

**LET  
ME  
OUT**

S.A. TAMEEZ

SA  
TAMEEZ



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## Chapter 1

Just like so many other memories, the memories of her mother and father were fading. She reviled this inevitability. She fought to hold onto them but knew they would eventually evaporate into the abyss, or wherever memories fled after they escaped you. Perhaps there actually was a place they fled to – a mysterious land of missing memories. The dwelling place for old friends, deceased pets and, of course, the “good old times”. Victoria often wished she could go to that place, though she knew this could never be, since, to get to that place she had to escape this place – and there was no escape from this place. Not a chance in hell.

Her fatigued eyes ritually explored the room in which she had been imprisoned for the previous six months. Held captive. Incarcerated by solid brick walls and a great, rusted, metal door which stood straight like an impenetrable iron guard. Although, unlike her body, her mind was far from being restrained. Her imagination had swum the depths of the deep blue seas, ventured through uncharted tropical jungles and often rocketed into space to explore the heavens. Her mind had seen things her eyes would never get to see.

Limitless.

Free – if there were ever such a thing.

The window. The only morsel of hope and light remaining. Like an enigmatic spectacle of a lone radiant red rose shimmering amid a bush of ghoulish nettles, it was mysterious, beautiful – almost surreal. A view of the outside. A wonderful world so close yet unreachable.

Although the unkempt garden and part of the neighbour’s garden were the only things in sight, this was now the only evidence remaining that a world beyond this dungeon even existed. A vibrant world where the air was renewed, and there existed life forms other than spiders and repugnant rats. This was now her world. A colourless realm with no one except her demons for company. And this gloomy, grey room will undoubtedly be the last thing she ever sees – of this, she was certain.

The room, the box, the dungeon – it had many names, was dark. Dark in more ways than one. There was light once, many months back. A diffused golden glow emanated from a petite orb on the ceiling. But just like her feelings of hope and escape, it gradually diminished.

The ceiling, on which the now lifeless bulb hung like a rotting corpse on a pendulum, was so high it was impossible to touch, yet, close enough to suffocate her. The tyrannical walls and blemished ceiling caved in and throttled her every day. She learned to take long deep breaths and clamp her eyes shut – imagining clasping her mother’s hand as she strolled along a sandy beach. With the beaming sun’s warmth draped around her, her mother’s words replayed, “Breathe... baby... just breathe,” like fresh water quenching a person dying of thirst. No, it was more than that. Her soothing words were a strong sedative to an intolerable suffering. Suffering no human should have to endure. Victoria’s nostrils flared as she inhaled deeply, hoping she would somehow smell the scent of her mother’s welcoming perfume. But all she caught was a vile whiff of the sickening stench in the dungeon.

For Victoria, her mother was her angel. Was being the operative word. And just like Victoria’s hope for freedom, her mother was no more.

The saying “All good things come to an end” earned its title as a cliché, as it was, as Victoria had learned the hard way, true. All good things *did* come to an end, and the worst part was that you couldn’t do a thing about it. Not a *damn* thing! But what about the bad things? Victoria often asked

herself, do they come to an end? Looking at her bruised arms and stroking her fat lower lip, she was not convinced they ever would.

If only she could just vanish like smoke into the atmosphere or be absorbed into the ground like spilt water – never to be seen again. She even deliberated suicide, every day in fact, but always lost the argument to her inner, stronger self. She detested that dogmatic bitch. Never around when you needed her but always surfaced when she wasn't wanted. A real bitch!

Victoria circled the room and glared at every corner as if by some miracle, something would be different. Something new would appear – perhaps a delicious Victoria sponge cake or even a fresh iced bun from Gareth's Bakery would just be there. She wouldn't even ask how it got there – she wouldn't even care. Stuff it down her as fast as she could and not speak a word of it to anyone, not even to herself.

Gareth's Bakery... she chewed her nails, the little that was left of them. Her favourite place to eat. Her mother took her there as a treat once a month at least; twice when she had been particularly good. It was the best bakery in town – the food was always fresh, and Mr Gareth would always offer Victoria a strawberry favoured lollipop from his tub of sweets before they left. "Not before your dinner, mind." he would say with his bushy eyebrows lifted. Victoria would always respond with a smile before they left. And, of course, devour the lollipop long before they got home. Her mother would never say anything – she always seemed like she had so much on her mind as they approached the house that she always forgot about the scrumptious sugary lollipop.

Now, however, breakfast, lunch and dinner were a scrap of stale bread, which was solid enough to pass as a flavourless biscuit, and water that smelt like a corpse. It was nauseating.

Either that or starve to death.

Recently, however, starving to death was the more appetising option.

The shabby single bed sat hauntingly in the middle of the room, surrounded by nothing except a filthy toilet, a sink, a metal cup, a large metal bucket and an antique dressing table and stool. At first, the dressing table gave her chills. She despised it. It looked like it belonged to a little girl who died hundreds of years ago. She hated the mirror that sat above the most. Unable to bear the sight of the blonde-haired thirteen-year-old staring back at her – reminded her of what she once was, though she was far from that now. Cheeks sunken, from what she suspected was malnourishment. Nose more prominent than before, now arched in the middle from breaking a month back. Murky green eyes that seemed like a frozen lake – lifeless and cushioned by puffy dark circles. The cut on her chin that had scabbed over but didn't seem to be disappearing. It would probably scar just to contribute to her hideous appearance.

*You are the most beautiful little girl in the world*, her mother would say. If only she could see her now. The ogre she had become.

The toilet reeked. Just like the dressing table, initially, she loathed it. The stench so foul that initially, she was sure it would poison her in her sleep – now, she hardly noticed it. It was the only thing she smelt, except for one day in the week. One glorious day a week there was another smell – a dreamlike aroma of a delicious roast dinner. It seeped in from the tiny air vents in the window, torturing her far more than the abhorrent stink from the disgusting toilet. She assumed it came from the neighbour's house, presumably on a Sunday, for roasts were usually had on Sundays – from what she could remember. The wonderful scent transported her back to a time when she was at home – happy and safe. Sundays were the days that her father had off work and her mother would make luscious food which Victoria patiently waited for all week.

Another life.

She used a piece of broken brick to form a tally – one mark for one day and one night – a way to determine she had been in this room for approximately six months, give or take. The tally was engraved behind the dressing table to conceal it from the evil eyes that lurked in the darkness. Eyes that knew her every movement.

Six months was several lifetimes in this place. It is true, time flies when you are having fun, but also true that time dragged when you were not. Hours like days, days like months and months like years. Not that there was a clock in the dungeon to inform her of when an hour had passed. She did, however, once, count seconds and nearly made it to an hour before drifting off to another world.

This was life now. An entire existence encompassed in a dungeon. Live here and eventually die here. She feared that even after death her ghost would be trapped here. Confined for eternity with only bitter thoughts of what could have been, should have been, but would never be.

## Chapter 2

Raindrops pattered against the window before battling to the bottom, leaving behind a disorientating view of the outside world. Victoria rested her head against the window and shivered from the breeze; forced to accept she would never feel the rain. She missed the rain. She missed walking to school in the cold, wet mornings.

She was suddenly hauled back to her old life. Hair drenched, stuck to the sides of her face, exposing only the front like an undrawn curtain. The golden tips tickled her neck. Cold drops sent shivers down her back. Irrespective of how irritating it was, she would do anything to feel it once more. Anything at all.

Her father usually left for work way before she opened her eyes to their grand five-bedroom house in Buckinghamshire. A wide house with a pointy roof, surrounded by beautiful green grass and mammoth trees. She was born in that house – way too large for a family of three. They would have been fine in a three-bedroom or even a two-bedroom, but her father would not have that. Not a chance! He was too proud – proud of his accomplishments – proud of his wealth – and damn proud of his status. He was an accountant, no, he was the best accountant in town, or in many towns for that matter. A range of clients depended on him to “fiddle the figures”. A unique skill, he claimed, possessed by him alone.

Victoria often overheard him talking on the phone. His thunderous voice could effortlessly penetrate the walls.

“The question is not how much on taxes you need to pay; rather, it’s how much do you *want* to pay?!” His favourite line – usually followed by a vulgar snort. He was charismatic and always demanded to be the centre of everyone’s attention. Everyone’s except Victoria and her mother’s that was. To the outside world, he was the beauty and to the inside, he was unquestionably the beast.

If he wasn’t at his office, he was meeting a client, and if he were not meeting a client, he would be on the phone to a client. Victoria didn’t mind this much. She had nothing in common with him, except, of course, that he was her biological father.

It was as if they were from two completely different planets. Victoria liked to paint and read storybooks. Her frequent reading earned her the nickname, Matilda, after the main character in her favourite Roald Dahl book. All of this was a waste of time in her father’s view, “If you aren’t making money from it, it isn’t worth doing!” He often chanted.

An absurd saying that didn't mean anything then or anything now. *He was dead* – his money could do little for him. And she was in hell, so the money could do nothing for her either. His fixation to accumulate money had consumed him, thus Victoria associated it with other harmful substances that consumed people such as alcohol and drugs.

She relived that day in her head many times...

Father had a late dinner party to attend and insisted mother paint her face, dress up and go with him so he could show her off as his other accomplishments. A pretentious man consumed by arrogance – dependent on praise. Her mother secretly despised his ridiculous functions. All of which were excuses for wealthy snobs to prance around in clothes worth an average family's grocery shopping for a month, convincing other snobs that they deserved to be there. A battle of statuses. Pathetic.

Victoria loathed them more than her mother did since she was the one left alone. Deserted in this grand old house. Her mother did not like leaving her on her own; Victoria knew that – she could sense it from her – the nervous look in her eyes, the prolonged hug goodbye, all clues to the fact that she would stay if she could. But dared not utter a word – Father was not the gentle, loving type. He was a 'can't take no for an answer' man. He understood his responsibilities and made damn certain you understood yours.

A man shaped by his father's belt.

Nevertheless, how could you hate a man that kept a roof over your head and food on the table? Her mother repeated robotically.

"Do me a favour petal," Victoria's mother said in a voice so beautiful that it sounded like greatest symphony ever composed. "Get my coat from the rack." She smiled warmly – a smile that exposed her dimples and concealed her anguish. Victoria dragged her feet. All the while, hoping that her mother would not go.

"Thank you." Her mother put her arms around Victoria and squeezed, "Now, you be a good girl. Make sure you brush your teeth and get to bed no later than eight."

"Must you go?" Victoria whispered in her mother's ear.

Her mother seemed desperate to hold on to her smile, "It is your father's friend's function. You remember Arthur, right?"

Victoria remained silent. Victoria could not care less whose function it was. Just another stupid function or party. And everyone knew father didn't have any friends – no real friends anyway. They were people he worked with or tried to suck up to, or who tried to suck up to him.

"I will be back before you know it." She ran her fingers through Victoria's silky hair.

"When will you be back?"

Her mother stood and faced Victoria's father, "When will we be back?"

He sighed and then lit up a cigarette. The end of the cancer stick blazed brightly as he took a huge drag.

"We'll be back when we are back!" he said dismissively and blew out a thick cloud of revolting smoke in Victoria's mother's face, "Now let's go – we're getting late!" With the cigarette clenched in his teeth, he wrestled to get his coat around him. The buttons on his shirt clung on for dear life as his belly sagged over his belt like a sack of dead chickens. Within a few seconds, he was gone.

In his eyes, Victoria was certain, she did not exist.

"I'm sure we won't be long." Victoria's mother bent down to give her another hug.

"You look beautiful," Victoria complimented as her mother released her grip.

Her mother tilted her head and smiled without parting her lips.

"Thank you. You are my little princess." Her smile then dropped, "Now, remember, bed by eight."

Victoria nodded her head but remained silent.

“I love y—.” But before her mother could finish her sentence, her father burst back in.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” he yelled, forcing her up against the wall. “I told you we were getting late!” he growled from behind his teeth. “Now get out!”

Victoria stumbled back, and her heart pounded as she watched her mother tremble. The colour drained from her beautiful face. She followed Father out of the house like an obedient slave. Without so much as a glimpse back and closed the door – never to return. Victoria detested that man and covertly wished he would die – she did not, however, expect him to take Mother with him when he did.

Selfish bastard.

“I love you too...” Victoria whispered as she stood staring at the large, ugly metal door – she was back in the dungeon. In the dark. All alone, with only fading memories of a life that once was.

She ran to the window and stared out. The wind was blowing ferociously in all directions, making the overgrown grass dance wildly and dead leaves floated in circles like lost souls. The clouds stared down at the world threateningly, yearning to unleash their wrath.

How she longed to be out there, in the land of the free. She glared at the birds with envy.

She couldn't stay staring out of the window for too long, however. Must be winter, she assumed. The days were short and nights incredibly long. The room was bitterly cold. She stood gazing out for a few hours last week and had a nasty cough for the following few days as punishment. She had to be more sensible, and thus she created a routine. When she woke, she would move the dressing table and mark another day on the wall, then use the loo, wash her hands, brush her teeth and comb her hair. She would scoff down the stale bread and drink the cup of stinking water, if it was there that was, and then spend forty-five minutes staring out of the window, daydreaming. She had no idea when forty-five minutes were up, so she just guessed.

It would then be time to wake Simon. Simon was her best friend, new best friend. He wasn't much of a talker, but he was a great listener, and he always smiled, even when he was angry – though he rarely got angry. Victoria strolled to her bed and turned over her pillow, where she had used an old crayon she found in the room to draw two big cartoon eyes, a round nose and big smile.

“Hi Simon,” she chirped. He smiled back at her. He was happy to see her.

After talking to Simon for a couple of hours about everything – the good, the bad and the ugly, she would turn him over and rest her head. She would stare at the ceiling and butterflies would dance in her stomach at the thought of what would come next in her daily routine. The very thought sent shivers through her, and if her malnourished body was not so desperate to cling on to the little scraps of food she consumed, she would certainly throw up.

She remained frozen. Trying not to make a sound. Hoping, praying that she would not hear that dreadful sound. The sound of the metal door unlocking and opening. But it did. Every night, without fail.

She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath as she heard the chilling clunks of the door unlocking.

### Chapter 3

The silence was chilling. She had become the master of pretending to be asleep. Like a corpse, she remained completely still and kept her eyes clamped shut. The art of not letting her eyeballs move under her eyelids was hard to master but she had done it. She breathed slowly, preventing her nostrils from flaring and her chest from raising. Perhaps he would think she was dead – that would

be even better. He might just wrap her up in this disgusting bed cover and toss her into the woods. Though she knew she was not that lucky.

"I know you are awake." A snake-like voice hissed. She didn't respond or move. The feeling was surreal. She was now so focused on acting she was in deep sleep, she had almost convinced herself.

"Must we do this every day?" the voice continued. She could hear creaks of leather, presumably from his shoes as he crept closer. Her heart was striking her insides like a desperate animal trying to escape incarceration. It was so loud she feared he would hear it.

In just a few moments he would be right next to her, towering over her. His demon-like eyes would penetrate through her. His revolting warm breath on her.

"Open your eyes, Princess." The voice spoke again, "That was what your mother called you, right? Oh, she was such a lovely woman."

Shut up! Victoria wanted to shout but dared not utter a word. He has no right to mention my mother – she represented everything good in the world and this vile monster stood before her represented all that was evil.

"It really is a pity that she spent her short life with that brute, your father. He was a real terror, even from when he was a little boy."

Victoria could feel tears forming under her eyelids. She desperately tried to stop them from breaking out. Why must he do this? She thought. Why must he bring up my parents?

"You know, your father and I had nothing in common. Growing up, he liked fancy things and spent a lot of his time sitting on rooftops and staring at girls as they walked past. I hated that stuff and so it was only natural that I hated him. I was different, I wanted more from my life, so much more... but my father... well, he couldn't understand. He wouldn't even try to."

Victoria opened her eyes and looked up at the tall, pale man stood next to her. She couldn't stand him and could not care less about what he was saying. She did not want to hear about him or her father – she loathed them both.

"Anyway, enough about that," the voice said after a prolonged silence, "You must be hungry?"

"I am not hungry." She eventually replied with her stomach grumbling.

"I forgot to leave any food for you in the morning... I had something very important to do and had to rush out. You do understand, right?" His unsightly, bushy eyebrows raised as he anticipated a response.

Victoria nodded.

"That's a good girl," he said, "I will go and get you some bread and some water now."

He ambled back out of the room. Victoria breathed out loudly as if she had been holding her breath the entire time. The very presence of him suffocated her. She sat up on the bed and wrapped her arms around her knees and squeezed. She did this often as it helped suppress the feeling of extreme hunger.

After a few moments, she caught sight of the door and noticed that he had left it open. She could not believe it. She could not work out whether it was indeed open or whether she was just imagining it. He never left the door open, she thought to herself. Never!

Her heart pounded, and she felt as if every drop of blood in her body rushed to her head. The door that had kept her imprisoned, in for what felt like a lifetime, was open. She didn't know what was behind it. She had never seen the rest of the house. She woke up in this room and this room was all she knew.

She finally built up the courage to roll off her bed and landed quietly on to the cold surface of the floor. What are you doing? She asked herself. Reminding herself of the fact that the man she both loathed and feared was just beyond that door. Can you imagine what he will do if you try to get passed that door? Her inner voice warned.



But she crept towards the door, unable to stop herself. What was the worst he would do? Kill her? Fine. She would choose death over this any day.

You will be surprised at what you can live through! Her inner voice spoke again. This was not the first time she had argued with her more sensible self and it was certainly not the first time she ignored her advice.

She approached the door. Fear had taken over the ship and yet it still sailed towards the unknown. A dull glow seeped from the small gap. It was frightening but felt magical. She reached out with trembling hands and tugged at the door. It creaked as it swung open. She immediately released her grip and shielded her eyes from the light that burst into the room.

It was so bright, she felt as if she were about to go blind. She spread her fingers a little allowing the small gaps to let in a little light in a bid to allow her eyes to adjust. Burning tears streamed down her cheeks and her skin stung agonisingly, but within a few moments, she could see again.

She was faced by a large staircase. Dim lights on the wall led up to another door. It was open.

Amidst the terrible thoughts that clogged her mind was the belief that at the top of these stairs was the possibility of freedom. Freedom from this life of imprisonment. Freedom from a life of misery. Freedom from—

Death! Her inner voice interrupted, beyond those stairs is death! Turn around and go back before it is too late. Before he sees you! It's a stupid idea – no, it's more than a stupid idea – it's the stupidest idea ever!

Victoria took the first step and then paused, wondering whether that would be it. That first step would be enough – the door above would swing open and the monster who resided behind it would come scampering down the stairs and finish her off for good.

Nothing.

Complete silence. The door didn't open, no one came running down and she was still very much alive. Although if her heart kept pounding at this rate, she felt, she may just die from panic.

The smell of old wood charged up her nostrils. It must be from the stairs, or the wooden panel on the walls she thought – it didn't really matter – it was amazing to finally smell something different, even if it was just old damp wood.

The second step was much easier than the first, though it was still extremely difficult. The fear and panic that boiled inside her were ready to erupt. Her legs disagreed with her and she fought to keep moving. She could feel her lips quiver as she approached the top of the stairs. She paused and momentarily glanced back at the room from which had escaped and then turned and faced the door that lay ahead. There was no going back now. She had come too far to turn back.

Her hand shook uncontrollably as she clenched the brass handle of the door and shoved it until it opened wider. She was immediately hit by a cold breeze that sent shudders rippling down her spine. Her mouth suddenly became painfully dry and swallowing was now impossible.

She stepped out on to the oak coloured wooden floor. Tiptoeing, she ambled along a narrow corridor and eventually into an enormous room. Her feet felt the warmth and comfort of a thick rug that lay in the middle of three luxurious sofas. The tickling sensation from the soft fibres of the rug on the soles of her feet felt alien.

Her fingertips gently stroked the leather on the sofas as she walked towards another room. She imagined escaping the dungeon so many times but now that she was out of the room, it was unlike anything she felt. Instead of rushing to find an exit, she roamed the house like a lost soul. It was as if she were in a dream or under the influence of a magical spell.

Panic began to set back in as she noticed huge paintings on the walls – portraits of the man who had held her captive. Except the paintings were not a true representation of him. In these, he looked almost human. His skin was that of other humans, he did not have so many blemishes, his eyebrows were not like pointy horns of the devil and his eyes not so demonic.

“That’s my favourite one.” The man’s chilling voice emerged from behind her, making her fall with fright. She looked up at him, towering over, holding a metal plate and cup.

“People used to tell me that I looked a lot like my father.” the man said as his bloodshot eyes locked on to the portrait. His head tilted, and she could see the blood draining from his face. His eyebrows met in the middle as a seethed look appeared on his face. He stepped forward, still staring at the portrait – lost in thought. His expressions switched between frowns to twisted smiles and he cursed repeatedly under his breath. He was like a volcano moments before eruption.

Victoria looked towards the door – the illusion of escape suddenly vanished. Although this was the furthest she had been, she was still nowhere.

## Chapter 4

“You!” he said in an ominous tone, “You should not be out here!” His horrifying voice echoed, and a thick vein formed on his forehead – it appeared like a small snake under his skin. She could have sworn she saw it slither. It was mortifying. His demeanour was not that of a human. His pupils were as black as coal and completely glazed over. A look she had seen many times.

Her pulse was beating in her ears and her stomach churned as the room spun – drawing her into a whirlwind of terror.

“Get back where you belong – you evil little child!” The plate he had in his hand launched towards her like a torpedo as she ran back towards the stairs. Her legs moved sluggishly as if they were in mud. The sharp pain from the metal plate as it hit her back proved that this was not a nightmare. This was happening.

She could feel his presence behind her as she hurried down the stairs and into the room. He followed her in. Within seconds, her back was against the cold wall and he cowered over her, breathing heavily. Her body stiffened. Unable to move. Unable to make a noise. Unable to escape.

“You have the devil inside you!” He hissed. Spittle sprayed out as he spoke. Intense heat radiated from him and his fists were tightly clenched. His penetrating gaze burned straight through to her very soul. She had seen and experienced the rage of the man stood in front her many times but never like this. Surely, this was it.

She should never have left the room, *how could you have been so stupid*, her inner voice spoke with an I-told-you-so tone. *As a result, he will probably beat you to death.*

She closed her eyes and prepared to meet her maker.

A few moments passed and by some miracle, she was still alive.

She could hear him taking deep breaths as if trying to calm himself down. Slowly opening her eyes, she noticed he had loosened his fists and his expression of fury seemed to have subsided.

“It’s alright my child.” He spoke in a serener tone, “I understand... I, too, had him inside me. It’s not your fault.” He took a step back and stared at the wall as if in deep thought, “My father... he knew how to get him out – he knew exactly how to get him out... and get him out he did.” His eyes fell back on her, “I know it seems cruel... it’s alright to feel that, believe me, I thought that as well. I used to think of him as a monster – the things he did... the things he made me endure. But little did I know the monster was in me... as it is in you.” He stepped towards her again, “You must know that there are things in the world that you do not understand. I never quite grasped this when I was younger...” He suddenly grabbed Victoria by her throat. She felt his large fingers tighten around her neck. “But I do now.”

Victoria felt as if she was being lifted off the ground. No longer able to breathe. The pain was so intense that she nearly passed out. A warm trickle of urine streamed down her leg.

Just before she passed out, he released his grip and she immediately fell into a puddle of her urine, gasping for air. But before she even had time to think, she felt a hard blow to her ribs. He then repeatedly kicked her while she lay curled into a ball. Every blow was worse than the one before.

“Get out! I will get you out – I shall expel the evil from you!” He chanted as he continued his beating. His voice echoed hauntingly until she could hear it no more.

Her eyes opened. It was dark and silent. A diffused white of moonlight spilt into the room. Barely enough to fight the darkness around her but enough for her to know where she was. She imagined the sky to be clear with speckles of shimmering stars. Its exquisiteness and mystery would be a magnificent sight if only she could get to the window ledge.

She lay on the floor – excruciating pain radiated from every part of her body. The pain was simply verification that she was still alive. Still breathing. She wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. Moving redefined the meaning of pain. A sharp stab in the chest with every breath convinced her she was not going anywhere for a while.

“Why could I have not just died?!” she said out loud. Tears rolled down her face and on to the floor. Her eyelids forcefully closed as she drifted off again.

“Victoria, can you please pass me the salt.” Her mother asked. She looked around at the table full of delicious, warm food. A large straw bowl filled with sliced loaves of bread. Plates filled with roasted chicken breast and vegetables.

*What is this?* Victoria asked herself. *It... it can't be...* She was in the dining room of her home with her mother sat opposite her at the dining table. The sparkling light from the chandelier and glowing candles bounced beautifully off the wine glasses, casting dancing shadows on the walls.

The aroma of the food was causing her mouth to water and stomach to grumble. But she felt too scared to touch a thing.

“Are you alright?” her mother spoke again with a concerned expression.

Victoria did not respond – she did not know how to respond. *This must be a dream... It can't be real. It cannot be.* How could she be at home, safe, in the warm, and around the person she loved the most.

“What’s wrong with you?” Father’s startling voice emerged. Victoria turned her head and noticed him sat there. His mouth was full of food as he spoke. “The salt... your mother asked for the salt!” He said in an annoyed tone.

“Yes, father,” Victoria said and leaned forward to pick up the jar with salt inside. But in doing so, she knocked over a glass with her elbow. It shattered as it hit the wooden floor. Her eyes grew in panic as she saw her father stand up and his chair fall behind him.

“It was an accident!” her mother yelled. But her father ignored her and ran towards Victoria.

Victoria squeezed her eyes shut.

## Chapter 5

When she opened her eyes, they were met by the greyness of the dungeon. She was back in the room. The night was over – the dream along with it. She would have taken the consequences of dropping the water over *this* any day. At least she would have been with her mother even if all she could do was helplessly watch as Victoria got better acquainted with Father’s belt.

It took her a while to blink away the blurriness. Her body was sore and stiff. She tried to shake her numb forearms to revive life back into them. They were the first line of defence against the brutal blows.

Unable to stand, she dragged herself to the bed and somehow climbed on to it – exhausted as she lay there facing the stained ceiling.

“I’m OK. Honestly.” She said and forced a smile.

“It hurts a little. But I am OK, honestly.” She kept up the smile. “You worry too much, you know that?” She turned on her side and faced Simon.

“Thank you,” she said and stroked his soft face.

“For everything. For always being there for me, always smiling at me when I am down. You are my happy thought.” She hugged on to him and squeezed.

“I’m your happy thought too? That’s so sweet.” And for a moment, just a moment, she forgot about the pain and everything else around her.

“You always know the right things to say. Even when you say nothing.”

“What do you mean that’s silly?” Victoria chuckled then immediately groaned in pain. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“Yes. That sounds like a wonderful idea. But I’m starting!”

“What do you mean why?” she screwed up her face, “You started the last two times, that’s why!”

“Thank you! OK, you ready? I spy with my little eye... something beginning with “w”

“No. Guess again.”

“A clue? OK... let me see... erm... OK, I got it... It’s something we do every day. We use it to do something.”

“Yes! You got it!”

“One day we will, just like that bird over there on the tree.” She pointed out of the window. She suddenly released her hold on Simon. Her eyes widened as she stared out of the window. She blinked wildly and then rubbed her eyes and looked again.

“Wait here...” she whispered and put Simon down.

It was hard to move. The pain was unbearable – her ribs felt broken. But she had to get to the window, she had to get a closer look to prove that her eyes were deceiving her.

She clambered out of her bed – her knees shook uncontrollably until she fell to the ground. She couldn’t depend on her body to get her there – she relied on her curiosity alone to carry her.

As walking was still not an option, she slithered along the floor until she reached the window ledge. Screaming in agony, she pulled herself up and stared at the garden in astonishment.

She couldn’t believe her eyes, but it was true. There, in plain sight.

“Simon! She yelled. “You must see this.” She smiled uncontrollably.

“No, you must see it – I don’t even know how to describe it.”

She fell back to the ground, adrenaline now pushing the pain aside.

She reached out and held onto Simon. “Come on... I got you...” She made her way back towards the window.

“I know the floor is cold.” She said. “I have been swarming around on it for a while now. It will be fine. We are nearly there.” She could hardly contain her excitement. If it wasn’t for the fear of her ribs cracking, she would have run back to the window.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” She said.

“No, I’m not telling you. Be patient. You will see soon enough, and you will know exactly why I am so thrilled.” She could not wipe the goofy smile off her face.

But as she got closer to the window, she heard the clunking of the metal door. She froze. Her vision distorted as if she was looking through broken glass. Choking, unable to breathe, she curled into a ball and closed her eyes. *It’s OK baby, just breathe...* her mother’s voice echoed in her mind.

She tightened her eyes enough for them to appear like they were closed but just open enough for her to get a glimpse of the room.

The door squealed like a dying animal as it opened. She gripped Simon with sweaty palms. And then the stark realisation that he would notice Simon dawned on her. Although she was in the same place where she was savagely beaten and left for dead, Simon was now wrapped tightly in her arms. The drumming of her heartbeat reverberated in her brain as the room spun. *What if he takes him away?* She thought. *What if he hurts him... the way he hurts me?*

"Don't worry Simon... I will not let him hurt you." She whispered knowing full well that she couldn't promise that.

"It will be fine – I am not scared." She lied.

She could see the mud-stained black boots as they trailed into the room. A blend of dried and fresh mud. She tightened her grip on Simon in a bid to overcome her trembling hands. The boots creaked as he approached. The urge to scream intensified with each step.

He crouched and looked at her with vacant eyes. He placed the metal plate and cup on the floor next to her. The odour of the water made her want to vomit. It smelt as if he had scooped it up from a gutter.

She could feel his dry hands stroke her hair. "I know this is hard..." He whispered. "I assure you it all will end. The evil that is deep within you will be extracted from you and you will not be angry at me, you will not hate me anymore – rather you will appreciate what I have done for you." He paused for a moment and then sat down on his knees.

*Please just go away!* She thought. *Why are you here? What do you want from me? Just leave the bread and stinking water, if you must, and go.*

"I can see your eyes rolling underneath your eyelids. I have always been able to see them, regardless of how many times you have tried to deceive me."

She had a sudden urge to urinate.

"It's alright. I do not blame you, for deception is the devil's trait. And while he is in you, his characteristics will continue to surface. This is *why* what I do is so important."

She could feel herself shivering uncontrollably.

"It's alright my child." He said as he stroked her cheek. "It's alright... Your body needs to heal before we can continue." He stood up. "The one thing my father didn't understand."

She felt a little relieved – she cared very little for his words but escaping a beating was heavenly.

Was she supposed to feel sympathy for him? How could she care about a person who had no mercy or remorse for what he did? She couldn't – she would never be able to.

His shoes turned in the other direction as he walked towards the door. She wanted to sigh but dared not to just in case he heard it and changed his mind. Instead, she held her breath and waited for him to leave.

He suddenly stopped and then peered at her bed.

*Damnit! He has noticed Simon is not there. I know it. He sees everything.*

## Chapter 6

The thought of him getting into a mad rage and beating her to death excited her as much as it terrified her. No doubt it would be excruciating, probably unbearable, but it might be the only feasible way to escape. She then thought about Simon and remembered he would still be here – all alone. And if she were gone then perhaps the monster would turn his attention to poor Simon. She could never let that happen. She could never abandon him and leave him alone in this place.

"Finally, you are thinking about someone other than yourself!" Her inner voice remarked. *Shut up! Just shut up!* She couldn't bear to hear another word from that sarcastic, snobbish, cow.

"How many times did you want to kill yourself just to escape and leave Simon here? And who was it that reminded you of him? Exactly."

*Shut up and go away. I might still be dead yet. He has noticed Simon missing from the bed – he is already crazy; this might just be enough to send him over the edge.*

After a moment, the man continued towards the door and then left, locking the door behind him.

Victoria breathed out and allowed her muscles to untighten. She lived another day, not convinced whether that was a good thing.

"You were lucky this time!" her inner voice said in a condescending tone. "You may not be the next time."

"Please," Victoria cried, "I can't stand you, so be quiet."

"Well?" another voice emerged. A voice she had never heard before.

Victoria quickly sat up. Blood drained from her face. Although a male voice, it was not the voice of the man, nor any voice she had ever heard before. It was a gentle, inviting voice.

"I still want to see what you are talking about." It spoke again.

Victoria looked at Simon and in shock, threw him to the ground.

"What did you do that for?" her inner voice said.

"I'm fine. Honestly, absolutely fine." The mysterious voice muttered.

"Simon?" Victoria asked quietly.

"Yes. Erm... do you mind picking me up from the floor? It is awfully cold, and I'm not used to cold floors."

"Yes... yes, of course." Victoria dragged herself across the floor and picked Simon up. Cradling him in her arms she smiled. "You can talk."

"Of course. But I am a much better listener."

"Your voice... your voice is nothing like I imagined it."

"You don't like it?"

"Of course not." Victoria responded quickly, "I just imagined it different, that's all."

"What did you think he was going to sound like? Prince Charming?" Her inner voice interrupted, as sarcastic and as unpleasant as usual.

"Ignore her," Simon said, "She is just a bitter hag!"

"That's rich coming from you feather face!"

"You can hear my thoughts?" Victoria asked.

"Yes..." Simon responded, "I suppose I can."

"That is quite extraordinary."

"Oh, how amazing, not." Inner voice commented.

"Can't you get her to be quiet?" Simon asked.

"Believe me, I have been trying."

"That's right. Try shutting me up. Gang up on me. Go on... let's see how long you survive without me! I am the reason you are still alive."

"That's probably why I despise you!" Victoria said as she climbed up on to the window ledge.

She held Simon out in front of her and pointed with her other hand.

"Look, look at the tree."

"Outstanding!" Simon commented, sharing her excitement.

"I think it belongs to next door?"

"It's a rope tied around a tree." Her inner voice said, "What's so great about that?"

"It's a swing." She wiped her mouth. "Somebody has made a swing and we can see it."

"That means that there must be children or at least one child next door," Simon said.

"Exactly! And we might even get to see them play." Victoria said, "I wonder how many children live next door or if there is a boy or a girl. I really can't wait to find out."

“Just think of swinging on it...” Simon said, eyes glued on the tree.

“It’s like the swing that Timothy had in his garden.” Victoria smiled.

“Timothy?” Simon asked.

“He was my neighbour and a good friend. Not that Father approved of him.” She picked at the scab on her chin until she felt the discomfort of tugging at raw skin.

“We played on that swing for hours until Father came home and ordered me to go inside.”

“Do you think we could ever go on that swing?” Simon asked.

“One day... perhaps.” She replied, glad that her inner self stayed quiet and didn’t ruin the moment. “One day.”

She stared eagerly out of the window until her eyelids could no longer hold themselves up and she fell asleep.

“Victoria! Her father’s voice echoed in the house. “Victoria! Come here at once!”

Victoria put her dolls down and sluggishly walked towards the stairs.

“What is it?” She could hear her mother asking.

“Where is she?!”

She had to be quick or the volcano would erupt quicker and more ferociously. She ran down the stairs and into the living room where her father stood with a look of rage and her mother stood close by with only fear in her eyes.

Father had a white piece of paper in his hands. She suspected the paper had something to do with his anger.

“Why do I pay to send you to school? Not *any* school but the *best* school in the country?”

Victoria was smart enough to know this was a rhetorical question so remained silent.

“It says here that you got a “C-” for Maths!” He shouted. “Can you explain that?”

She wasn’t sure whether this question required an answer or not and chose to not say anything. Not that she didn’t know the answer. She knew exactly why she didn’t get the grade he expected – she hated Maths – hated it with a passion. There was only one thing she despised more than Maths and that was him.

“She received an “A” for Art.” Her mother commented, peering over at, what Victoria assumed was her school report, “And it looks like she did pretty well in English as well.”

It was just like her mother to explore her strengths and look at the positive aspects of everything. Not that this would ever help.

“Shut up!” he yelled, without looking at her mother and without breaking eye contact with Victoria. She loathed the way he looked at her. It was a look that said he thought nothing of her, that she was not worth a thing to him or to anyone else. She was a waste of oxygen.

He scrunched up the paper and threw at Victoria. She flinched as it hit her in the face.

“You are an embarrassment to me!” He yelled, “You disgust me!”

“I... I will try harder,” Victoria muttered.

He stormed towards her and grabbed her by the hair. The pain of being hauled by her hair was indescribable. She thought it would be ripped out of her head any minute.

She could see her mother crouched on the floor – her face buried deep in her palms as she was cruelly dragged along the wooden stairs. She felt sorrier for her mother than herself. It must be hard to watch – helpless, as this merciless creature tormented everyone.

He pushed her into her bedroom. She fell to the ground and he towered over her.

“I will make sure you try hard!” he hissed and then slapped her in the face. He struck hard enough for her to see a bright flash of light. He then threw all the items on her desk on the floor. He tore her drawings and paintings that she had spent days working on and sprayed them across the room.

Her room was being hit by a tornado – destroying everything in sight.

“This rubbish is not going to do anything for you!” he screamed and then slapped her again. He then grabbed her by her hair and threw her on the bed as he continued to ravage her room.

As she lay helplessly on her bed, she looked out of the window and saw Timothy sat on his swing. He looked so peaceful and happy. For a moment, she forgot about what was happening around her and imagined being out there with him. Playing blissfully. How she longed to be out there, away from this madness.

## Chapter 7

Awoken by a coughing fit. Each one like a dagger to the kidneys. Chest burned with every breath. She peered down at Simon. Her teeth clattered.

“Sorry, I must have dozed off.” She slithered off the window ledge. “Are you alright?” She breathed hot air onto her numb fingers. The pecked nails made her tips tender. The remainder were darkening, appearing like gothic nail polish. Not a look that she liked.

“I’m fine. Thanks.” Simon smiled.

“How long was I out?” She rubbed her dry eyes.

“Too long!” her inner voice interrupted, “You could have killed us! Hypothermia or whatever it is called.”

“Trust me, we are not that lucky.” Victoria crawled across the floor and into the bed. She shivered under the covers for a while before being able to breathe like normal. No human body would find it easy to regulate its temperature in this place – that was for sure. When it was hot, you baked – when it was cold, you froze. There was hardly an in-between. The one consistency was the dryness. Her throat was so dry it almost always felt clamped shut and there was a constant tickle in her throat. The tickle sometimes became so unbearable that she would be unable to sleep. Coughing to clear her throat made it worse.

Her skin had become so dry that the skin on her hands and elbows began to peel. She didn’t mind this as much as it wasn’t painful, and she quite enjoyed picking at it. Picking at scabs and dry skin had become a morning routine and could sometimes go on for hours.

The bread went down hard – the water even harder but offered a little temporary pain relief in her stomach and that incredibly annoying tickle in the throat. She could now function for the next six or seven hours before the stomach ache would reconvene its torture – the tickle will resume in the next hour or so.

Her gut would grumble loudly as a warning before sending the excruciating cramps. If only she had the capability to manually turn off pain receptors. She read about this “mind over matter” idea once. She even tried it – it failed. It wasn’t real. *Pain*. Now that was real.

“If you could have anything to eat... anything at all... what would you have?” Simon asked.

Victoria grinned. “Erm... let me see.” She stared at the wall. “Anything?”

“Anything at all.”

“Alright.” She said and sat straight. She brushed her hair off her face and licked her lips. “I would have a fresh sandwich but with French bread, none of that cheap stuff from the supermarket, it must be freshly baked and crispy on the top – fluffy on the inside. I would like it a little warm, not hot, just a little warm. And I would have it with melted cheese... cheddar cheese, the mature kind. And lots of salad – tomatoes, cucumber, lettuce and... oh, yes, onions – red onions. I love red onions!”



“And w—”

“And crisps!” she interrupted Simon, now speaking faster as if she were placing an order and tried to quickly add a last-minute demand. “Cheese and onion flavoured crisps. I don’t mind which brand, but they must be cheese and onion flavour.”

“And what about dessert?”

“That’s easy. Chocolate chip muffins and ice cream, vanilla ice cream. Oh, and lollipops, lots of lollipops!”

“Drink?”

“Anything fizzy and filled with sugar.” They sat in silence for a moment. She dreamed about the food. Trying her hardest to imagine the colours and the smell.

“Now, I want to play a game,” Simon said.

