

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera on a bridge at night. The bridge has a complex, geometric metal structure with many vertical and diagonal beams. The scene is illuminated by warm, yellowish-orange lights, likely streetlights or bridge lights, which create a soft glow and some lens flare. The person is in silhouette, walking along a path that leads into the distance. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

JOHN DOLAN & FIONA QUINN

chaos
is come again

TENTION BOOKS

CHAOS IS COME AGAIN

by

John Dolan

and

Fiona Quinn

TENTION BOOKS

This book is intended entirely as a work of fiction. Although it contains incidental references to real people, this is solely to provide a relevant historical and geographical context. All other characters, names and events are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

All quoted words in this book are believed to fall under the category of fair use. However the publisher is sensitive to the rights of copyright owners and should any such copyright owners have cause for concern please contact the publisher.

CHAOS IS COME AGAIN published by Tention Publishing Limited

Kindle Edition

Copyright John David Dolan and Fiona Quinn 2014

John David Dolan and Fiona Quinn have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity (including, but not restricted to, Google, Amazon or similar organisations), in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, scanning or by any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Tention Publishing Limited Reg. No. 8098036
Unit 4 Provender Mill, Belvedere Road,
Faversham ME13 7LD, United Kingdom

tentionbooks.com

ISBN 978-0-9573256-7-8

[Table of Contents](#)

[Dedications](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[About the Authors](#)

For those who wish the world smaller, and friends closer ~ John

For my husband, Todd - the hero of my own life's story ~ Fiona

*Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.*

William Shakespeare, Othello

1

Off balance, Avery Goodyear pushed her weight into her high heels and locked her knees. Her lips curled into a tight line as she willed herself not to sprint out the office door. *Focus*, she rebuked herself.

Her boss, Jerry Meyers, crossed his arms over his chest, stretched out his legs, and thumped his feet onto the corner of his desk. Always a bad sign. Things never went well after he struck this pose. “Travis Bishop has flown the coop,” he said.

“What does that mean?” Avery asked, not sure if she should move farther into the room to sit in the guest chair, or not. Jerry had positioned the chair precisely so the morning sun would catch his unlucky visitor in the left eye, blinding them. He was following a strategy from a book called *How to Get the Upper Hand and Win*. One of their competitors had read the manuscript first and beaten Jerry to signing up the author. Now the book was a New York Times bestseller, and all Jerry had to show for his efforts was rearranged furniture and absurd alpha-male poses.

“He’s hiding in London. The Notting Hill area to be exact.” Jerry said. “Apparently, there were one too many crosses nailed to his door, and the twenty-four-hour news-a-thons aren’t letting him get his beauty sleep.”

“You encouraged him to go?” Avery slid her hands into her pockets, but that didn’t feel right. She pulled them back out. She stood there, awkward and uncertain. Bishop wasn’t in her queue, thank God. She had nothing to do with him. Wanted nothing to do with him. Why was Jerry bringing him up?

“Not to London. He’s too inaccessible there. I can’t swoop in for a surprise visit. I was thinking more of a New England farmhouse down a long and private path where he could write in anonymity and get this damned sequel done already.”

“Why push him?” Avery asked, holding the sliver-thin hope that Jerry would tear up the Bishop contract and move on to something more. . . wholesome. Okay, wholesome was too big a stretch. Wholesome didn’t sell. Scandal sold. In today’s saturated book

market, everyone was elbowing for a place. Avery closed her eyes and tried for a deep breath, but her lungs stuck at the halfway point, leaving her breathless. She lifted her gaze and caught Jerry smirking at her.

“Money. That’s why.” Jerry uncrossed his ankles and came upright, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair, steepling his fingers. Power pose number four. “Controversy makes PMT piles of money, which equals job security. And right now, in this industry, job security is everything.” He cocked his head to the side. “Don’t you agree? I mean, what would you do, Avery, if you lost this job? Huh?” His raised brows folded his skin into four straight lines across his forehead. “Where would your editorial skills take you? Do you know how many book agents are out there trolling the Twittersphere, looking for desperate wannabe writers who need editing at two dollars a page? Could you make your life work out on that kind of pay check?”

Avery swallowed past the lump in her throat. Jerry was positioning the sword of Damocles over her head. She’d have to say yes to whatever came next.

“Has Bishop given you an update on his progress?” Avery hoped to delay the inevitable. A rivulet of perspiration formed on her back, tickling down her spine. She reached back to pull her silk blouse away from her humid skin.

“Nope. I’m giving him to you as a gift. The updates are now on you.”

Avery stilled, reprocessing his words, hoping she’d misunderstood.

