pointed out. “And yes, you do have to.”

Michael frowned. “But not now. When I’m ready.”

Lisa rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Maybe not right this second,” she admitted, though she was already planning out exactly what she was going to do next.

“Good.” Michael said, and sat down on his bed. He bounced up and down a bit, picked up the alarm clock and turned it over to the other side.

Then he placed it between his knees and gripped, turning the key so that it would wind up.

Lisa watched him as he turned the key to the alarm clock.

Then she stood up slowly, flipping through her clipboard... she looked up at Michael, who was still turning the key. He set it on the nightstand and looked up at her.

“I have to go now.” She told him, “But I’ll be back later to check up on you.”

“Goodbye.” Said Michael, grinning at her.

Lisa exited the room and closed the door behind her. She took a key from her pocket and locked the door, then reached for the box that encased the light switch to Michael’s room.

She took a deep breath and flipped it to the OFF switch. Then, ignoring the other patient’s accusing stares, she walked away quickly.

The End