Victoria blinked fast, like windscreen wipers in full throttle. She coughed lightly to clear her throat.

“Erm... Alright. Let’s play. I spy with my little—”

“No. Not that one.”

“Oh,” Victoria was startled. She had never played any other game with Simon – she didn’t even think he knew how to play any other games. “OK. What game did you have in mind?” She said sceptically.

“Well, it doesn’t really have a name.”

“OK...” She said as she picked at the scab on her chin. “So, how do you play it? This game without a name.”

There was a brief pause and then Simon spoke again.

“We are already playing it.”

“Explain?” Victoria asked and felt one of her brows raise. A reflex she had no control over.

“Well, you pick all the things you would like to eat, and I pick all the things I like to eat.”

“Alright. That sounds interesting. You can start... I mean, it is your game after all.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Simon said. Another brief pause and Victoria couldn’t help but start thinking about what she would pick while she waited for slowcoach. She was surprised things didn’t just spring to his mind. They had not had anything worth eating in so long that you could pretty much pick anything. Besides, surely, he must already have thought about this before. She knew *she* had – every day in fact. She knew exactly what she wanted – right to the very crumb.

“I got it!” He finally spoke.

*Thank God*, Victoria thought. She really wanted him to get it over and done with, so she could spout her demands. Though she was intrigued by what he might choose. She wasn’t clear on the game dynamics or rules. I mean what if he picked things that she wanted? What would that mean from a game perspective? She hoped it didn’t mean she would not be able to choose them. A part of her was now questioning whether she should have insisted to start.

“I think I would really like a steak,” he said cheerfully, “and perhaps some chicken, grilled chicken. The soft and tender type. And the steak must be medium cooked, none of that overcooked stuff. That gives me a bad tummy.”

“Sounds delicious,” Victoria remarked, relieved that he didn’t pick anything she wanted. “Would you care for some salad with that?” Victoria asked trying her best to impersonate a waitress.

“Salad?” Simon shrieked. “Why would I waste precious tummy space with rabbit food? No. Meat, meat and more meat for me please.” He said in a gravelly voice.

Victoria really enjoyed the game so far. It took her back to when she was younger and secretly hunted through catalogues for all the toys she would like to have and then pretended she had them. It was fun and kept her entertained for hours.

*“Hours completely wasted!”* she imagined her father would have said if he had ever found out.

“So, what now?” Victoria asked. “Is there anymore to the game?”

“No,” Simon said.

“Oh,” She was a little disappointed but enjoyed it nevertheless.

“Now we eat,” Simon said in a perky voice.

“Eat what?” She asked, her heart galloped like an out of control horse.

“The food... we eat the food we chose.”

“But... I don’t understand. There isn’t any food?”

“Of course there is.” He smiled brightly. “Next to the bed. The food is laid out next to the bed.”

Victoria’s famished eyes searched the room but saw nothing new.

“But I see nothing, except what was already here.”

“Victoria. The food is there, you must look harder.”

“I can’t—” She stopped mid-sentence. Her skin tingled, and she clasped her throat. “This... this is not possible.” She uttered in a shaky voice. She suddenly felt disoriented as food began to appear on the floor. Not just any food but the very food she mentioned in the game. She rubbed her eyes and had the sudden urge to pinch herself, but didn’t for if it was a dream, she didn’t want to wake.

“I... I can see the food.” She hoped this euphoria would never end. “Is this real?” She sat on her knees next to plates filled with food. Not daring to touch it.

“As real as you and I,” Simon responded with his frozen smile.

“This is ludicrous!” her inner voice interjected. “What next? Imaginary friends?”

They both ignored her. Eyes fastened on the food. The bread looked like it had just come out of the oven. The aroma was to die for. It smelt like it was from her favourite bakery.

“I wonder how it tastes?” She said – saliva pooled in her mouth.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

She smiled uncontrollably as she opened the bread, which happened to be sliced through the middle accurately. She paused and stared deeply at the food.

“It feels and smells so real – is it really real?” She stuffed the bread with salad. “Please tell me this is real!” As she bit into the bread, she tasted heaven. “This is amazing! It’s the best thing I have ever tasted!” She vacuumed the food as fast as she could. Must be in survival mode as she was unable to stop herself. She ate the bread and then finished off the remaining salad.

“Are you going to eat that last piece of chicken?”

“Please have it. I am stuffed.”

“Yeah literally!” her inner voice remarked.

Victoria chomped into the warm chicken leg. Delicious. She was not a keen meat eater but today was an exception – today she would eat whatever was laid.

## Chapter 8

Her eyes snapped open. A strange sound emerged. It wasn’t the door. That would usually penetrate her like a dagger. This was different. It was pleasant. A sound she somehow associated with joy and even safety. *What is that sound?* she asked herself.

Her stomach churned. She wasn’t sure whether this was due to stuffing it with all that food or whether she was hungry – either way, it hurt. Falling asleep on the floor didn’t help either. She wiggled her toes to try to shake off the pins and needles.

Her bones crackled as she forced herself up to a sitting position. The noise was coming from the window. And then it hit her. She knew that noise. It was the noise of a rope scraping against the branch of a tree. She was sure of it. It was the same noise she heard when her friend Timothy used to swing in his garden.

The sound hauled her back to a time when she sat on her bed, at home. She stared out of the window and watched as Timothy swung – one hand held the rope, the other clasped a Cornetto. She envied him. And if she didn't like him so much, she would have probably hated him.

He played for hours. Always snacking on one thing or another. She sometimes secretly questioned why she was in *this* house and he was in *that* house. If she was born in that house, she would be playing all day and enjoying sweet snacks. But it was hard to stomach someone else living with her father, especially Timothy. He was lovely.

She jumped as the door knocked.

"Good morning." Her mother said as she walked in.

"Morning." Victoria stretched her arms.

It was the best thing in the world, seeing her mother first thing in the morning. She would always smile, and her hair would be messy. Messy hair suited her. She had the sort of face that any style of hair would suit her.

"Sorry, we got back so late last night." She said. She scrunched her lips and her forehead creased.

Last night... Victoria searched her mind. Nothing.

"Last night? Where did you go last night?"

"I told you, we went to your father's friend's function." She responded. "You remember Arthur, right?"

Victoria sat up on her bed. Blood rushed to her brain.

"But..." Victoria said but then fell silent. *This doesn't make any sense.*

"You went to the function... Arthur's function? Last night?"

"Erm... yes." Her mother sat on the bed next to her and placed the back of her hand on Victoria's forehead. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm... I'm not sure."

"Are you feeling alright?" Simon's voice emerged.

"Huh?" She said as she looked around the room and realised where she was. "Yes... I'm fine. Thank you."

"How could it be?" she asked herself.

"How could *what* be?" Simon enquired.

"My mother... she told me that they had gone to Arthur's function."

"OK?"

"It's not OK!" She stood and marched across the room. She paced back and forth, mumbling under her breath and chewing on her nails. After a moment, her ribs reminded her that they were still in pain and she backed into a corner and slid to the floor. She hugged her legs and stared over her knees. Her eyes shifted from left to right and then right to left like a cornered animal.

*Surely, mother didn't make it back after the function. But then what was this memory? A warm tear filled with confusion streamed down her cheek. She had spent the last six or seven months sure that both her parents died in a car accident after Arthur's function. They did! I know they did. Didn't they?*

She closed her eyes and stepped into her brain. A minefield of thoughts and memories she had spent months compartmentalising. *I need to figure out what is going on. The answer is in here somewhere.*

"You really are a mess!" her inner voice butted in.

"Shut up! I'm trying to think!"

"You know it's sort of your fault, right?"

"What is?" Victoria asked.

“Forget it...”

“No, tell me... what is my fault?”

“Ignore her!” Simon said from across the room, “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Please... please tell me.”

“You told me to shut up!”

“Since when have you listened to me!?” Victoria shouted, “Now tell me what you are talking about!”

“Fine. The day your pa—”

A loud clunk. It was the door. She could never mistake that sound. She looked around with eyes open wide. Muddled thoughts blasted through her mind like shooting stars. A volcano of bewilderment erupted in her brain. The door would open any minute. Lord only knew what he would do to her, yet she could think of nothing except, *what did she mean my fault? What was my fault?* The bitch conveniently disappeared when the door opened. Big bark small bite.

She peered at Simon. He was still staring out of the window, probably oblivious to the door opening. It was too late to even warn him. She had to just hope that the bastard wouldn’t notice him.

But *of course* he would, how could he not? Simon was right there, not moving, making no attempt to move.

She had to warn him. But how? The man would hear her. And if he did... well, who knew what he would do.

“Simon!” she whispered. He didn’t respond. He just blissfully continued to stare out of the window.

“Shut up!” Her inner voice said. “He will hear you. He will be in any second.”

“I need to warn him.” She sobbed.

“It’s too late for that. You should have thought about that before. You should have never taken him off the bed.”

She was right. It was too late. The drought that hit her and sent chills up her arms warned her that the door was open. She didn’t need to look up to know he was inside. He didn’t need to say anything – his shoes did all the talking. The creaks got louder.

They stopped.

For a moment, her heart stopped as well. But then it drummed in her brain as if trying to catch up with the skipped beats. Her stomach was in her throat.

*He’s stopped. Why has he stopped? He has spotted Simon. I know he has. I must do something. But what? What can I possibly do?*

She looked up at the man. His bronze hair was slicked back – stuck tightly to his head. His crusty lips looked like they were about to crack as he smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile like Simon’s or like her mother’s – it was a twisted smile. His lips were thin and his smile was unnaturally wide – like a letterbox on a narrow door. The nostrils on his pointy nose flared as he inhaled deeply.

Irrespective of his terrifying demeanour, she had to do something to divert his attention from Simon. She had to protect him. He had no one else.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

The man tilted his head and his smile grew further – it grew so much she thought it might grow out of his face.

“What are you doing?!” her inner voice said. But Victoria had too much going on in her mind to pay any attention to her.

“... Thank you for the food.”

The shoes creaked, and he was now stood in front of her. She was relieved he was away from Simon. As long as he was safe – it didn't matter what he did to her – as long as Simon was safe – that's all that mattered.

"Did you like it?" The man's creepy voice penetrated her bones.

She nodded but said nothing.

"I asked, did you like it?"

"Yes... I liked it. Thank you."

"It's a shame really." He placed his arms behind his back and strolled to the other side of the room.

*Please don't notice Simon, she prayed.*

"It's a shame that the first time you have spoken in months and you utter a lie."

She wanted to say that it wasn't a lie, but it was, and some lies can never pass as truth, regardless of how well you tell them. The bread and water were disgusting.

"Now, tell me the truth. Did you like it?"

She suddenly found it impossible to swallow. Breathing was hard too. She didn't know what to say. *Tell him the bread and water were repulsive? God knows what he will do.*

He sighed as he waited for her response. And then the shoes creaked.

"Did you like the food?" he repeated.

Victoria searched the floor for an answer. She knew the man stood before her was unpredictable – there was no right or wrong answer.

A blast of burning pain passed through her toes and up to her brain as his boot landed on her foot. She silently screamed as he pressed down hard. The bones in her feet felt as if they were crushed. *Blank it out, she instructed herself, imagine you're somewhere else... at home, in school, anywhere but here.* But it wasn't working; the pain was too extreme. She lost all sensation in her leg. Her bladder filled up, ready to overflow.

"It was disgusting!" she screamed at the top of her voice. "It was horrible! And it made me sick!"

Blood flowed back into her foot as the boot lifted. Pain was still present, but the pressure was gone. Relief.

"There he is," the man said as he stepped back, "The demon within you. I knew I could get him to surface." He smirked and looked pleased with himself. "He can't hide in there forever." His eyebrows now met in the middle. "The food is food. It keeps you alive. It is only the ungrateful that don't appreciate it... and right now, *you* are ungrateful. You have surrendered to him and that was a mistake." He walked across the room – the awful creak echoed in her ears.

As he closed the door, he spoke again.

"Let's see how you feel after a couple of days without it." The door slammed shut with such force that it shook her insides.

"No food for two days!" her inner voice yelled. "Now look what you have gone and done!"

"It's OK, Victoria..." Simon finally spoke. "It'll be fine."

"How?" her inner voice said, "How on earth is it going to be fine? Oh, let me guess... you're going to play that stupid food game? Fools!"

*Is that really such a bad thing? Starving to death? Better than being beaten to death, right? She thought to herself but dared not say out loud for the fear of Simon hearing. He didn't need to hear that – innocent Simon – he doesn't even understand this cruel world. And I pray he never does.*

"Speak!" Victoria demanded. "Tell me what you meant by it was my fault. Now!"

"Victoria, I want to play a game," Simon said.

"Not right now Simon,"

"But I really want to play," he insisted.

"I said not right now!" she responded sharply. "I... Simon, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap – you did nothing wrong. I just need a minute."

Simon fell silent. I guess he knew she meant business.

"Speak!"

"Well, if you really want to know then I will tell you." her inner voice said but then went quiet.

"Spit it out!"

"Fine! Think back to the day..."

"What day?"

You know what day! The day your mother and father were going to the function, Arthur's function..."

She saw herself stood at the door, watching as her parents got ready to leave.

"You... you were there." Victoria said.

"Of course I was." Her inner voice said, "Where else would I be?"

"You... You were there. In my head. You told me to stop Mother from going... but, how could I have? How could I have possibly stopped her?"

"I told you to tell her you were ill, really ill. And tell her she had to stay at home to look after you. Remember?"

"Yes... I remember. But I... I couldn't. The function was important to Father – he would never have accepted it."

"You didn't even try!" her inner voice growled.

"I... I couldn't."

"You could have – you damned well could have... but you *chose* not to."

"I had no choice."

"You *always* have a choice."

"No!" Victoria shouted, "I didn't... I couldn't do anything... I..." She fell silent.

"I... it's all my fault." She finally uttered. Her face buried in her hands, she sobbed. "It was all my fault. I should have stopped her, but I didn't. I..."

"You were weak." Her inner voice hissed. "Too weak to do anything."

"Stop it!" Simon screamed from across the room. "Please stop it!"

"Now look what you've done!" Her inner voice said.

"I'm not doing this. You are."

"You did this! You did all of this – you're the reason we're here. You're the reason we're not safe and you... you are the reason your mother is dead!"

Victoria covered her ears and screamed, "I hate you! I hate you! Get out of my head!"

"You don't hate me Victoria – you hate yourself. You hate yourself because you were not good enough to be a daughter... yes, that's right – you drove your father to hate you. And in case you hadn't guessed it, you were the reason why he hated your mother."

"It's not true." Simon jumped in.

"Shut up Feathers! You weren't there."

"I know Victoria... she is not what you say!"

"You know her better than me? Please. I know her better than she knows herself."

## Chapter 9

No one spoke for the rest of the day. Simon stayed asleep. Probably too upset to talk or play a game. Victoria locked away her emotions and searched her mind for clues. The more she unravelled, the less things made sense. Her mind was a maze *and she was lost*.

“Hi Honey.” Her mother stepped in the house. Her forged cheerful tone and pretend smile told a thousand lies. *She’s back early*, Victoria thought. Victoria was certain that she would be fast asleep by the time they returned. That’s what usually happened.

Thick splodges on her mother’s coat suggested she caught some drizzle. Her dark blonde hair seemed relatively dry, and her face glimmered with a few sparkles. She looked like she had just had a fight with her mascara. It ran down her face, smudged as if wiped in a rush. This wasn’t the first time she came home looking a mess. In fact, it was becoming more and more frequent.

Today, however, there was something peculiarly different about her.

She was hiding something – Victoria could sense it. It was hard to hide things from a child – especially a child-like Victoria. She was “a curious little cat”, her form teacher always used to say. Her inquisitiveness, although sometimes earned her a pat on the back, often landed her in trouble.

“Where is Father?” Victoria asked noticing that the front door was closed. Father would usually follow, accompanied by a reek of tobacco and alcohol. His vacant eyes would search only for the stairs. He would crawl up them drunk, desperately clinging on to the banister. Victoria would secretly wish he would slip and break his neck with every step. She never got lucky and he would somehow always manage to get to the top.

Her mother seemed to struggle to uphold the smile or maintain any reasonable length of eye contact. Her bottom lip quivered. She removed her shiny red heels and put them carefully on the shoe rack, taking her time as if to evade answering any questions. *I bet he hit her again...* Victoria thought. *He’s obviously got really drunk and then used her as a punching bag to take out his anger. The crafty old man knew not to hit in the face – that would make people talk – no, he was way too sly for that. Hope he rots for what he puts her through.*

“Did you brush your teeth?” Her mother asked in a shaky voice – swiftly changing the subject. “And... I thought I said bed by eight, young lady.” She ran her hands through Victoria’s hair as she staggered passed. She trudged up the stairs as if she were carrying the world’s weight on her shoulders. She wasn’t drunk. She didn’t drink. She despised it. This was a different kind of stagger.

Victoria heard the bathroom door close as she crept up the stairs. She carefully placed her ear against the door and heard her mother sob. She searched the hallway looking for something to say. Any excuse to just talk to her – make her feel better, somehow. *But how?*

“Erm... I was wondering if we could play a game?” Victoria asked.

She could hear her mother blowing her nose and coughing as if to clear her throat.

“Sorry, darling...” her mother finally responded, “I am extremely tired and besides, you... you should get to sleep – it is way past your bedtime. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, Mother.” She responded reluctantly.

“That’s a good girl. You need your beauty sleep. You are a *beautiful* little girl after all.”

*Perhaps that is what it was*, she thought, *...she was just tired*. Victoria lied to herself as she plodded to her room.

She lay awake, staring at the ceiling, hoping to not fall asleep until her mother came out of the bathroom. It would just take one look to make sure she was alright to help her get a good night sleep, but her mother was taking too long. She thought of going to the bathroom door and knocking but she was supposed to go to bed. She didn’t want to upset her mother more than she already was.

Regardless of how much she fought, her eyelids could not hold themselves up and she drifted off.

“Victoria...” Simon’s voice emerged as did the agonising pain from her foot. It throbbed, ready to burst.

“Are you alright?” Simon asked.

“I’m fine.” She scrunched up her face as she limped to the bed. As she lay on her stomach, she tried to revisit her thoughts, but her mind had hit a rock. Her attention was suddenly taken by the rope sound. She faced the window.

*It’s the boy. I know it is,* she thought as she rolled off the bed and landed on her knees. She crawled to the window and sat on the ledge.

“I wonder what his name is...” Simon asked, staring in excitement. Victoria loved it when he was excited. His watery blue eyes sparkled, and his smile grew. He had the kind of smile that could brighten up the darkest places. And this was the darkest place in the world.

Victoria was equally as excited. How she longed to be out there, in the garden – she would joyfully run across the lawn allowing her fingertips to stroke the unkempt grass. She wouldn’t mind if it was cold or even wet, she would just be glad to be out there. “Please may I have a turn on your swing?” she would politely ask the boy. She was sure he would say yes. Especially if she took Simon – no one could say no to those puppy-dog-eyes. And then they would play for hours – just her, Simon and the boy from next door.

The boy wore denim jeans and a dark blue hooded top. Although hard to see, she caught sight of the side of his face. He had olive skin and straight brown hair which he let hang as if to hide behind it. There was something about him that demonstrated confidence and perhaps courage. How she sensed that she didn’t know – she just knew it. He had a presence.

“He looks sad,” Simon remarked. Victoria stared harder but didn’t get that vibe from him. *Lonely perhaps, but not sad.* She thought. *I mean, how could he possibly be sad? He was out there, in the land of the free and playing on the best apparatus ever built. Sad, I really don’t think so.*

“He’s probably just in deep thought.” She said. “He’s probably thinking about how wonderful it is to be swinging out in the open. Probably enjoying the fresh breeze and... and you remember the lovely aroma caused by rain on greenery.”

“I... I don’t.” Simon said, “I have never experienced it.

“Of course,” Victoria said, now feeling guilty. “Well, it’s... it’s actually very hard to describe. It’s fresh, strong and... and nice... just very nice.” She said, feeling a little lost for words. She never had to describe a smell to someone before – it wasn’t easy, that was for sure.

“Sounds wonderful,” Simon said

“Don’t worry Simon,” Victoria said, “I am sure you will get to smell it one day.”

“Lies!” Her inner voice hissed, “Why do you feed him lies? Putting his hopes up for no reason – none of us are getting out of here and giving him false hopes is just cruel.”

Victoria tried her best to ignore her, but she was right. *As usual.*

No one was getting out of here. They were deep in the countryside – in the middle of nowhere. She had already tried screaming and hitting the window – no one could hear her and all it earned her was a good beating.

*But what about the boy?* She thought. *Perhaps—*

“Don’t even think about it!” her inner voice jumped in. “Have you completely lost your mind? Already forgotten the last time you pulled a stunt like that?”

A sudden chill rushed through her body and she found it hard to swallow.

“Would you like me to remind you about what happened... or shall I say, what *you* caused to happen? That poor innocent man.”

“Shut up!” Victoria screamed and covered her ears. Not that it was any use.



## Chapter 10

“Please... just stop. Stop talking.” Victoria pleaded.

“What’s the matter – truth hurts?” her inner voice taunted.

Victoria could feel her eyes filling.

She tried not to go there but couldn’t stop herself. Before she knew it, her mind had taken her back to a few months earlier. To an event that she had locked away in her mind and vowed never to revisit. But her inner voice, being the vindictive little bitch, she was, would never allow that. She would never give up an opportunity to put her down or make her want to commit suicide through guilt.

As the memories of what occurred that horrible humid morning resurfaced, her insides slithered up her throat. If she’d had anything in her stomach, it would have certainly spewed out. Instead, a rotten taste remained in her mouth.

“You remember the man... the visitor, don’t you?” her inner voice said.

“You really are a vile little—” Victoria paused as the sight of the man flashed before her. Blood oozing out of his throat as he was dragged into the room by her captor. He wore some kind of uniform. Perhaps a courier uniform.

“Is this what you wanted?” Thick veins emerged in her prisoner’s neck as he screamed. “I told you not to try anything stupid and now look what you’ve gone and done – you stupid little girl.”

She shook uncontrollably. She couldn’t bear to look at the lifeless man yet was unable to take her eyes away. He didn’t look a day over thirty. A handsome blond-haired man with a blood-stained wedding ring on his left hand.

*Why didn’t she just listen?* She thought. *Had she not banged on the door when she heard the muffled sounds of someone else upstairs... then perhaps her captor wouldn’t have killed him... or had to have killed him.*

“Perhaps?!” her inner voice shrieked, “Perhaps?! Of course, he wouldn’t have killed him. The poor guy was probably here to drop a parcel or maybe he was here to check the electrics... and then he would have been off to get on with the rest of his life. Tend to his wife and children... what about them? Did you think of that? You knew what he was capable of – all you had to do was stay quiet. But no, you had to be the hero and look at what it resulted in. A completely innocent man killed in cold blood.”

*She was right.* Victoria fell to her knees. All she had to do was stay quiet. Instead of yelling and screaming for help. She could have saved his life just by doing nothing.

“But I didn’t kill him!” Victoria said angrily.

“You might as well have done.”

“I just wanted help... I just wanted to be free... that’s all...”

“And are you? Are you free?”

“That’s not fair.” Victoria protested.

“No, what’s not fair is that you selfishly got a man killed. That’s not fair.”

“I hate you!” Victoria screamed. “I hate you so much!”

She stared at the floor where the man lay dead in a small pool of blood. The haunting image remained frozen in her mind for several minutes. The room caved in and although her inner voice was still ranting, Victoria could no longer make out what she was saying. It was as if life was being sucked out of her and she collapsed. A brief but sharp pain shot through her from hitting the ground before she passed out.

Her eyes opened, and she found herself in the bedroom of her family home. It was warm – the good kind of warm. The kind that kept you snuggled in bed in the mornings. The strong smell of her mother’s favourite air fresher floated about the place – *Vanilla*. Victoria loved that smell.

As her eyes searched the room, she saw herself sitting on her bed, blissfully playing with her dolls. She wore her favourite dress. White with flower patterns. Her hair tied back tightly with a small neat fringe.

“Let’s do Natasha’s hair today.” She said with a wide smile and brushed her doll’s hair. It was peculiar being a spectator of her younger self.

*Am I dead?* Victoria asked. *I must be. Thank God – it’s over. And this... Is this heaven? It must be. Me, in my room, with my dolls, wearing my favourite dress. All I would need now was—*

At that moment, her mother merrily strode into the room. Her long hair bounced, and her strawberry lips glistened. She looked as beautiful as ever.

“Mother!” Victoria said and rushed towards her with arms open. Her mother smiled and opened her arms to embrace her. She couldn’t believe it. She was free again and about to finally be reunited with her mother. There could never have been a better moment. This was heaven – she knew it was – it had to be. But as Victoria leapt to grab her mother, and to her devastation, she floated right through her. Unable to touch her, hold her or feel her warmth. Her mother looked right through her as if Victoria was invisible.

The Victoria from the bed cuddled her mother instead.

“How’s my beautiful princess?” Her mother spoke in a voice that caused the little hairs on the back of Victoria’s neck to stand.

“I love you, Mother.” She replied.

It was a strange feeling watching her... her *other* self, kissing and cuddling her mother. It was even stranger to feel jealous of herself. It should be her in her mother’s arms – not that... *that* imposter! *That’s* what she was *an imposter!* Someone that just looked like her and was taking all her mother’s love.

She turned away and accidentally caught sight of herself in the mirror. Frizzy hair, face painted with dirt and dressed in ripped rags – a blend of hideousness. She wasn’t Victoria – not anymore. Her mother wouldn’t even recognise this unsightly beast. *She* was the imposter – not that happy, clean little girl held in her mother’s arms.

Perhaps this wasn’t heaven after all. Maybe this was hell. And her internal punishment was to live in an infinite loop of watching her mother love another little girl while she sat invisibly and sulked.

She slid down the wall and sat in the corner of the room. Arms locked around her knees as she enviously observed the other Victoria play with her mother. The little girl was carefree and looked as happy as happy could be.

How Victoria longed for her mother to look at her with eyes filled with love and affection. She reached out a few times as if to touch her mother but then pulled back – it was no use – it wasn’t real, *none of it was*. This was just a cruel illusion created to make her suffer. She must have been a wretched soul in a past life and this was her reprimand. *How else could she explain it?*

“What happened last night?” The other Victoria asked her mother. “You seemed so upset.”

“How do you know I was upset?” her mother replied. Her smile faded.

“I heard you crying from behind the bathroom door. You were definitely upset.”

Her mother stood and faced the window. She crossed her arms and remained silent for some time.

“What’s wrong?” the other Victoria asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No sweetheart...” her mother turned back and knelt to her face height. Her eyes were watery, and cheeks were glowing red. “You did nothing wrong. You are a wonderful and smart little girl who deserves all the happiness in the world.”

The other Victoria grinned and blushed, "So what was wrong?"

It seemed like her mother found it hard to maintain eye contact, "Listen to me Victoria, you know that no matter what happens, I love you. I always have and always will." She wiped her eyes.

The other Victoria hugged on to her mother tightly, "I know. I love you too."

The light in the room suddenly flickered. An icy breeze barged in and sent chills rippling through Victoria. Within seconds, the warmth, the light and everything in between vanished, and she was back in the dungeon. Pain emerged from every part of her body. Suffocated, she gasped for air as if she had just barely escaped drowning.

## Chapter 11

"Victoria!" Simon shouted. "Thank goodness you are alright... you are alright, right?"

"I am alright, Simon, I'm fine." Victoria hugged him tightly. There was a prolonged silence as they embraced each other. She was relieved to see him. She could always count on him to be there to comfort her.

"I believe you," Simon said.

"What do you mean?" Victoria asked, stroking his fluffy cheeks.

"What you said... you know... that we will get out of here one day. And I believe it will be one day soon."

A rush of guilt surged through her. And although her inner voice miraculously remained silent, she imagined her saying something along the lines of *Now look at what you've done! Poor Simon will live life with the false hopes of getting out when both you and I know it isn't going to happen.* And as usual, she would be right.

"Simon, listen—" She stopped in her tracks as the sound of the door unlocking echoed in the room.

*Oh no, not now...* She really couldn't deal with this right now. God only knew what he, that monster, had in store for her now. Perhaps he would play mind games and torment her mentally. Or maybe he would beat her nearly to death – either way, it wouldn't be pleasant.

She grabbed Simon and dragged herself towards the bed. Thankfully, it usually took him a while to get the door unlocked – she wasn't sure this was because it genuinely took him a while or whether he did it slowly on purpose to taunt her. She could see the satisfaction in his demon eyes when he felt her fear. He thrived on it. She discovered this a while back and tried to hide her fear in rebellion, but this backfired as it just enraged him more and resulted in worse torture.

She climbed onto the bed and faced Simon down. As she lay facing the ceiling, she closed her eyes and imagined she was somewhere else, anywhere but here. In her room, in school, at her favourite bakery – she couldn't focus on one place – they all flashed before her and merged into one.

"Hello, Victoria." His creepy voice dominated her mind. She felt his body heat and a nasty combination of bad body odour and alcohol shot up her nose, making her head spin and want to vomit. The same stench she would smell from the one man she hated almost as much.

Her experience of men was worlds apart from the ones she used to read about in books. She even questioned whether such men like William, the father in *Danny Champion of the World*, by Roald Dahl, existed. She had never seen or heard of such a man in real life. Maybe men wrote books to fool children into thinking they could trust them. Or perhaps their characters are built on boys before they become men. She knew a few boys from school and her neighbour, Timothy, was a boy – they were nice... normal, even. They were a little naughty sometimes, but they certainly didn't

want to lock people up, starve them and beat them nearly to death. Perhaps that comes later – when they turn into men. They probably transition from babies to boys, boys to men and then from men to merciless beasts.

“I knew this girl once,” his eerie voice emerged again. “Mary, her name was. Ah, she had luscious brown hair that matched her beautiful, sparkling brown eyes and a smile that could change the weather. Not that she smiled much, mind. But I caught a glimpse on a few rare occasions. Best instances of my life they were. Sometimes she wore black-framed spectacles which just added to her intellectual appearance. She was a hard character to describe – she wasn’t the kind of girl you would see making daisy chains if you know what I mean.” He snarled as if he had said something clever.

“I wasn’t much older than you when I first laid eyes on her. She lived with her parents on a farm not too far from here and I would see her playing in the park every Saturday. I didn’t even like the park – playing on the swings made me nauseous and running around pointlessly felt idiotic. That was your father’s cup of tea. *Being idiotic*. He did that effortlessly.

I always tagged along so I could see Mary.” He paused for a minute as if he needed to catch his breath before continuing. “I wasn’t the best-looking boy on the block, you see. So getting any type of attention from a girl was strange and I often didn’t know how to behave.” He paused again. “It wasn’t like that!” His voice turned defensive. “I know what you’re thinking...”

He had no idea what she was thinking. It certainly wasn’t about his *pathetic* life, her idiotic father or the girl, a girl that if she knew what was good for her would have moved town or even country to get away from this vile fiend. Rather, Victoria was thinking about being far away from here and that the wretched excuse for a human stood beside her was dead. She often thought, even wished and prayed he would fall down the stairs and break his neck. In fact, she fantasised of many ways which he could die – some fast and some slow – she wouldn’t mind, either way, providing he did just die.

“I watched her while I sat under a large tree and pretended to read,” He continued. “She strolled around the park aimlessly while her younger sister and brother played. She didn’t want to be there either – I could sense it. She was different from the other girls, not into gossip or cartwheels, she was a thinker and bided her time to observe the world and try to make sense of it. I often caught her staring at the heavens.”

*Wow, you got all that from stalking her at the park,* Victoria thought.

“She was lost and I... I knew I could help her find her way. Because I too was once lost.” He fell silent. The whistle in his breathing ascended. And he cursed under his breath. Victoria thought about the little girl, *Mary*. She imagined her as a character in a book. From how he described her, she did seem different, more interesting than other girls – it was a shame that people like that sparked the interest of psychopaths – they must mistake inquisitive and interesting with deranged. Victoria had no interest in hearing where the story was going but knew that he would make a point of finishing it and all the while, try to make himself seem human. She had no sympathy for him. She wouldn’t flinch even if he spontaneously combusted. He was not human, for surely the instinct of a human is to look out for other humans, right?

“Your father,” he continued, “he clocked on to why I would always insist on going to the park on Saturdays. He would catch me staring at her and eventually put two and two together and although a brilliant mathematician, stupidly came out with seven. I didn’t fancy her, love her or anything like that. Or at least I didn’t think I did. I could relate to her, that was all. She was different, as was I. But that *idiot* father of yours couldn’t fathom anything like that, a platonic relationship between a girl and a boy was unachievable to creatures like him and *my* father, for that matter – they both had simple minds which could only process numbers and formulas. Simply unable to comprehend the *bigger* things in life and the universe. To have a deep and meaningful conversation

with my father or brother was comparable to explaining quantum mechanics to a three-year-old; *pointless.*" He fell silent again. His breathing now even louder.

*Just beat me, she thought, but stop talking, for God's sake, just stop talking.* His voice and his ridiculous stories made her want to fall asleep only to never awake. She would trade listening to his rubbish for a thrashing any day. She was even tempted to scream, *just hit me! You miserable bastard and be done with it!* The grief she would get from her inner voice later when she lay battered and bruised on the cold floor prevented her from doing so. Mind, she would trade her inner voice for the thrashing also if she could.

"My brother would torment me all the time." He now spoke a little quieter and slower. "Every opportunity he could, he would sing, *Gavin and Mary sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G... Gavin and Mary...* he would repeat until it echoed in my head in an infinite loop."

*Poor you, Victoria thought. How did you cope?*

"It didn't stop there." He hissed, "He got all his friends involved until everyone around me was vocalizing that dreadful chant. It wasn't long before other girls got whiff of it and joined in. The ridicule and embarrassment were unbearable. And then, when I thought things could not get any worse and to my utter devastation, they did. Mary heard the girls chanting it. The one person that should never have heard it.

She reacted exactly how I expected her to; she cried and ran out of the park. Her watery eyes peered back at me one last time before she vanished to never return to the park.

How things could have been different if she did not leave that day. If she didn't hear that awful song...

I always disliked your father, but after this, I despised him. I loathed him to the extent that I even contemplated using his pillow to suffocate him while he slept, and if it wasn't for the fact that he was far stronger than me, I would have – he deserved it."

*We finally agree on something, Victoria thought. That would have solved many problems. Father would be dead, this monster behind bars and I would never have been born.*

## Chapter 12

Time was dragging. His speech was slow, his pauses prolonged. He always spoke as if he were some kind of wise old man who knew the secrets to the universe, and he talked about people like a true anthropologist. Yet, Victoria was sure, he knew very little about either. He was a cruel, disturbed man, who had a callous rock instead of a heart. The worst part was that he believed he was doing something good, something pertaining to honour or justice even.

"I did try killing your father once." He said sounding almost a little proud. "He used to ride a silver BMX. It was his pride and joy. He would pedal on that damn thing all day and show off to the girls on the road with his stupid stunts. Wheelies, I believe they were called. Ridiculous thing to do and how someone could be impressed by an act of such stupidity was beyond me, it really was. But they were, the girls on the street would love it when he would cycle down the entire road on one wheel. They would scream, clap and sometimes even wolf whistle.

It infuriated me to think that it was stupid things like this that would have the world admiring and cheering. This! A stupid boy on stupid bike, pulling a stupid stunt. The world had gone mad – and I wanted no part in it.

So, one day, I awoke early and went into the shed. I used my father's tools and loosened the front wheel of his bike – in a bid that when he was speeding down the street, the wheel would come off and send him to his imminent death; you must excuse my naivety, I was but a boy.

But your father must have noticed the wheel loosening as he rode and simply lifted the handle bar into his famous wheelie position and continued riding. I saw the nervous look on his face as the wheel fell off and continued rolling on its own. I knew he wasn't nervous regarding the possibility of injury or death as I had hoped, rather it was for the ridicule he may receive from the onlookers. He couldn't bear the thought of being shamed, especially in front of the girls – if anything could kill him, it would be that – he could die from embarrassment, literally. And to his despair and my joy, some of the girls did giggle.

I did, however, applaud his tenacity, I really did. He always found a way to impress the girls, even if he was as bright as a blown light bulb. He just smirked and reached down and snatched the rolling wheel that went rogue and held it in his arms as if it was all part of the plan. Instead of ridicule, he got louder cheers and applause, as if he had just performed a new stunt.

But he could never impress a girl like Mary. She would ignore acts of such childishness, at most, she would roll her eyes and walk on. Mary was sophisticated and too complicated for the likes of simpletons such as your father. And just because he could never impress a girl like Mary, he made damn sure I could never either. I knew why I hated him. He was little Mr Perfect. He was almost a foot taller than the other boys in his age group, he had the looks, thick straight hair and the gift of the gab. But most of all I hated him because he took Mary away from me.”

*She was never yours,* Victoria thought but dared not utter.

“But I never understood why he hated *me*. Perhaps it was down to me being a foot shorter than the rest of the boys in my age group, and my appearance, which from how your father described me, was comparable to a malnourished fox that had been hit by a train. Or was it because my hair curled uncontrollably, and I often looked like I had a nettle bush on my head – *Medusa*... they called me – one of my least favourite nicknames.

I knew, however, that someone like Mary wouldn't care about that. She was not a superficial creature who ogled at boys like other girls on the road. No, she was deeper than that. And she wasn't mean and nasty. We would have clicked perfectly, had we had the chance.”

*I very much doubt that,* Victoria thought, *unless she was a demented, evil ogre like you!* She fell into deep thought as the man rambled on about how much he hated her father and about this Mary girl, who he was obviously obsessed with. She could no longer make out his words and could hear only his croaky murmuring

*I wonder why hideous creatures like this man are allowed to exist.* She contemplated. Perhaps they existed to bring about balance to the world. One end of the spectrum she had her mother – an angel in human form and at the other end she had this... the devil in human form. Victoria was young – which meant she had not been around for long nor seen much but had been around long enough and seen enough to know that the world works in mysterious ways. Life is taken over by death like day is taken over by night. There was no real explanation for the phenomena, except in science and religion – neither of which she understood. How could she? Her father did not believe in any religion, except money and her mother occasionally mentioned God and prayed silently in her room, she never really talked to Victoria about it. Neither of them trusted scientists.

She suddenly found herself unable to breathe and a sharp pain surged through her. As she came back to her senses, she found the man towering over her and his hands tightly wrapped around her neck.

“You think I'm evil don't you?!” he shouted.

Her heart pounded. *Had he stepped into her mind and heard her thoughts?* Or had she stupidly spoken them out loud for him to hear?

She tried to shake her head to indicate that she didn't think that, though she did. But his grip was so tight that she couldn't move. Her eyes felt as if they were about to explode out of their sockets like cannonballs being fired from a ship. She could no longer breathe. Her head felt light enough to

float to the ceiling. Her vision blurred and all sounds, including the heavy breathing of the fiend choking her, faded. She was going to die. He would keep squeezing until he squeezed the life out of her. And she was ready for it. But just before she passed out, he released his sweaty palms and stood back, while she gasped for air.

“The problem is that people don’t understand me!” The man hissed. “They don’t understand that to enjoy order you must endure anarchy and chaos, to obtain peace, war is inevitable!” He leaned forward and spoke from behind his teeth, “And to feel joy...” He tugged her hair painfully, “you must endure suffering.” He dragged her off the bed and threw her on the floor.

“Scream!” her inner voice shouted. “Scream out in pain – give him the satisfaction.”

*Why should I?* Victoria protested.

“Because if you don’t, he will keep pounding you until you die! Scream and cry to show him you are terrified and in pain. Do it now!”

*I feel nothing...*

“It doesn’t matter what you feel! Scream you stupid cow!”

Victoria felt a hard blow to her ribs. The pain was unbearable. But she was determined to not scream or cry.

The man stood over her growling and breathing heavily. “It seems as though, you have let the evil inside you become strong and your will to control it has weakened. But don’t worry I know how to help you. My father knew exactly how to help me.”

He stepped back and began to unbuckle the belt on his trousers.

“What the hell have you done!” her inner voice shouted. “He is going to kill you.”

Blood rushed to her head and the room spun. Her stomach churned and the desperate urge to cry and urinate overcame her.