“Wheedle something out of him.” Jerry picked up his pen and jabbed it towards her, punctuating his instructions. “An outline, a first chapter, anything you can get. I want something on my desk by the end of this week.”

Pen jabbing. Power move number nine. Disdain bubbled in Avery’s stomach. *He’s turning himself into a caricature.*

The phone buzzed against Avery’s thigh. She pulled it from her pocket and tapped it off without checking the readout. “Me? But…” Avery moved behind the chair, using it as a shield against all the ramifications of this conversation. “Please, I’m really opposed to this whole project. Maybe the intern would like to get this on her resume?” Avery threw out the Hail Mary with little hope of success; Jerry looked too smug right now to be generous.

“You. Bishop insists you’re the only person he’ll talk to.”

“But I’ve never met him.”

“Hank Harrison recommended you. End of story.”

Jerry’s PA came over the speaker announcing his wife was on line one. Jerry reached for the receiver and pointed at the guest seat. Avery dragged the chair away from the window and sat down to wait. She checked the number that had called. Lola. Shoot. Her best friend wouldn’t call her at work unless her mom was acting up again.

One crisis at a time. Being thrown into the Travis Bishop three-ring circus certainly felt like a crisis. Avery had received dozens of nasty letters from strangers, telling her that she’d damned her soul to hell by her involvement with Bishop’s last book, *Nosferatu, the Lost Gospel*. And she hadn’t been involved at all. What would happen now that she was going to be his principal handler? She needed to stay as anonymous as possible. She’d need to get a new phone number right away, an unlisted one.

Jerry banged the receiver into its cradle. He wasn’t wearing his Titan of the Literary World mask any more. Stress tightened the muscles around his eyes, making them seem small and too deeply set. He paused and seemed to gather his thoughts. “You should know that my wife found an old photo from back when we dated. Luckily, you were wearing that big floppy hat of yours. She asked if it was you. I said no. She thinks we met here at the office after I signed on with PMT. And she will never know anything different.” Jerry paused and considered Avery. “If she shows up here with the picture and asks you about it, you will deny it’s you.”

“Jerry, we had this discussion. We dated years ago, before you even knew her. I’m not sure why this is an issue.”

“Right, well, I want to be clear. You need to be very careful and stick to our story. If she brings up the conference in London last Christmas, that’s all right. She knows you attended. But let’s be professional about this. I’m your boss now. You’re my assistant. And that’s it as far as she’s concerned.” He stood up, stretching to his full looming height of five feet seven inches. Number three, *How to Get the Upper Hand and Win*.

Avery would have liked to laugh at the absurdity of his affectations, but this wasn’t funny at all.

“Obviously, I want you to keep on working here at the firm.” He continued. “I don’t want anything to make that feel impossible.”

“It’s not a problem, I assure you.” Avery stood so they were closer to eye level. She wanted this meeting to be over already, but she sensed there was more bad news to come. “As far as I’m concerned our history started here at PMT when they hired you on.” Avery’s voice sounded strong and a little bored. She couldn’t have pitched her tone any better if she’d practiced in a mirror beforehand.

“Good then.” Jerry slid a piece of paper towards her. “This is Travis Bishop’s London information. I want you to contact him. Immediately.” He checked his Rolex. “It’s four in London. Bishop should be sitting down to tea.”

Avery reached for the paper, but Jerry held it in place with a firm hand. “Avery, you also need to clear your calendar for next week. I need you to fly to New York with me. It will be just the two of us from this office.”

Avery watched the smile slowly spread across Jerry’s face. He would have seemed handsome had the scars from the last time he burned her not been so painful. Avery pulled the paper out from under his hand. “Okay. I’ll take care of this. I’m going to take the Simpson manuscript home and read for the rest of the day.” She spun to move towards the door.

“Oh, and Avery?” Jerry called.

Avery stilled, but didn’t turn towards his voice.

“Burn that damned hat.”

Avery strode across the parking lot trying to get as much distance between her and Jerry as she could, as fast as she could. Now was *not* the time to have a panic attack. The late September sun blazed down on her head, and she yanked her suit jacket off, seeking relief from the humidity. When her phone bounced against her hip, Avery remembered she hadn't called Lola. Avery opened the car door and let the heat swell out while she pressed number two on her quick dial.

"Holy Joseph, thank God you called. You've got to get home now. And I mean right now."

Avery slid under the wheel, with the phone squeezed between her jaw and shoulder so she could get the door shut and the engine revved. The air conditioning belched out heat, and Avery's long blonde hair caught in the sweat on her neck. "You'd better give me the bullet points, so I'm ready when I get there."