The man kicked her over, so she lay on her stomach. The floor was painfully cold. She heard the belt slicing through the air before sharp, excruciating pain surged through like lightning.

Whether she wanted to scream or not made no difference anymore – she no longer had a choice. By the third whip of the belt, she was screaming at the top of her voice by the fourth, she felt the warm trickle of urine. By the fifth, she felt as if she were about to die.

The whipping of the belt completely redefined her understanding of pain. And as she lay there on the floor for what felt like many hours after the man had left, not even her inner voice said what she was probably bursting to say, *I told you so...*

And for the first time, Victoria wished she did.

## Chapter 13

It was almost as hard to sleep as it was for her to clamber onto the bed. Simon was already asleep, which was a relief, she really didn’t need him seeing any of that. Would probably give him nightmares for life. *She* was used to the beatings... and nightmares.

It was a shame as Simon didn’t get to experience life outside the dungeon. And although Victoria had the awful experience of living with her father, there were some great times as well. Like the time she went on a school trip to London. She loved school trips as they were an opportunity to explore something different. Go somewhere, do something. She would always wake an hour earlier on a school trip day, she would get her clothes on and pack her bag and hunt through her lunch box to see what her mother had packed. Her mother would always pack a few extra goodies on a trip day. That, and giving her a tight hug with a look that Victoria was abandoning her became a trip day custom.

Victoria was always paired up with her best friend, Nadia. She was great. She had long, dark hair and olive skin. Being the only girl with olive skin in their school meant she was the point of admiration, envy and occasionally hate. She wasn't born in England – she came with her parents from India when she was three. Her father was an engineer and she too had the ambition to be an engineer – Victoria had no idea what an engineer was or what they did. She didn't think Nadia knew either – but her father was nice, and her hero. If her father was the hero then Victoria's father was the villain. The thought made Victoria chuckle and she often thought about writing a story about it. She didn't know how good Nadia's father would be at playing the hero, but her father would certainly play the best villain. He had played the character many times.

*I wonder what Nadia is doing right now... she thought I wonder if she thinks about me at all. If she ever lays on her bed wondering what I'm doing...*

Victoria missed her. Nadia, as well as being her happy thought, was her sad thought. If she could turn back time, she would not change a thing about the time she spent with her best friend, she would, however, savour it and try to enjoy it more. The cliché, *you don't know what you've got until it's gone*, sprung to her mind.

Victoria loved it when Nadia spoke about her holidays to India. From the way she described it, it was a colourful place where the sun never stopped shining. Why you would leave a place like that to come to sunny England was beyond her. Not that she wasn't happy Nadia's parent did so – for had they not, she would never have experienced meeting such a charming girl, who although had a very faint accent, spoke impeccable English – better than most people in their school. She was incredibly brave and super smart. Top groups for every subject including maths, a subject Victoria loathed with all her heart.

Nadia would know what to do if she were here. She wouldn't have been pathetically stuck down here in the basement of some old house and being used as a punching bag.

"There you go again," her inner voice emerged. "Back to your wild thoughts – thoughts destined to get you killed."

Victoria was in no mood to argue with the condescending little hag so tried to stop thinking about Nadia and the good old times – wishing that there was a way to know when the good times were happening before they passed so you could enjoy them more. Besides, she wasn't looking forward to the "I told you so speech" which, she was sure, was on its way.

Victoria was distracted by the rope noise again. The boy was out again, playing on the swing. But the pain in her back forbade her from moving.

"The boy is out playing," Simon said cheerfully. "I can hear the rope."

"Hey Simon," Victoria smiled, "You're awake."

"You look a little pale..." Simon remarked, "You alright?"

"I am fine, thank you."

"Want to have a look out the window?"

"Erm... not right now. I am very tired."

"OK, how about a game?"

"Maybe a little later."

"Are you sure everything is alright? Have I done something to upset you?"

"Of course not. Just give me a little while to rest and we will gaze out of the window and play as many games as you like."

Victoria closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pain. She scoured her mind scanning for answers – in the hope to put the pieces of the puzzle together to figure out what happened with her parents. *They died in a car accident* – that's how she remembered it. *Didn't they?* But she has new memories of her mother, after the night they were supposed to have died – after her father's friend's party.



Unless his friend had more than one party... but he didn't, she was certain of that. And her father didn't seem to be in any of the new memories. Perhaps her deep hate for him had forced her mind to blank him out or perhaps it was just him who died in the car accident. But that wouldn't make sense. Surely, her mother would have suffered some sort of injury or she would have at least told her what happened. Victoria would have been thrilled to hear it.

No, there was something she was missing here. Something important that, once unearthed, will solve everything.

*Come on Victoria... think... what happened?* Her thoughts hit a roadblock. There was an accident, her parents died... and then she woke here... in this place. This was her Uncle Edward, her father's peculiar brother's place. And although she couldn't remember the exact events, she assumed that after her parents were pronounced dead, she would be handed to her next of kin. How else could it have happened?

"Both you and I know that's not how it happened." Her inner voice said. "I mean are you really that stupid? You are comparable to a deer that actually wants to run out into speeding traffic just to see what happens!"

"Why are you such a bitch!" Victoria said, unable to stop herself.

"I am what I am because of you and your stupidity. I am a necessity – here only to keep you alive because you're too stupid to do so yourself."

Victoria fell silent. She did feel stupid but not because the bitch was saying so but because she couldn't figure out what happened.

"So why don't you tell me what happened, if I'm so stupid and you're so smart."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why on earth not?"

"You're reckless and don't know when to speak or when to shut up. It's what I hate about you the most."

"Please," Victoria's tone changed. Her inner voice may be the only one to have the answers to unlock her past. Irrespective of how much she hated her, Victoria needed her – more now than ever. "Please help me. Tell me what happened. What happened that night... after the party?"

"I am not sure how this is going to help – there's obviously a reason, your mind has blanked it out – you're too weak to handle the truth. Better I tell you a fairy tale to help you sleep at night."

"Fine! I'm stupid, reckless, weak and always wrong! You're right about all of that but please, I'm begging you – tell me the truth I need to know."

## Chapter 14

"So be it..." her inner voice said, "If you think the truth will set you free, it won't. If anything, it will make things so much more complicated and—"

But before either of them could say another word, they were distracted with the noise of the rope against the branch of the tree. Victoria wanted to scream in pain as she turned her body to face the window. She could see him, the boy. He was wearing the same blue hooded top. And as he swung, he looked over towards the window. Victoria looked away immediately.

He can't see me in here, can he?

She looked back after a few moments and he had stopped swinging and he had turned himself completely to face the window. Maybe he can see me... he's looking right here.

"He is definitely looking in this direction," Simon said, staring out the window with eyes wide open. "You should—"

"Nothing!" her inner voice snapped, "You should do nothing. Can you imagine what your uncle Edward would do to you... or even to him? Just get it out of your mind and ignore him until he gets on with his own business."

"But maybe he could help..." Victoria said faintly.

"How is he to help? How? He is a boy. Just a boy!"

"But he must have parents, guardians who could help."

"What, like your guardian. The one that batters you black and blue. Snap out of it – no one can help us."

"We should at least try," Simon said.

"Morons, both of you." She paused for a moment and then said, "Fine. Do it and get yourself in deeper trouble than you're already in. But don't hate me when I say *I told you so*, because I will."

*I have no doubt*, Victoria thought.

"And what do you think is going to happen? What, you think you're some princess locked in a castle and that... that boy is your handsome, brave prince coming to save you! Wake up! So typical you... can't stop thinking that you're something special."

"I could tell him..." Victoria said, ignoring the foul things her inner voice was verbalising, "You know... about what is going on in here... about evil Uncle Edward and the things, he is doing. And perhaps he could get help."

"And he will believe you and run to alert his parents or even the police? Is that what you think? The second that Edward gets a whiff something is wrong, he will get rid of all traces of us! That's what will happen."

"... when he gets whiff of something wrong?" Victoria raised her voice, "Look around, does anything look right with what you see? This is all wrong! He... that man, who is supposed to be my uncle, ...he is wrong!"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"I don't care what you meant – I stopped caring about the things you say a long time ago – you are toxic and nasty. You're bitter, mean and hurtful and I hate you."

A cold silence overcame the room. Simon had sensibly stayed out of the feud.

"I'm going to the window and..." She wasn't sure what she would do when she got to the window. Her inner voice, although a bitter, twisted cow, was usually right. What could the boy do? He was just a boy – looked innocent. Uncle Edward was sly, too sly to let a boy get one over him. But she had to try. This was her first and perhaps her last real opportunity to try to get out of here. Only a fool wouldn't take it.

"You ever wonder why your mother came home that night, after the function, looking a mess?" her inner voice said, stopping Victoria in her tracks as she slithered towards the window. Her words penetrated Victoria like bullets. "You ever wonder why your father wasn't with her?"

Victoria froze. Pins and needles rushed up her legs and spine.

"Think, Victoria," her inner voice said, "Think back to that night. You knew something was wrong, you could feel it inside you. Yet you did nothing."

"I... yes, there was something wrong... mother was upset, very upset. But what could I have done? She wouldn't tell me anything. I tried asking her."

"How hard did you try? I mean your mother comes home in a mess, her mascara running down her face. Her clothes torn, dirt on her face and you asked her if everything was alright once and went to sleep, while she wept in the bathroom."

Victoria felt sick as images of her mother flashed before her. Her hair was tangled, she gasped for air as she barged into the door. She was drenched and dirty. One of the heels of her red shoes was missing and they were covered in mud.

"I... remember the night." Victoria visualised the same event of her mother coming back into the house after the Arthurs' function – except it was different this time. Almost completely different.

Her mother barged in frantically and rested her back against the wall. Water mixed with dirt dripped from her fingertips and onto the floor. She had caught more than a drizzle this time. She wasn't smiling, not even pretending. Her eyes were wide open and searched the hallway as if it the first time she laid eyes on it.

What's wrong? Victoria wanted to ask but remained silent. The words shot up to her throat but then froze and slithered back down into her gut.

Her mother wiped her face and then approached Victoria. She fell to her knees and stared deep into her eyes.

"Listen to me, sweetheart... please..." She swallowed a few times and then put her palms on Victoria's arms as if it to ensure she had her undivided attention. "I love you..." Her bottom lip quivered, and she looked like she was about to break down and cry. "You have to know that... no matter what happens..."

Victoria nodded but still failed to speak. She wanted to shout, *of course I know that! And I love you too, with all my heart.* Instead, Victoria's eyes fell on her mother's hands. A couple of her nails, which she always ensured were at the perfect length and in perfect shape, were chipped. Her deep red nail polish was scraped and stained with dirt. Scratches on the back of her hands and on her forearms appeared as if she had been attacked by a small animal. But none of this indicated that something was terribly wrong as much as the look in her eyes. Her eyes spoke of something that was killing her inside.

"I... I need to tell you something..." her mother said in a hushed tone, "Something very important and I need you to promise that—"

Victoria was suddenly distracted by a tapping on the window. It was too loud to be rain or even hail. She peered back and her eyes sprung open in shock.

## Chapter 15

She couldn't believe her eyes and almost collapsed in surprise.

"It's... it's the boy..." Simon said sounding both shocked and excited.

"We can see that!" her inner voice said, sounding irritated, "What is he doing here? What does he want?"

Victoria didn't know what to do. She instinctively thought to hide in a corner or jump into her bed and cover herself with the filthy sheets, but she couldn't move. Her eyes locked onto his as he stared at her curiously. She walked towards the window in a surreal state. She felt as if she was floating, not knowing whether this was real or just a dream. She was now used to dreaming whilst asleep and whilst awake. She hadn't seen anyone new for a long time. The last person she saw from the outside world had been dragged into the room with his throat slit. Not exactly a pleasant meeting.

"What are you doing?" Her inner voice said in a frustrated tone, "Have you not learned anything? Are you really going to the window to a boy that should not be there? You know that Uncle Edward will not like this, right? He will find out. He figures everything out and once he figures this out, imagine what he is going to do to you and... just think of what he'll do to the boy."

She was right. He does figure everything out and will definitely not like this and she couldn't even imagine what he would do to her. But this was her chance to get help... or even if not, to just be able to converse with someone from outside these four walls would be heavenly.

"Look at him..." her inner voice whispered. "Look at those curious eyes and innocent face. Do you really want to drag that poor boy into this?"

She had a way of playing with Victoria's emotions that was for sure.

"Look at him!" she barked. "You looked like that once." Victoria gazed over at the mirror. She saw a young pretty girl with long beautiful hair. Her eyes sparkled and were filled with life. Her rosy cheeks and flawless complexion made her appear as if she had walked out of a magazine.

"Yes, that was you, once upon a time. But not all fairy tales end well... you get that boy involved then he will probably be joining us in here. Is that what you want? Is it?!" she shouted. "On my God, it isn't it – you can't stomach the fact he is out there, free, while you are stuck in here. You feel like you've been dealt a bad hand and now you envy that boy don't you!"

"That's not true... I don't—"

"You can lie to me as much as you want but you can't lie to yourself!"

She wasn't lying, she was sure of it, wasn't she? Yes, it is unfair that she is caged here like an abused animal, but she didn't want this on anyone, especially not that boy – he did very look innocent; had probably never experienced anything bad in his life.

No, the bitch was wrong. She didn't want him in here.

"You're a selfish, spoilt little girl."

Was it really selfish to want what he had? She didn't want to take it from him, she just wanted it as well. Did that make her a bad person?

"What if the only way you could have it was to take it from him?" her inner voice asked, "What then?"

She wouldn't want him in here – she wouldn't wish this on anyone. But it did make her question, what if by trading his freedom, she could get hers? That wasn't possible and the answer would be no! She wouldn't do that!

"Are you sure about that? You get that boy's attention, and you might be asking for just that."

And as usual, and annoyingly, she was right. The boy couldn't help her, no one could. All she would do is endanger his life – like the way she had done so with the man who is probably buried in the garden or dumped in a river. Poor guy probably didn't wake up that morning thinking his throat would be slit because of a silly little girl trying to escape.

She tore her eyes away from the window and walked back towards the bed with sunken shoulders and feeling defeated. It was so typical for her to have any feelings of hope and excitement swiftly swapped with misery. Her ambition to be free should have been buried with the man she had murdered.

The tapping lasted another few minutes and then stopped. Victoria kept her head buried under the bed covers until the boy gave up. She dared not look up at the window in case she had a change of heart and begged for the boy's help. She could see the disappointment in Simon's eyes. He hid the expression of sadness behind his smile.

She distracted herself by revisiting that night. The night her mother came back from the function. Her mother was about to tell her something – something that Victoria believed would shed light on exactly what happened. But her thoughts skipped that night and went to another time, a time where she and her mother were walking towards her favourite bakery. Her mother seemed different. Lost in the clouds.

"Are you OK?" Victoria asked her mother.

"Sorry... what?" she seemed startled with the question, "Of course, I'm fine... So, what would you like?"

Victoria's mouth watered as she thought about the fresh bread.

Her mother stopped walking and rummaged through her purse.

"Damn it. I must have left my purse at home and the keys. Damn it!"

"Erm... its fine, Mother, we'll just come back another time. Honestly, it's fine."

"No, you don't understand, the keys... the door keys – I've locked them inside the house."

“Oh,” Victoria now understood the panic, “Well, can’t we call Father—”

“We can’t do that right now.” Her mother suddenly looked pale. “Come on, we have to go.” She grabbed Victoria’s arm and rushed back in the direction of their home. She was taking large strides and Victoria had to run to keep up. At times, she felt she was being dragged along.

They walked passed their house and stopped at the neighbours. Her mother banged on the door.

“Hi Angela,” her mother said in a bubbly tone. “I am so sorry to bother you, but I must dash into my husband’s work to get the house keys. I clumsily locked us out – is it at all possible if I could leave Victoria here until I get back?” She bit her bottom lip while waiting for the response.

Angela bent down and smiled at Victoria, “It would be an absolute delight.” She responded, “Timothy is in the garden, why don’t you run along and join him. And I hope you’re feeling like some freshly baked cookies, they’re in the oven.” She winked.

Victoria adored Angela’s cookies and loved playing with Timothy.

As she walked in, she could hear Angela whispering behind her.

“Is everything OK?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t it be?” her mother responded defensively.

“No, it’s just that I have noticed that your husband hasn’t been around for a few days... and to be honest, you look like you have seen a ghost every time I see you. I was just wondering if things were... you know, that you two were OK?”

“We’re fine.” Her mother said sharply, cutting her off. “Thank you for watching over Victoria – I shan’t be long.”

“Take your time,” Angela said as Victoria’s mother hurried down the road, “It’s no bother.”

Angela must have noticed the look of puzzlement in Victoria’s face as she closed the door.

“Oh, you’re still here, I thought you would have been in the garden with Timothy by now. But as you are here, you might as well help me get the cookies out of the oven. Timothy will be thrilled at the sight of the cookies, and you for that matter.”

Victoria smiled. The lovely smell of the cookies was in the air before Angela opened the large oven door. She had one of those mammoth ovens that Victoria suspected had the capacity to cook a baby lamb.

Angela removed three long trays loaded with a variety of cookies – plain chocolate, milk chocolate and white chocolate. The smell shot up her nose and immediately made her mouth water and stomach grumble. But not even the sight and smell of these delightful cookies could distract her from thinking about her mother. She needed to know what was bothering her so much.

## Chapter 16

The grey sky made way for the sun to expose golden rays as the afternoon progressed. Victoria loved Timothy’s garden – most of it was green – trees and flowers of various heights and colours. There was a small patio area that had a large garden table with twelve chairs and a barbeque area that was used frequently in the summer months. A grand pond occupied by Great Crested Newts sat in the middle of the garden – always a treat to look at. They had two large apple trees that gave them more apples than they could ever possibly consume. In some seasons they would spend hours collecting the apples, fill bags and leave them outside the house for neighbours to freely take. This was after Timothy’s mother had made every possible apple dessert known to man.

Angela had taken the hobby of gardening after her husband died from cancer a few years back. Timothy told Victoria about how hard she found it to cope. His father was sick for two years before what the doctors had predicted as the *inevitable* happened.

She saw a therapist who gave her the advice to find a hobby and she chose gardening and had been doing it religiously ever since. She worked hard to keep all the beautiful flowers and plants

alive – something she felt she failed at with regards to her husband. She blamed herself – perhaps if she had looked after him better, he would not have died. Or if she had just encouraged him to fight harder, he wouldn't have given up.

Timothy knew an awful lot about what his mother went through – they obviously spoke about things. Victoria longed to be a friend to her mother as opposed to just her daughter. She wished she could be someone her mother could confide in; the way Timothy's mother clearly did with him.

She smiled as she approached Timothy. He swung on the wooden swing his father put up for him when they moved in many years back. She was excited to show him the cookies and looked forward to playing with him. Her smile dropped when she saw his expression. He looked pale and distraught. She could sense immediately that something was wrong.

"Hey, Timothy... Look what I got..." she raised the bowl of cookies. She expected his eyes to light up in excitement but instead, he forced a smile that lasted a few seconds and then looked away.

"Erm... you want to try one?" she asked with her mouth full. "They are delicious! Your mother makes the best cookies! They're even better than the ones in the bakery. And they're still warm and taste the best when they are warm and soft."

He didn't respond – just shook his head.

She desperately wanted to ask him what was wrong but knew that this type of question would annoy him. He didn't seem in any mood to eat cookies or to play. He just swung slowly and stared at his shoes.

"So, you want to play something?" she asked, hopefully.

"Victoria." He finally spoke, "Can I trust you?"

"Of course. Why would you ask such a thing?"

He fell silent again and reverted to staring at his shoes. Victoria thought it wise to not prompt him until he was ready – she was just glad he was speaking to her – even if it was a little awkward.

"No, it's just that I..." he started talking again, "I want to tell you something, but I need to know you won't tell anyone."

"What is it?" Victoria asked putting a half-eaten cookie back into the bowl and giving him her undivided attention.

"First, you must promise you will not tell!"

"Fine, I promise. Now, what is it? Come on spit it out! The cookies are getting cold."

He jumped off the swing and walked to the back of the garden. Victoria curiously followed, still clenching the bowl of cookies hoping that whatever it was, it was worth having to eat the cookies cold.

"So, where we heading? She asked as they walked further into the garden. He didn't respond but picked up his pace. She tried her best to keep up. The garden was huge and seemed like it never ended. He stopped near a nettle bush and nervously fiddled with his fingers. She noticed his hands tremble.

"Timothy..."

"Behind the bush..." he whispered.

"What?"

"Look behind the bush."

The serious look on his face made Victoria swallow hard. Her pounding heartbeat was in her throat. She didn't know what to expect. She thought to ask him what was behind there, but she had a feeling he would keep insisting she looked for herself.

She crept forward, now terrified of what she might find. She questioned whether she should even look. If it, whatever it was, had Timothy spooked she couldn't imagine what it would do to her. Timothy was brave and adventurous, and she had never seen him like this.

As she peered her head behind the bush, her eyes widened in horror and the sudden urge to scream overcame her.

## Chapter 17

“Please...” Timothy said in a shaky voice, “You promised you wouldn’t tell. You promised.”

Victoria’s hand remained over her mouth as she stared at a dead animal. It was a black cat – its head covered in blood.

“Is it...”

Timothy nodded but said nothing – his face was bright red, and he looked as if he was about to cry. Once Victoria had overcome the initial shock of seeing something dead for the first time, she knelt and studied its face. It looked sad and incredibly familiar.

“Oh my God...” she said and put her hand back over her mouth. “This is Alfie. The cat from down the road.” She remembered seeing the missing cat pictures on noticeboards around the area for the past week. She assumed it was a very much-loved cat with the number of posters she saw.

“Alfie has been missing for a week!” she said, her gaze making Timothy turn away. “What happened? And why have you not told the owners? They have probably been worried sick. And they have a right to know... Anyway, how did this happen?”

“It... it was an accident, I swear I didn’t mean to hurt it.”

“What did you do?”

“I noticed that some of the Newts were dead around the pond... not eaten but just dead. So, I kept a close eye on them and that’s when I noticed the cat. It came into the garden and killed the Newts. They are an endangered species, you know.” He looked at her as if waiting for a reaction.

“What happened?” Victoria asked a little less patiently.

“Well, I just wanted it to stop – you know, scare it away. So, I loaded my slingshot and fired a few stones to scare it and for a few days it worked but after a while, it wasn’t scared anymore and stopped running. So, I began shooting rocks closer... not to hurt her, I swear, I just wanted it to stop and leave the Newts alone. And... I accidentally hit it in the head.”

Victoria was frozen in shock. The cookie she stuffed down her earlier was preparing to come up as fast as it went down.

“When did this happen?”

“Yesterday.”

“What!” she looked around and then lowered her voice, “The cat has been lying here dead since yesterday and you haven’t told anyone.”

“I didn’t know what to do... I panicked and dragged it here behind the bush so no one could see it. I didn’t mean to kill it, I swear!” he sobbed. “And imagine telling my mother... she has been through so much and the thought of something dying... here in her garden and worst of all, because of me... I couldn’t... I can’t.”

“But... we can’t just do nothing... Just leave it here.”

“I know... you’re right but I can’t tell my mother – she doesn’t even know I have a slingshot; she’ll kill me!”

Victoria could see the fear in his face. She knew exactly what he and his mother had gone through. And God only knew what this would do to her.

“OK,” Victoria said, “I will not tell anyone, but we can’t leave that poor cat out here.”

“What do we do with it?”

“We have to give it a proper burial.”

Timothy nodded in agreement.

“There is a field behind the garden – we will need something to dig with and we will need some gloves... oh, and a bag to put it in.”

“I can get all of that from the house. My mother keeps all the gardening gear in the storeroom in the extension.”

“OK. Get it and let’s do this now before anyone notices us.”

Victoria’s legs were wobbling as she waited for Timothy to get the tools to cover up a murder. She wished she wasn’t involved in this, but it was too late – her friend needed her. He made a mistake and although a life has been lost as a result, what would punishing him and putting stress on his mother achieve? The cat was dead, there was no changing that. Timothy and his mother were good people and didn’t deserve this. And although guilt crawled all over her like an infestation of ants, she convinced herself that this was the right thing to do. The cat had to be stopped or the Newts would have all been eventually annihilated, and for what? The cat’s amusement. Killing the cat was probably not the best approach to stopping it but it worked – the Newts were safe. The only thing left to do now was to give the dead cat its rights to a proper burial.

“Have you got everything?” she asked, looking around to make sure his mother was not witnessed to the cover-up. Timothy nodded. The look of fear and panic was frozen on his face.

“Hold the bag or wear the gloves and put the cat in?” she asked knowing which he would prefer.

He remained silent and tears dripped down his cheeks.

“Listen,” she said, “You need to keep it together, it was an accident, and you didn’t mean to do it. Now, if you don’t want anyone finding out, then we need to do this.” She grabbed the gloves and put them on. “Come on, let’s get this over with.” She said with more confidence than she was feeling.

“Hold the bag.” His hands trembled as he held out the bag.

*How the hell am I going to do this?* She thought as she stared at the dead cat. She knelt and reached for it, the smell of death was not an easy odour to take in. She felt like throwing up a few times as she lifted its lifeless corpse and gently placed it into the green rubble bag. She noticed Timothy had faced away the entire time, obviously unable to look at the dead cat nor face up to what he had done.

Victoria tied the bag into a knot and carried it toward the fence.

“Bring the shovel,” she commanded Timothy. He stood frozen. “Come on!” Timothy grabbed the shovel and followed like a lost puppy. It was easy climbing over the low fence, and they trudged through the woods up until they feared they might get lost.

“There,” Victoria pointed towards an area of grass surrounded by bushes and flowers. It looked peaceful. “That looks like a nice place.”

They took it in turns to dig – Victoria kept a lookout while Timothy dug and vice versa.

When the hole in the ground was deep enough, she debated whether to leave it in the bag or remove the bag and bury it bare. Bare felt more natural.

After they buried it, filled the hole and covered it with large leaves, twigs and flowers, they stood there for a moment silently.

“Should we not... like, say a prayer or something?” Timothy whispered.

“Yes... Yes, I suppose we should.”

They silently prayed. Victoria prayed that the cat goes to better a place and was certain that Timothy was praying for forgiveness.

They rushed back to the garden. Victoria picked up the plate of cookies and acted as if nothing had happened while Timothy put the tools back.

They met back in the garden, “Where is it?”

“Where is what?”

*The murder weapon, you idiot!* She said silently. “The slingshot.”



He removed it from his pocket.

"Come with me..." she led him back to the fence.

"Throw it!" She ordered.

"What?"

"Do it! Throw it as far as you can and promise me you will never use anything like that again or do anything like this again."

He nodded and then threw the slingshot over the fence as hard as he could.

"I promise."

## Chapter 18

"Victoria... wake up Victoria!" her inner voice echoed in her head. She must have fallen asleep.

"Get up!" She shouted, "The door. He's at the door. Victoria could hear the door unlocking. How long was I out?"

The door swung open and Uncle Edward strolled in holding a plate and a cup. The usual, stale bread and water.

"You must be hungry..." he said. "Here..." he placed the plate and the cup on the floor the way you would for your pet dog. Perhaps that was what he considered her as, a pet. A pet that he often used as a punching bag. No, that wasn't it. He was a noble crusader, here to beat the devil out of her.

He sat on the bed next to her and smiled. His smile was hideous and made her sick from inside. A smile that hid something incredibly sinister. He stared at the window as if in deep thought. Victoria wished he would leave so she could jump at the bread. She didn't care if it was stale, she needed to eat something before she passed out. The game she played with Simon was great for a moment, tricked her into feeling satisfied for a while. But once the illusion wore off, the hunger set in.

"You know, it's interesting how unpredictable life is. Don't you think?" He peered at her, searching her face for a response.

*Life's a bitch!* She thought.

"It's funny how you plan your life and you sometimes even feel as if you have everything worked out but then something happens, and everything turns upside down... I wanted to study History. It was my passion, along with Philosophy and Art. It was an unusual combination, I know, but it was what my heart desired and you can't always control what your heart desires.

I was very good at History, but my teachers were pedantic fools who were more interested in students learning names and dates. It's probably why history repeats itself in an infinite loop. People don't learn the lessons from history, only names and dates.

In any case, my father, the master and commander, did not care for my heart's desires. He didn't care about history or the lessons of the past. His eyes were always set on the future and on making money. He worshipped the muck. *Money makes the world turn*, he would always say. And I think he believed it. I always felt that time was too valuable to exchange for money. People put hours of elbow grease in exchange for money, yet money could never be used to buy more time. My father considered me a fool and I considered him one. In truth, we were both fools.

My not caring for money and inability to view the world the way he did, cost me many years of my life. He thought joining the army would make a real man out of me, whatever that was. But four long, laborious years in Afghanistan didn't make a man out of anyone. It created monsters. Doing the things that we had to do... commands that we knew were wrong in every sense of the word. Yet the only wrong considered wrong out there was to not follow commands. Out there, we weren't

men, we were machines – not allowed to think, not allowed to question. Follow the commands or be considered a traitor.

I hated the desert. The weather was like a taste of hell – the dry air made you not want to breathe at all. And the people were rats. No concept of civilisation or order. Dressed in rags with no clue about the world. They weren't worth saving, in my opinion – not that saving them was on the agenda. We killed way more than we saved. And first, it was hard but after a while, it became easy – too easy." He paused for a moment and stared into her eyes.

"You must think I'm crazy... but I am not, far from it, in fact." He turned his body to face her. "Not allowing people under the age of eighteen to play a game based on war yet letting them join the army and participate in the real thing from a younger age. Now, that is crazy! Crazy is a soldier ordered to blow up a house that they know has women and children inside. And crazy is living oblivious to all the evil forces at work around you." He paused and stared at the floor.

"My father was right about one thing; being in the army did give me a new perspective on life. I realised that there is evil that lurks in every corner of this dark world and everyone is asleep. They don't know what is happening under their very noses." He stood up straight and looked like he was about to salute. "But some of us have awoken and it is incumbent on us to fight against the evil."

Victoria braced herself. His pity speeches were usually followed by a beating. She wasn't over the whipping she received not so long ago. What would it be this time? His fists? His boots in her ribs? It didn't really matter – *pain was pain*.

His breathing was loud, it has always been louder than normal people but today it was particularly loud. He sounded out of breath as if he had just returned from a sprint.

He coughed a few times, "I will leave you to rest and regain your strength," he mumbled with his hand over his mouth. "You will need your strength if you want to win the fight against evil."

She wasn't sure whether he had planned to pardon today's beating or whether it had something to do with the loud and out of controlled breathing and cough, but she was relieved. Her back was still murdering her from the lashes.

As he walked towards the door, he kicked over the cup and the water spilt onto the bread. Victoria's heart raced.

"Oops." He said, peering back. The sinister smile resurfaced.

He walked slowly towards the door, which was like torture. Victoria's eyes were glued to the soaked bread. The remaining water had spilt onto the floor.

She rolled out of bed as soon as she heard the doors locking. She dragged herself towards the plate and without thinking about how awful the taste would be and ignoring the stink from the water, she stuffed it down her. Her dry lips cracked as she chewed, and her throat was so sore that she felt as if she was swallowing a knife with every morsel. It tasted revolting. But none of that mattered. All that mattered was that she forced it down her so her stomach would stop screaming at her.

After eating every crumb and licking the plate, she stared at the empty cup. A desperate thirst was induced by the nasty bread. She looked at the spilt water on the floor and shook her head. *No way!*

"Yes way." Her inner voice emerged.

"That's disgusting! I can't."

"You can... and you will... or you will die."

"So be it," Victoria shouted.

"Listen you stubborn brat... you need to get that water before it dries up. You don't know when he will give it to you again."

"I don't care!" she threw the plate on the floor and hugged her knees. Her stomach cramped painfully. "I want to die!"

There was a moment of silence before her inner voice spoke again, “Fine. You’re right...”

Victoria couldn’t believe her ears. Her inner voice, little Mrs Perfect... Mrs Always Right, accepting that Victoria was right. It was a miracle. Victoria being right, by default, meant her inner voice was wrong – impossible!

“You have had enough, I get it. The pain and torture are too much. You can’t bear it anymore. This place is hell and anyone living here would suffer every day, especially if they were alone.”

She was finally getting it.

“So, you probably should just let yourself die... I am sure Simon will be fine.”

Victoria’s eyes shot to the bed where Simon lay peacefully.

“He is strong...” she continued, “I am sure he can handle being here all alone. You go ahead, do what you need to. Escape this place, once and for all.”

Suddenly the thought of letting herself die was shrouded by sadness and guilt – it had lost its appeal entirely.

Victoria knew that her cunning inner voice had intended for her to think of Simon and feel the guilt. Victoria also knew that she didn’t care about Simon, he was a tool she used to stop Victoria from giving up on life. She wasn’t convinced that her inner voice even cared if Victoria died but had to keep her alive just to ensure she stayed alive. Irrespective of her intentions, she was right, she was always right... even when she was wrong.

## Chapter 19

Victoria crawled back to her bed and lay on her side. Lying on her back was proving way too painful. She stared at Simon – he brought her some joy in this miserable world. His smile, his kindness and innocence all contributed to making him a symbol of good and hope.

As she lay there waiting for him to wake, she thought back to that night after the function, a night that was now plaguing her mind. But her mind went straight back to Timothy’s garden.

Timothy and Victoria sat on the grass in the garden in complete silence. No one sat on the swing or touched a cookie. Millions of thoughts buzzed through her head – *Did we do the right thing? Did anyone see us? If someone was staring out of their top window, they definitely could have spotted them climbing over the fence with a bag and a shovel. How much trouble would they be in if they did get seen? Could they go to jail for something like this? Sure, she didn’t kill the cat because she was now an accomplice to a murder cover-up.*

Judging by the look on Timothy’s face, he was having similar thoughts, except with, presumably, the addition of extreme guilt. She thought to say something, even took in a deep breath to start but then stopped. What could she say, everything is going to be fine? Or reassure him that no one will find out that he killed the cat in cold blood? None of that would help. She couldn’t guarantee that no one would find out and she was positive that things weren’t going to be fine – not for a while anyway. It can’t be easy living with the guilt of having taken a life.

She was startled by Timothy’s mother as she stepped out into the garden. She panicked, worried his mother may have heard her guilty thoughts.

“Victoria sweetie your m—” she stopped in her tracks. Timothy’s face turned red. Guilt resonated from him like heat from an open fire. *She knows...* Victoria thought.

“Look at the state of you!” she said with eyes wide open. “You look like you’ve been rolling around in the dirt. Timothy, in the bath. Victoria, your mother is here. I am sure she is going to be pleased to see you looking such a mess.”

Victoria swiftly got to her feet. She was desperate to see her mother. To see her reassuring smile would put things right.

She ran and hugged on to her mother.

"Hey," her mother said, startled from the tight squeeze, "Everything alright?"

"It is now." Victoria responded, "Can we go home please."

As they walked back to their house holding hands, Victoria noticed her mother had changed her clothes. She could have sworn her mother was wearing her long blue dress and black coat. And the heels were gone, and she was wearing flat shoes.

"You changed into your red dress," Victoria said.

Her mother paused for a moment, "Yes, I was feeling hot in the other one, so I changed before I got you." She smiled, "I imagined you were having fun playing with Timothy so thought I would give you a little more time... and looking at the state of you, you had fun, right?"

Now it was Victoria's turn to give a moments silence. "Yes. We had fun." She lied.

There was an awkward silence until they got inside the house. Victoria went straight to her room and her mother into the bathroom.

Victoria thought about the dead cat. She even thought about telling her mother – her mother wouldn't judge her and just telling her would make her feel a lot better about it all. But then she remembered her promise to Timothy. She couldn't do that to him. He and his mother have been through enough.

She sat silently for a while. The atmosphere was strange. It was calm with her father not around, away on business is what her mother told her. But there was an invisible tension looming in the air. The long awkward silences at the dinner table. Her mother's long visits to the bathroom. The sobbing behind the door. And now Victoria had the dead cat to add to it.

She couldn't stay in her room, she needed to distract her mind, so she walked around the house while she waited for her mother to come out of the bathroom. When she walked passed the entrance hallway, she noticed the shoes her mother was wearing this morning, the ones she had changed. They were covered in mud. The bottom of her coat that she was wearing also had a few spots of mud. Where would mother have possibly gone to get mud on her?

The toilet flushed. Her mother must be nearly out. She debated whether she should ask her mother. And then something terrible dawned on her. *Perhaps she knew about the cat. What if she had seen them burying the cat? That would explain the mud. But why didn't she say something? Maybe she is waiting to see if I own up and tell her what happened.*

It would be a great relief if she were to tell her.

She waited for her mother to come out of the bathroom. She jumped when she saw Victoria stood right outside and staring at her.

"Oh my God!" she said with her hand on her chest, "You nearly scared the life out of me."

"Sorry."

"It's OK darling. How about we get dinner on?"

Victoria nodded.

"Mother, I wanted to ask you something first."

Her mother's face lost its colour and her smile faded.

"What is it?"

"Erm... I just wanted to know that if... What if you knew something... like a secret."

Her mother remained quiet and nodded as if for her to go on.

"What if someone you care about did something bad, but they didn't mean to..." Victoria didn't know how to explain what just happened. Perhaps she shouldn't beat around the bush and just get to the point. "They did it to stop more bad things from happening." She thought about the poor Newts.

Her mother crouched to Victoria's face height.

"Listen to me..." her eyes were watery. "Sometimes people do bad things. Not because they want to or that they are bad people but to protect other people they care about."

She knows about the cat... I know she does... At least she's not angry.

"Now, I'm not saying it is right," her mother continued, "and it isn't. But sometimes people feel they have no other choice."

Her words gave Victoria a sense of calm. They didn't remove the guilt but certainly helped.

"I don't get it," Victoria said.

"Don't get what?" Simon said, smiling.

"Anything."

Nothing made sense. Why did Mother have mud on her shoes and where was Father? And why was her mind taking her here and there but not to what she wanted to know? And what did her inner voice mean when she said it was all my fault? Too many questions and not enough answers.

*It wasn't my fault! I know it wasn't. I would never do anything to hurt my mother! And I didn't. My mother did not die in an accident after the function. She came home, very much alive!*

She had hoped that her inner voice would say something, but she was silent.

"You are wrong!" Victoria said out aloud. "And you are a liar."

"I am not a liar." Her inner voice eventually responded. Her tone was not as sharp as usual. "Fine! I may have worded it wrong – it wasn't your fault, but you were the reason."

"What do you mean?"

"*You are the reason this all happened.*"

"*All what happened?*"

"That night, after the function, your parents didn't die, not both of them anyway. Your father died that night and it was no accident."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on Victoria, are you really that stupid or are you just pretending? Your father didn't come home that night. Your mother was a mess and she was hiding something, and you knew it then and you know it now. Her clothes and shoes were muddy. The constant crying in the bathroom."

Victoria remained silent for a moment. Her head was pounding.

"Do you really need me to spell it out?"

## Chapter 20

"Yes, I need you to spell it out because from what I think you're trying to say..." she fell silent.

"I... I don't believe it."

"It doesn't matter what you believe. It is what it is."

"No. She couldn't have – she could never do anything like that... she couldn't hurt a fly."

"The way your friend Timothy could never kill that cat. The way you would never help a murderer hide a body and cover his tracks."

Victoria's eyes widened.

"What? You think I don't know about that? I know you Victoria... I know you better than you know yourself."

"It's you!" Victoria shouted, "You're playing tricks with my mind. Just stop it. Leave me alone."

"Hey, you're the one that wanted the truth – but you obviously can't handle the truth. You should have left it buried. Some things are best left in the dark."

Victoria thought back to the muddy shoes. Her father had never been away from his house for that long. *But surely, mother couldn't have... have, what, Killed father? That is what the bitch was insinuating. My mother was no killer that was sure. No, I refuse to believe it.*

"Refusing to believe it doesn't make it less true."

"And how can you be so sure it is true?"

"Because I can clearly see the facts – I am not blinded by love."

"How can you know anything about love when you are loaded with spite and hate? You may know me better than I know myself, but I know my mother and she is no killer. She did not kill my father!"

"You're not sure of anything. You saw the signs and you ignored them. While you were helping your friend, Timothy cover up a murder, your mother was busy covering up hers. The more pressing question is why. Why did she do it?"

"Shut up!" Victoria sobbed.

"Are you alright?" Simon asked, looking worried. She hugged on to him tightly as her inner voice continued.

"She did it for you... because of you. She did it to protect you from him, your abusive father. And who could blame her? He deserved it."

"Victoria," Simon called, "The window, look at the window."

Victoria looked at the window and she saw the boy. He stood staring in. They made eye contact. He smiled. It was a warm, kind smile, one she hadn't seen in a while. She remembered the advice of her inner voice. Talk to the boy and you risk dragging him into this. She didn't want to drag anyone into this mess. But she couldn't tear her eyes away either.

The boy tapped on the window.

"He's trying to get your attention," Simon stated the obvious.

"I know, but—"

"I think you should talk to him," Simon interrupted, "He seems nice."

Victoria crawled out of bed. She could hear her inner voice warning her not to talk to him, but she managed to ignore her. She had to talk to him. She had to reach out to someone.

She stood directly in front of the window, facing the boy. He had hazel eyes and rosy cheeks. And small dimples appeared when he smiled.

"Hi, my n..n..name is Jack." He said loudly so she could hear from behind the window. He spoke slowly and with a stutter. "We moved in next door a little while ago. I d..didn't know any children lived here. M..m..my mother told me an old man lived here on his own. But I was very happy when I saw you. I was playing with my ball and k..k..kicked it into your garden accidentally, sorry about that." He then smiled, "But I am glad I did now."

Victoria smiled. She didn't quite know what to say but was glad to see someone. She peered down at Simon, who was wrapped snugly in her arms. He was smiling too. And although he didn't say anything, she knew he liked the boy.

"So," the boy spoke again, "what's your name?"

"It's not too late!" her inner voice surfaced again, "You can still walk away from this. Just ignore him and go back to your bed and pretend this never happened."

"Victoria... My name is Victoria."

The boy's smile grew wider, "Like the Queen... Queen Victoria?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"It's a lovely n..name."

Victoria blushed.

"Oh my Lord!" Her inner voice said loudly. "You are getting a retarded boy involved in this. How can he possibly help?"

"Just shut up!" she mumbled under her breath.

"Sorry?" Jack said, "I didn't catch that."

"No, I... thank you."

"For w...what?"

"For the compliment on my name and for coming over."

"You're welcome. So, Victoria, your highness," they both chuckled, "How long have you been here?"

Victoria could feel her smile fading as she was suddenly reminded of her circumstances. For a moment, as she engaged in a conversation with a boy from the outside world, she forgot that she was held here as a prisoner – suffering torture at the hands of a deranged lunatic.

"About six months, I think."

"Oh, a little longer than me then. We moved here from the city. My mother thought it would be better for me... for my development. But really I think she did it because she was embarrassed by me."

"Why would she be embarrassed by you?"

"Because I am a little slow and I have a stutter."

"Oh, I hadn't noticed," Victoria said, trying to be polite.

"Liar!" They both chuckled again.

"The slow part is something I can s..sometimes hide but the stutter, well that's impossible to get away with. My mother took me to lots of doctors and they tried so many things to try to help but they were u..unsuccessful."

"It's not that noticeable, honestly."

"I didn't think much of it either but the children in school would always make fun of me. They even g..got v..very creative with it. They came up with this rhyme:

*Jack is a slow tank engine,  
And we must mention,  
He s..stutters with every word and his mind slacks,  
He c..cries like a girl and he's always stuck on the tracks.*

...Which even I thought was pretty g...good"

"That's horrible," Victoria said. Annoyed that he even bothered to memorise the mean rhyme. "They were very mean and shouldn't have said those things to you."

"It's fine. These types of things bothered my mother way more than they bothered me. She said that the city was not the place for me and that I would enjoy my life way more somewhere quiet. I think she meant somewhere where people wouldn't notice my flaws and p..pick on me."

"I am sure she is just looking out for you. She just wants you to be safe and happy."

"B..but I feel bad. I feel as if she liked living in the city, she had all her friends there and because of me, she has had to leave all that behind."

"It's obvious that you are more important to her than all of that – she is probably way happier out here, seeing you happy than—"

Jack suddenly turned around.

"I can hear my mother calling, d..dinner must be ready." He faced the window again and smiled. "It was really nice meeting you. And I guess I'll see you around." Victoria returned the smile but said nothing. She wanted desperately to ask him for help. But remained silent, content with just having had a good conversation with someone from outside this room. It was amazing.

"Thank God he is gone!" her inner voice sighed in relief. "And I am glad you didn't drag him into this. You made a mistake by talking to him but let's just hope that Edward doesn't find out."

"I liked him." Simon said, "He seems really nice."

"Yes, I like him too," Victoria said.

"I'm glad you spoke to him. Hey, do you think he would want to play games with us?" Simon asked.

"He will not come back around here if he knows what's good for him!" Her inner voice snapped.

## Chapter 21

Victoria spent the rest of the day thinking about the conversation she had with Jack. She thought about his innocent smile and his stutter but more than anything else, she thought deeply about the sacrifice his mother made for him. She thought about *her* mother and what she may have done if there was any truth to what her inner voice was suggesting.

Victoria had a high level of admiration for Jack's mother for leaving the city to bring him here, so he could have a better life. It was amazing. *But did Mother kill Father to stop him from hurting me?*

Her mother's words played on her mind, *"Sometimes people do bad things. Not because they want to or that they are bad people but to protect other people they care about."*

*Is that what she meant? Father would beat her and Victoria frequently. Did she kill him to stop him from hurting me?*

*She is a mother, just like Jack's mother and she would do anything to protect me... Oh, God...*

"Finally," her inner voice said, "The penny drops."

"... But she couldn't, she couldn't do it..."

"You will be very surprised by what people are capable of when facing difficult situations."

"But... none of this makes sense. How am I here? I filled in the gaps to try to make sense of things, but they don't make sense at all now. My mother and father both died in a car accident whilst returning from Arthur's function. I was handed over to my father's brother Uncle Edward. But if mother didn't die, how did I get here?" She was hoping her inner voice would shed some light on the puzzle, but she remained silent and left Victoria to ponder.

If her mother was alive, she would not have allowed Victoria to get stuck here. She wouldn't let her get tortured and beaten by this monster. She would have protected her.

"Forget all of this stuff for now." Simon said, "You've been through a lot today. Can we just play a little game to get your mind off things? Just a quick game, I promise."

Victoria felt bad that she had been neglecting Simon. He had been asking to play a game for a while now and she had been avoiding it to try to make sense of the mess in her mind. And he was right, she had been through a lot and playing a game with Simon was always one of her happy thoughts.

"What would you like to play?"

Simon smiled. And for a moment, all her worries and anxieties and, to an extent, even her pain disappeared.

They played for what felt like hours. They played eye spy, hide and seek, tag, blind man's bluff and noughts and crosses using a crayon. They talked, laughed and they sang songs until they fell asleep.

That night, Victoria slept peacefully. The pain from the belt lashing was still there but she felt a lot better after having spent time playing with Simon. He was an escape for her. He couldn't help her with unlocking the secrets in her mind, protect her from the beatings or provide her with real food



but he did help her elude her reality, even if it was just for a moment. He was her best friend, *her only friend*.

In the morning, she was hardly able to move. The skin on her back felt as if it was about to tear open and it stung like hell. She thought hard about her mother, still shocked at the possibilities. There was more to all of this, she knew it. But before she could revisit the puzzle, she heard the devastating sound of the door unlocking.

*Not now! I really can't take this anymore.*

"Keep it together." her inner voice said calmly.

"Rise and shine." The horrible voice of Uncle Edward emerged. He sounded stranger than usual. She wasn't sure whether this was due to him having just woken up or whether he was ill. She remembered hearing that sudden changes in the weather can make you feel ill. And the weather had shifted from cold to colder. Secretly, she wished he was dying.

He was carrying the plate with the usual delightful bread and the cup of water. And although she hated it, a few days without it made her appreciate it.

She noticed his hands shake as he put the plate and cup on the floor, so much so that water spilt out. It reminded her of Mr Jones, her History teacher from school. He had arthritis in his hands. The only difference was that she felt sorry for Mr Jones. He was a great teacher who was passionate about helping people. In his spare time, he worked for a charity, raising money for cancer research. Thinking about it now, she didn't know what he was like behind closed doors. Outside, in the public eye, even her father seemed like a nice guy, but once the curtains are drawn, the mask comes off.

"Make sure you eat and drink to keep up your energy." He said, sounding as if he had her best interests at heart, though she was certain he didn't have a heart. "I have brought four pieces of bread and a full cup of water, as I need to go into the city today and will not be back until tomorrow."

He seemed a little distressed – he looked paler and more hideous than usual. His eyes were red and puffy. He made no eye contact and slammed the door on his way back out.

Victoria sighed in relief. *No long and boring biographical speech and no beating. It must be her birthday!*

She sat staring at the wall thinking that this was the only time she had ever seen him looking vulnerable. He appeared almost weak and frail. He had almost lost his menacing demeanour. *Almost.*

He was a wrinkly old man in his fifties or maybe in his early sixties. He often smelt of cigarettes and booze, a smell she was familiar with from her father.

Perhaps he is dying, or just seriously ill and that's why he needed to go to the city – to see a specialist. If that is the case then hopefully they will figure out that he is a psychotic maniac that needs to be behind bars or, better yet, put to death. Or if she's really lucky he doesn't make it to the city and dies on the way. But all this wishful thinking would just make it even more depressing when he returns in good shape and eager to unleash his terror.

"I had a wonderful time." Simon said, "We haven't played like that in a long time. It was so much fun. Thank you."

"Don't be silly," Victoria smiled, "The pleasure was all mine."

"I would ask you to play again but it seems like there is someone else who might want to talk to you."

She looked at Simon puzzled.

"The window... Look at the window."

She peered towards the window and noticed Jack looking in. He waved when they made eye contact. Victoria smiled and waved back.

“Honestly,” her inner voice emerged, “This boy doesn’t know when to give up. Stop waving at him, you silly little girl and get rid of him. Tell him to go away and never to come back!”

Victoria approached the window with no intention of telling him to go away. She was thrilled to see him.

“Hi,”

“Let me guess,” Victoria said, “The ball came over into the garden?” Her eyebrows raised.

“What can I say... I...I have two left feet.”

They both chuckled.

“Erm... I was wondering,” Jack said, “Would you like to play in the garden? It’s not even that cold today,” he grinned as he noticed the cloud of warm air coming from his mouth as he exhaled. The cold wouldn’t bother Victoria, she had become used to the cold – she would love to be out there. But how could she explain to him that she is trapped here and unable to leave and that him even having a conversation with her puts her and him in great danger?

“You’re playing a foolish game here.” Her inner voice spoke. Victoria ignored her, though she was right.

“Erm... I can’t right now...” She paused thinking of a convincing reason for why. “I have a few things I need to do but perhaps a little later on.”

“Oh, OK. That w..will be nice. It gets awfully lonely out here.”

*You’re telling me.*

“My mother’s gone to do the w..weekly shop. She asked me to go with her, but I hate grocery shopping – it is so boring. And my mother spends so long reading labels that it takes twice as long as it sh..should.”

What Victoria would give to go shopping with her mother, go anywhere with her mother.

“So, I guess I’ll see you later on?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

Jack left. Victoria and Simon watched him as he walked back to his garden and leapt on to the swing.

“You’re lucky the old man is away for day or two.” Her inner voice said. “If he gets whiff of this then there’ll be hell to pay!”

Victoria ignored her. She’d had a great time playing with Simon, uncle Edward had pardoned her today’s dose of beats and had gone out leaving her enough to survive on. She had the chance to meet and speak to someone new – engage in conversations that briefly made her feel normal. She couldn’t care less what the bitch said. Sure, she would try her best to put a negative spin on it all, but Victoria promised herself that she wouldn’t let her win.

So what if it was just temporary? So what if he found out and beat the life out of her? It would be worth it, every second of it.

She stared at herself in the mirror as she ran the water. She shook her head, “*What a mess!*” She mumbled as she splashed ice cold water on her face.

She ran her fingers over a faint scar on her forehead and it took her back to a time where she was at home with her father.

## Chapter 22

It was a bright sunny day, the kind that made you cover your eyes when you drew the curtains. Victoria’s mother had an appointment. She couldn’t take Victoria with her and the neighbours were away on holiday. She had no choice but to leave her at home with her father.

“Just do me a favour, honey,” her mother said to her before she left. “Just play in your room and stay out of your father’s hair.” The irony is that her father was receding to the extent he had very little hair left. Victoria nodded and ran upstairs to her room. She had new library books and was eager to get stuck in. She loved sitting on her bed and getting lost in a good read. The days the sun beamed in through the window providing both bright light and natural heat were the best.

“I shall not be long.” Her mother said as she closed the door behind her.

Victoria sat on her bed and read. She got so sucked into the book she was reading that she hadn’t even noticed the hours go by. Her stomach grumbled, indicating lunchtime had passed. Her mother wasn’t back. Not wanting to be detected by her father, she tiptoed down the stairs in stealth mode. She knew the fourth and sixth steps creaked, so they must be skipped.

She sighed as she got into the kitchen. Now for the custard creams and a fresh glass of milk – that should suffice until her mother returned. She loaded her plate and filled her cup and headed back for the stairs. Still no sign of her father – no sign was a good sign. She counted the steps and skipped the sixth but as she tried with the fourth, her toes skimmed the step above and she fell, hitting her head on the wooden part of the staircase. The pain was excruciating, and the cup of milk spilt down the stairs.

The commotion had rattled her father who came rushing out of his office to find Victoria on the stairs bleeding from her head and the spilt milk and biscuits on his expensive carpet. Victoria completely forgot about the pain as she saw the infuriated look pasted on his face.

He clambered up the stairs until he was towering over her. His eyes filled red. Without saying a word, he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her up the stairs. She screamed in pain as she felt her hair being torn out of her head. He turned on the cold tap and let the bathtub fill and then threw her in. The water was freezing and painful. He grabbed her hair and pulled hard, then dunked her head into the ice-cold water. She felt water rush into her mouth and up her nose. He held her under for long enough to feel as if she was about to die and then pulled her up. She gasped and coughed to try to clear her lungs.

She wished her mother was here. Not that she would be able to stop him. The best she could do was share some of the punishment.

“Get yourself cleaned up and then clean up that mess on the stairs.” He spoke from behind his teeth, “If I see it when I come back later, I will drown you in the bathtub!”

Victoria had no reason to not believe him. She nodded submissively and stared in fear as he walked out of the bathroom.

She remained in the bath for a few minutes in shock. Her legs had become numb and she wobbled as she got out and headed for her room to dry herself up. The last thing she needed was to soak the carpet as well. God knows what that would earn her.

She used her towel to dry her hair and wipe the blood off her head. She needed a plaster or something. The cut on her head looked deep and the blood wasn’t stopping. The plasters were in the drawer with all the medicines, in the kitchen. She wasn’t risking going back there. She got changed into dry clothes and then kept the towel pressed on her head to stop blood from dripping. She quickly picked the cup, which was now completely empty and the plate and scattered biscuits and ran them to her room. She grabbed a cloth from the bathroom and dashed back to the stairs and used one hand to keep the pressure on her wound and the other to scrub the carpet.

As she was scrubbing, she felt someone’s presence behind her. Her heart began to race.

“Hey, sweetie.” She heard her mother’s voice and turned to face her.

“On my God.” Her mother knelt down and looked at the blood-soaked towel.

“Sorry, I fell and I... spilt the...” Victoria began to cry.

“Don’t worry about the spillage, I will clean it up in a second. Let’s clean up that cut and see if we can patch it up.”

“But I have to clean this up before father comes back. He is really annoyed about it.”

Her mother stared in the direction of the office with a look that could kill.

“Don’t worry. Give me the cloth.” She took the cloth and started wiping the carpet. “I will get some carpet cleaner from the cupboard and get this sorted. Why don’t you go upstairs and wait for me to come.” Victoria walked up the stairs feeling guilty as well as being in pain. Her head was stinging. She wished that she had not been so ambitious as to get the milk and biscuits and had just waited for her mother to return. It was her own fault for being so foolish – it wasn’t as if she hadn’t been warned.

As she sat on her bed waiting for her mother to come up, hopefully with the plaster and some painkiller, she pondered on her life at home. She hated being at home. She loved her mother but hated this house and hated that sorry excuse for a father. She wasn’t the sulking, feeling sorry for herself type but she did really feel sorry for her mother.

She didn’t know why Mother married that man. She vowed to never marry a man. She would be content living her life on her own. She would work a normal job, like a school teacher. She would buy a small house and perhaps get a cat for company. Men are mean and miserable.

She stared at the dirty mirror in the dungeon and repeated, men are mean and miserable. There were no Romeos, Prince Charmings or Mr Darcys. They lived only in tales.

The more she looked at the faint scar on her face, the more she realised that she knew very little about her past. Up until recently, she believed her mother and father had died in an accident. Her inner voice had suggested her mother murdered her father and her memories were now adding some weight to that claim. But even still the mystery of how she got here, especially if her mother did not die, was still on her mind. If her mother was ready to kill her husband to protect her then surely, she would not have allowed her to be trapped here, suffering far worse than she ever did at the hands of her father.

She sat on her bed and spent a while thinking and picking at the scabs on her forearms.

“You should stop that!” her inner voice said.

“Stop what?” she replied mechanically.

“Stop picking at those scabs. You know they’ll scar, right?”

“You’re right. And that will completely ruin my modelling career!”

“You can be as sarcastic as you like, in fact, it suits you. But you’ll be sorry when you get an infection as a result of your silly habit.”

It may have been a silly habit but for Victoria, it was like a child picking daisies. Not as pretty but equally as pleasurable and satisfying.

“Shut up. It helps me think.” She then stopped picking her scabs and moved onto her other habit, biting her nails. She was worried that her inner voice would intervene again, this time talking about the bacteria that gets collated under fingernails being worse than a toilet seat, blah, blah, blah. But thankfully she didn’t. She remained silent which gave Victoria some time to think. Not that thinking was helping. Her memories were coming to her as they pleased and, frustratingly, in no particular order.

What did it matter anyway? Whether she eventually discovered why or how she got here made no real difference. She was not getting out. Like a prisoner serving multiple life sentences, she would rot in this cell.

Victoria was still sitting on the bed switching from picking her scabs and biting her nails when she heard the gentle tapping on the window. She had no way of telling exactly how long she had been sitting on the bed, in her own world. She looked over at the window and waved.

“Stutter-face really is as stupid as he looks.” Her inner voice said. “Why doesn’t he just mind his own business... stay in his own garden.” She then raised her voice, “This is trespassing, you know!”

“You know he can’t hear you, right?” Simon said. “Thankfully. As you are very mean. The boy has a little stutter and you are calling him names. You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“Don’t you understand the possible consequences of this?”

“I don’t think Victoria cares anymore... and neither do I.”

Victoria walked to the window. She knew he would ask her to come out to play with him in the garden and she would love to, but she couldn’t. Even though Uncle Edward was not around and would not be able to see, she had no way of getting out. And as he caught her off guard, she couldn’t think of any excuse either.

“Hi... erm... Would you like to come out and play? It is warmer than earlier, I p-promise.

“I...” She had no idea what to say to him. She couldn’t tell him her deranged uncle had locked her in here and gone out, risking that he may tell his mother. This man could do anything. This poor boy and his mother didn’t deserve that.

“Finally,” her inner voice said, “you’re using your brain.”

“I can’t get out right now.” She said unable to think of what else to say.

“Oh, why not?”

“I have a bit of a cold and I don’t think it would be a good idea to leave the house. Besides, you don’t want to catch it – it’s pretty nasty.”

“Yes, you’re right. I just got over a cold a couple of weeks ago and I don’t want it again. It’s why I wear the thick hoody and layers underneath – keep myself warm.”

“Good idea.”

There was a brief pause. They both stayed where they were in silence, but it didn’t feel awkward.

“So, do you g-go to school?” He finally spoke.

“Erm...” she paused for a minute, “No... I don’t go to school.”

“Great! Me neither. I guess you’re being homeschooled.”

“Yes... something like that.” She couldn’t remember the last time she read a book or studied anything. They only thing she learned over the past six months was that life was incredibly unfair and it was astonishing what the human body could live through. Things you’re not taught in school.

“So, you l-live here with your...”

“My uncle.” She said trying not to give away the fact she hated him.

“Oh, a-and if you don’t mind me asking, why is it that you don’t live with your parents?”

Victoria paused, frozen. He asked the question she dreaded most but should have known was inevitable.

“My parents live not too far from here.” She lied. “They are busy working and I am staying with my uncle.” She imagined how stupid she must look. Out of all the lies she could have told she probably chose the most unconvincing one. But Jack nodded without changing his facial expression at all. He must have believed her. Why wouldn’t he? It wasn’t like he had any reason to suspect she was lying.

“Hey, you want to p-play a game?”

She didn’t look over at Simon but imagined that the thought of playing a game would have excited him.

“Say no!” her inner voice said. “And for the love of God, tell him to go away. He is going to get us killed, don’t you know that?”

"Sure," Victoria replied, "What did you have in mind?"

"I... I don't know... how about the *Yes or No* game?"

"I have no idea what that is."

"You've never played the yes or no game?"

"No."

"Ha-ha. You just lost!"

"What... wait... that's not fair. I don't know the rules of the game. And I didn't know we had even started."

"Well, the rules are that when it is your turn, I need to talk to you and try to get you to say either *yes* or *no* and you have to try to avoid it by using alternative words or phrases. For example: if I were to ask you if your name is Victoria, you could respond with, it certainly is... or... I believe so. Whatever happens, you must not say *yes* or *no*."

"Oh, sounds interesting," Victoria said. Thinking about Simon and how much he would love this game.

"So, let me get this right," Victoria said, "I can say anything except *yes* or *no*?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Ha-ha. You lost! You said *yes*!"

"Hey! Not fair!" They chuckled.

Victoria and Jack played the Yes and No game for what felt like hours and Victoria laughed so much at times that she felt as though would pass out. It was a brilliant game and a change from the usual games they played.

"Wow," Jack said, looking at the sky as daylight faded. "It's getting dark and I need to have my dinner yet."

Victoria peered back at the plate with the manky bread and sighed, "Yes... me too." The thought of her dinner was not exactly appetising. She wondered what he would be having for dinner. Probably something incredibly tasty and nutritious. The thought of asking him crossed her mind but she dared not in case he asked her what she was having in return, and she would be forced to lie again. The problem with lies is that one leads to another and often reaches a point where you forget what the truth is.

"It's been really fun. I really enjoyed myself."

Victoria smiled but didn't say anything. While they were talking and playing, she had felt normal and now he was leaving, she would have to return to her reality. At least her vicious uncle was away for a while, that was something. And she still had Simon and she was pretty sure he would be eager to play this new game.

Jack left. She watched him as he faded into his garden.

Simon was asleep. She lay next to him after eating half a slice of bread. She couldn't stomach eating the rest.

"He waited for you..." her inner voice said, "He watched you play with that boy. He so desperately wanted to play with you, and you ignored him!"

A feeling of guilt rushed through her like a chill.

"He was fine." Victoria said quietly, "He wanted me to play with Jack."

"Did he now... or was it that he just wanted to see you happy? He is always looking for your attention – all he wants is to play and you denied him that by playing with that boy for hours! In a way, you betrayed him. Yes, that's what you did, you betrayed him!"

"I did no such thing! I will wait for him to wake and I will play the new game I learned. He will love it."

"Oh, the new game you learned from lover boy?"

"I know what you're trying to do," Victoria said.

"What's that then?"

"You want me to stop talking to Jack. And you're using your usual twisted techniques to stop me."

"You always think the worst of me. As if trying to keep you alive is a sin!"

"You are only trying to keep me breathing. I stopped living a long time ago."

## Chapter 24

Victoria woke before Simon. She watched as he slept. Although she did well in pretending she wasn't bothered about what her inner voice was saying, she felt guilty for not playing with Simon when he probably really wanted to. She got up and overextended her back. She could feel the scabs on her back from the lashing stretch and tear. The pain took the pleasure out of the long morning stretch. She looked in the mirror and then vowed to make it up to Simon by playing with him for the entire day. They would play all the games he liked, including the new, *Yes and No* game.

As she ran her hands through her hair a bunch of it came out. She stared at it intensely. It reminded her of a time her mother would brush her hair, sometimes her hair would collect in the brush. She loved those moments where she would sit on the stool of her mother's dressing table and her mother would stand behind and brush gently, careful not to tug. She would catch her mother looking at her in the mirror and smile. But just like many of her good memories, this was also shadowed by something horrific. She remembered her father barging into the room. He was frantically searching for something.

"Have you seen my blue tie?" he asked. His face was flustered as he rummaged through the drawers.

"Have you checked in the tie drawer?" her mother responded.

"Of course I have! Do I look like an idiot?"

Yes, Victoria thought. The buttons on his shirt looked like they were about to burst as his belly hung over his belt. There were small gaps where his flabby hairy body was exposed. And his trousers were way too long for his stumpy fat legs, so they gathered at the bottom. So, yes, Victoria thought, he looked very much like an idiot indeed.

"What about in the wardrobe?" her mother said, "Have you checked there?"

"Yes! I have looked bloody everywhere!" he shouted. His face was now like a bright red balloon about to explode.

"Why don't you try another tie?" Her mother foolishly said, "You have plenty of them."

The bright red balloon exploded.

"Can you just shut up and help me find it!"

"Yes, just one moment. I am just finishing Victoria's hair and I will be right with you."

Without warning he rushed behind her mother and grabbed her by the hair, swinging her from one side of the room to the other. Victoria froze, unable to breathe. She felt like she was being choked. She fell to the ground and curled up into a ball as she watched her father swinging her mother into the bedroom furniture. Her screams echoed in Victoria's ears painfully as she remained frozen and helplessly watched.

She saw bunches of her mother's beautiful hair being ripped out of her head and fall to the ground, some of them stained with blood.

She wished he would stop but he didn't – she wished someone would come to her mother's aid but no one did. She wished she could do something, but she could do nothing. After he finished

swinging her about like a rag doll, he threw her onto the floor and stamped on her. His face was full of rage.

It was only when she lay almost completely unconscious and unable to scream anymore that he stopped. He fell back onto the bed, exhausted and breathing heavily. Beads of sweat had formed on his large forehead. His shirt was now untucked and the bottom few buttons had gone AWOL.

After a few moments, he looked around the room with scattered bits of furniture, bunches of hair, shirt buttons and smears of blood. Then he looked over at Victoria. His eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

Her heart began to race. She was terrified that he had now had enough beating on her mother and round two would be with her.

“Get this mess cleaned up!” He ordered as he stormed out and slammed the door.

“Hey,” Simon said, “you’re awake already.”

“Hi,” Victoria said with a smile. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“I learned how to play a new game.”

She saw his face light up.

“It’s called the Yes or No game. You want to play it?”

“Yes please.”

“Ha-ha, you lost.”

“What?” His smile dropped.

“I’m just kidding... it has become sort of a tradition now when showing someone how to play the game.”

“Is this what you were playing with that boy?”

“Yes. His name is Jack.”

“So, are we going to play or what?” Simon asked impatiently.

“Yes. Let’s play.”

“Ha-ha, you lost!” Simon giggled.

“You are a very fast learner, aren’t you!”

“I guess I am.” His nostrils flared in pride.

“But I am so much better!” She said.

“No, you’re not!”

She tilted her head and grinned.

“What? No, that didn’t count!”

“You said it again!” Her smile grew wider.

“Oh man! This is harder than I thought!”

Victoria was suddenly startled by the now familiar tapping on the window. Jack stood staring and waved. Victoria rushed to the window in excitement.

“This can’t go on!” her inner voice said. Victoria ignored her.

Jack was wearing the same hoody and jeans he had worn every time she saw him. She began to wonder whether he even had any other clothes – or perhaps he had lots of pairs of the same clothes. But then thought, he probably thinks the same about her.

She was glad that Jack was a simple boy – didn’t ask too many questions and accepted what she said as the truth. Anyone else would have noticed the filthy rags she was wearing and the dingy room she was in.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to keep c-c-coming over, but I really wanted to see you. I haven’t had the company of anyone my age f-f-for a long time. And when I did, in the city, they were never nice to me. You are nice to me and... well, I was hoping we could talk or play a game or whatever.”



"I am glad you're here." Victoria said, "I like your company."

"So, you want to come out today?" he pursed his lips, "Or are you still n-not feeling well? I mean, it really isn't cold out here today, I promise!"

He caught her off guard and she didn't know what to say. She should have thought of an excuse before – she had enough time.

"Erm... I can't. Not today. I have to do a few chores."

"Oh. Now, I'm not the brightest boy on the block but I'm not the stupidest either."

"I..." Victoria panicked, "I don't think you're stupid at all."

"You're hiding something from me."

Victoria could feel her palms sweating. The words of her inner voice bounced around in her brain. He's obviously figured it out and now he will probably do something silly and put himself and his mother in danger.

"You're grounded, aren't you?"

"What?" She said and then silently sighed. "Erm... yes, you got me, I am. I am grounded, that's it." She felt like an aeroplane losing altitude and heading for a crash but then lifted back in the air seconds before crashing, and regaining control.

"I knew it!" he said, almost jumping up and down, "I knew you were grounded. That's why you don't come out. I could tell you weren't ill. You have no sniffing nose, you haven't coughed or sneezed once, and I bet if I touched your forehead it would be at completely normal temperature."

"Yes. Sorry, I should have told you sooner."

"No, that's fine. I wouldn't tell you if I was grounded either. I am not b-by the way." He looked at her intently as if he needed her to nod or say something to acknowledge she believed him.

"That's great. You don't want to be grounded, believe me."

"I know, I was grounded once. I tried to usher Fredrick away and it went all wrong. Fredrick's our cat. He is a fat old thing and likes to s-s-sit at the top of the stairs in our home in the city. I was in my room and I heard the ice cream van out on the street. I knew it wouldn't be there long so I raided my money tin and d-dashed out, just to find fat Fredrick sitting at the top of the stairs. I desperately wanted him to move, I shouted at him and tried to push him out of the way with my foot but I t-tried a little t-too hard and he ended up rolling down the stairs. My mother witnessed the whole thing but assumed I kicked poor Fredrick down the stairs on purpose – I didn't, it was an accident."

"I believe you," Victoria said trying her best not to sound sarcastic.

"My mother didn't see it that way. And although Fredrick was perfectly fine, she grounded me! For a week! No ice cream, no TV, no going out – nothing!"

*An entire week!* Victoria thought. *You should try six months!*

## Chapter 25

Victoria and Jack spent almost the entire day talking and playing games from behind the window – she loved every second of it. It had been so long since she spoke to someone new that she had forgotten what it was like – a breath of fresh air.

Victoria felt a little deserted when he left for dinner. She wished she could go with him. They could continue to talk, play games and eat dinner together, real dinner, not this muck. She would get to meet his mother and from how he described her, she sounded amazing. She tried hard not to think about her own mother, she had had a wonderful time talking and playing with Jack that she didn't want to go there, not today.

Simon was pleased to see her. He didn't make her feel at all guilty about her just abandoning him at the drop of a hat. She wished she could say the same for her inner voice.

“So much for loyalty and promises! Spend the entire day playing with Simon... what rubbish!”

Victoria was getting good at ignoring her now. She sat next to Simon.

“So, you want to play a game?”

“No, I am a little tired. But can you please tell me a story. Pretty please.”

“Sure.” Victoria smiled. “Which one?”

“Little Red Riding Hood... No, actually, The Three Little Pigs... no, perhaps Goldilocks and the Three Bears... Oh, I don’t know which one to choose, they’re all so good!”

“How about I read all of them to you one by one? How about that?”

“You would do that? For me?”

“Of course!”

“You are the best!”

Victoria hugged Simon and now felt even guiltier for not spending enough time with him. Since she had met Jack, she had been so distracted that Simon was spending a lot of time on his own. She hadn’t even had the decency to ask him what he had been doing while she was preoccupied. And the fact that he didn’t even complain made her feel rotten.

The next morning, as she sat on the bed, she heard the metal door unlocking. He was back and hadn’t died in a car accident or obviously wasn’t ill enough to die.

“You had better hope that the stupid boy you dragged into this doesn’t come knocking when Uncle Edward is in here.”

Victoria’s heart speeded up. Adrenaline flowed through her like a gushing river.

*It was morning. This is usually the time Jack comes knocking. What if he comes and knocks when Uncle Edward is in here? What would happen?*

*What have I done?*

“It’s too late for that!” her inner voice said, “Just pray he doesn’t come knocking and try not to piss Edward off.”

She lay down quickly on her bed and pretended she was still asleep. The creaky shoes were an indication he was in the room.

“Hello, Victoria.” He said. His voice not sounding as croaky. “I just thought I would let you know I am back.”

There was a long and awkward silence. He knew she was awake. He always knew. But she pretended anyway in the hope that he might, by some miracle, fall for it. He never did.

“Are you not going to ask me about my trip?” He sounded different. His voice sounded like it had more life in it. Which was the exact opposite of what she wanted.

“Perhaps later. I...” he paused and allowed silence to take over the room. “Please open your eyes.”

“Do it!” her inner voice commanded, “Do it now before he throttles you!”

Victoria opened her eyes and saw her uncle Edward stood in front of her. His appearance seemed different. His skin not so pale and his eyes not so demon-like.

“I was hoping you would join me for dinner today. You know, upstairs. At the dinner table.”

For a moment, Victoria suspected that she may still be asleep, and this was a strange dream. No, she was awake. The pain in her back still felt very real.

“Agree to it, you fool!” her inner voice said.

Victoria remained silent. She was convinced that this was some kind of twisted prank. He would wait for her to agree and beat her to death for having the audacity to even think she could leave the room and eat food other than the crap she was being fed.

“It’s OK. You don’t have to decide now. I will open the door at dinner time. You can decide in the meantime whether you will come up or not.”

He strolled to the door and closed it behind him.  
She sat completely still. *What on earth just happened?*  
She started questioning whether that actually happened or whether it was in her imagination.  
It couldn't be real. The man who has kept her locked up her for months and tortures her was suddenly calmer, nicer and offered her to come upstairs and join him for dinner. *This can't be right.*

Metropolitan Police Station – London

Detective Howard sat at his desk and gazed out of the window. The rain usually helped him concentrate. But not today. He was exhausted – it had been a long week at work and the worst part was nothing got done. Folders bursting with unsolved cases and piles of paperwork to get through. He sighed as the phone on his desk rang.

"Howard," he answered.

"Hey Howard," the female voice said, "I've got Mrs Bailey here to see you."

His heart sunk and he sighed again. Obviously loud enough for the lady on the other end to have heard.

"You want me to tell her you're busy?"

"Erm... No, I'll be right down."

He hung up and leaned back in his chair. He peered down at his cup, *I'm going to need more coffee.*

He loosened his tie and closed his eyes. The migraine he'd had since morning was not going away. The Paracetamol, Ibuprofen and Coca-Cola cocktail he had earlier did nothing to combat it. He was convinced that he would never die on the job or have a heart attack or anything like that – if anything was going to kill him it would be a bad migraine.

The door swung open. A short plump man burst in. His hair was a mess and he looked flustered.

"Boris, what hell is wrong with you, man?"

"Sorry, but I thought I would let you know that she is here again."

"Yes, I know. Jenny just called. She's at the reception desk. But why the hell are you all flustered and look like you have just run a marathon?"

"You won't believe it but the bloody elevator is out again! So it's up and down those blasted stairs!"

*Great!* He thought. He opened his drawer and looked at the box of twenty Marlboros. Two months ago, he would have used them as a sedative before he met with Mrs Bailey. Now that's not an option. He reached in the drawer and grabbed a packet of chewing gum and left the office.

"You want me to tag along?" Howard asked.

"I should be OK. Thanks."

"Great!" Boris said sounding relieved and scarpered down the corridor.

## Chapter 26

Howard walked down the stairs slowly and lost in thought. He was about to go to see a lady whose case had him puzzled for a long time. A case that, although he wouldn't admit, even to himself, had affected his job and his personal life.

Had he not let it get to him so much, perhaps Melissa wouldn't have left him. Who was he kidding? Their marriage was over way before the case. She worked long hours in a hospital saving lives and he spent his time trying to save the world. Making detective – what an achievement he and

a few of his friend's thought – he had become his childhood hero, Sherlock Holmes. This was his opportunity to make a difference to people's lives – you know, solve the mysteries, catch the bad guys, save the good guys stuff. Except it was never that simple, as he learned the hard way

There was a fine line that separated good guys from bad guys, and sometimes that line was barely visible.

*Boris was right about these damn stairs – there are a lot of them!*

He felt the impact of every step on his knees. They had been giving him grief for a few weeks. He was on the wrong side of forty and it was downhill from here.

He spat his gum into the bin outside the interview room and stood staring at the door. He took a few deep breaths. His mind couldn't help but wander back to the Marlboros in his drawer. Maybe this was why he never threw them away when he quit. They were there for emergencies, and damn it, this was an emergency. But he couldn't. Kicking a forty-a-day habit wasn't easy and cigarettes were like lies – one would lead to another.

"Mrs Bailey," he said as he walked in and faced a woman whose beauty was concealed by pain and grief. "How are you holding up?" She looked like she had aged dramatically since he saw her last.

"Detective..." her voice was shaky and defeated. "I know that my case has not been easy but you..." She paused for a moment. "You believed me when no one else would... And I need your help."

"Mrs Bailey... Jane, listen to me... It has been *six years*. I think we need—"

"My daughter is still out there. I know it. I can feel it."

"We spent years looking for her. I dedicated my life to find her because I felt your pain. I saw it every day that you walked in here. I wanted... I want nothing more than to reunite you with your daughter but—"

"You've given up."

She paused and let silence fill the room. "Do you have children, Detective?"

He shook his head. He didn't need to have children to imagine what she was going through – *hell*.

"Then it might be hard for you to understand that I can feel her. I know she is alive. I know it. Only a parent can know without knowing."

Howard pulled the chair on the other side of the desk next to her and sat by her side. He didn't want to make it feel like an interview. She had had enough of that over the years.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked her in a soft voice, "Coffee? Tea?"

She stared blankly at the desk. She looked like she had very little fight left in her, yet she couldn't quit. Something he was guilty of – quitting.

"You think she's dead don't you?"

"I didn't say that. And the truth is, we don't know if she is alive or dead."

"You say we. I am not asking we, I am asking you. Do you think she's dead?"

"I... She is missing, that's all I know for sure. We turned over every stone – we followed every lead and found nothing."

"Every lead? Every stone?" Her eyes now penetrating his.

"What? Edward Wellington?" He shook his head. "We've been through this. We searched his vehicle and his property three times! We had him in here for questioning at least five times. We had... have nothing on him."

"You don't know him. His family... what they are. They are monsters."

"I understand why you feel the way you do, I get it. Your husband was a violent and abusive man and Edward is his brother and is probably the same but that doesn't mean he has your daughter. Why would he?" He has a good solicitor and he made enough complaints about harassment to make the chief suspend me for months.

"I... I am sorry. I know you have had a hard time because of me. But my daughter is alive, and I will not rest until I find her."

"Jane, listen to me," He put his hand on her shoulder. He could feel her bones, it was clear she had lost more weight, "You need to stay away from Mr Wellington. You will get yourself into more trouble."

"What am I supposed to do? Just sit at home and pretend she never existed."

"I... I think that maybe you should talk to someone. Get some help."

"I am not crazy!" She snapped. Her eyes filled.

"No one is saying you are, but you have been through a lot. I can get you a number for someone who might be able to help you deal with things better."

"I think this was a waste of time." She said as she stood and pushed the chair back with her legs. The screech of the chair against the hard floor caused a sharp pain in Howard's ear and strangely in his teeth.

"Let's not forget that you are lucky to not have been investigated for being there the night your husband died," he said and then instantly regretted it. She walked around the table and headed for the door. "There was enough evidence to suggest you were in the car when the accident happened." She paused. He wanted to stop himself from speaking but couldn't. He wanted her to leave but didn't want her to go.

"My husband had an accident and died. Why does that need to be investigated? Accidents happen all the time," she allowed silence to fill the room, "and people die all the time."

"I know what your husband was like. He was a narcissist who deserved to die but you were there, I know you were and yet you lied. You lied about being there. Why?"

"The more interesting question is that if you knew this and could prove it, then why didn't you charge me?"

Howard fell silent. That was a damn good question!

She walked back to the desk, "You're a good man, Detective. There aren't many of your kind left in the world." She opened her purse and removed a piece of paper. "I dug through my husband's paperwork and found out that he had details of a property, I think it's his old family home, in the countryside. He spoke about it but always looked a little shaken up afterwards, so we didn't talk about it much. He changed his name before we got married, I didn't know that until I looked through the paperwork. It might be why it never came up on your radar."

"How did you not know he changed his name?" Howard asked by reflex.

"There was a lot I didn't know about him..." She paused and looked away as if feeling ashamed. "I was young and dumb. He had the looks and the charm. Both of which disappeared after we had Victoria." She handed him the paper. "There isn't an exact address but there is an area."

Howard took the paper but didn't look at it. He looked in her swollen eyes – eyes which had shed so many tears that they were like a dry well.

"Go home, Jane. Take this card. It is a number for a great therapist. Speak to her and get some help." He handed her a card from his wallet.

"But—"

"Listen, I chased down every lead. Interrogated so many people, including Edward Wellington. I put every other case on hold, I put my life on hold to track down your daughter. And I did all of this with no evidence. This new address is a needle in a haystack. I can't get the resources to find this house. A house that might have nothing to do with anything. You think I can march into the chief's office and say let's open a case from six years back with no new evidence?"

She was expressionless and silent for a moment.

"I am sorry I wasted your time." She took the paper out of his hand and walked to the door. She turned back before she left, "I didn't ask you to do all that for me, but I was grateful. And my daughter *is* out there, *somewhere*. I know she is."

"Call that number!" he yelled as she left. "And stay away from Edward Wellington!"

## Chapter 27

Victoria had spent most of the morning moping. She paced around the room, confused. It felt as if a lot of time had passed. It must be nearly dinner time and she would have to decide whether she was going to go out of the room or not. An impossible decision to make.

Perhaps he will not open the door at all. A bit of time back from wherever he went might just bring him back to his senses. Or maybe she did just imagine it all – one of her daydreams that felt so real that she was tricked into believing it happened. Like a person lost in a desert seeing a mirage.

She sat on her bed and bit at her nails. They were so short and painful that they sometimes kept her up at night, yet she couldn't help but to bite them and pick at the peeling dry skin on her hands. She could feel a headache coming on. Her lips were sore from dryness. She peered at the cup of stinking water and sighed. It was full. But her headache and her dry lips had already told her that.

She held her nose and gulped it and gagged a few times as it went down. She put the cup back down and stared at the wall.

"Hi Victoria," Simon said. He had woken from his nap.

"Hi S—"

She was interrupted by a gentle knock on the window. She recognised the knock. It made her heart speed up and butterflies danced in her stomach.

"Listen," her inner voice said, "Think about this. Uncle Edward is upstairs. He has said he will be opening the door and you will be able to go upstairs and eat. Eat real food! You need to tell this boy to go away and to stay away!"

Victoria walked to the window.

"Victoria!" Her inner voice yelled.

She ignored her and smiled at Jack who was stood there with that same excited look he always had. She knew that her inner voice was right. But she couldn't tell him to go away because she didn't want him to go away. If she could she would be out there with him.

"Hi Victoria," he said. Huffing as if he just ran from his garden.

She smiled but said nothing – just happy to see him.

"Erm... sorry I didn't come earlier m-m-my mother made me go with her to the butchers."

"That's alright. You don't need to apologise and—" She was about to say ... and you don't have to come and see me every day but stopped herself. She liked that he came every day and she didn't want him to stop. The truth, although she would not admit it to even to herself, was that she felt a little deserted when he didn't come earlier. She was expecting him and even amidst all the danger and risk, she was thrilled to see him.

"...And?" he said waiting for her to finish what she stopped herself from saying.

"And... I am happy to see you."

He smiled. "Me too."

"You are a fool!" Her inner voice hissed.

"I r-r-really hate going to the butchers." Jack said, "Not sure how you can... you know, butcher an a-a-animal."

Victoria chuckled. "It's not exactly like that. The animal is already dead when it gets to the butchers, I think – they just cut it up and skin it so you can cook it. And eat it of course."

"It's weird." He said, looking as if he might be sick.

"What is?"

"That we..." He paused then said, "f-f-forget it."

"No, please go on."

"That we can just kill animals – just to eat them. They are living, b-b-breathing beings and we just kill them. It just feels weird, doesn't feel natural. I used to love eating chicken until I went to the butchers and saw it strung up and ready to be cut into pieces. Before seeing that I didn't really put too much thought into it. With the w-w-way my mother cooked it with all the spices and flavours, it didn't even feel like... you know, something that was once living. Now, it just all seems a little cruel."

Victoria thought about it for a while. She never gave it much thought either. Now, it did seem a little cruel. *What gave us the right to be able to do that? Just take living beings, cage them, kill them and then eat them. It seemed kind of sick. It isn't a crime to kill and eat animals and I guess it doesn't feel wrong because it is so common. Everyone eats meat. But did that make it OK?*

Perhaps her being trapped here, like a caged chicken, was punishment for the fact that she loved eating chickens – the irony being that she was now the caged chicken, ready for slaughter. Is that what she was? A caged being? And Uncle Edward had kept her here waiting for the right time to slaughter, skin and eat her? Perhaps that's why he invited her to dinner because she was the main course. It's no sicker than forcefully taking a chicken, stealing it from its family, caging it, stripping it from its right to live and then eating it.

It might just be that people like Uncle Edward are a necessary evil. They are sent to earth to remind humans of the crimes we commit against the rest of the world. And we are too arrogant to be told, thus we must be shown.

"My mother loves eating meat," Jack said snapping Victoria out of her strange thoughts. "I am so scared that she might eat Fredrick one day."

"Your cat?" Victoria laughed.

"It's not funny. When w-we run out of meat, I hide Fredrick in my room just in case."

Victoria continued to chuckle, "Sorry, it's just that people don't eat cats or dogs."

"But—"

They were interrupted by the sound of the door unlocking. Victoria began to shake uncontrollably. Her heart pounded in her chest like thunder pounding the sky. This was exactly what her inner voice had been warning her about.

"You have to go." She said in a shaky voice.

"What?"

"You must leave now!"

"Oh, I get it. This is because you are grounded and if you are caught talking to anyone, you will b-be in t-trouble... I remember when I was grounded, and m-m-my mother wouldn't let me talk to anyone and—"

"Yes!" she said, "That's right, I will get in big, big trouble. So, please can you leave."

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

Victoria nodded and watched him run back to his garden. She then peered towards the door. It was open. Not fully but enough to let the outside light in.

*He did it, she thought, he is actually allowing me up.* She thought back to the last time the door was left open and how he reacted when she was upstairs.

She trembled as she walked towards the door. A million thoughts buzzed through her mind. She didn't know what this was. Nothing about it felt right. But then nothing about any of this felt right. She bit her nails not sure what to do. The man seemed different. He had obviously gone somewhere and something had changed. She could see it in his face and in his demeanour. And he didn't beat her senseless. But she couldn't let this get in the way of what he was. He was an evil twisted man

who kept her locked up in a room and beat her almost every day. He fed her next to nothing – just enough to keep her alive. He was sick, that much was clear.

But what's the worst that can happen? He butchers her. At least this nightmare will all be over. She was not feeling particularly brave, but she had to get up those stairs and face whatever laid ahead of her.

## Chapter 28

Detective Howard walked towards his desk in no hurry. The pile of paperwork on his desk made him want to scream, so he tried not to look at it. He reached for his mug, "The Boss" printed in bold across it. A gift from his team years back. He swigged the last few drops of cold black coffee and searched for the aspirin he was sure was on his desk somewhere. Headaches, backaches, knee aches – he suffered from every ache that existed. He couldn't even pinpoint what was aching today – all the aches had just merged together to make one big ache.

He crushed the empty box of tablets when he found it under a brown folder.

"Great!"

He opened the drawer, eyed the packet of Marlboro, mumbled a few curses under his breath and then slammed it shut. He was out of coffee and the machine on this floor was playing up and there was no way in hell he was walking those stairs to use one on another floor. So he decided to go to the restroom and wash his face instead. He heard washing the face and certain areas, like the wrists, helps take the edge off the pain. He couldn't recall where he heard it nor was he convinced it even worked but the aspirin was finished and he felt like hell. It had to be worth a try.

The splashes of cold water were refreshing and quickly brought him back to life. His eyes opened fully as he stared in the mirror. He despised what he saw – a washed-up detective who pissed his years away and chased away everyone who ever gave a damn about him. No one told the nine-year-old boy who had the ambition to be a detective about the shit he would see and deal with – or in his case, not deal with. Novels and movies glorified it – showed you the good side, a side he was yet to discover. All he was exposed to was the bad side. Had they told him this when he was nine, he would have become a librarian. But it was too late for that. He is was in and there was no easy way out.

He plumped himself back in his chair and reached for the top of the mountain of paperwork.

"This came for you," Boris said and handed him a small white envelope.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. It's a sealed envelope with your name on it. It was given to the desk and I thought I would bring it over to you."

Howard took the envelope and tore it open. He removed a note that said, *You're a good man, detective. Good men always do the right thing.*

It wasn't signed by anyone, but he knew who it was from. He turned it over to find, East Yorkshire, scribbled on the back.

"Well?" Boris asked, "What is it? This secret letter? An admirer?" His eyebrows raised.

"No... It's nothing." He folded the letter and put it in his pocket. "I need to go out for a bit. You can get me on my mobile if you need me."

"OK..." but where are you going?"

"To do my job."

"Wait!" He handed him a plastic cup. "Here, the coffee machine is having a sick day. I grabbed you one when I was downstairs."

"What would I do without you?"



Howard walked down the stairs to the second floor.

"Detective Howard. To what do I owe this pleasure?" A blonde-haired lady swivelled her chair to face him.

"Stephanie. Listen, I need a favour."

She removed her black-framed glasses and smiled, "I knew you didn't come just to see how I was. What do you need?"

"I need you to do some digging."

"That's sort of my job."

"Properties in East Yorkshire registered to the name Wellington."

"OK... talk about a needle in a haystack!"

"I know."

"There's probably going to be loads."

"Get me all of them. I need this as soon as possible."

She turned to face the desk, "I'm on it."

"I owe you one!"

"Take me out for a coffee and we'll call it even."

Howard placed the cup Boris handed him on her desk and smiled.

"What's this?"

"The best I can do."

She shook her head and grinned, "I'll call you when I get something."

"Thanks!" He walked back out.

"And you should come down more often. It gets pretty lonely down here!"

Howard didn't reply and paced back up the stairs. As soon as he approached his desk, he was faced by Boris.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine. I need to access some old files. You think you can get Judith to bring them from the file store?"

"How old are we talking? And aren't we supposed to be going through this Charlton case? It's been sitting on your desk for days."

"We'll get to that, but I just got a feeling that we missed something."

"Missed something..." Boris put his coffee down on the desk and stared deep into Howard's eyes, "It's her, isn't it? I knew when she came in your mind would be ticking on that again."

"Look, I just need to check out one thing and that's it."

"You can't do this to yourself. Do you not remember what this case did to you? It took over your life and you're letting her come back in and do it all over again!"

Howard fell into deep thought. He had a pile of recent cases on his desk that he was supposed to be working on. A recent stabbing of a sixteen-year-old boy, a string of acid attacks and a woman murdered in her house with the main suspect, her husband now on the run.

"You need to let it go. I mean, I thought you had. We found nothing. For all, we know that crazy woman murdered her little girl and hid the body somewhere herself."

"So, why is she so desperate to find her? She comes here every six months and—"

"And what? She is crazy. She needs help. And I'm worried that if you keep speaking to her then you will go crazy too." He picked up his coffee and slurped it. "Look, you tried your best. You did all you could and it's just part of the job – you win some and you lose some. If you can't deal with that then it will consume you."

Howard slumped into his chair and sighed, "You're right. We didn't get anywhere with this case in the past, what makes me think we're going to get anything now?"

"That's the spirit. Besides, we got something far more important to deal with right now."

"Go on..."

"The damn coffee machine! I tell you what, if they don't get that sorted then nothing will be getting done around here. Look at everyone – they're walking around like zombies!"

Howard smiled and then grabbed the folder on the top of the pile on his desk.

"So, what we got on the stab victim?"

"It seems to be linked to another stabbing a few blocks away. Gang-related, I believe. Silly kids fighting over postcodes and turf wars."

"Ok, let's get cracking. But before we do, you couldn't be a saint and get me another cup of coffee, could you? My knees are murdering me."

"Sure, it'll give me an excuse to have a quick cigarette."

"Those things will kill you, you know that right?"

"Not before those bleeding stairs, I tell you that!"

Howard chuckled and waited until he was completely out of sight. He lifted the phone on his desk and punched an extension number.

"Judith," he said in a bubbly voice, "Hi, I need a huge favour..."

## Chapter 29

Victoria opened the door. The light felt like a blow torch burning her eyes. She covered them with her hands as they began to water. She made gaps with her fingers to allow a little light in to help her eyes adjust before trudging up the stairs; not sure whether she was walking to have dinner or walking towards her doom. Surprisingly her inner voice hadn't added her pennyworth.

She was on her own on this one. Was probably best. God only knew what lay ahead of her. When at the top, she peered back wondering whether she should just run back down and hide under her bed covers. A few deep breaths and she opened the door. A burst of warmth hit her in the face. It felt nice but sent shivers through her.

A nice ambient glow in a colourful warm room. A sound of faint orchestral music in the distance and the smell of cooked food in the air. She now felt like Alice entering Wonderland. Although the place seemed pleasant, there was an eerie feeling in her gut. Like a mouse that finds the cheese but doesn't discover the trap.

She followed the music through a corridor. The lights on the walls emanated a warm, golden glow but didn't give much light. The music led her to a door. It was closed and the light was escaping from the bottom and spilling onto the floor of the corridor.

*He must be behind this door.* She could feel beads of sweat forming on her forehead and her stomach felt as if it had just been punched. She still had time to run back to the room. No one had seen her. She couldn't, she had to face the music.

She put her hand on the door handle and braced herself to turn it. She even began to count down in her head, 3...2...1... She stopped.

*I can't just barge in there. I should knock.* She thought back to the time she made the mistake of walking into her father's office without first knocking. Something she lived to regret.

She made a fist and raised it to the door and began the countdown again. 3...2...1... she knocked on the door.

Nothing.

She waited a minute or so and then knocked again, except a little harder this time. The music went quieter and she could hear him clearing his throat.

"Come in." A perky voice emerged from behind the door.

She took one glance back down the corridor – it was too late to turn back now. She turned the handle and stepped inside. She was faced with a long wooden dining table. Twelve chairs neatly around it. An extravagant chandelier hung from the high ceiling. She felt the nice and natural warmth from a wide fireplace. The colours were overwhelming. She almost lost her balance.

Edward sat at the opposite end. His head laid back, resting against the headrest of the chair and his eyes closed. He was moving his head gently to the music and then opened his eyes. He smiled at her, exposing his yellow, rotten teeth.

“Please, take a seat. I knew you would come so I took the liberty to fix you a plate. I hope you like steak.”

Victoria walked to the table and pulled the chair and sat down. Her eyes were fixated on the plate of food. Steam was still coming off the steak and the cooked vegetables looked delicious. Although it didn’t feel right, the food smelt so appetising that she felt no longer in control of her body nor mind.

“Please get stuck in,” he said as he picked up his fork and knife and began cutting.

*He must be fattening me up for the kill.*

She picked up the knife and fork and began eating her meal. She promised herself that she would try to eat slowly and calmly but she hadn’t seen real food in so long that she couldn’t help but to chew through like an animal. It tasted amazing. The steak was succulent and delicious and the vegetables soft and salty just the way she liked them. Her lips cracked as she opened her mouth wider than she had ever done. She bit her tongue a few times while chewing but didn’t let it stop her from cramming in more food.

“It’s a strange world we live in,” he said while he ate. “Half the world starves while the other half eats itself to death. We are a peculiar species.” He then stuffed a large piece of meat into his mouth and chewed. He then chewed faster as if he thought about he was about to say next. “Doctors are banging on about steak being bad for you.” He stared at the fork with a chunk of steak on it. “It raises your cholesterol, they say. But what do they know! They know about as much as the fool that steps out of university with his fancy qualification and is given the position to command an army. Sure, he can tell you what needs to be done according to what he has read, but he can’t tell you what should be done. He hasn’t stepped foot on the battleground, seen his friends get blown to hell, held a man and watched him die, he hasn’t even smelt gun powder.” She could sense the bitterness in his voice and his knuckles were whitening from how hard he was clenching his fork. The same fork that he probably intended to kill her with.

“I acquired a huge amount of wealth after my father died. Some people would consider this as a huge blessing, but I knew it wasn’t. It was like an exchange for time. An unfair trade that I had no say in.”

“You’re dying,” Victoria said without thinking and immediately regretted it.

He put the fork down and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“You’re a smart girl. It’s what I like about you *and* what I hate about you. Your father, I always felt, was the root cause for my misery. When I returned from the army, having lost so many of my years, I had one intention. To make my father and your father pay for what they did to me. And although it gave me immense pleasure to watch my father suffer and die, the ultimate satisfaction would be when I got your father. I could hardly contain my excitement at the thought of putting him through hell, but I didn’t get the satisfaction.” He stood and walked to the window.

“He was dead. Killed in a car accident. He didn’t deserve a death like that. He wasn’t worthy of a death like that. He had to suffer and should never have had a proper burial. The earth was too pure to be poisoned by such filth. He should have been burned to ashes and his ashes thrown straight to hell.” He rested his body on the window ledge and caught his breath.

“Even in death, he managed to outwit me... humiliate me.” She could hear his breathing get louder. Her heart began to pound. She looked at the table, his fork was still there. He probably wouldn’t want to use that anyway. He would much prefer the satisfaction of killing her with his bare hands. This was a mistake. She should have stayed in the room. She had been lured into the lion’s lair.

“I...” he then paused for a moment, his breathing now calming, “I took you from your home to get back at him. I wanted to cause him unbearable pain. I wanted to take everything from him, just the way he took everything from me, before taking his life. I didn’t know the vile creator was dead, I learned that after I had taken you. I felt cheated.” He walked back to the table and sank in his chair. “I had intended to give you back to your mother, but she wasn’t well. She was neglectful of you. Left you for hours, even days while she locked herself away in her room.”

*Liar!* Victoria thought.

“I know why. She struggled to live with the guilt – the guilt of murdering her husband. You see, love is a dangerous thing. It can bring out the best in you and it can bring out the worst.”

“You’re a liar!” Victoria shouted without thinking, “My mother never neglected me! She loved me and you took me away from her!” Now unable to control herself.

He gave her a look that insinuated, *how dare you!* But he said nothing. He gently massaged his chest and then coughed lightly as if to clear this throat, “Listen to me, my child. I know you are angry, but I did what I thought was best for you.”

“Lock me in a room, starve me and beat me to near death?! That is what you thought was best for me?”

“That wasn’t my intention, believe me. I had intended to kill you, chop you up into little pieces and post you back to your father piece by piece.” He said in a matter of fact way.

Victoria suddenly found the ability to control her outburst. Her heart raced as she watched him continue to eat his steak as if he had just said something completely ordinary. All the while, visualising him killing her and dicing her up into small pieces. He had given her no reason to doubt anything he said. Her courage suddenly diminished as she remembered what this monster was capable of. He had no intention of trying to fool her into thinking she was safe.

She was not safe.

“When I learned of his death, I thought to reunite you with your mother but as I said, she was not well and you... well, I saw something in you that reminded me of your father. Something that although made me want to kill you, I believed I could fix. And that’s when I found my calling.” His eyes opened wider. “Can’t you see it Victoria? I am here to heal you, purify you from the filth you inherited from that rotten father of yours.” He stood and lifted a jug of water and then walked towards Victoria. Her stomach churned and she trembled as he approached. He poured water into her glass. Him being this close to her made her ice over. She was unable to move or run which was what she desperately wanted to do. Run as far as she could from this place and this monster. If she could she would keep running until she reached the end of the earth.

As he walked back to his chair, he peered back at her and smiled. It wasn’t his usual sinister smile, but it wasn’t warm either.

“I think... I believe my purpose is to help people who are lost – those who I can help, that is. I know you are probably thinking about the man I had to kill – the electrician. He would have come in the way of my work. He would have tried to stop it and anyone that wants to stop me from ridding the world of evil is on the side of evil. So, I felt no remorse and made peace with what I had to do, as it was for the greater good.”

Now she knew he was crazy. He had lost his mind. She wanted to scream it out to him but the image of her being chopped up into little pieces kept reappearing in her mind. He was capable of

anything and had somehow made justifications for his wicked actions. She felt as if at any moment he would spontaneously start battering her to death or butchering her with the steak knife.

### Chapter 30

Detective Howard rummaged through the old box of files that Judith had dug up on his request.

*What did we miss?* He asked himself. He spent the next hour hunting through old statements and notes on the case. He did well to keep Boris busy with cups of coffee, errands and chasing leads on other cases. *He wouldn't understand, so best to keep him out of the loop.*

His eyes eventually fell on reports of a black Vauxhall Vectra that was suspiciously in the area a couple of days before the abduction. *We checked this out... Edward Wellington drove a Ford Mondeo. Move on...* but he couldn't. Something about this played on his mind and he found it hard to let go. The car was never found. There was something about this, he knew it.

He suddenly stopped. *What am I doing?* It was as if he had just gone back into his obsessed mode again. He let this case go. He chased all the leads – there was nothing – there's *still* nothing. He slumped back in his chair and massaged the bridge of his nose. He can't do this to himself again. It was hard to accept that he couldn't find and save the little girl, but he had to. The world was an unfair and cruel place. It didn't have space for dead-weight detectives who were so obsessed in their case that they lost themselves. He had become a cliché.

He promised himself he would never be that guy again. He even contemplated quitting the role completely, but he didn't know anything else. This was who he was – it was what defined him.

He put the folders and paperwork back in the box. He had gone through it so many times, three years ago, that he knew all that was inside. He was wasting his time. There were plenty of fresh crimes that needed a detective. He slurped the last few sips of coffee and put the lid on the box, closing it with the intention to never open it again.

He mumbled a little prayer for the little girl and her mother which was all he had left to offer.

"We got a fresh lead on the acid attacks," Boris said in excitement. "Maggie, the owner of the newsagent on Bridge Street said one of her staff may have seen someone running from the scene who he recognised."

"Finally." Howard said, "Someone who saw something."

"I am going to talk to the witness. You coming?"

Usually, he would decline using one of his premade excuses, but he genuinely wanted to get out of the rut he was in. It was almost like seeing Mrs Bailey finally put things into perspective. She lost her daughter, he couldn't imagine how someone dealt with that and she clearly hadn't. Unable to deal with it – unable to move forward. But he had to. He had to move forward for the sake of the people who were not to be saved. He was among those people who were trusted to stop bad things from happening. That was his original intention anyway.

He grabbed his coat from the back of his chair, "Lead the way."

Boris smiled, "Great! I was getting worried."

"I'm fine," Howard said reassuringly.

"No, not about you, about me. When I went on holiday last year, we went to India and I met this wonderful chap, Balvinder, I think his name was. Anyway, he was a cha-wallah, which meant he was the guy who always served the tea... and I kind of felt his pain today."

Howard smirked, "Well, good thing I only got you to get me coffee then. What's the name for the guy who always serves the coffees?"

"Boris, I guess. Anyway, enough about that. I told Maggie I would be there in half-an-hour."

"We had better get a move on then."

Before they could escape the office, the phone on Howard's desk rang.

He answered, "Howard."

"Hey Howard, I got those addresses you wanted," Stephanie said. Her voice was unusually quiet. He wanted to tell her to forget about the entire thing but what she said next didn't allow him to.

"Over twenty houses came up with the name Wellington... but I'm guessing you are looking into the missing girl case again and although I don't approve, I found something that might interest you."

He held his hand over the microphone and looked at Boris.

"Sorry, something important has come up. I won't be able to join you after all."

"I knew it was too good to be true." He said sourly, "Fine, but when I get back, you're going to take the role of the cha-wallah... sorry, coffee-wallah!" He left in a rush.

Howard took a deep breath and then removed his hand from the mic.

"Go on..."

"So, among the properties I found, there was one, a manor on Gillsbury Lane. It was registered under Wellington but last year it was transferred to an Edward Wellington." There was a short silence.

Millions of thoughts buzzed through Howard's mind. This is exactly what he didn't need. In the last hour, he had worked things out. He had to get his life back on track and this was not helping.

"It could just be a coincidence." she said breaking the silence, "There must be hundreds of Edward Wellingtons in the country."

There was another brief silence.

"Perhaps." He said, "I owe you one."

"You bet you do." She said before hanging up.

Howard knew it was the right Edward. If there was one thing he had learned in his years as a detective, it was that there were no coincidences, only clues. But what could he do? He couldn't reopen the case. He had no grounds – there was no fresh evidence. All he had was an address of Edward Wellington's family manor. And this case had got him in enough trouble already. The smart thing would be to ignore it. Move on. But why didn't Edward tell us about his secret family home? When questioned, he claimed he only had access to one home, here in London. He was hiding something. Howard knew it and so did Mrs Bailey. The problem was that they were the only two people in the world that thought this. He could just save his career and sanity by walking away and accepting it was over, but he wouldn't be able to sleep at night.

If Edward did take her, which something told him he did, then he was sure she was in that house. The question was now whether she was there dead or alive.

I guess there was only one way to find out. He would have to drive there and check it out. Sure, this was not the best thing to do, considering, but it was undoubtedly the right thing to do. And if good men did the right thing then it was about time he became a good man.

He snatched his car keys from the desk and headed for the stairs.

"Howard!" He heard a loud and assertive voice behind him. He turned back to see the Chief stood with half his body out of his office. "You got a minute?"

"Well, I... not right now. Can it—"

"Let me rephrase that, my office now!"

Howard glanced back at the staircase. He contemplated just ignoring him and just dashing down the stairs but then remembered he wasn't in school anymore. He slumped his shoulders as he trailed towards the chief's office. This is exactly what he didn't need right now.

The Chief closed the door behind him.

"Take a seat."

Judging from his voice, that wasn't a request either.

"What are you doing Howard?" The chief said, now sat opposite him.

"I... well, Boris and I are working on—"

"I meant why are you asking the girls to dig up files on the missing girl?"

"How did you know?"

"I am the Chief, I know everything. Why are you doing this to yourself? I thought you were over all of this."

"Chief, listen, Edward Wellington—"

"I really don't want to hear that name ever again!" He looked as if he was about to thump his desk. "You know that his high-flying solicitor has filed enough harassment complaints against us to almost have us hung, drawn and quartered!"

"I know but—"

"No buts. Do you have any fresh evidence that he took the girl? Real evidence?"

There was a moment of silence. What could he say to him? He didn't have evidence but there is an address to someone named Edward Wellington in East Yorkshire?

"No."

The Chief sighed, "Well, that means the case is closed and it stays closed. I don't want you anywhere near Wellington." He stood and leant over, resting his palms on his desk. "Look, I get it. You got too involved in the case – we've all been there but this... this isn't right. You've lost your partner, most of your friends, I used to think we were friends. He shook his head. "And for what? This one case? The girl went missing, you did everything you could. You did more than what you could, but you didn't get her back. You can't win them all. It doesn't work like that."

He walked to the back of the office and faced the window. "You're a good detective but you need to take some time off. Go home, take a shower, do something fun. I don't know, take up a new hobby. Do anything but just stay out of here for a while – a long while."

"I'm fine. I don't need any time off."

"That was not a request." He opened the office door, "Go home."

"But the other cases I was working on—"

"They'll be here when you get back. Now go home!"

Howard walked out of the office.

"And, Howard..."

Howard turned back to face him.

"Stay out of trouble."

Howard didn't respond and left the building.

## Chapter 31

Victoria remained silent at the table – frozen. She couldn't eat anymore and what she ate desperately wanted to come back up. She refused to let it. It was the first real meal she had in so long that she bared the pain in her gut. She gulped the last bit of water from her cup and sat waiting for what was next.

Edward finished off his food and drank his water with loud slurps. After he put his cup down, he stared at Victoria as if he wanted to say something important.

"My body has been fighting cancer for some time." He said. "My mind had beat it, but my body was unable to. The doctors told me that when I was in the army and I fell sick. It's how I managed to leave. The irony is that when I said to myself that I would do anything to get out of here, I didn't mean get an incurable illness that would kill me.

When I got back from Afghanistan, I was told I didn't have long to live, the stark realisation that I had wasted the little time I had left fighting a war that made no sense, infuriated me." He used the napkin to wipe sweat from his forehead. His face was flustered.

“Doctors told me I had months, but I lived on for three and a half years. Again, doctors, like the people who are given authority in the army, are highly educated fools. They live by the book and make others die by the book – yet, it is if they have never read the damn book! Life is a mystery and you can’t predict things as accurately as they have you believe. A person in a horrific aeroplane accident can sometimes walk away unharmed and yet a person can die from an infection from a minor cut. You just don’t know what will kill you in the end.”

Or *who* will kill you... Victoria thought.

Although the room was warm, Victoria felt an ice-cold chill run through her. She put her hands under the table to hide her uncontrollable tremble. She even thought about sitting on them.

*Why is he telling me about his illness?* She didn’t know a lot about cancer but knew that most of the people she heard had it, died from it. That was a calming thought, him dying. It meant that this would all end. But she took into consideration the fact that he had survived it for three-and-a-half-years. What’s to say he couldn’t survive another three-and-a-half? Or even longer?

“I feel weak.” He continued, “I am not myself and I fear that I will not be able to continue fighting.”

Victoria’s heart pumped. What did this mean? It would explain him not beating on her recently but... what? He might ... set her free? Her mind then switched. Perhaps he would now kill her. That sounded a lot more likely. He would kill her and bury her body next to the Electrician. No, it will be neither of those – he will leave her locked up in the dungeon and quietly die up here, leaving her to starve and rot there for eternity.

“The problem is that if I depart from here, I cannot leave you like this. I need you to live on to do my work.”

*What work? And why would I do anything for you?*

“You see Victoria, you were lost, and I found you... I gave you direction. I taught you to live through famine, physical pain, extreme cold, extreme warmth and you did it.” His eyes widened, “You survived and managed to rid yourself of the evil inside you.”

What on earth was he talking about?

“You are stronger than were before – you take control of yourself better than others, and you, Victoria, you can help liberate others.”

She had the desperate urge to tell him he’s sick in the head. He needs help, or that he is beyond help and needs to be locked up for life or even put to death. But refrained from saying a word.

“But there is one thing left to do.” He walked towards her. “You must let go of everything, cleanse yourself of this world and everything in it.”

She remained frozen and tried not to make eye contact with him as he approached. *What did he mean by let go of everything?*

“Come with me.” He walked out of the room. Her stomach was now hurting worse than before and she had to forcefully swallow the food that came up to her throat a few times. She climbed off the chair and followed Edward through the corridor and down the stairs. They were heading back to the room. Perhaps, this is where he would do it? He probably concealed the steak knife from the dinner table in his pocket without her noticing it. And he would use it to end this ghastly fairy tale.

They entered the room. Victoria’s eyes immediately shot to the window, she desperately hoped Jack would not randomly come knocking. She had put him in danger. She should have listened to her inner voice.

Edward stood next to her bed and stared down at it for a while.

*What is he doing?*

“Come here.” He ordered, “And turn it over.”

Victoria’s heart sunk. He was talking about Simon. *Oh my God, he knows...*



“Now!” He yelled staring at her while she remained frozen. She thought about the door, she was close to it. He was further in the room. She could run out and slam it shut and lock him inside. He would be trapped, and she could get out of the house. She could be free. But he would be with Simon. Poor Simon. And what if she didn’t make it and he caught her, what would he do to her then?

The sensible thing would be to do as she was told. She walked to the bed. Her hands trembled as she lifted Simon and turned him over. Edward’s face began to change. His smile had disappeared, and his dark pupils inflated.

“This is what I was talking about. Did you think I did not know about this? This filth... this evil!” He grabbed Simon aggressively with one hand. Victoria screamed instinctively.

“No! Please don’t hurt him!”

“Hurt him?” he said from behind his teeth. He grabbed her arm with his other hand and dragged them both upstairs. His grip was strong. Her arm was in pain from how hard he squeezed. She couldn’t imagine what Simon was going through.

“Victoria!” Simon shouted, “What’s happening?” She could sense the panic in his voice.

“Please!” She shrieked, “Please let him go.”

“It’s you who needs to let him go!” Edward shouted back. Every time she resisted, he tugged at her arm harder until they went through the corridor towards the room they had just dined in.

“Victoria!” Simon called out repetitively, “I am scared!”

“Don’t be!” Victoria said, trying to keep him calm. “It will be OK.”

“Victoria! Victoria!” he kept repeating. She felt so helpless. If only there was something she could do. Her inner voice with all her wisdom and opinions was conveniently not around to make any suggestions.

“Victoria! Please... I’m very sacred!”

Of course, he would be, he had never been out of the room. And now he is being viciously dragged out to God knows where.

Edward kicked the door of the dining room and hauled them in. She thought about the steak knife.

*No... please no... God no...*

He stood in front of the open fireplace and looked down at Victoria.

“You need to let go of the filth and the evil of this world. And in order to do this, we must destroy the devices of this evil.” He held Simon out close to the fireplace. The tall, goldenly flames were terrifying.

“No!” Victoria screamed.

“Victoria! Please... help me! Victoria!”

Streams of tears rolled down her cheeks and she could hardly find her voice.

“Don’t do this... please don’t do this...” she said, defeated and almost in a whisper.

“I’m not going to.” He said calmly. Victoria looked up at him in hope.

“You will.”

Victoria felt as if she had been kicked in the gut. His words penetrated through her like radioactive poison.

She shook her head, “No! I will not do that! Please, I’m begging you... Please let him go.” She even thought to offer herself to be thrown in as an exchange, but the ferocious flames frightened her far too much.

“Do it!” He held Simon out in front of her.

“No!”

“Victoria...” Simon said, now facing her. “Please... help me. Take me back to the room. I promise I will not keep pestering you to keep playing games. I promise.”

Victoria burst into tears.

“Here!” Edward said, “Take him and do it now before I lose my patience.”

She shook her head and stepped back.

“You disappoint me.” Edward marched to the dining table and snatched the steak knife. He threw Simon on the floor and grabbed Victoria. She screamed. He put his arm around her neck with the back of her head pressed against his chest. The knife was now pressed against her neck.

“Do it or I will...” He pushed the knife a little harder. A sharp pain. “I will do it. Don’t make me do it.”

She could hardly breathe with how hard he held her.

“No!” She just about managed to say. “I will not do it.” She closed her eyes ready for him to push the knife right into her neck.

“Do it!” Her inner voice finally spoke, “He is going to kill you! You are going to die!”

Victoria ignored her. She wasn’t going to do it. She would die a thousand times before she would do it. Simon was her happy thought. He brought more life into the room than even the window.

She said a little prayer as she felt the pain in her neck intensify. She wanted to scream but didn’t. She made her choice – she would rather die.

## Chapter 32

Howard had convinced himself that this was for the best as he trudged down the stairs. He was no good to anyone right now. He wasn’t helping Boris in solving any of the cases that needed desperate attention, nor was he getting through the stack of paperwork on his desk. Not to mention he had probably got Stephanie and Judith into a whole lot of trouble with the chief. A sabbatical – that is exactly what he needed. He was lying to himself to help him get over just being politely suspended.

This would have been the perfect time for a cigarette. He even parked outside his local off-license on the way home, tempted to walk in and ask the person behind the counter for a box of twenty cancer sticks. It would be Mr Patel, a fifty-year-old man who migrated from India twenty years ago and never bothered to learn English properly. Instead, he focused on learning the English culture and slogans such as “cheap as chips mate” in a cockney accent, regarding this as far more useful as a business owner.

He would be disappointed that I started smoking again but happy to recover a customer. Both tobacco and cancer were lucrative industries after all.

Howard sensibly drove off settling with a stick of chewing gum from his car’s glove compartment and sucking on his pen and blowing out as if he was having a smoke.

The drive home was long due to the heavy traffic but not long enough. As he approached the turning for his street, he thought about not taking it. *Just drive and keep driving.* Go where the road and half a tank of fuel would take him.

The car behind him horned to snap him out of his trance. The traffic lights had turned green. He indicated and turned onto his street. He was exhausted. Time to put his feet up in front of the box and forget about the world outside. That was the plan.

The house was a tip. Cereal boxes, takeaway boxes and empty cans decorated the living room. It smelt like something had died. He was scared to open the curtains because of the amount of dust that would spread in the air due to them having not been drawn for months.

He thought back to how it was when his wife was around. Curtains were drawn to allow sunlight in. The cushions fluffed and in their designated places. And not a takeaway or empty can in sight.

It was as if she had taken all the order, colour and brightness with her when she left. And that’s when it really dawned on him. *My life has become a bloody cliché!* He was living out the life of a fictional washed-up detective from an American novel. Far from his ambition of being the great

Sherlock Holmes. All he needed now was a bad drinking habit and he would fit the character perfectly. He laughed silently at the thought.

He took a few deep breaths then went into the kitchen. He rolled up his sleeves and got the refuse bags from the store. This was it. Time to make a change – get this place back into shape. Transform it from a junkyard back to a home.

He started with the living room. He filled three bags and disposed of the empty boxes and cans. He used two cleaning cloths and half a bottle of cleaning spray. It took over twenty-five minutes to vacuum the floor and the dust off the curtains. And the dust nearly suffocated him.

He stared at the clean and tidy room with a feeling of triumph. It looked great. It looked better than great – it looked like a home. *Now, clothes in the wash, shower and then a well-earned cup of tea.*

As he took his clothes to the washing machine, a couple of pieces of folded paper fell out onto the floor. He plumped the clothes in front of the washing machine. He picked up the paper and sat at the kitchen table.

He unfolded the first one.

*You're a good man, Detective. Good men always do the right thing.*

The second was the Wellington's address that he had scribbled down on a scrap of paper.

He folded them back up and left them on the table. After putting the clothes in the machine and showering, he sat in front of the television for over an hour watching a blank screen.

He imagined her saying the words in the letter. *You're a good man, Detective. Good men always do the right thing.*

The desperation in her face. The pain of not having her child and being so sure that she knew who had her. He couldn't get her out of his head. And the poor little girl. They didn't deserve that.

He had spent a long time trying to get over her and the case. He had to. He had to prove to himself that he could. And prove to his wife that he was not infatuated with Mrs Bailey. He wasn't. It was always way deeper than that. Had he told his wife the truth, perhaps she would have understood.

After graduating from university, he, and a group of his friends decided to take a year out and go travelling. Travelling the entire world was a little ambitious, so they selected a few of the places they wanted to go and set out. They had a great time and eventually ended up in Australia. It was a beautiful place and after visiting it, he could appreciate why people from Britain would move across to the other side of the world.

It felt as if the sun never stopped shining and the people were incredibly friendly. One day, they all decided to visit a remote beach. He couldn't even remember the name of it. Or maybe he made himself forget it.

There were only a few people around when they heard screams.

"My daughter. She's drowning!" A hysterical lady was pointing out to the water. They could see splashes in the distance.

"Please help! I can't swim!" the girl's mother cried. "I can't save her!"

Everyone looked at Howard. He was the fittest and the best swimmer from among his friends. He saw the desperation in the lady's face and dived into the water. He swam as fast as he could and believed he could make it.

He knew she was far out, but it was only when he started swimming that he realised exactly how far. Too far. The tide was against him and in the panic, he swallowed a lot of water, which didn't help. He couldn't hear any splashing as he got closer – she had drowned. By the time his friends had caught up, they had to rescue her from near the bottom. Drowned. Dead.

His friends comforted him.

“You did your best.” They said. But this didn’t help. He felt as if he let the girl and her mother down. They trusted him to save her and he didn’t.

When he saw Mrs Bailey, he saw the lady on the beach, and he imagined the girl that drowned as Victoria. And he vowed that he would save her little girl, the way he should have saved the little girl from drowning. The lady from the beach relied on him. He gave her hope and then he let her little girl die.

He walked to the kitchen and grabbed the paper and then went to the study.

## Chapter 33

Edward threw Victoria on to the floor like a worthless rag and stared at her in disgust.

“You’re still weak.” He hissed with nothing but contempt in his voice. “I had so much hope for you. A worthy successor but you are truly your father’s daughter.”

He picked Simon up.

“Victoria!” He screamed, “Please help me!”

Victoria sprung to her feet with energy that she didn’t think she had. She had to save Simon. She had to do whatever it took.

“Let him go!” She shouted and ran towards Edward like a raging bull. She could see shock and disbelief in his eyes as she barged into him, pushing him back into the table.

A sadistic smile moulded on Edward’s face as he formed a tightly clenched fist. He swung and hit Victoria on the face. A bright light like the flash on a camera flared before her, and intense pain shot through her. Her brain felt like it had bashed into the barriers of her skull as she hit the ground.

“Maybe there is hope for you yet...” The blur above her said before she passed out.

Victoria’s eyes flickered as she woke with the worst headache she had ever felt in her life. She could see the mouldy ceiling in the dungeon.

“Simon!” She shouted as the memory of the ordeal flashed back to her. She screamed as she tried to get up.

“Easy!” her inner voice said, “You’re lucky to be alive. I wouldn’t try to get up too quickly.”

“Simon? Where is he? Is he OK?” She asked frantically.

Silence.

“I can’t see him.” She looked around. “Is he OK?”

“I am not sure. He is not here. He might be with Edward or...”

Victoria began to cry uncontrollably. Horrible images of evil Edward hurling poor Simon into the flames crossed her mind.

She wrestled with her broken shell to get off the bed and slither to the door. She banged on it and screamed.

“Simon! Simon!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Her inner voice said, “He almost killed you. Do you—”

“Shut up!” Victoria cried. “I don’t care what he does! I hate him! I hate him!” She banged on the door. “Simon! Give him back to me!” Unable to stop herself, she bent down and vomited. She wiped her mouth and then shouted, “Simon!”

She continued to bang on the door and scream until her palms became sore and inflamed and she had practically lost her voice. She felt dehydrated from the tears she had shed.

She sat thinking about how neglectful she was of him over the last few days. All he wanted was to play a few games. He loved playing games – it probably helped him deal with being in a place like this. She was a bad person. He needed her and she wasn’t there for him, and when he needed her

the most, she could do nothing for him. Now there was someone that she hated far more than that evil bastard Edward.

Her head was pounding. And the room was spinning. She unwillingly rested against the door and drifted off into the abyss.

“Victoria,” her mother said as she came into her room and sat on Victoria’s bed. Victoria put her book down and looked up at her mother. She looked different. Her eyes were swollen and cheeks sunken. She still looked beautiful, far more beautiful without her face painted. Something Victoria’s father insisted she does. Her beauty emanated from inside and flourished like a peacock at full stretch.

“I am sorry that I haven’t been there for you lately. It’s just that I... I have had a lot on my mind. And I have been suffering from migraines and... but look, that’s no excuse. I really want things to be normal again.”

Victoria didn’t want things to be normal again. Normal would mean Father being around again and she didn’t want that. There was a mystery surrounding where he was, but she didn’t care. Of course, she wanted her mother to feel better and she didn’t quite know how a migraine felt but she had suffered headaches and if they were anything like that then she understood the hours, sometimes days of wanting to be alone in a dark room. She wanted her mother to be normal, but she didn’t want Father back. *Good-riddance*.

“It’s OK.” Victoria said, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“There is one thing.”

“What is it?” Victoria asked curiously. She was prepared to do anything, even cleaning the bathrooms, the thing she hated the most.

“You can help by telling me what toppings you would like on your pizza.” She smiled and all her beauty returned.

“You’re making pizza?” Victoria smiled.

“No, we’re going out to eat.”

Victoria’s eyes lit up. She had never been out to eat. Her father would sometimes take her mother to a fancy restaurant. But this was rare, and he always had a hidden agenda – like a client or someone he was trying to impress would be dining there. But he would never take Victoria anywhere.

Victoria stood by the door with her coat on, patiently waiting for her mother when the doorbell rang. Her mother came reluctantly towards the door as if frightened to know who was behind it.

Perhaps it was Father, Victoria thought. That would explain the fear she could see in her mother’s eyes. Her mother’s hands trembled as she reached for the door handle. She then paused and turned to Victoria. She knelt and stroked Victoria’s cheeks.

“Baby, listen to me.” Victoria nodded her head. “You have to remember something... I love you. I love you more than anything else in the world.” Her eyes were filling. “No matter what happens. You know that, right?”

Victoria nodded and forced a smile. Her mother inhaled deeply and faced the door with a straight back and then opened it. They were faced by two men in Police uniforms. They both wore sympathetic expressions.

“Mrs Bailey?” one of the men asked in a soft voice.

“Yes.”

“Can we come in please?”

“What’s this about?”

“It’s about your husband?” he paused, “I think it might be better if we come in.”

They all sat in the living room.

“What’s going on?” her mother asked.

“I am sorry to have to tell you this, but your husband has been involved in a car accident. His car was recovered this morning a mile from here. I am sorry Mrs Bailey, but he must have died on the spot.”

Her mother put her hand over her mouth as if in shock.

“I mean... are you sure it is my husband? He was supposed to be on a business trip. He left two weeks ago and said he would be gone three weeks.”

“We will need you to identify the body, but we are certain it is him. I am sorry for your loss.”

She nodded as tears rolled down her cheeks. Victoria wanted to shuffle closer to her. Put her arms around her, say she was sorry, but she wasn’t. She wasn’t sorry or sad at all. And although she didn’t show it, she was thrilled at the thought her father gone, never to return. She felt guilty for her heartless thoughts. He was her father after all and anyone dying was tragic, but she couldn’t shed a tear for that man. He made their lives hell and perhaps now they could live in peace.

“We will leave now but if you need us to call anyone or do anything then please let us know.” The man said and then handed her a piece of paper. “Here are the details of the hospital where his body is. And the telephone number to make the necessary arrangements.” The men stood and walked towards the door. Her mother followed and stood facing the door as they left.

Victoria had many questions but didn’t ask one.

Victoria had expected her mother to have cancelled the pizza trip, but she didn’t. She was a little quiet and Victoria caught her gazing out of the restaurant window in deep thought a few times. But they had a great time. The experience of eating in a nice place, where there were other people enjoying themselves was amazing. Being served by a friendly waiter was great. Her mother let her order anything she wanted, and Victoria ate until she could not eat anymore.

Victoria opted to have dessert to take home as anything else going in her stomach would have caused an explosion.

When they got home, Victoria desperately wanted to tell her mother that she was glad her father was gone and that she wasn’t sad at all. And that she thinks they would be much happier without him. But she didn’t. She wasn’t sure how her mother would react. Things were good. Soon she would feel better and they would live their lives in an enjoyable way. They were free – finally free.

## Chapter 34

Victoria woke with the sound of the knocking on the window. Her head still felt as if it was about to explode. Her body was stiff and sore from having fallen asleep against the door and at an awkward angle.

She knew it was Jack knocking on the window, but she didn’t turn to face him. She couldn’t bear to face him. He was the reason she neglected Simon. If Simon was hurled into the fire and was now dead, then the last memories he would have had of Victoria would have been of a neglectful *so-called* friend who wasn’t strong enough to help him when he needed her the most. He deserved better than that. He was always there for her when she needed him.

She had to eventually admit to herself that it wasn’t Jack’s fault, it was hers. He had no idea and wasn’t to blame but she still couldn’t bear to face him. She stayed in that same painful position until the knocking stopped. She peered back to make certain he was gone. Dragging her defeated body to the bed she climbed in and crawled under the covers, sobbing and wishing she had just jumped into the flames and ended this nightmare. At least if Simon was gone, he would be free from this place. She couldn’t stop the tears from streaming.

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The drive to East Yorkshire was long – Howard stopped at quite a few service stations to stretch his legs and ask himself what the hell he was doing. He convinced himself that he was just an ordinary guy travelling to the countryside to enjoy his involuntary sabbatical.

He stopped at the last service station before he would reach his destination. He splashed water on his face. “You’re a real mess, Howard.” He said to the man looking back at him in the mirror.

He habitually popped a few Aspirins as he sat sipping a coffee at the Costa.

Last few miles. What’s the plan? He asked himself. Was he planning to just march up to Edward Wellington’s house and ask him politely if he did, in fact, kidnap the little girl and had her stashed away in his secret house? It had been a long drive and he was shattered. Perhaps he would save the pleasantries and just punch him square in the face and barge in and find her. If she was there, that was.

Technically, he wasn’t even a detective. He had no power to do anything. The cliché, *you take a man out the job but you can never take the job out of the man*, sprung to mind. He laughed – a dry humourless laugh. He remembered it was this very cliché that stole everything good in his life, leaving him with the bitter taste of loneliness and regret.

And yet, like an addict, here he was, ready to prove to himself that he was indeed a tenacious bastard who never learns from his mistakes.

The ghostly roads heading to the house were narrow, some were one track. He wasn’t sure whether the roads were deserted was due to it being the quiet countryside or that he was the only fool to be driving around at 3 am. Either way, he was relieved. The combination of roads with no street lights and bright car headlamps were blinding.

He could see the house in the distance. He parked the car on the side of the road and turned off the headlights. Pitch black. He couldn’t see a thing. He sat there, in the dark with absolutely no idea what to do next. He could turn around and drive back and call it a long drive – a stupidly long drive. But that wasn’t going to happen. He leant his head on the headrest. Best to wait until daylight and take it from there. He unfolded the paper and read it again, You’re a good man, Detective. Good men always do the right thing.

His eyelids felt heavy and could no longer hold themselves up.

“You alright there?” A voice and banging on the window woke him. He rubbed his eyes. In what felt like a few seconds, it was daylight. An old man in a green coat stood staring into the car. Howard rolled down the window.

“Sorry,” the man said. “I was on my morning walk and I saw you on the side of the road. You alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you. I was driving late and got tired. I parked up and must have dozed off.”

“Better you did that when you’re tired.” The man smiled, exposing his fake teeth. “Better safe than sorry, I say.”

“Yes, quite right.” Howard smiled.

“Have a nice day.” The man walked off.

“You too.”

The morning was bitter, and the roads were grey with fog. Howard got out of the car and stretched. The cold cut through him like a machete. He could do with a warm breakfast and a few Aspirins. But would happily settle with just the coffee. He jumped back into the car and fired up the engine. He turned the fans to the maximum. They blew out cold air. He rubbed his hands together while he waited for the engine to warm up.

He pulled out into the empty road and the car crawled towards the house. The house looked like it belonged in an old storybook. It was an old manor with thick black roof. White stone walls and large single glazed windows with brown frames. Judging by the sheer size, Howard presumed it must have at least seven or eight bedrooms, a few reception rooms, a large kitchen or two and God knows how many bathrooms.

Thick smoke seeped out from the chimney and he felt as if the house was staring at him as he approached. He couldn't remember the last time he saw smoke emerge from a chimney. *No such thing left in London*, he thought. A smaller building sat next to the house which he assumed was an oversized garage. A space large enough to be easily converted into a house. It would be bigger than a lot of houses he was used to in London. *Rich folk!*

He drove past the house without stopping. There was no sign of life except the smoke escaping from the chimney. Someone was home. And he could bet his last penny it was Edward Wellington – the Edward Wellington who was a suspect in the disappearance of the little girl a little over three years ago. He parked the car a little further ahead, out of sight. He had to come up with a plan. He had to stake out the place until he was sure this was his guy – and there can never be a stakeout without coffee. He turned the car around headed back in the direction he came – he remembered passing a café a couple of miles back. He could stock up for the long hours that may lay ahead.

The café looked old. Similar to most of the other buildings around there. From the outside, it looked dead. *Pepper's Café*. A place like this wouldn't last a month in London. A Starbucks or Costa would smash to oblivion.

Inside, the place had a rustic feel. Not like the fabricated rustic feel, you sometimes got in posh London cafés; they got fake versions of old furniture and scattered random things like old typewriters that probably got made from China, about the place.

No, this place genuinely had old furniture and many of the fixtures were actually falling apart. It still had wallpaper on every wall that looked like it had been there from the seventies. Howard skimmed over the books on the shelves – packed with heavy classics such as *War and Peace* and *Great Expectations* and without a modern commercial fiction in sight. It was as if the entire place was catered for the old and the blind.

Two old men sat on a table in the corner and an overweight middle-aged lady behind the counter. They all stared at him in surprise, as if they hadn't ever seen anyone except the locals walk into this place.

After a few long stares, the two old men looked away and continued slurping their drinks and muttering to each other. The fluffy-haired lady behind the counter gave a welcoming smile showing off her pearly white teeth. They didn't look real. Her powdered face and bright lipstick resembled a China-doll.

"Mornin," she said cheerfully. "What can I get ya?" She was chewing gum with a wide mouth.

"Coffee, please," Howard said and glanced at the fresh bakery items.

"Them iced buns are fresh." She said with pride in her voice, "Made em maself, I did. You wanna try one?"

Howard smiled, "Yes. Why not. I'll have two. And can I get the coffee to go?"

"Sure ya can." She turned to the coffee machine. A coffee machine that looked like it had been stolen from a museum.

"You not from around here, are ya?"

Howard shook his head, "No. I'm from London."

"Ooh," her eyes opened wider. "I've thought about movin to London a few times, me. Ya know live in the city."

"It's not all that, believe me." Howard said.



“So, what ya doin all the way up ere? You can’t be ere for business – coz there ain’t none.” She chortled a little. “So, you got family or somethin?”

“No, I’m actually here to see a man called Edward Wellington.”

The Lady’s face dropped immediately and she turned and faced the coffee machine.

“Do you know of him?”

She didn’t respond and just continued preparing the coffee.

“Ya like milk in it?”

“Just a spot.” He responded, “Sorry, if you don’t mind me asking, do you know Edward Wellington, he lives just—”

“I *know* where he lives.” She snarled, “That cursed old manor. Burn the place ta the ground if I could, me.”

This really got Howard’s curiosity going. He had a feeling she was about to say more and so he didn’t prompt anymore. He didn’t want anyone thinking he was digging for information. He wasn’t a detective right now and he had no business fishing for information. Especially when it came down to Edward Wellington.

“You’re not part of the Wellington family are ya? A long lost cousin or somin like that?”

“No. I am—”

“Good! Coz if you were, I’d tell ya to get the hell out of ere!”

“I assure you I’m not. I just need to speak to him.”

She handed him the coffee. It was piping hot. He had to put it down on the counter and blow on his hands. This didn’t faze her. She just gave him that look like he was wimp. He imagined her thinking that all city boys were wimps.

“You don’t want to speak to him. Especially not that one. He is the last one left. The father disappeared and his brother moved away. But the worst of them remained behind. A plague, that’s what they are. A plague!”

She began packing the iced buns into an unbranded paper bag. She then leaned in a little closer and spoke a little quieter.

“He’s not normal, you know. None of them were. Something not right up there,” She pointed to her temple. “A good few years back when we woz girls, me and my friend Louise, we used to know her. We weren’t like friends but we knew her.”

Howard stared at her, bewildered.

“The girl,” She whispered, “Mary was her name. She was a lovely girl. A bit quiet, kept herself to herself, but a lovely girl. Pretty too.” She handed him the bag with the iced buns.

“Everyone said she disappeared, some said she ran away. But she didn’t seem the type to run away.”

Howard’s curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “So, what do you think happened to her?”

“He took er! That vile creature, Edward took her.”

“Did the Police not—”

“Huh!” She grunted, “You’ve more chance of solving a case using toddlers with magnifying glasses than you do with the old Bill around here. Useless bunch, they are!”

Howard smiled, “Well, thank you for the iced buns and—”

“It was the way he looked at er. He would just stare at her whenever he saw er. Poor girl. He was obsessed with er. But she didn’t want nothing to do with him. And one day, she just disappeared without a trace.”

“You telling stories again, Margret!” One of the old men remarked and turned around on his chair and faced them.

“I just saying what happened, me, that’s all. People have a right to know. They need to be warned about em.”

“Take no notice of her,” the man said and then looked at Margret, “Let the poor guy go. He ordered his grub to go, get the hint.”

“You can shut it in all, Alf.” She said, “No one gives a toss about ya opinion!”

“How much do I owe you?” Howard intervened.

She smiled, “It’s on the ouse. First time here, you can have it.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“No bother.” Her smile then dropped, “You seem like a nice fella. If you want my advice, stay away from the Wellingtons – they ain’t nothin but trouble, you hear?”

“Thanks for the buns and the advice.”

He turned to walk out with a million thoughts running through his mind.

“Excuse me!” the lady yelled from behind him, “You forgot your coffee.”

Howard smiled embarrassingly and walked back looking at this red palm. She turned around and grabbed another plastic up, and doubled it up, presumably to make it a little easier to bear the intense heat radiating from it.

“Would forget my head, if it wasn’t screwed on.”

She handed him the cup.

“I certainly hope it is screwed on.”

He could feel her gaze as he left the café in a hurry, partially to put the hot cup in the car’s cup holder but mainly to get away from the butch lady.

## Chapter 35

He thought about the Mary story as he sat parked a little further up from the Wellingtons’ house. It could just be a coincidence. Girls do sometimes run away. And from his experience as a detective, the quiet ones were usually misunderstood and are more likely to run away. But he was not convinced. This *Edward Wellington* obviously already had a reputation around here. He had something to do with the disappearance of Mary and Howard was now sure he had something to do with the disappearance of Victoria. The difficulty is and has *always been* to prove it.

He waited almost ten minutes before sipping the coffee, just in case it set fire to his insides.

What did she make it out of... lava?

Despite its intense temperature, it was the best coffee he ever had. Probably just a real cup of coffee and he wasn’t used to it – he only drank the mass-produced, refined crap that came out of vending machines. And she was right about the iced buns, they were fresh and soft. And the icing not too sweet that it hurt the teeth.

He looked in the car’s rear-view mirror.

“Jesus Howard! What are you doing here?”

Even if he had the girl in that house, and presumably she was alive, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to take her out into plain view for him to see out here.

*Think Howard, think...*

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Victoria had no idea how much time had passed but she was unable to move. Or she just didn’t want to move. She fell in and out of sleep until she could sleep no more.

She sat up and ran her hand over the empty part of the bed where Simon usually lay. She felt guilty that she felt sad that she was now all alone when she should be thinking about poor Simon and what had happened to him. Perhaps he was still upstairs, and she just had to think of a way to get up there and rescue him.

"Don't even think about it." Her inner voice said, "You've done enough already!"

*Great. It was now just her and the bitch.*

She jumped as she heard the knocking on the window.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Her inner voice started, "Does this boy have nothing better to do than harass girls?!"

Although Victoria was upset, she knew Jack was innocent and she couldn't ignore him or punish him for something he wasn't responsible for.

"Yes, but he might be responsible for the death of you and me." Her inner voice warned. "Think about it! Don't be a fool!"

Victoria forced herself off the bed and walked painfully to the window. Now suffering from double vision and feeling sick from the smell of her own vomit which had filled the room.

"Are y-you alright?" Jack asked.

Victoria nodded but didn't say anything. She didn't want to say she *was* because she wasn't. How could she tell him that she just lost her best friend – *only friend?*

"I knocked for you a few times and y-you... you i-ignored me. Did I do s-something wrong?"

*Great! More guilt.*

He genuinely looked upset. And again, she was the cause of it.

"I am sorry..." Victoria built the courage to speak. "I..." she then fell silent again unable to find the right words to say next.

"It's OK," he said, "Sometimes I don't want to talk to anyone either. A-and sometimes I don't even know why."

Victoria wanted to smile, she liked what he said, it made her feel better, but she couldn't. She couldn't stop thinking about Simon.

"I am glad you're talking to me and you're not mad at me." His face then dropped, "You're not mad at me, are you?"

Victoria shook her head.

"Phew! Because my mother is furious at me and I can't have two people annoyed with me." He sighed. "I forgot that I had fed the goldfish and fed them again and one of them died." He paused and waited for a moment. He was probably waiting for judgement, but Victoria was on no moral high ground to pass judgement.

"Wait... it gets worse..." he continued, "When I noticed Fred wasn't moving, I took him out of the tank and tried to flush him down the toilet."

He paused. He must have noticed the expression on her face.

"What? I saw my mother do it when the last fish died."

Victoria grinned. It was true, where there was tragedy you often found comedy.

"To make things even worse I put a load of toilet roll on top thinking the extra weight might help it go down, but the toilet blocked. Mother was furious. I had to run out of there. I think she might have killed me had I not."

Victoria found the entire story humorous and fought to stop herself from bursting into laughter. After a moment, her mind floated back to Simon. He would have found the story of Fred the fish being flushed down the toilet hilarious. It would have been a brilliant story had Roald Dahl thought of it, she thought.

"Anyway," he continued. "I just n-need to stay away from the house for a couple of hours, you know, lie low until sh-she forgets about the whole th-thing." He sounded like a fugitive on the run.

"I am sure we can entertain a fugitive for a few hours," Victoria said. A sudden feeling of shame overcame her. How could she be so normal after what had just happened? Had she really, in just a few moments, completely forgotten about Simon?

“On second thought,” she said, “I...” she had started talking without thinking of a good enough excuse, so she settled with the truth. “I need to go and lie down – my head is murdering me.”

“You g-get headaches as well. I hate headaches. I don’t usually get them but when I do, I feel as if a volcano is about to erupt in my head. You know, my father used to always say that most headaches are due to d-dehydration.”

No, Victoria was pretty sure hers were due to her being slogged in the face by her deranged uncle and slammed into the hard floor like a sack filled with dead animals.

“Thanks,” she said, “I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Anytime. I guess I’ll just play on the swing and stay out of sight.”

She wished she could go with him. Get away. She took in a deep breath, ready to spit out the truth about her situation but then remembered the wise words of her inner voice. She remained silent and watched as he walked back to his garden. Enough lives had been lost as a result of her. No more.

The sound of the door unlocking grabbed her attention.

“Move away from the window!” her inner voice ordered, “You don’t want him thinking that you have been trying to get that stupid boy’s attention.”

Victoria walked past the bed and stood directly in front of the door.

“You really are stupid as you look!” her inner voice stabbed.

But Victoria didn’t care. She wanted to know where Simon was and she wanted him to be OK. She would demand he be returned, unharmed.

“You are in no position to make demands!” her inner voice hissed. “You’ll stay quiet if you know what’s good for you!”

Victoria was in no mood to stay quiet. Until she saw the man that had terrorised her for months stood in front of her. She unwillingly took a few steps back. As he leaned forward. His eyes were filled with rage, yet his face completely expressionless.

He walked past her and put the metal cup of water and the plate with a slice of bread on the floor and then silently walked back to the door.

This was her opportunity to ask about Simon. Edward was there. He would hear her.

But she was unable to utter a word. His very presence brought with it an atmosphere of terror. He was different from how he was at dinner, back to the way he was before he had left for a few days.

He walked back but then stopped at the door and peered back.

“I really thought you were ready to join me. But it seems it will take longer than I had expected.”

Join him in what? None of what he said made sense to her anymore. If she could work out what he wanted to see in her then maybe she could just pretend. That may mean that she got to leave the room, get real food... find Simon... escape...

“Simon!” she finally said, “Where is Simon? What have you done with him?”

“Him?” he turned and walked back towards her. “That’s a nice name, Simon. Did you give it that name?”

*What?* It then dawned on her that she had no idea who gave him that name... or where he came from or anything about him, except that he was here, and he was her friend.

“Where is he?” she asked trying to sound assertive but could hear the shakiness in her voice.

“I know you must hate me,” Edward said, “And that’s fine, for to truly appreciate me it is necessary for you to hate me. That will pass I assure you. Throughout the passage of time, there existed those whom you loved and those whom you loathed. The heroes and the villains, so to speak. But you appreciated them both, more the villains – as they were the brave. They were the ones that taught you about life, its mysteries, its misery and its pain. The villains play an important part in life – without them, there would be no balance, there would be no truth. These are men and

in some cases women, who stand for something, whether it be something you understand or not. And they are remembered for it forever.” He bent down and looked her deep in the eyes, “Tell me, what would the world have been like had Hitler not shook it? Or Stalin? Or Vlad the Impaler? They shook the very core of our being – they made us question... they made us think. And for that they live on forever, they have earned immortality, whereas everyone else is dead and forgotten. These people are no longer loathed, they are now studied, marvelled for their magnificence and admired.”

She desperately wanted to tell him that she thought he was sick and needed help but remained silent and thought deeply about what he was saying. His views, as twisted as they were, meant that he was capable of anything. His time was running out but hadn't run out. God only knows what his plans were and where she fit into them. A protégé, to continue his twisted ways and spread his message of glorifying the vilest people throughout history.

“You will learn to appreciate and admire me.” He said as he walked out, “The entire world will, one day.”

## Chapter 36

The sugar from the iced buns dominated the caffeine from the coffee and Howard felt lethargic. He kicked himself for not topping up earlier on the Aspirin as the headache crept in. He looked in the rear-view and watched the house. Nothing.

This was ridiculous. He agreed with himself, to wait another couple of hours before he would be forced to re-evaluate his plan – not that he had a plan. He really wanted the creep to step outside so he could confirm it was him. He reached into the back of the car and picked up a brown envelope. He removed the file he had borrowed from the files on the missing girl case. He studied the face of Edward Wellington. *He couldn't have changed much in three years*, he mumbled to himself. He should be able to spot him from a mile – ugly bastard.

Nothing happened in the two hours he had agreed to wait. He had to think of something else.

What? Buy a gas inspector's uniform and knock on his door saying he is here for an inspection? No, this was real life and in real life, stupid stunts like that didn't work.

He had to get closer to the house and he had to do it without getting seen. He couldn't risk spooking him. If he did have Victoria in there and he got the slightest hint something was up, the first thing he would do is get rid of the evidence. And he was not here to get her killed. The advantage was that the area had very little lighting. He could use the night as cover to get a look around.

His grey suit and white shirt were hardly a good camouflage. He had to change the rags.

A quick drive into the town and a drive-through meal later, he found himself trying on a pair of black jeans and a black jumper at a Tesco store. It didn't matter where you went, you could always find a Tesco somewhere.

He grabbed a woollen beany hat and kept the jeans and jumper on. He ripped off the tags and used them to pay at the checkout. He made the mistake of paying at the Kiosk. His eyes were drawn to the shelf filled with cigarettes and packets of tobacco. He paused when the lady behind the counter asked him if he wanted anything else. He wanted a pack of cigarettes. It would have made this whole thing a lot easier.

“No, thanks.” He replied.

A quick trip to the toilet and he was back on the road, heading for the Wellington house. He drove slowly and scoped the house as the car crawled passed. He parked a lot further ahead than before. He wanted to make sure the car was completely out of sight.

Now, like a thief, he had to wait until daylight disappeared.

After a couple of hours, it got dark. Not like the dark, he was used to. London never got this dark. There was always some light coming from somewhere.

He got out of his car and had to feel his way to the boot. Thankfully there was a little internal light that provided enough of a glow for him to rummage around and find his torch. He wasn't getting anywhere around here without that.

He walked down the country lane using the torch to see ahead of him. The roads were dead and there was not a soul in sight. He was genuinely scared. He kept reassuring himself that no one or thing was going to jump out at him from the bushes. He turned around and flashed the light behind him a few times to make sure no one was behind him.

He was beginning to think that this may not have been the best idea he had.

"Damn it!" He said as he felt his ankle twist from accidentally stepping into a pothole. Pain shot up his leg. He shone the light back; he couldn't see the car anymore. He limped forward. It wasn't too bad. He could walk. He headed for the house and after a few moments, he could hardly feel the pain. He knew that wouldn't be the case tomorrow morning.

A dull light emanated from the house window. He switched off the torch and crept towards it.

*What now? He wasn't used to being on this side of the law. He felt like a criminal.*

There was a tall, black gate in front of the manor. A huge front garden leading to the house.

The gate was closed but not locked. Judging by the rust on the metal hinges, it would scream like dying animal when pushed open. That would probably alert the occupier. He walked to the side of the house and stood outside the other building which he assumed was the garage.

*This might be a good start.*

He looked around to make sure no one was around and crept towards the wide double doors of the building. He stopped suddenly. He heard a noise; he was sure of it. A rustling coming from the bushes near the fence.

If Edward Wellington was the kind of psychopath, he and the lady at the café assumed he was, then creeping around his garden at this time was a mistake. He was tempted to turn his torch on but that might get him spotted. He stared at the bush and held out the torch in front of him like a sword. If that was Wellington, he was not going to take any chances.

He covered his mouth to stop himself from yelling as a squirrel came shooting out of the bush, straight past him and up a large tree.

"Jesus Christ!" He whispered loudly.

*Damn thing nearly gave me a heart attack!* He put his hand on his chest and could feel it thumping.

Sweat accumulated on his back and above his lips.

He glanced back at the house. The light in the room was still on and nothing else had changed. The thought of just walking back to his car as fast as he could and driving away from it all crossed his mind.

He crept to the door of the garage. It was locked but with one of the cheap padlocks that if yanked hard enough it would just snap open. Or at least he hoped it would.

*Ok, on the count of three... three... two—*

He was startled by a cold drop of water hitting the back of his neck. At first, he thought he had imagined it. Then he felt another and then another. Before he knew it heavy raindrops were bashing his head and the ground.

*You have got to be kidding me!* He thought as he looked up at the dark sky.

He reached for the padlock and tugged. It was stronger than he had assumed. He yanked it as hard as he could – it didn't budge. He looked around and then bashed it with the back of his torch. It snapped open. He stood frozen for a moment and then quickly looked around again. He heaved the door open. Inside, he could see nothing except darkness. He switched his torch on and shone it

around the place. It was even bigger on the inside than it appeared from the outside. The floor was smooth concrete and there was a strange blend of smell in the air – petrol and paint.

The entire back wall was covered in shelves with various cans and boxes. There were tables with tools and numerous toolboxes scattered about the place. It felt like a mechanics garage. He could feel the slipperiness of grease under his feet as he walked further in.

Howard's eyes were drawn to, what he assumed was a car. It was covered by a large silver dust sheet. Perhaps he was a mechanic and that was the vehicle he was working on. Or maybe a car enthusiast and that was his project, hidden from prying eyes until it was ready to flaunt itself in all its glory. He turned back and gently pulled the door closed behind him and walked towards the object, leaving a trail of wet footprints. Years of being a detective made him curious about everything. He needed to know what was underneath that dust sheet.

He lifted the sheet, revealing a black car. It didn't look fancy or valuable enough to bother covering it with a dustsheet. *No one would cover a car like this... unless you were hiding it...*

It had a Vauxhall badge at the front. He gazed at the number plate:

D19 BAA.

He patted himself, hunting for his pen and his notebook to scribble it down but then remembered he was wearing his cat-burglar outfit and all his belongings bar his keys were left in the car.

"D19 BAA... D19 BAA..." he repeated to himself. It was an easy enough number plate to memorise, "D19 BAA..." Even for an old fool like him.

He walked around to the side of the car and lifted the dust sheet, almost getting completely underneath. The doors were locked. He shone his torch inside just to make sure no one was inside it. Then he walked towards the back to check the make and model of the car and to see if the boot was unlocked.

As he lifted the sheet his back pushed against the shelf on the back wall. He quickly moved forward but it was too late, a small metal paint can came crashing down. The lid flung open and white paint oozed out onto the floor.

*"Shit!" That was loud enough to wake the neighbourhood.*

His heartbeat raced as he thought about what to do next. Someone would have heard that. He had to get out of there.

He rushed towards the door. Sweat formed on his forehead. What if Edward was already stood behind that door? Waiting for him to come out. Ready to kill him and plead self-defence from a trespasser – which in the eyes of the law, was exactly what he was. Forget not having a warrant, technically, he was not even a detective. He was in trouble. The advice he received about not doing something stupid like this suddenly polluted his mind. Not so long ago, he was in the comfort and warmth of his own home – safe and on a sabbatical that would have set him straight. Now, he was in danger – he could feel it deep inside him. *Run!* He thought to himself. *Run as fast as you can and don't look back!*

He was relieved when he opened the door – no one was stood outside with an axe, ready to attack him. He pushed the door closed behind him and crept back in the direction he came from. He had to get back to the car. The rain was now pouring even harder and it seemed darker than earlier.

He felt his stomach churn as he noticed the light in the room, he saw earlier was off. The gate in front of the house was now open.

He looked around in panic. Someone had opened that gate. Someone knew he was here but there was no one in sight. He instinctively thought to call it in and request backup but then remembered, he was on the wrong side of the law. Trespassing, vandalism and if this was Edward Wellington's property, then he could add harassment to that list as well.

He shone his torch behind him and then in front of him and then spun around in every direction. He couldn't see anyone, but he could feel a presence. Or perhaps his paranoid mind was playing tricks on him. He felt as if he was in one of the many horror movies he had seen and regretted watching. He felt as if the air he was breathing was not reaching his lungs. His pulse was pounding in his eardrums so hard that it drowned out all other sounds.

His first instinct was to run. Run back to the car. Get away from here and get to safety. But before he took another step, he felt arms grab him from behind and in a headlock. His mind spun. For a moment the entire thing felt unreal. Like a bad dream that quickly turned into a full-blown nightmare.

The arms squeezed. His throat tightened. The more he wrestled, the more the lock tightened.

He thought back to his self-defence classes and realised he had forgotten almost everything – including how to get out of a headlock. He could feel a man's chest pressed against the back of his head, so he assumed he was considerably shorter than the man trying to choke him. Trying to use the back of his head to strike the man in the face was out of the question.

Breathing became more difficult as the lock tightened. His neck would snap any minute, he was sure of it.

Howard was exhausted from trying to get out of the lock and the lack of blood and oxygen getting to his brain. His head lowered as he began to pass out.

Looking down he noticed the man's foot just behind his. He lifted his knee as high as he could and then used all his might to stomp on the man's foot as hard as he could. The grip of the headlock loosened, allowing Howard to strike him in the gut with his elbow. He heard the man yell in pain and let go of Howard. Howard broke free and ran as fast as he could and dared not look back. He didn't care about the huge puddles he was stamping in or about the potholes that promised to break his ankle. He just ran. And he kept running. His chest was burning, and he felt a sharp stab with every breath, but he wasn't prepared to stop. Not until he was sure the man was not chasing behind him and he reached the safety of his car.

His lungs were showing their gratitude for the years of smoke and tar he pumped into them.

He wanted to keep running but his body forced him to stop. He had a painful stitch on the left side and his brain was ready to explode out of his ears.

He turned the torch on and shone it behind him. Nothing. Thank God he didn't give chase. Howard had no energy left. Had the man caught him, Howard would have happily laid there to die. He was done. He bent over resting his palms on his knees and trying to breathe. His stomach churned and he threw up.

After a few moments of gasping for air, he caught his breath and walked back to the car. His hands trembled as he got in. He was still panicked and checked the back seat the way he checked under his bed as a child. He sped out onto the road, checking his rear-view every few seconds. His neck was murdering him and he could no longer move it.

"Shit!" he shouted and hit his palms on the steering wheel.

He needed to rest after his nerves had calmed and adrenaline had faded, he needed sleep. Preferably in a bed not in the car. A shower and some food would help him recharge. He asked himself whether he had just screwed everything up. Was that Edward Wellington who just tried to kill him? And if so, did he just get spooked? There was no way he would have identified Howard. He was facing away from him and wearing a beany hat. Hopefully, he would have believed it to be a break-in.



Either way, Howard had to act fast. He remembered why the black Vauxhall in the garage rang a bell. It was the same car that was reported as suspiciously in the area weeks before Victoria was abducted.

"D19 BAA." He said out loud.

He reached over to the back seat and removed a notebook from his jacket pocket. He drove around until he spotted a payphone booth.

He flicked through the notebook and stopped on S. He punched in a number and leaned against the glass while he waited for an answer. He looked around just in case the man came rushing towards him. He knew it was unlikely, but his eyes didn't stop searching all around him.

"Hello," a female voice answered.

"Stephanie. It's Howard."

"Jesus Christ, Howard, it's nearly midnight... and how did you get my home telephone number?"

"You gave it to me a while back... anyway, forget that. I really need a—"

"No way!" she cut him off, "I am not doing you any more favours. Your last one nearly got me suspended. How is suspension anyway?" she asked with obvious sarcasm in her voice.

"I'm on sabbatical..."

"Sure you are. Anyway, Howard, goodnight."

"No, no, please wait. Listen, I really need your help. I went to the Wellington property in—"

"You did what! Have you completely lost your mind?!"

"Listen to me, please. It's important. You could help save a life."

There was a short pause.

"You got sixty seconds."

"I broke into his garage."

"You did what!"

"He has a black Vauxhall hidden in there."

"It's a garage. That's we all hide our cars."

"All I need is you to run some plates. If this is the same car that was spotted in the area before Victoria's abduction, then we have a link. Something connecting him to the case."

There was another pause.

"What's the reg?"

"Thank you! Thank you. I owe you big time."

"Yeah, yeah... just give me the reg."

"D19 BAA."

"I will check the reg in the morning and see what comes up."

"Thank you! I will call you at around ten."

"Ok, but you have to promise me something."

"Anything."

"If nothing comes up on these plates, you will come home."

"Done."

"I must be out of my mind..." she mumbled. "Call me at ten." She hung up.

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Victoria sat on her bed and bit her nails. She didn't care about his peculiar speeches and nonsensical ideas – she just wanted Simon back. She got off her bed and walked around the room. She then stood in front of the dressing table mirror and picked at the scabs on her arms. She did this until she had no scabs left and her forearms were incredibly sore. Her arms looked like just bone with a paper-thin layer of skin.

She walked to the window and stared outside. It was pitch black and raining hard. She thought about Jack and what he would be doing right now. Sleeping. Unlikely, probably getting up to something that would get him into a whole lot of trouble.

She was startled by the sound of the locks clunking. The door swung open and Edward limped in. Victoria froze, not expecting him back so soon. He hurried in, dragging his foot along as if he had just stubbed his toe or dropped something painfully heavy on it.

His hair and clothes were drenched. He seemed in a state of confusion and panic. His left eye twitched uncontrollably. He was breathing heavy as if he had just sprinted here.

He cursed and then punched the door a few times. Victoria stepped back until she felt the wall behind her. His eyes shot from side to side as if searching for an answer for something.

She flinched as he screamed in rage and kicked and punched the door again. This time faster and harder. He kept going until he looked completely exhausted. She could see blood on the door, presumably from his knuckles. He soon bent over gasping for air. And then fell to his knees and began weeping.

Victoria remained iced-over, not sure what to do or what to think. She had never seen him behave like this. She had never seen him cry. After a few moments, he became silent.

Perhaps he had planned to finish her off. Maybe he was on his knees praying, asking God, or the sick voice in his head, about the noblest way to kill her. She hoped it would be quick and painless but if the last six months had taught her anything, it was that he didn't do quick and painless. This would be the grand finale – something extravagant to please the demons within him.

He peered back slowly and stared into her eyes. He wiped the saliva that drooled down his chin and said, "It seems as if we may have to end this earlier than I had planned. It's a pity as we were so close."

## Chapter 38

Howard found a hotel nearby, it wasn't the Ritz, but it had a bed and a bathroom, which was good enough. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out his soaking socks over the warm radiator.

He observed the red marks on his neck in the bathroom mirror. Earned as a result of his clumsiness. He was glad he joined law and enforcement as opposed to the criminal world. He would have been a far worse criminal than he was a detective.

After taking a long shower, he wore one of the complimentary hotel bathrobes that smelt like it may not have been washed after the last occupant of the room wore it. He opened the brown envelope with the details, statements, notes and some photographs of the missing girl case and spread them out onto the bed. He scanned over them hoping that something relevant would just jump out at him – he knew he had no such luck.

He looked through the statements of the suspicious car four different people in the neighbourhood reported seeing it. All gave the same description black Vauxhall, two of whom confirmed it as a Vauxhall Vectra. A male driver, no description. No registration recorded. He was shocked that four people deemed it suspicious but none of them thought to note the plate. But that may seem obvious to him as he was trained to make notes of everything – it was his job. Everyone else had busy lives and more important things to do than to walk around noting people's number plates.

Getting Stephanie to run the plates was a long shot. He wasn't even sure what he was expecting to come back. He had no idea what the reg on the suspicious car was. But perhaps by some sheer fluke, he may be able to bridge a link. If nothing else, the fact that Edward Wellington lied in his

statements when questioned about having a Black Vauxhall in his possession, had to mean something. This was his guy; Howard could feel it in his bones.

Either that or he was infatuated by Mrs Bailey and had become obsessed with helping her.

He looked at the photo of Victoria. It was taken by her mother only days before she disappeared. She looked happy. A pretty little girl with a close resemblance to her mother. Her oppressive father was out of the scene and they were probably just getting their life back on track when this tragedy struck. Now at the hands of another member of the Wellington family. It wasn't fair. But then what did fair ever have to do with anything. A man could savagely rape a woman, taking away something from her that could never be replaced. Destroying her sanity – her life and get a five-year prison sentence – be out in three for good behaviour. Three years of not worrying about rent, bills and getting three square meals a day.

Howard was in no mood of thinking about fair. Fighting for justice in a world of injustices could push a man over the edge.

Howard picked up the photo of Edward Wellington. He stared into the evil eyes that glared back with a look of conceit.

"I know you have her, you bastard!" He said.

\*\*\*

The room was silent, and Edward hadn't moved an inch for what felt like forever. Victoria silently recited a little prayer. This was the end; she could feel it. It would be hard, probably more painful than anything she had ever felt but the comfort was in that it would all be over soon. She would be free at last. The anguish would be no more.

Edward got to his feet. Victoria tightened in fear. He limped towards the vomit that was on the floor and stood staring down at it. She saw his fists clench and he was cursing under his breath. He looked like a volcano moments before it was to erupt. He turned to face her. His eyes were swollen as if he had been crying for days. His frown turned the little hairs on the back of her neck into raised bristles.

"You..." he hissed, "After everything I have done for you. The provisions I gave you. This is how you show your gratitude!"

Victoria felt as if the ground was shaking with his loud yelling. She wanted to say that she didn't mean to – she felt sick – she couldn't control it. But she knew he didn't want to hear anything. The time for talking was over, that much was clear.

He walked towards her, dragging his foot. His nostrils flared in rage. She screamed as he clutched her by her hair and lugged her along the floor. The pain of having her hair ripped from her head was excruciating. He stopped next to the vomit.

"Look at it!" he screamed. He clasped the back of her neck, pushing her closer. She could feel his hands trembling. "You little devil!" He spoke from behind his teeth, "Look at it!"

Tears streamed down her face as she stared at the vomit.

"I'm sorry," she cried. Her face was inches from the muck on the floor. The smell was making her want to vomit more. But she swallowed hard. She could not tell that happen.

He pushed her face down and rubbed it into the vomit. She felt it all over her face. A burning sensation across her cheeks.

"You vile creature," he shouted and then lifted her head and then slammed it hard into the vomit. She saw a bright flashing light as her face struck the hard surface. Her bottom lip exploded, and pain surged through her like a lightning bolt.

Was this how he would end it? Crush her skull into the ground?

He lifted her head again. She braced herself for the next blow. Hopefully, this would be it. This would finish her off. But he didn't slam her head. He bent down.

"The problem with creating monsters is that the world must live with what they do." He whispered into her ear and then let her drop to the ground. Her vision was blurry, and his voice echoed. He limped out of the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

The room spun as she tried to get to her feet. Warm blood trickled from her lip and she was unable to move her mouth. She ran her finger over her lip and could feel her tooth. She stumbled to the mirror and cried as she saw her tooth and had ripped through her bottom lip and was now sticking out like a horn on a rhino.

She screamed in agony as she lifted her bleeding lip over the tooth to free it. More blood gushed out and the pain almost made her fall to the ground. Her tooth wobbled as she touched it. She thought back to the trips to the dentist. She was the girl who always got the reward sticker for great oral hygiene. She brushed for two minutes in the morning and for another two before bed. And religiously flossed at night. The dentist would often joke and say, "Here's the girl with the Hollywood smile."

She washed her face, cleaning off the blood and then held her mouth until she climbed into her bed. She pulled the covers over her head and prayed that she would fall asleep, never to wake.

## Chapter 39

Howard woke feeling stiff. His neck was locked, unable to turn left or right and his throat was sore. Like a caveman hunter who thought of getting up and hunting for food, he thought about finding a place that sold Aspirin. He groaned as he stretched his arms and tried to sit up.

He looked at his wrist, *nine-fifteen*. He had slept like a log. He probably would have laid straight back down had he not desperately needed to go to the loo. That and the craving for caffeine and pain killer. He felt his bones crack as he walked to the bathroom. He splashed cold water on his face and gently moved his neck from side to side until it loosened up enough for him to move it without it feeling like it was about to snap.

They were out of Aspirin in the first store he found that sold medicine. He settled with Paracetamol. But he was not compromising on the caffeine. He drove back to the café that sold amazing coffee and a lady who could speak for England.

"Coffee, black. Spot of milk please," he said soon as he walked in. There were more people in the café than last time. At least nine or ten. Scattered around the large area. The one thing he really was beginning to admire about the area was the open spaces. The Cafés in London were like shoe boxes in comparison. Nine or ten customers would be a full house in most places but here, it was the opposite. You could sit down and stretch yourself out. Not that he had any intentions of sitting down. He needed his fix and he had to make an important call to Stephanie to see what she dug up.

"You're still er then?" The outspoken lady remarked as she began making his coffee. Howard didn't say anything. He just smiled.

He noticed she was using fresh beans from an unlabelled jar. She caught him staring at the jar.

"You liked the coffee didn't ya?"

"It was great."

"I knew ya would. It's made with beans ya don't get around here."

"I'm sure." Although Howard, as a keen coffee drinker, was interested in finding out more about the coffee beans used, his mind was on his mission.

"To go, please." He said as he glanced at his wristwatch.

She turned and faced him, leaning her back against a shelf as she waited for the coffee to brew. Her eyes fell on the red marks on his neck. He buttoned up the top of his shirt to try to hide them but they were obviously still visible.

She then turned around and doubled up the coffee cup. She put it on the counter.

"It's on the aouse." She then stared deep into his eyes. "I hope whatever you are here to do... works out for ya."

Howard smiled and picked up his coffee, pretending he wasn't feeling the intense heat radiating from it even with it being doubled up.

"Thanks. I hope so too."

He drove to a payphone and sat in the car for a moment. He thought about sipping the coffee but then thought about what it might do to his insides at that temperature. He massaged his neck for a moment before getting out and heading to the payphone.

*Nine-fifty.* That will have to do. He wasn't waiting any longer.

"Stephanie, hi."

"I did the check, Howard."

"And?"

"Now don't jump to conclusions..."

"Stephanie! Come on, what you got?"

"The car was reported stolen from East London three years ago."

Howard fell silent.

"You still there?"

"I'm here," Howard responded quietly. "I knew it."

"Howard, listen. This doesn't prove anything."

"The man has a stolen car in his garage that is linked to the crime."

"No Howard. He has a stolen car. There is nothing to prove that this was the car reported as suspicious. Nor is there any evidence to prove that the car had anything to do with the abduction."

"So, you're saying this is all a coincidence?"

"No Howard, I'm not. I'm just stating some facts. I have spoken to Boris and the Chief."

"You did what!"

"Listen to me. They think you're onto something. There is something really not right about this guy but you can't just barge in there with nothing. His solicitor will have you for breakfast. And if they can prove you broke in last night, then the case will be thrown out and you will face criminal prosecution."

"So what then?"

"Boris and Howard are on their way to you. They said to stay put and they will meet you at the Wellington property in the evening – 8 pm sharp. If you are right and that girl is in there, then you're getting her out tonight."

"Thank you! I... I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything and for God's sake don't do anything stupid. If you're right about all of this, then Wellington is a dangerous man. Don't go there alone – that hero shit doesn't fly in the real world. Remember, 8 pm sharp."

"Roger that."

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Victoria walked into the kitchen in her home. Her mother hadn't come out of her room all morning. She was tempted to knock on her door and ask her if she wanted anything but decided to let her rest.

*She was probably tired and needed to catch up on her sleep.* Victoria lied to herself. She was old enough to understand that sometimes adults could feel down and even get very miserable. There was nothing she could do. Even when Victoria had asked her whether she was OK in the past, her mother would always respond by saying she was fine – just feeling a little tired. But this was far more than a little tired. The living room was a mess and the kitchen worse. There was no fresh food in the house and the last bit of milk finished yesterday.

She rinsed out a cup and filled it with water and sipped it slowly. She thought it would be a good idea to clean the place up. It needed it and it would be a nice surprise for her mother when she woke. Everyone loves a nice clean place. She could even fill the kettle up and turn it on, ready for her morning tea. Victoria opened the kitchen unit and saw the jar of tea bags.

Perfect.

She started with the living room and then worked her way into the kitchen. Her stomach grumbled as she collected last night's takeaway pizza box to put in the bin liner. It felt a little heavy for an empty cardboard box. She put it on the kitchen counter and opened it. Her eyes lit up when she saw a slice of deep pan vegetarian pizza. It felt a little hard but it went down a treat. In fact, it may have been the best pizza slice she ever had. She washed it down with a cold glass of water and then continued getting the place in order.

She had filled a black bag and put it next to the back door. Her eyes were drawn to the money jar her mother had on the window sill. It was full of coins and a few notes. This gave her an idea. She wanted her mother to have a proper cup of tea – one with some milk, the way she liked it. A few of her favourite biscuits would be a good idea. Rich Tea biscuits.

Tea with milk and a plate of Rich Tea biscuits would cheer her right up. She took the jar down and removed a five-pound note, three pound coins and four fifty pence pieces. She grabbed her coat and headed for the back door. Better to leave via the back as she didn't have a key for the front door, but the back-door key was always wedged in the door.

She opened the door as quietly as she could and then locked it behind her and placed the key safely in her pocket. There was a corner shop two roads down as you left the private estate. She had been there plenty of times with her mother. They sold everything there, from meat to cereal. She could get there, get the milk and biscuits and be back in twenty-minutes. Her mother wouldn't even know she was gone.

## Chapter 40

She glanced over at the neighbour's garden. The swing was empty. Timothy and his parents had gone away for the holidays. They had gone to California to visit family. It was good. Jack didn't seem himself for a while after the whole cat incident. Probably good he got away for a while. Get his mind off it and start fresh when he returned.

Also, if he was there, he may have insisted to tag along, and his mother wasn't the kind of mother that would be OK with them just wondering off outside. Nor was her mother coming to think of it. She had to be quick. She opened the garden gate and walked out on the road. It seemed peaceful. A little chilly but quiet. She briskly walked down the road. She was walking so fast that at points she found herself running. Both fear and excitement rushed through her. She had never done anything like this. She was not allowed out of the house on her own. Her mother had always been too overprotective for that. She knew enough horror stories to tell if ever required. But she'll be fine. She'll see it was OK when Victoria gets back having accomplished her first-ever solo shopping trip. Besides, this was a very safe neighbourhood.

The worst that ever happened around here was a missing cat or complaints about kids riding their bikes on the pavement. She'll be fine.

As she approached the end of the road, she noticed a black car with a man sat inside. The only reason it stood out to her was because the car was not parked very straight along the road like the other cars and that the man sat inside was staring right at her. She couldn't make out his face and didn't want to stare at him. She just walked faster until she reached the main road. It was busy and she felt safe at the sight of people rushing around. She walked straight into the corner shop and smiled at Mrs Khan who was stood at the counter.

Victoria walked around to the milk section and snatched a medium-sized carton. The small was too small and the large was too heavy to carry back. She then went to the biscuit section and nabbed the Rich Teas and shot to the counter. She thought about the sweets and the chocolates on display but decided not to get them – this wasn't about her.

"Hello, Victoria." Mrs Khan said in her strong Pakistani accent. An accent her father hated so much that he refused to shop there.

"Hello, Mrs Khan. Just these today thanks." She heaved the milk and biscuits onto the counter.

"Where is your mother?" She asked, looking concerned.

"Erm... she's in the car. Waiting, we're in a bit of a rush."

"Oh, OK. I hope you are going somewhere fun these holidays."

"Yes. My mother is going to surprise me." She said as she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"That is good. You are a lucky little girl. That will be three pounds, thank you."

Victoria put three pounds in her hand.

"Is your mother OK? It's just I haven't seen her in a while and the last time I did, she looked a little stressed out."

Victoria forced a smile. "She's fine. I'll tell her you said hi."

"Thank you, dear."

Victoria rushed out carrying the milk and the packet of biscuits. She probably should have asked for a carrier bag, but she just wanted to get out of there in case she got her lies tangled up and Mrs Khan clocked on to her not being with her mother at all.

She ran back as fast as she could. She thought about the strange car that was parked crookedly and the man that sat inside staring at her earlier. He had an eerie look about him. She wondered if he would still be there. Still staring.

It was daylight; people were around, not as many as usual due to the holiday period. Many of the residents on the private estate had gone away on holiday in the summer but there was still a fair few that didn't, like Miss Twain. A forty-seven-year-old widow that tended to keep an eye on the street from behind her white nets. She probably didn't realise that her nets weren't patterned enough to hide her. If you looked carefully you could see her silhouette. Or perhaps she didn't care that people could see her. Everyone knew she knew everyone's business – mainly because she went around telling everyone everyone else's business.

At any rate, Victoria had planned to keep running as fast as she could, and she was a relatively fast runner. She glanced at the area where the car was parked earlier. It was gone. She stopped running and walked briskly the rest of the way, relieved she was nearly home, and that the creepy car was gone. She barged into the garden gate with her shoulder and ran to the back door. Her hands trembled as she tried to unlock it. She was suddenly desperate to get inside. She looked back and saw an empty garden. She was just being paranoid. There was no one there. It was the middle of the day and she was just moments from getting in.

After a few seconds of trying to get the key into the keyhole, the keys fell out of her hand and onto the floor. Her heartbeat pounded in her head. She was now sure that someone was watching her. Someone was behind her. She looked back. Nothing. The garden was still empty. She knelt down and picked up the keys and began trying to get the right key into the keyhole. It was in, finally. She peered back as she turned the key making sure no one was around. The lock released and she

quickly turned the handle and got in. She was inside the house. She was safe. She locked the door and rested against it, breathing heavily. She closed her eyes and promised herself that she would never do that again.

After a few moments of coming back to her senses, she put the milk in the fridge and the biscuits on the table. She guzzled a pint of water and headed to the stairs to see if her mother was up. If she was Victoria would rush back down and get the kettle going and prepare a plate of biscuits. Then when she had made the tea, she would take it up to her room and serve it to her in bed. She would be thrilled to see it and it will make her day. And then when she came down and saw the gleaming living room and kitchen, she would feel fine – Victoria was certain of it.

Victoria opened her mother's bedroom door slightly and peered inside. It was dark. The curtains were still drawn. She looked at the bed; her mother was still fast asleep. She closed the door gently and walked back down the stairs. It's fine. She would go down and make herself a cup of tea and wait until she heard her go into the bathroom. She would get the tea and biscuits and wait in her room until she came out and then surprise her. She will love it.

As she walked down the stairs, she noticed the black bin liner she had filled earlier sat leaning against the front door. It took away from how hard she had worked to get the place into respectable shape. The bin was at the side of the house. She put on her shoes and opened the door. The cold breeze barged into the house.

The front door had one of those locks that opened from the inside without a key. She turned the handle up to lock it in case the door slammed shut behind her and locked her out. She heaved the bag out and across to the side of the house. The street seemed deserted. More people must have gone on holiday than last year. Aside from the whistle from the wind, the bag being lugged across the floor was the only sound that could be heard. She moved slow, careful to not let the bag rip. That would be disastrous. She imagined the bag splitting open and the wind carrying the contents across the street.

She was overcome by the same feeling of someone watching her as she did earlier.

*Get the bag in the bin and rush back into the safety of the house.* That was the plan. But now fear was overtaking her. The thought of just leaving the bag where it was and running back to the house crossed her mind.

"Get a grip!" she said to herself. She was just being paranoid, just like she was earlier. She had to get to the bin, dump the bag and get back in the house. A task people did every day. The bin was around the corner of the house. She couldn't see it, or anything thing else behind there. What if there was someone or something hiding behind that wall, next to the bin? What then?

You're not five-years-old anymore! She thought. Come on. There's nothing around that corner except the bin. She moved forward ready to peer around the corner with just her head at first to confirm that there was no boogie man stood there waiting to gobble her up.

## Chapter 41

She took a deep breath shuffled to the edge of the wall. She then cautiously peered around the side of the house.

She sighed. You're just being silly.

She tossed the bag into the bin and headed back to the house. Her eyes caught sight of the black car she saw earlier with the man sat inside. It was parked almost directly opposite her house. This time it was empty. She was only a few steps from the house... she'd be fine. Just run!

She ran inside the house and locked the door behind her. Her heart was beating wildly. But she was safe now. She took some deep breaths and walked to the kitchen with a warm cup of tea and a few of those tasty biscuits in mind. She might even take them upstairs and enjoy them while reading



a book. Her father hated her eating upstairs. He would have killed her if he saw her eating biscuits in her room. But he was gone. Gone for good.

A strange feeling loomed in the air as she walked into the kitchen. She couldn't get that image of the black car out of her head. And the feeling that someone was watching her was not fading. She had gone out. Done something adventurous, even a little dangerous – it was probably her nerves or adrenaline making her paranoid, she told herself.

She was at home now, in the comfort and safety of her locked and secure home. She need not worry about that car or anyone else. Besides, her mother was just upstairs – dead to the world but upstairs, never the less.

As she went to turn the kettle on the uneasy feeling intensified. Something was wrong she could feel it in the air. The sudden urge to drop what she was doing and run upstairs to her mother rushed through her. And she decided to do exactly that. But before she could move, she felt arms wrap around her – a hand tightly over her mouth, muffling her scream.

"Hello, Victoria..." A man whispered into her ear.

She wrestled to get free, but it was no use. He was too strong and held her tightly. She felt a sharp prick in her neck and within a few seconds, her body felt weak and limp. Her legs could no longer bear her weight and her vision became a blur. Her eyelids closed and she became unconscious.

Victoria screamed as she woke. She rolled off her bed and landed on her knees in the dungeon, gasping for air. She searched for Simon. She needed him now more than ever. She remembered what happened. Edward came into her house and abducted her. He must have got in when she was taking out the rubbish and he injected her with something to put her to sleep. Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle were fitting together. But there were still so many unanswered questions. What about her mother? Surely, she would not have just accepted that her daughter just disappeared without a trace. She didn't ever leave the house. She then thought about earlier that day. She visited the shop and brought milk and biscuits. And she lied to Mrs Khan about her mother.

What must Mother have thought? That she ran away? Went to the shops and got some supplies before she ran off?

She stood and sat on her bed. She gazed into the air. Her mother loved her. She would never have left any stone unturned. She was looking for her. Victoria was positive of it. Her mother was her hero and she would never let her down.

"If she was going to save you... your mother, she would have by now..." her inner voice remarked. "She's not coming for you, no one is. You're on your own. You don't even have Simon anymore."

"You're a liar! My mother is looking for me... I know she is! She would never give up on me, never!"

"Your mother was in no state to be looking for anything." Her inner voice bit back, "She could hardly look after herself."

Victoria wished Simon was here. He would have sided with her, he always did. And right now, all she needed was someone to understand.

At that moment, she heard a knock on the window.

"Great! It's the r-retard!" Her inner voice mocked. Victoria wanted to scream at her to shut up but then imagined how she would look to Jack. She was sure she looked weird enough already. Jack's mouth opened wide as she approached the window. She then remembered the state her lip was in. But it was too late to try to hide it now.

"W-what happened t-to your face?"

"I fell," Victoria replied.

"You must have fallen pretty b-bad. You're a mess."

"Thank you," Victoria replied.

"No, I didn't mean it like that. It's just that... it's really bad."

"I know... but it looks worse than it is." She lied. She didn't even know why she was lying. She should just tell him the truth. He was a nice person. Innocent, naïve. She could probably tell him everything and make him promise to not tell anyone and he would comply.

"Don't even think about it!" her inner voice intercepted her thoughts. "You cannot risk it."

*Why not?* Victoria thought. *Edward was psychotic, sadistic and now on the edge. You heard him, he was going to end this. What the hell do you think he meant by that?*

Her inner voice remained silent.

*Exactly.*

"Jack..." She said looking at Jack who seemed to still be a little grossed out by the state of her lip. "I think of us as friends – we are friends, right?"

"Course."

"Good. And friends can tell each other anything, right?"

He nodded in agreement. His expression appearing more serious. His eyes jumped from her lip to her eyes and then back to her lip.

"There's something I want to tell you."

"Don't do this!" Her inner voice said with desperation in her tone.

"A secret." Jack's face lit up in excitement, exactly what she assumed would happen at the mention of a secret. "But if I tell you, you must promise to not tell anyone."

He nodded.

"No, I need you to say it."

"OK, I do."

"No, say it."

"Fine, I promise I won't tell anyone... about y-your secret."

Victoria smiled. "Ok. Thank you." She took a few deep breaths and thought about where to start. The part that she was abducted from her home or being here, locked up by her psychopathic uncle who was ready to murder her? Either way, this wasn't going to be easy.

"Well? Are you going to t-tell me your secret or what?"

Victoria bit on to her nails. "There's something I haven't told you about me." She started. "I... am imprisoned here, by my uncle."

His pupils widened and he swallowed as if in shock and disbelief.

"You're joking, right?" he said with a half-smile, "You've been reading those fairy tales of princesses locked up in castles waiting for brave princes to rescue them, haven't you?" His smile dropped. "My mother told me never to make up stories, e-especially s-stories like these! Th-they can g-get y-you i-in a lot of t-trouble." His stutter was getting worse. She realised she was being selfish dragging this poor innocent boy into this. Look at what happened to Simon. She didn't want the same for Jack. He was the only person she could talk to and rather than getting him killed, she could just talk to him and play games – pass time until the inevitable. That would be the best course of action.

"I'm sorry," she forced a smile, "I thought it would be a fun game."

"Not fun!" Jack said. "For a m-minute, I almost believed y-you... Not fun at all!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's OK. I played a horrible p-prank on my mother once... I covered my hand in tomato sauce and pretended my finger had been chopped off in the door. Sh-she screamed in panic. It was h-hilarious but only u-until she figured it o-out. Sh-she was m-mad. I mean really mad. B-but she didn't punish me. She got really u-upset and emotional instead. M-my mother is the most emotional person in the world. I b-began wishing she d-did punish me. It was w-weird because her not p-punishing me was

like the worst p-punishment ever. I even laughed to provoke her to get furious and give me a clip round the ear or even just shout at m-me but sh-she didn't. She just sat on the s-stairs and cried." She could see his eyes filling. "I really regretted it and never did anything stupid like that again."

"OK, I get the hint," Victoria said. "I will not do anything stupid like that again."

"Good. Thank you."

"Good," Victoria repeated, "because I thought *you* were about to cry."

"I was not!"

"Were too!"

"Shut up!"

"*You* shut up!" they both broke into laughter. Victoria wasn't sure how she was able to laugh considering the circumstances, but she was. Perhaps if she didn't laugh, she would cry.

"How about *I* decide what game we play." He suggested.

"Fine by me."

He tilted his head and fell into thought. "Erm..."

Victoria sighed in relief. She was relieved that she didn't convince him of the truth of her situation. He wouldn't have understood. And he certainly wouldn't be able to help.

"Simon says." He finally said. Victoria's heart sunk to her ankles. She thought about her best friend. The friend who stood by her through thick and thin. The one who gave her hope when she lost all traces of it. *Simon says* was one of his favourite games and he was incredibly good at it. And the fact that his name was Simon made him feel as if he had more authority than her when they played. This being his happy thought meant that even if she wanted to, she would never win, she wouldn't do that to him – beat him at his own game.

*Beat him at his own game... Beat him at his own game...* The phrase repeated in her mind. *Beat him at his own game...* She suddenly had the craziest idea. It was so insane that she immediately tried to think of something else to prevent her inner voice from getting a whiff of it. She hid the thought in the deepest realms of her mind. She wasn't sure whether it was an epiphany or a moment of madness – but it made all the chemicals in her body react. Butterflies danced wildly in her stomach and hot and cold shivers electrocuted her.

"Are you OK?" Jack asked waving his hands in front of her eyes.

"Erm... sorry. I am actually still feeling a little sore and I don't think I am going to be much fun." And that part wasn't a lie. She was incredibly sore. The lie was in that she didn't want to play that game because it was the game that Simon loved most in the world and to play it with someone else was to betray her best friend and she would never betray Simon, ever.

"Oh. Ok, so how about we just talk. I like talking to you."

"OK. What do you want to talk about?"

Jack looked like he was in deep thought. "I have never really been asked that question."

"Sorry, that is a bit of a silly question."

"A very silly q-question!"

They both laughed.

## Chapter 42

Howard wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. There were a fair few hours between now and their rendezvous time and it wouldn't be a good idea to be lurking around there, especially after his close call last night. He found it incredibly hard to bottle up the excitement and adrenaline brewing inside him. He wished he had a mechanism to turn his insides from boiling to simmer.

He had been wrestling with anxiety for a couple of years. He found some temporary coping techniques but no real solutions. He dabbled in meditation, reading for an hour a day, he even took a swing at pottery. But all of these had little effect. They had no effect.

He missed smoking. This would be a great time to light up a cigarette and he often lied to himself about how it helped him cope in moments of stress and sadness. He tried to convince himself that it would help him calm his nerves. He would only have a couple or maybe even one, just to help deal with this and he would throw the rest away... or keep them in his glove compartment for rainy days.

Thinking about rainy days, the rain had been non-stop all night, it had taken a short break in the morning and now it was falling at full force. And looking at the sky, what had started as a heavy shower was spiralling into a potential storm. There was a faint drumming in the sky and an occasional spark. He didn't like either. Three or four years anxiety had meant that loud noises and even heavy winds amplified his panic. He avoided being outside in strong winds and buried his head deep in his pillows at the sound of thunder. All this suggested that the therapist was dead wrong about it being a temporary phase.

His years of studying criminals, psychopaths and cold-blooded killers might have just twisted his mind into a knot that could not be untangled. He was broken. Broken beyond repair. Perhaps saving this little girl and helping Mrs Bailey was his calling – the last good thing he would ever do before he finally cracked. He had returned the key to the hotel room. This was the last day he would be here. After this, he was going home, and he was not leaving without Victoria.

He sat in his car and thought of how to best kill the time remaining. He wasn't going back to the coffee shop – the lady was getting a little too curious and he was feeling guilty about her not charging him. He thought about her mentioning the girl Mary. The girl, she believed, went missing at the hands of Edward Wellington. It might be a good idea to do some digging and see what he could unearth about Mary, her disappearance and if there is a link to Mr Wellington.

It was a short drive to the local town. He loved the sight of the countryside. It looked beautiful even in stormy weather. What he couldn't stand were the country lanes. Narrow roads where every car on the opposite side was a potential head-on collision. *Someone distracted, looking down at their radio and leaning into the other lane at fifty-miles-an-hour or a couple having a heated argument and not paying attention to the approaching bend.* The lanes didn't have that sort of room for error. Nor did they have room for a suicidal deer leaping out and staring death in the face. Again, all in his head according to the therapist. Anxiety – he hated the word.

He couldn't go to the police station, not yet anyway. Instead, he visited the local library. He felt like a child playing detective. He walked up to the librarian desk where he was met by the gaze of an old lady peering over her glasses. She looked exactly how a librarian should look. Grey hair with a boring cardigan and sat behind a book which looked heavy enough to be used as a murder weapon.

"How can I help you?" She said in a voice that reminded him of his secondary school teacher, Mrs Hammond. He suddenly viewed himself as a thirteen-year-old boy.

He coughed lightly to clear his throat, "I was wondering if you had archives of old newspapers. Local newspapers... or national. Anything really."

She removed her spectacles and leaned back in her chair. It squeaked loudly.

"You're not from around here, are you?" She folded her arms.

Was it that obvious? Or was it that this town was incredibly small, and everyone knew everyone?

"No, I'm from London actually."

"What interests you in old newspapers of a little place like this where nothing ever happens?"

That was a good question and Howard was surprised that he hadn't prepared an excuse for it.

"I'm a writer, actually." He said quickly, "Yes, and I am working on a book set in this town and I wanted to learn a bit about its local history."

Her stern, teacher-like demeanour suddenly disappeared. Her face almost lit up and her wrinkles intensified as a smile grew on her raisin-like face.

"Oh. That's... that's wonderful." She sat forward. "Have you already had something published or is this your first book?"

The best lies were the ones with the most amount of truth, Howard thought.

"No, actually I am an aspiring writer, and this is my first novel."

"And you travelled from London all the way here to write it?"

Howard pursed his lips, "Yes, I wanted to feel the area that I was describing in my story."

"Remarkable." She said, "Tell me, what kind of story is it? I know this area is creepy enough for a Stephen King kind of mind. Please tell me you're not writing a horror book."

"No." Howard had seen enough horror in his career to fill this library with those types of stories. "I'm writing a book about a man. A man lost, running searching. Not knowing what he is running from or what he is searching for."

"Ooh, a story of self-discovery?"

*An autobiography, more like*, he thought. "Yes, something like that."

"Sounds delightful. I will not take any more of your valuable time." She stood and walked around the desk. "Follow me." She walked towards a spiralling staircase.

"Thank you."

"The world needs more writers. People who are skilled in telling stories, stories that shape society – people like Dickens and Orwell." She said as she walked up the steps. "This room has archives of old newspapers, dating back to the late sixties. We don't have anything earlier than that."

"That's perfect, thank you."

"You're welcome to stay and do your research but we close at four. And reopen in the morning at ten."

"I'm sure I will find what I'm looking for in a couple of hours, thank you."

The lady smiled and went back, presumably, to her million-page book she was reading earlier.

Howard began shovelling through the papers and hunting for reports on a missing girl called Mary. He thought about asking the librarian what she knew of the incident but thought she might mistake him for a reporter and kick him out.

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"Oh, guess what?" Jack said, his eyes lit up in excitement.

"What?"

He rummaged through his pocket, "My Auntie Martina came around yesterday. That's my mother's sister. She is really nice. My mother doesn't like her being around. She wears makeup and a lot of perfume. And my mother thinks she is a bit too much."

"What does she mean by a bit too much?"

"I don't know. The p-perfume is strong and lingers in the house for hours after she has left b-but it smells amazing. I am not sure if it's that or just because sh-she is so fun and doesn't take things as seriously as my mother. Mother looks at makeup as a sin and is repulsed by it. Auntie Martina thinks my mother is uptight and old fashioned. They don't agree on anything and there is always tension in the house when she is over and it remains there for hours after she leaves."

He removed two sticks of Wrigley's chewing gum. "She sometimes gives me treats in secret." He then looked at Victoria with a more serious look. "No one knows about that, you must not tell anyone."

"Cross my heart."

“And hope t-to die?”

“And hope to die,” Victoria repeated, meaning every word in every possible sense.

“She offered me a stick of gum before she left. I told her about you and she gave me two. One for you.” He smiled.

Victoria did not smile back. Panic flooded through her like a gushing river. This is exactly what her inner voice had warned her about. The boy and his big mouth. And now an adult knows about her. An adult who could get involved, get killed. Another person she might get killed.

“Are you ever going to come out?” Jack asked, holding the gum out.

“I... need to do something...” She said in a state of panic. “I just remembered something.”

“You do like gum, don’t you?”

She didn’t even know how to respond. How could she say she didn’t know whether she liked it when she could barely remember what it tasted like? She hadn’t tasted a sweet or chocolate in so long that she had forgotten their flavours.

“I... do. But I must go.” She turned and walked away.

“OK.” Jack said, “I’ll keep it for you for when you do come out.”

Her legs were so wobbly that she fell onto the bed.

“You better hope that Aunty Tart minds her own business and stutter face keeps his mouth shut,” her inner voice said, “Or they’re dead. All of them.”

She was right. If they asked about her, Jack would tell them she was a stupidly skinny girl he only ever saw in a room, wearing filthy rags, covered in bruises and scabs. She was a secret. Never to be exposed to the outside world, and a monster like Edward would go to great lengths to keep that secret.

What if Jack had told his aunt these details about her? What if she knew everything and was going to march up to the door and confront Edward – without realising she was marching to her death?

Victoria’s suicidal thoughts returned.

## Chapter 43

Howard finally found newspapers with articles about a missing girl named Mary Fisherman. The town was astonished to hear that she was missing. And police had tried hard to find her. There was no mention of Edward Wellington in any of the papers except one that mentioned he had been questioned but he was not arrested. The interviews from the local people claimed that she was a good girl. Polite and kept herself to herself. All of the interviewees said they found it impossible to believe she would ever run away. She had no reason to run. All her belongings were still at home. No one runs away without taking anything.

He looked at the images of Mary in the papers. She looked distinctly familiar to Victoria. Same shaped face, same colour hair. They could have easily been mistaken for sisters. This definitely could not be a coincidence but just like everything else in the damn case, it definitely couldn’t be used as evidence. Mary was probably someone Edward was obsessed with. But she didn’t seem the type to be attracted to eerie characters like him. She looked like the type that would fit nicely among human rights activists. People who cared about others, worried about the health of the planet and ate only natural foods.

*He couldn’t have her so he made sure no one could have her!* Howard’s best guess in this case.

There wasn’t a lot more about Mary and her disappearance in the papers but there were reports of other missing people. More than you would usually expect in a town like this. He put the papers together and noted down at least fifteen people going missing over the course of two years. All without a trace. But no connections to Wellington.

There were a few articles on Mr Wellington, who Howard assumed must have been Edward's father. A respected member of the community and regular volunteer at the local church. He had a few allegations of excessively beating children but from what he read, no charges. He was rich – filthy rich. The family had a lot of money but there was no mention of where it all came from.

He looked at his wristwatch.

Ten to four. Time to leave.

He put the papers back in their places and made his way down the stairs. He was met by the librarian's gaze. She smiled.

"Hope you found what you came for."

"It was very helpful, thank you."

He thought about asking her about Edward Wellington and her thoughts on Mary and her mysterious disappearance but decided not to. It wasn't long before he would meet his Chief and partner at the Wellington house. He didn't need to cause a stir. And he didn't need any more convincing that Edward was a rotten apple.

As he drove out of the town centre, he caught sight of flashing lights up ahead. His heart began to race. He didn't know why but it did. In his experience, flashing lights was never a good thing.

It was a fire engine and a police car parked next to it. He could see a cloud of smoke in the air. It was coming from the side of the road. He saw a car with huge flames emerging from it. The fire had consumed most of the car, but he could see some black panels at the bottom.

"Shit!" He hit his palms on the steering wheel and pulled over ahead. He should have guessed this would happen. He ran towards the car.

"Stop!" A police officer in a high visibility coat stood in front of him showing Howard his palms. "You can't get any closer – it's not safe."

Howard thought about identifying himself, but he thought about why he was here and what sort of impact this could have. If the local police got the hint that a detective from London was snooping around their neck of the woods, they wouldn't appreciate it. No one liked gate crashers.

"I... I just wanted to know if everyone is OK," Howard thought quickly, "I am a doctor."

"That's great Doc. But there's really no need. There was no one in the vehicle and as you can see no one is hurt. And unless you are a fireman, better than the ones taking care of the blaze, then I suggest you step back and stay clear."

Howard's eyes were peeled to the car. He knew what it was. It was Edward giving him the middle finger. The one thing linking him to the abduction burning to ashes in front of him and there was nothing he could do about it. Edward could have burned that car in a remote location where it wouldn't have been discovered for weeks or months. He could have dumped it in a river hundreds of miles from here. He could have done anything with it but instead, he chose to set it on fire next to the town centre and less than a mile from the police station. This was his way of saying "Catch me if you can!" loud and clear. *Arrogant bastard!*

He had a tenancy of getting rid of all traces of evidence in front of everyone's noses. He knew the law well and knew the loopholes in it even better. Of course, he would have sussed out that someone had seen the car. The lock on the garage door was broken. He almost killed Howard last night. He's getting rid of all traces.

*Victoria!*

She was the last trace.

Howard ran back to his car as fast as he could. Panic surged through him.

He was instructed to wait until the Chief and Boris arrived, but he was afraid. He was afraid it would be too late. Edward was too smart to wait for them to catch up. He was always a step ahead. But this was end game now. He knew they had found the family home – the place that would piece the last part of the puzzle.

Howard drove as fast as he could towards the Wellington's house. The car was sliding across the slippery lanes. Thick grey clouds covered the sky making it darker than it should be. That along with the heavy rain made it hard to see. It was a surprise that Howard's car didn't end up in a ditch.

He hit his palms on the steering wheel as he thought about the burning car. This was the reason why the chief would have agreed to come all this way. The car that would link Edward to the abduction. The only evidence that existed.

Howard would have denied ever breaking into the garage without a warrant. He would have had to claim that he received an anonymous tip and that's why they went to search the property. But now things just got complicated and Edward Wellington and his fancy lawyer loved complications. Still, they could never prove it was Howard that broke in last night. It was too dark and stormy. Besides, his dark clothing and black beany would have made him impossible to recognise. It would be Edward's word against his.

Howard put his foot down hard. He had to get there before Edward got rid of all evidence – if he hadn't done so already.

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Victoria chewed on her nails as she thought frantically about the consequences of her ever talking with Jack.

She thought of all the ways she could kill herself. She couldn't bear seeing Edward drag another dead body in here. Especially someone like Jack's aunty. She seemed like a free spirit – a person who would go on to live an exciting and adventurous life. The kind of person who would not be scared to bang on the door and demand answers.

Victoria thought of using the bedsheets to hang herself. Then thought about running into the door or wall head-first as fast as she could and repeating the process until she was good and dead.

"Stop it!" her inner voice said, "Stop thinking like a fool."

"I'm not. It's over. I can't take it anymore."

"So, you're just going to kill yourself? That's your answer!"

"You got a better suggestion. I am not going to watch another person die because of me. I can't and I won't!"

There was a brief silence.

"You're a coward!" her inner voice said.

"What?!"

"You are! You're scared of what you will feel. You're scared of how you will feel more than you are scared of Edward, more than you are scared of someone being killed. Just the way you are afraid of how life would be without Simon more than you are about what may have happened to him. You are afraid of yourself more than you are of anyone else. Aren't you?"

Victoria broke into tears.

"No! I don't want anyone to die."

"You don't want to be responsible, that's the truth."

Victoria shook her head and sobbed more.

"Your father died, and you were glad of it."

"He was an evil bastard!" Victoria screamed.

"And he deserved to die?"

"Yes! He deserved to die. He deserved more than that!"

"So, why did you find it so hard to deal with? Why did your mother find it so hard to deal with? It's easy to deal with people dying – it's not easy to be responsible for them dying. Your mother



didn't kill your father – it's true. She didn't have it in her. But she did let him die. She didn't help him after the accident, knowing that by doing so he would die. And do you know why she did that?"

Victoria put her hands over her ears.

"She did it for you. She did it to save you from him. You may as well have stabbed him in the heart with the kitchen knife."

"He was an abusive man who made our lives hell!"

"So you silently conspired with your mother to kill him."

"No! It was an accident. My mother must have panicked and ran. People panic."

"Lying to the world is one thing but lying to yourself is something completely different. It eats you up inside."

"I'm not lying!" She screamed. "My mother did not kill him, and I am not responsible but I am..."

She paused.

"You are what?"

"I am glad he is dead! But I am not responsible!"

"Then deal with it! Deal with what has happened and what should happen. Your natural instinct is to survive, not die. You only want to die when you can't deal with it in your head. Use your head and deal with it. If you want to survive that is."

She heard the clunks of the door unlocking.

"You want to die?" her inner voice whispered, "Here's your chance!"

#### Chapter 44

The door flung open and Edward strolled in, boots squeaking. He was soaked. Stunk of petrol and wore a smug look on his pale face. He walked past her and gazed out of the window.

Is he looking for Jack? Does he know about him? Has his aunty already come to confront him? Has he... God no.

He remained silent for a while. This put Victoria on edge — the suspense was killing her. He orchestrated the long silences to create tension, she was sure of it. For him, this was like a form of art. A play that he wrote and played the main part. He executed each step exactly how he outlined it. She witnessed him close his eyes and shake his head slowly as if he was listening to a melody that only he could hear.

"It is often said that life is a gift," he finally spoke, still facing the window, "A gift that comes with many promises yet only one guarantee." He turned and faced Victoria, "Do you know what guarantee that is, my child?"

Victoria remained silent. Shivers ran through every inch of her body.

"Death," he said and then fell silent as if to add dramatic effect. "Life is a ticket to the greatest show on earth. We are both the audience and the performers." He turned and faced the window again. "What is a play without tragedy? When it is the tragedy that makes the play. Take away the tragedy from Romeo and Juliet and what are left with? A bad play that would have been forgotten almost immediately after it was performed. It is death and tragedy that breeds new life into us."

You're mad! Victoria wanted to scream but dared not utter a word. Instead, she realised that she was far closer to the door than him. She had enough time to run out of the door and lock him inside. He was limping as he walked in. He was slow. She would have a good head start to run out and lock him inside.

"If you are going to do this, do it now!" her inner voice said, "He is not here to just talk to you today. It is the end of the road. He is here to carry out the tragedy in his sick little play. Do it! I believe in you!"

Victoria swallowed painfully and a million ways of how this could go wrong flashed across her mind. The one thing she could rely on was the fact that he would never expect it. She was the little girl that was too scared to do anything. An easy target. Someone he could terrify, get thrills out of torturing for his sadistic pleasure. And know that she would take it and do nothing. But not today, he wouldn't expect her to be courageous enough to run out and lock him inside – outwit him.

She took a deep breath and tried to stop herself from shaking. She was afraid that she might fall over with amount her legs trembled. Her inner voice was right, a person's natural instinct was to survive and in order to survive, she had to run out of that door, irrespective of how terrified she was and regardless of the consequences of what would happen if she failed in her escape.

She turned and bolted for the door without looking back. She imagined the shocked expression on his ugly face.

She pulled the door with all her might and it slammed shut. She stared at the locking mechanisms. There was a metal leaver that needed to be slid along the door and onto the latch on the wall. She groaned as she tugged at it with all her strength, but it wouldn't budge. It was too heavy. She searched the rest of the door but in the panic couldn't make sense of anything else.

"Bravo!" he said from behind the door, "Bravo!" He clapped a few times. "And the plot thickens..." He laughed.

"Run!" her inner voice shouted.

Victoria took the advice. With a surge of adrenaline running through her body she pelted it up the stairs as fast as she could. Her thighs were burning as she got to the top. She didn't look back to see if he had come out of the room. The fact that he was so calm about her getting out of the room, frightened her even more. Not only did it appear like this was a game to him, but he also didn't seem like the kind of player that ever lost.

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Howard floored the car straight into the long driveway of the Wellington manor. He broke through the gates and heard the headlights on his car crack.

Playtime was over.

If he had got this all wrong, he was fired, even face some prison time. But he wasn't wrong – he knew that much. And he knew that he couldn't wait for the Chief and Boris to turn up at their leisure.

He sprung out of his car. The pain in his knees from him running towards the steps leading into the house reminded him he was no longer twenty-five. He peered into the window. His heart pounded his chest and he panted. He couldn't see much inside. It was dark and there was no movement. He checked the door. Locked. He shoved it hard in the hope that he may be able to force it open. It didn't budge. He had to get inside and fast. He ran back to the car and opened the boot. He rummaged through until he found his wheel changing tools. He could use on end of the tool like a crowbar – it was a pity he didn't have a battering ram to hand.

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Victoria ran through the corridor in panic. There were a few doors. She followed the music. It was still playing like it was when she went there for dinner.

"What are you doing?" her inner voice asked. There was panic in her tone.

"I need to find Simon." Victoria ran towards the door.

"Have you completely lost your mind? You need to get the hell out of here! Look for an exit.

Victoria barged into the room where she had been not so long ago. Sat dining with the enemy. The fire was out, and the room was ice cold.

She hunted for Simon. He wasn't on or under the table. She searched all the corners of the room but found nothing except another door on the opposite side of the room. She ran towards the door.

"You don't have time for this." Her inner voice said, "You need to find a way out now! He is probably close. Maybe just outside the room. You need to move."

But Victoria couldn't run. Not without Simon. She opened the door on the other side of the room. It was dark and she was met by a staircase leading down.

"Don't do it! Don't you dare go down there! You don't know what is down there. Run back and find the door leading out of this hell hole!"

Victoria crept down the stairs barely able to see in front of her. "Simon!" she called. As she got to the bottom of the steps she was met by another door. It was metal and had similar locks to the ones on the door of the room she had been trapped in.

"What is this?" She asked herself.

"What do you think it is?!" her inner voice said in a bitter tone. "This guy is not well. He is a complete psychopath! You think you're the only one he has locked up here. God knows how many people he has caged and how many he has already killed. This place is a chamber. You need to get out.

Victoria unlocked the door. The loud clunks sounded the same as what she was used to from her room in the dungeon. She pushed the door open. She covered her mouth as she stared at a room the same as the one, she was in. It had the same layout. Bed, toilet, sink and dressing table. Except there was no window. Just four concrete walls.

"Simon is not here." She said as she gazed around the room.

"No shit!" Now turn around and run like your life depends on it. Because guess what? It does!"

"But Simon..."

"He is not here! Listen, if he is still here and wasn't hurled into the fire then you are no use to him if Edward gets you. Get out of here and get help. You can come back to him with the police. Then you would actually be able to help him."

Victoria walked further into the room. Her curiosity had taken over all her other senses. Who was this room for? There were photos and newspaper cut-outs on the dressing table. She looked through them. The newspapers were all stories of a missing girl, Mary Fisherman. The photos were of the same girl. She was smiling in some and sad in others.

"She wasn't like you..." Edward's voice emerged from behind her.

## Chapter 45

Howard wedged the end of the wheel nut removing tool in between the door and the door frame and yanked as hard as he could. He wriggled it from side to side until the lock snapped open. Part of the door frame broke and fell to the ground.

He ran into the house and into a large living room. There were three doors leading out and a staircase. He barged through the door closest to him. It led into a long corridor.

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"She was brave and daring." Edward continued. His voice calm as if the fact that Victoria making a daring escape and ending up here was all part of his plan. Victoria didn't turn around. She was too afraid to face him.

"She fought right up until the end. It was something I loved and hated about her. I loved her spirit but hated her stubbornness. She wouldn't even give me a chance. There was no one in this world that could give her what I could have given her – had she given me the chance – had she just not been so obstinate. She was meant to be here. She was meant to be with me." He fell silent for a moment. "Emotional creatures, women. Something I could never figure out. It was illogical to think and make decisions on emotions. Emotions can kill you as she proved to herself. The brain was the tool given to man to think. Not the heart. That's why the brain continues to function for a while before the heart gives up and stops beating. The mind is a powerful thing. And should not be influenced by the heart."

"You're sick," Victoria said without thinking. "You're not normal. You killed her by locking her up here and torturing her! She killed herself to escape from you – I thought about doing that many times."

"And yet you didn't."

"I was too afraid to! I am a coward, that's why I didn't."

"On the contrary, I think you are the brave one. You chose sanity over insanity; you chose life over death. You are not a coward. It is what makes you unique. It is what I saw in you."

She turned to face him, and her soul felt as if it had leapt out of her body.

"It's strange. Being in her room and looking at you stood there reminds me of her. She would try to convince me that I was sick and not normal. She could never understand me, but I think you do. You Victoria are very special, and I will not let this foul world consume you. I will set you free."

He took a couple of steps closer. His face was covered with what looked like a brown sack with two holes cut out for eyes. Victoria trembled at the sight of him.

Victoria caught a glimmer of the steak knife he had in his hand. He had it by his side, pointing to the ground. This didn't make her any less terrified. She knew exactly why he was here. This was the end of the road. She had imagined this moment many times in her head and sometimes even longed for it to come. But nothing prepared her for it. She could feel the warmth from the urine trickling down her legs.

"So, is this how you did it?" Victoria said in a shaky voice, "Is this how you killed her?" She picked up a photo from the dressing table. "You wore that... that thing over your face... you couldn't bear the thought of her seeing you for the monster you really are!"

He tilted his head. "I would never hurt a hair on her head. She was very precious to me."

"Let me guess, you showed her that by locking her up in here and feeding her rotten bread?"

"No. I kept her here until she realised her purpose, our purpose. But she... she wasn't patient enough and she took her own life." He paused for a moment and then took another step closer. Forcing Victoria to take one step back. She tried not to show her fear.

"I was devastated." He continued, "I didn't want to lose her. I wanted to protect her. I failed in that. But I will not fail in you." He walked towards her. Her back was against the wall – there was nowhere left to run. Hopefully, it will be fast. He would just slit her throat or stab her straight in the heart as opposed to repeatedly stabbing her in different places causing her the maximum amount of pain before death. It wasn't a nice feeling knowing that the last thing she would see of this world would be this hideous mask. But she preferred the mask to the more hideous face underneath it.

"Victoria!" A voice emerged from upstairs. Edward froze. At first, she thought she might have imagined it but then she heard it again, "Victoria!" It was a man's voice. She didn't recognise it. She knew it wasn't in her head because Edward heard it too. He looked in the direction of the stairs. Victoria could sense his panic. She wasn't sure where the courage came from but she ran forward stamping on Edward's bad foot as she shot past and up the stairs. She heard him scream in pain behind her. She didn't look back and kept running until she got to the top. She was faced by a man. He stared back at her in surprise. He stepped forward and raised out his palms.

“My God...” he said and stared at her as if he was staring at a ghost. “I can’t believe it is actually you. Victoria.”

She had no idea who he was and how he knew her name. What was he doing here? Maybe Jack had told someone. Either way, he, just like her, was now in danger.

“Victoria, my name is de—”

“We have to leave right now!” Victoria shouted and ran towards him.

“Wait, hold on...” but the man’s eyes looked behind her. Edward was behind her. Still wearing the sack over his face. His devilish eyes visible through the eye holes. Still clenching the large knife.

“Run!” the man pulled her arm and they ran out of the room and through the corridor. She noticed the man looking around frantically, confused about which way to turn. He barged through a door, pulling her along. They ran through a large room and through another door. He stopped and looked around. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and he was panting.

“This way.” He pulled her along as he headed for another door.

The place was like a maze. Rooms and doors everywhere. The dingy lighting and dark furniture didn’t help.

They ended up in a room that Victoria recognised. It was the room that led back to the dungeon that she had escaped from.

“We can’t get out this way,” Victoria whispered. “We must go back out.”

“Wait. Be quiet.” The man whispered back. They could hear creaking shoes outside the room. Victoria knew that sound all too well.

“Detective Howard.” Edward’s voice emerged. “So nice to see you again.”

The man was a detective, Victoria thought.

Howard held her hand, pulling her closer and moving away from the direction of the voice.

“It’s been a long time.” Edward said and then chuckled, “I applaud your tenacity, I really do. The hotshot detective who fell for the damsel in distress, losing everything in his life... losing himself to chase a ghost. You’re like a character in a bad movie.

But I got to hand it to you, you are a damn good detective, most people in your shoes would have quit years ago. But not you. You’re the kind of man that sees things right through to the end. That’s why you and I are not so different. We may have taken different roads, but we are certainly heading in the same direction.”

She could feel the sweat on Detective Howard’s hand as he clenched tightly. She could even feel his pulse pounding through it or perhaps it was hers. He used his forearm to wipe the sweat from his forehead as he braced himself.

The door swung open and Edward rushed in, pulling his bad foot along. Detective Howard opened the door that led down to the dungeon and pushed Victoria in.

“Run!” He yelled and then ran towards Edward who now had the knife raised almost above his head. She turned back and stared with eyes wide open as the detective tried to wrestle to stop Edward. The detective had grabbed the arm that held the knife and they rocked from one wall to another. But to her horror, Edward managed to break free. And he stabbed the knife into the detective’s stomach. He screamed out in agony. And Victoria screamed in fear.

His shirt turned red and he slid down the wall and on to the floor. Edward yanked the knife out of the man’s gut and sat on the floor next to him, gasping for air. He ripped the sack off his face and held his throat as if he was being choked.

Victoria remained frozen. Unable to look at the man leaning against the wall, eyes closed and blood pouring out of him, yet unable to look away. He tried to save her and now he was dead. She was lethal. Anyone who came anywhere near her ended up dead. Perhaps this is why Mary killed herself. She couldn’t handle being the cause of people dying. Maybe if she was as brave as Mary, she

would have done the same and saved innocent people from dying. But it was her selfishness that stopped her. Her life in exchange for many others. What type of person did that make her?

After a few moments, Edward appeared as if he had got his breath back. He turned his head to face Victoria. She remained frozen at the top of the steps.

“Victoria, sorry. Where are my manners? Please meet Detective Howard. He is... was the detective working on finding you. And although you know nothing of him, he knew everything about you. He worked for a very long time and conversed with your mother, who also did everything she could to try to find you.”

Victoria felt butterflies in her stomach at the mention of her mother. Victoria knew she wouldn't have forgotten about her. She knew how much her mother loved her. She thought about what her mother would have gone through. The last memories she had of her were not the best. She was not in a good place and to then have her daughter suddenly go missing and right under her nose. It couldn't have been easy. The biggest mistake her mother ever made was to marry her father. A mistake that she had paid a severe price for.

Edward put the mask back over his head and then stared at her through the holes. He tilted his head. Victoria's heart sped up again. She felt as if she was shrinking and about to hyperventilate.

“This wasn't how I envisioned the end. But that's the enigmatic thing about fate – it's not in your control. Far from it, in fact. It is like a magical journey. You don't know where it starts or where it leads – you're just a passenger, here for the ride.”

## Chapter 46

“You're driving a little over the speed limit, are you not... Chief?” Boris said as he stared at the speedometer and held on to the armrest. The chief didn't respond. “Gavin, I am serious. You're hitting ninety. And the time we gave was eight. We have plenty of time.”

“Something doesn't feel right.” Chief Gavin said, keeping his eyes glued to the road.

“Ok, so Edward Wellington has a stolen car in the garage of his family home. What are we going to do? Arrest him for that? His lawyer will have us for breakfast! Let's not forget the fact that Howard broke into the property. No warrant means trespassing, and the judge will throw it out.”

The chief remained silent.

“That's even if the car is still there! If he figured out that Howard has been snooping around, he would get rid of that car immediately. That's what I would do... Then we'd have absolutely nothing. And you're hitting ninety-five and to be honest, I'm a little uncomfortable with that.”

“Howard trespassing or us going at ninety-five?”

“Both.”

“Look, if he has got this all wrong and Edward has nothing to do with the missing girl and the car is a mere coincidence, then we need to stop him before he does something stupid. And if he is right... then Howard may be in real danger.”

“So, why aren't we alerting the local police?” Boris asked, his eyes opening wider as he noticed the needle on the speedometer inclining further.

“Howard is my... he is our friend. He was dealt a bad hand with this case. That doesn't mean we leave him to the dogs. We're going to help him and bring him back to London in one piece.”

“You're right...” Boris said.

Chief Gavin tore his eyes away from the road and looked at Boris.

“What? You're right. He is our friend and he would help anyone in our department. In fact, he would help anyone that asked for it. He's a bloody Samaritan, that man!”

“Thank you!” the Chief remarked with a smirk.

“Now please can you keep your eyes on the road before you get us both killed. And maybe try to keep it below a hundred.”

“I’ll try. But I can’t promise you anything.”

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Edward slowly got to his feet. Still holding the blood dripping knife. He used the detective’s jacket to wipe it clean. It felt surreal. Victoria didn’t know what was more terrifying, the fact that he just killed a man in cold blood or that he seemed so casual about it all. As if a person’s life meant nothing to him and cleaning blood from his murder weapon was something mundane like washing the dishes.

He had no hesitations with killing, that was for sure. He wouldn’t even flinch when he killed her. Just the way she imagined he would have mercilessly thrown Simon in the fire. There was nowhere left to run. No escape.

She ran down the stairs and into the room, closing the door behind her. She was back in the dungeon. This was probably his perfect ending. Just the way he had imagined finishing her. Right here in the very room she was imprisoned and tortured in. Edward was right – you could not escape destiny.

She stared out of the window and awaited her fate. She watched the branches of trees blowing in the wind. The heavy rain hitting the window. It was beautiful. She imagined being out there.

She heard the door swing open but didn’t look back. She could hear his heavy breathing and the creaking of his shoes as he walked in. She wasn’t scared anymore. Her hands and legs stopped trembling. She was ready to stare death in the face. She turned and faced Edward. She looked past the mask and saw a soulless man with vacant eyes. A man who had interpreted life in a twisted way. She could no longer even hate him for it. He was just part of fate. Something out of her control.

She closed her eyes and thought about her mother and Simon – her happy thoughts. In the bid that if they were the last thing she saw in her mind then perhaps that would be what she would hold onto for all eternity.

The creaking of his shoes got louder as he got closer. She could feel his presence towering over her. She tried not to think about what was about to happen or that he probably had the knife raised up and ready to butcher her. She kept sight of her happy thoughts and found comfort in that she would never hear the creak of those shoes or the clunks of the metal door. She would finally escape the dungeon.

“It’s gone, isn’t it?” Edward said. “Fear. It’s gone. I know it is. I can’t sense it from you anymore.”

Victoria remained silent, trying not to pay attention to what he was saying. She didn’t want his voice to be the last thing she heard.

“You have finally learned to let go of everything. My child you—”

“I’m not your child!” Victoria yelled. “You are a monster. A murderer.”

“I like to think of myself as a teacher. I teach life lessons.”

“You’re twisted!”

“Victoria, Victoria, Victoria. You still amaze me. It really is a shame it has to end like this.”

“And you’re a coward.” She continued, now opening her eyes and staring straight into the holes in the sack.

He leaned forward and grabbed Victoria by the neck. Squeezing hard enough to make her head spin. “I may be many things; a murderer, a madman but I am no coward.” He threw her on to the dressing table. The table toppled over and the mirror shattered and fell to the floor. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her over the sharp pieces of glass. She could feel some of the glass piercing into her skin. She screamed in pain.

He slammed her head into the wall. The pain nearly made her pass out. Victoria's eyes caught sight of Jack. He was stood by the window. His face filled with terror. She wanted to scream, tell him to run, get away from here as fast as he could but she was unable to speak. Edward pulled her hair and threw her to the ground.

"Your mind is weak. Still weak." Edward said. "You've dealt with the fear but you can't deal with the pain." He raised the knife, ready to launch it into her. But before he could, he yelled out in pain.

Detective Howard struck him on his back with the stool from her dressing table. He was still alive. He held his stomach and looked as if he was in agony. The knife had fallen from Edward's hand and Howard kicked it to get it away from Edward's reach.

"Run! Get out of here!" Howard shouted as Edward came charging at him like a raging bull. Howard screamed out in pain as Edward speared him to the ground and sat on top of him repeatedly punching Howard in the face.

Victoria fought to get to her feet. The room was spinning and her head was ready to explode. She glanced at the window and saw Jack holding a brick in his hand.

What are you doing? She thought.

"No!" She screamed as he launched the brick at the window, shattering the glass.

She turned to run but felt someone grab her leg forcing her to fall on the ground. Edward was lying on the floor and had her leg clenched tightly. He pulled her towards him. She dug her nails into the ground, desperately trying to stop herself from being dragged back. But it was no use. The floor was concrete, and she had no nails left. She kicked as hard as she could and even managed to kick him in the face, but it wasn't enough to stop him and he kept pulling. She felt more glass from the mirror cut into her back.

Edward shuffled himself on top of her and clasped her neck tightly. She tried to fight back but he was too strong. Her vision was turning into a blur. She then noticed Jack stood behind Edward. His face still with a look of shock and horror. She wanted to tell him to run but she was not able to. She saw Jack reach down and pick up a long piece broken mirror. His hand was dripping blood from how hard he was clenching it.

She tried to shake her head to tell him not to do it. He was a simple boy and doing something like this would ruin his life.

Jack lifted his arm and then stabbed the sharp glass into Edward's neck. The pressure around Victoria's neck released immediately. And blood gushed out of the side of his neck like a fountain. Victoria gasped for air and her heart was throbbing so fast she thought she was about to have a heart attack. She always wished that she could watch Edward as he died. See the pain and horror in his face. The look that he had lost, been outwitted. But she was glad he was still wearing the mask. She couldn't bear to see his face. After a moment Edward, holding the hole in his neck and making loud choking noises collapsed on top of Victoria. He was heavy and her chest tightened with his weight.

Victoria looked at Jack who was stepping back and his hands trembling. He looked at the piece of glass in his hand and then dropped it in a panic. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Jack!" Victoria called out. He didn't respond. He kept stepping back.

"Help me!" She shouted. "Please." But Jack's eyes looked like they had glazed over. And he turned and ran. He climbed out of the window and ran.

"Jack!" Victoria screamed as she felt the weight of Edward crushing her and the blood from his neck spraying on to her face. She could no longer breathe.

"He's gone." Her inner voice said, "Now, save your breath. And your energy, you're going to need it if you want to live."

Victoria struggled and pushed to get out, but she was in too much pain and too weak to budge him.



“Stop trying to push him. He’s too heavy and you’re far too weak. Instead, wiggle your body and try to slide out.

“I can’t... I can’t do it.”

“You can and you will. Come on move!”

Victoria wiggled her body as hard as she could. She could feel the glass tearing into her back.

“Good. Now push with your legs at the same time.”

Victoria pushed with her legs and screamed in agony. She managed to move higher. Edward’s head was now off her chest and on her stomach, which was painful but at least she could breathe better. She rested for a moment and took some deep breaths. And then wiggled and pushed again until she broke free.

She lay on the floor. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her head was spinning.

“Well done, Victoria.” Her inner voice said, “Well done.”

Victoria used the bedsheets to wipe some of the blood off her face. She felt a sharp pain in the palm of her hand. It was cut pretty badly. She assumed it must have been from when she fell on the glass, she thought.

She walked towards the stairs, not looking back just in case Edward raised himself from the dead to finish her off. She thought of the man who came and saved her lying on the floor unconscious but she didn’t have the courage to turn back. She ran through the stretched, dingy corridors. She barged through the first door she saw. It led to a large room with nothing except two large sofas. She ran back out and continued along the corridor. Her feet tingled and the walls felt as if they were caving in. She was afraid of the house – bile came up her throat. She tried the next door. Worried that Edward would be behind the door, with that terrifying mask over his face.

Another room. More dull furniture. The room had a door on the other side. She was too afraid to open it. Too afraid of what she might see. Another room used to imprison another girl. A torture chamber. A place Edward stored the bodies of Mary and the engineer and God knows who else.

She wasn’t taking any chances. She ran back out into the hallway until she got to the very last door. She opened it and ran through a large room to a door that was half-open. She could feel a cold breeze coming from it. It must be the front door of the house. The door the detective used to gain entry. That would explain why it was damaged and open.

She stopped as she got to the door. Frozen. Terrified. Was this a dream? She asked herself. Was she finally getting out of the dungeon? None of this felt real. She was sure that she would die and rot in this place and that Edward would way outlive her. But no, this was very much real. The cold was biting into her skin.

She pulled the door open. She was hit by a gush of wind. It felt amazing. Fresh. She cried as she walked out into the front of the house. The dark sky had a few glimmering stars. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. The light drizzle quickly transformed into heavy raindrops. It felt sensational. To feel anything outside of the dungeon felt extraordinary. She closed her eyes and faced the sky. The rain hit her face and rolled down her neck. She smiled.

For a moment she thought about Edward resurrecting from the dead and grabbing her from behind and strangling her to death, but she didn’t care anymore. To have felt the wind and the rain against her skin, even if it was for just one last time, was enough. He could do nothing to her now. She was free.

She walked across the garden and stepped over the broken metal gates. Dizzy. Pain resurfaced in her head as the adrenaline wore off and the cold was now making her shiver uncontrollably. The area around her was beautifully dead. No one to be seen.

She stood in the road and searched for help. Her legs were barely able to hold her weight. There was a dim glow in the distance.

## Chapter 47

"I can't see a thing." Chief Gavin said as they drove through the narrow country lanes.

"That's really reassuring," Boris said. His heart racing and palms sweating from clenching the armrest tightly. "Perhaps you should slow down."

"We're nearly there. This place is quiet, peaceful. I see why people move out to the countryside. Be a nice place to retire."

"Gives me the creeps," Boris said as he looked out of the passenger side window, unable to see anything. "I am not sure I like the thought of having to carry a torch just to walk outside."

"Yes, it is a little dark."

"A little dark is a bit of an understatement, don't you think?"

"You're right. Can't see a damn thing. I really hope a deer don't jump out on us."

The thought made Boris clench the armrest even tighter.

"You don't think Howard would have just gone in there, on his own?" Boris asked. Trying to distract himself from the thought of a deer jumping out.

"This is Howard we're talking about. He has never listened to anything I have ever told him to do."

"True."

"It's probably what makes him such damn good detective."

"Look out!" Boris shouted as he saw someone stood in the middle of the road. Chief Gavin swerved sharply and slammed on the brakes. The tyres screeched across the wet tarmac. The car spun and hit the bank.

Boris felt whiplash. And judging by the look of sheer pain on Chief Gavin's face he felt it too.

"What was that?" Chief Gavin asked.

"Looked like a little girl."

"Stood in the middle of the road?"

Boris looked out of the window.

"That's the Wellington property."

"Call for back up." The Chief opened the door and almost fell out of the car. The painful feeling of having the wind knocked out of him was subsiding. He staggered towards the little girl who was still stood in the middle of the road. Her face and clothes were covered in blood.

He removed his coat and put it around her.

"Victoria?" He asked.

She didn't respond and collapsed to the ground. He knew it was her. Howard was right. He was right about everything.

"Boris, call an ambulance and get me some help now!" He yelled at Boris who was fighting to get out of the car.

The Chief gazed over at the Wellington house. It looked like a house that belonged in a dark corner of hell. He held the girl tightly. She was shivering and was not saying a word. Her eyes looked glazed over. He recognised her from the photos. She looked different. Her cheeks sucked into her face. Eyes sunken. Nose arched. A skeleton of the pretty little girl in the photos.

A strong feeling of guilt overcame him. He should have listened to Howard. This was the reason people joined the law. To save lives and bring people to justice. Howard had taught him a valuable lesson – sometimes you got to tell bureaucracy to kiss your ass.

Boris came rushing towards them with a flashlight.

"She alright?"

"I think so."

“Back up and an ambulance is on the way. Any sign of Howard?”

“No.”

Boris shone the flashlight at the house.

“That’s his car.”

“Wait for back up.” But Boris had already started running towards the house.

Victoria turned her head and looked at the house. Her shaking intensified.

“It’s OK.” Chief Gavin said. “It’s over. You’re safe.” He was torn between staying with her, making sure she was OK or chasing after Boris to stop him from going in on his own. Back up was on its way. He could hear the sirens in the distance.

Boris walked into the house. Rushing through the corridor, holding the flashlight out like a weapon. There were so many doors that he didn’t know which one to open. And he would be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t scared of what might be behind them, of what might jump out at him. He noticed the door at the very end open. His gut told him to try that one first. His brain told him to turn around and run back out.

He walked in and saw the door at the other end of the room. He rushed towards it and down the stairs. He walked fast just in case his nerves tried to talk him out of it. He needed to find Howard. His partner – his friend.

His eyes almost bulged out their sockets as he stared in horror. He saw a man with a sack over his head lying in a pool of blood. The sight sent chills through him. His stomach churned. He swallowed desperately to prevent himself from vomiting. But he was a detective – he couldn’t let the horror of the scene sway him. He wanted to run, get as far away from whatever it was under that mask. He crouched down and with trembling hands felt for a pulse. Nothing. Dead.

He shone the light further up and noticed someone else on the floor. He rushed towards him. It was Howard. Laying there unconscious. Drenched in blood.

“Howard!” He placed his two fingers on his neck and sighed in relief as he felt a pulse. He took his coat off and scrunched it up into a ball and placed it onto his stomach. It was obvious he had lost a lot of blood. He applied pressure on the wound and called out to him.

“Howard... Can you hear me, Howard?”

Nothing.

“It’s me, Boris. Your partner. Come on... Howard.”

He gently tapped him on the face trying to wake him.

He could hear marching footsteps above him.

Howard half-opened his eyes and looked as if he was trying to speak but he was unable to make a sound.

“Down here!” Boris shouted. “I need help now!” Within moments the room was covered with police officers and paramedics.

“It’s over Howard,” Boris whispered into Howard’s ear as he was carried away in a stretcher. “You did it. You saved the little girl.”

### **Three months later...**

Victoria sat in the back of the taxi holding her mother’s hand. Something she never thought would happen. It had been three months since they had been reunited. Three months since Victoria had discovered she had been missing for a little over three years. Time obviously meant nothing in the dungeon. It was like a portal to a dark realm that made no sense.

Her mother had aged way faster than she should have. Worrying. Panicking. She became an insomniac and had to take pills to help her sleep. She suffered from depression and hallucinations.

It must have been a long painful three years.

Sometimes when she saw Victoria in the morning she would hug onto her and then touch her face to make sure she was really there. She blamed herself for what happened. Everyday. Victoria could see it in her face. Had she not locked herself in her room and left Victoria all alone then she would have been there to keep her safe. She was a bad mother.

Victoria told her she didn't blame her. And she did all she could as a mother. This wasn't her fault. And the person to blame had paid for it with his life. This was an awful chapter in a great book. A book that was yet to be finished. One bad chapter does not define the book.

There were many blanks in her memories that the therapist she been seeing told her she may never be able to fill. *The mind is a complicated thing* he would say almost every time they met. She found it incredibly hard to sit in a room with a man – and for the first month, refused to be in the room alone. Her mother was always by her side. Now she waited outside. Close enough to hear Victoria if she screamed for help.

Victoria didn't really care about the blanks in her past. She was no longer interested in the past. For her, life had just begun. She looked at her mother and smiled. Her mother returned the smile. She had never seen her so happy. Except, behind that smile, there is an element of fear. Her eyes gave it away. Irrespective of how hard she tried to hide it; Victoria could see it. She could sense it.

"You know you don't have to do this, right?" her mother said, now putting her other hand on her hand as well. "We can turn back and go home, right now. Just say the word."

"I'll be fine." Victoria gave her a reassuring smile. "If Doctor Benjamin thinks it will help, then I think it might."

"I think he is a little weird, Doctor Benjamin."

"He's nice and has helped me a lot. But you're right, he is a little weird."

"I know, right... especially that weird twitch he gets in his eye. I think he might need a therapist himself." They both chuckled. Victoria rested her head on her mother's shoulders. The past three years were hell. The pain, the torture, the starvation but most all, the loneliness. That was the hardest part. Perhaps Edward was right. This was the way that life taught her to value the things she loved the most – the people she loved the most. She squeezed her mother's hand tighter. Her mother kissed her head.

"I'm going to be right there with you and the second you say... forget say, just give me a nod and we're out of there."

Victoria wanted to say that she was scared and there were plenty of moments on this journey when she wanted to back out and ask to go home. But she didn't. It was time to face up to her past. And to defeat it.

## Chapter 48

"So... Doctor..." Chief Howard raised his eyebrows, hoping the man stood next to him would help remind him of his name. Both Howard and Boris stood next to him with expressions that said they had no idea of his name either.

"Doctor Benjamin." The man responded.

"That's right, Doctor Benjamin. Are you sure this is a good idea?"

The doctor didn't respond. He rubbed his hands and blew into them. It was chilly. Deceptively chilly. The sun was shimmering in all its splendour and there wasn't a cloud in sight, yet the air was bitter.

"I mean, the poor girl has been through a lot and to bring her back to this..." He gazed at the Wellington manor. "To *this* place." It looked just as haunting during the day as it did at night. Maybe more as you could see its hideousness more clearly.

“Thank you for coming, Chief Gavin. And allowing us access to the property. I am not sure how much this is going to help Victoria, but I think it would be good for her to revisit it. It might help her understand some important things that she still hasn’t got to grips with.”

“Burning this hell hole to the ground would be the best thing,” Howard said. He held his stomach as if he was in pain.”

“How are you keeping?” Chief Gavin asked noticing the expression of pain on Howard’s face.

“I’ll live.” He stuffed a stick of chewing gum in his mouth.

“What about this Edward character, Doc?” Boris asked while sipping on his coffee.

“What about him?”

“You know... what made him do all these horrendous things? They’ve discovered at least five bodies buried in the garden. Three torture chambers in the house. What kind of nut-job was this guy exactly?”

“I am not sure, and I don’t really care about him. I leave studying him and his likes to university students – my concern is people like Victoria. She is a young girl who has had so much stolen from her and events like this can destroy her future unless she gets the proper help and support.”

“And you think by bringing her back to the place where she was imprisoned and tortured will help her?” Howard said, an obvious sour tone in his voice. “You don’t think it will bring back all those bad memories? I mean, she’s been through enough wouldn’t you think?”

“Detective, you’re an intelligent man. And you did a wonderful and courageous thing by saving that girl and probably many more by putting an end to Edward Wellington’s reign of terror. But you don’t understand how complicated the mind is. Do you really think that by her not being here, she has magically forgotten everything? No, she lives this nightmare every day. What I hope to do is show her this place from a different perspective. Allow her to distinguish reality from make-belief.”

“Whatever,” Howard said. “You’re the doc, doc.”

Doctor Benjamin gave Howard a piercing look as his left eye twitched.

Howard stared in the distance. He could see the taxi approaching. He felt butterflies in his stomach. This would be the first time he saw Victoria since the night he rescued her and nearly died at the hands of a madman.

Mrs Bailey had visited a few times while he was recovering in hospital. She had her little girl back. It had taken three years, three long years no one could give back to her, but like a badly written fairy tale, they were reunited – in the hope they will live on happily ever after. That was the important part. It wasn’t fair, what happened to them. Life wasn’t fair. He wanted to say life was hard but couldn’t because he didn’t know what to compare it with. There was life and there was death. Without experiencing the latter what is there to contrast with?

Life wasn’t hard – it was just full of people and people were the problem. It took him many years and many bad experiences to learn that Hitler and Gandhi were the same person.

He broke the rules. He allowed personal feelings to get in the way of his job. But he helped save a life – two lives. We make rules to maintain order and balance but when order and balance are broken – so must the rules be. That’s what he told himself, anyway.

The car slowed and Victoria’s eyes were drawn to the Dungeon. She suddenly felt a hard blow to the gut and looked to her mother for help.

“It’s OK baby. Remember, you just say the word.”

Victoria nodded. It wasn’t too late. All she had to do was say was “no”. He mother would tell the taxi driver to turn around and they could return home. And no one would judge her. She was perfectly within her rights to be a coward. Cowards lived longer being cowards. And she was sick of wanting to die. She wanted to live.

"I'm right here." Her mother said with a reassuring look. She could probably feel the tremble in Victoria's hands. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

"Hello Victoria," Doctor Benjamin said. "This is Chief Gavin, Detective Boris and Detective Howard."

Victoria's eyes were stuck on Detective Howard.

"Hello Victoria," Howard said with a smile. She wanted to say hello back, or even return the smile, this was the man who saved her life. A guardian angel who refused to leave her for dead. Risked his life to save hers. Yet she remained unable to move. Looking at him brought back her last moments in the dungeon. Moments, she was sure, would haunt her for the rest of her life.

"Victoria," Doctor Benjamin stood directly in front of her and stared her deep in the eyes. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, though she was far from ready. For this, she would never be ready. She held her mother's hand tightly. She wasn't sure if the sweaty palms were her mother's or hers. Probably both of theirs.

The Chief lifted the police warning tape so they could all walk under it. Victoria felt as if life was about to escape her as she stepped inside the house. It looked different. There were lights everywhere. Presumably, put there by the police.

"It's fine. Come through," the Chief said. "This is no longer a crime scene."

Victoria didn't know what to make of that comment. It was no longer a crime scene... but it was exactly as it was, bar the additional lighting. What was it to be in the future? She wondered. The story had been all over the papers. Her mother refused to put the news on the television or buy a newspaper in case Victoria saw it. But Victoria secretly watched the news and watched as her last three years at the dungeon had been sensationalised in the media. Her misery had been sold as entertainment. The only thing left for them to do now was to turn this place into an attraction.

She shook her head at the thought. The irony is that even after losing, Edward won. He would live on in newspapers, studies and even literature. They might even make a film about him. He would be the predecessor of Norman Bates and the actor who played him would go on to win academy awards. He would be analysed, his life explored, obsessed about, perhaps even admired like the sadistic icons he was in awe of. He beat life, he beat cancer and he beat death. He was immortal. He was as he preached, a master of his own destiny.

## Chapter 49

Victoria could feel his presence. It loomed in the air like a foul smell. It was in everything she saw. It was in the fabric of the furniture; it was in the ink of the paintings on the wall – it was in everywhere. Her heart raced. She was back in the castle, heading to the dungeon. And he was here. All around her.

Victoria's legs stiffened. She found it hard to move forward, like a horse being ridden to the edge of a cliff. She could see the door that led to the dungeon. She thought about Simon. She thought of him being down there, smiling, excited to see her. But she knew he wasn't there. The police never found Simon. And Victoria accepted she would never know what happened to him. All she could do was pray for him. And find peace in knowing that he was up there, in a better place, looking down at her. Smiling.

"Come on. You can do this." Doctor Benjamin said.

"Victoria," her mother looked her in the eyes, "You don't have to do anything."

"It's fine." Victoria said, "Doctor Benjamin is right. I can do this."

I need to do this...

She ambled down the stairs, each step burning her feet. She was now desperate to turn away and run from her demons.

The sight of the metal door tore holes into her soul. Fear surged through her as she entered the room. She was terrified that the door, with a mind of its own, would close behind her and chortle at her foolishness for returning to hell after escaping it.

Why did she come back here? She froze and questioned her sanity. What did she think was going to happen? She would make peace with this place and move on? She could never move on. This place, even if burned to the ground, would exist. It existed inside her. And as long as she lived, it would live with her. An unwanted companion who refused to leave.

She gazed around the room. Her bed was exactly as it was except the sheets had gone. The table was still there, looking even uglier without the mirror on top. The glass had been cleared, as had the blood.

She covered her mouth. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she stared at the floor where her captor, not so long ago, lay dead in a pool of his own blood. She thought about Jack and what he did to save her life. She had not thought about him much out of fear that someone may intercept her thoughts and discover the truth about what happened here. A truth that Victoria had vowed to take to her grave. She would protect him the way he protected her.

"Victoria," Doctor Benjamin stood in front of her. "Tell me about Simon. Who was he?"

Victoria refused to say anything. She didn't want to talk about Simon. It was too painful.

"You mentioned the window. The Window in the room." The doctor moved towards the wall.

"Is this the window?" He pointed at the window.

Victoria nodded.

"You mentioned that you used to look through this window every day."

She nodded again.

"Victoria, can you still see the window?"

Again, she nodded.

"Did you draw the window?"

Confusion overcame her. Her legs felt wobbly. She saw her mother's face. It had lost its colour and her eyes were welling up.

"Victoria, I think it is important for you to understand that you had been trapped here for a long time on your own." The doctor pointed at the window and then slid his hand across the wall. "It is not abnormal for a person in your circumstances, considering the isolation and... all the other factors, to build characters and even objects like this window for comfort. And they can feel so real. As real as you and I. But they are not real. The window is a drawing that I believe you drew. And Simon and the other person you don't want to talk about, are not real." He moved closer to her and smiled, "I know... to you, this might seem a little strange and even hard to believe but in time, you will see things for what they are."

He was talking about Jack, the boy she refused to talk about.

She returned the doctor's smile. But looked past him and at the window.

*Jack is very real, you just can't see him, Doctor Benjamin... He is in his garden, on his swing, waiting for me.*