Lola's voice, spiced by her Latina heritage, always sounded like there was a private joke entwined in her words. "Well, let's see. Father Pat is on his way. The police are climbing out of their car. Your newest caregiver, Sally-what's-her-name, is sitting on your porch in tears. And one of your neighbours is starting a petition drive."

"So mom is doing well then." Avery paused and strained to hear the background noises. "Are there chickens in the mix?" Avery clicked on her right blinker and pulled out onto the tree-lined street in Washington D.C., heading for 95 South and Springfield.

"What? No. No chickens. Why?"

"It sounds like someone's trying to strangle the whole flock."

"Nope, it's your mom." There was a long pause. "I think that's supposed to be Ave Maria." The screeching reached a crescendo. "Sally says your mom thinks the Devil stole her vocal chords. Now your mom's in an all-out battle to show the old Devil he didn't win."



Avery inched her car past the police cruiser and the ambulance. Father Pat sat in his car with the engine still running, his head leaning against the headrest, his eyes closed. She saw the uniformed men standing in the shade of her broad-limbed oak.

Pulling into the empty drive, Avery realized Sally had left. She wondered if the newest adult sitter had already decided this assignment was too big. Would Sally show up to work the next day? Avery opened her car door, not quite ready to throw herself into whatever brouhaha her mom had stirred up.

Lola sat on the porch, looking thoroughly amused. “Your mom won’t open the door, and I decided not to use the key until you got here. She’s pretty confused.”

Avery nodded. A tension headache thrummed behind her eyes. As she reached the top step, the door popped open.

“Avery Grace, thank goodness you’re home. What a day I’ve had.”

Avery watched the first responders gathering up their equipment.

“Mom, how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

Avery lifted her hand to wave at the paramedics. “I’ve got this. Thank you so much for coming,” she called as she watched them striding as a group towards her, their cases in hand.

They stopped, seeming uncertain, then nodded and moved to their vehicles, leaving one to approach and have Avery sign the requisite paperwork. By now, Avery knew the drill.

“Mom, Lola came to help you. Why didn’t you let her in?” Avery turned her mother around and moved her into the house where the air conditioning provided relief from the Virginia humidity.

“Lola Santiago? She didn’t come here.”

Avery pointed over at Lola, who plopped onto the couch. “This is Lola, Mom.”

“No, it’s not.” Ginny Goodyear scolded. “You are not Lola Santiago.” She pointed a menacing finger at Lola, whose eyes glittered with merriment. “Lola Santiago is nine-years-old. You don’t even look like her mother. Her mother was beautiful.”

“Mom,” Avery’s voice strained to sound patient. “Lola is grown up and married. Her last name is Zerkova now. Did you get confused when Sally told you Mrs. Zerkova was at the door?”

The doorbell chimed, and Avery answered it to find Father Pat standing red-faced on her stoop. He had a gallon of water in his hand, still in its Giant Foods grocery bag.

“Your mom called me and said the Devil was here. Shall I look around and see if I can find him?”

Ginny jumped forward and grabbed the priest’s hand. “Would you? I think he went away, but if you could make sure.”

Father Pat smiled weakly and shuffled towards the back of the house.

Ginny turned to Lola. “Now, if this were pretty little Lolly, I would recognize her. This floozy is an imposter.”

Lola’s designer dress; her long jet-black hair, cut into face-framing layers; and her manicured nails gave her the air of a society belle. There was nothing trampy about Lola Zerkova.

“Mom, this is twenty-fourteen. Lola is a grownup now. She has children of her own. Five kids.”

Ginny’s gaze narrowed on Lola. “Five children? Do you know who any of the fathers are?”

“Mom!”

Olanzapine.

Ziprasidone.

Paliperidone.

The language of chemistry.

A language Sean Kenny knew only too well.

Dr. Hunt adjusted his glasses and peered at Sean.

“How long have you been having these memory lapses?”

Sean tilted his head and let his eyes rest on the shadow between the ceiling and the wall as he calculated. “A few months.”

The physician put his pen down and leaned forward. “Why didn’t you come to see me sooner?”

He shrugged. “I *feel* fine. I thought it would pass.”

“You should know better. Have you been taking any other medications? Some have an adverse reaction with antipsychotic drugs.”

“No.”

“No recreational drugs?”

“Absolutely not.” A trace of annoyance tinged Sean’s tone. “I’m not so irresponsible.”

Dr. Hunt scratched his chin. “How long are these blank periods?”

“A few hours, I think. I don’t have them during the day, only in the evenings and at night.”

“Anything else you need to tell me? Any recurrence of the visual or auditory hallucinations?”

“Visual, no. But. . .” Sean hesitated.

“Yes?”

“There have been some limited issues with hearing voices again.”

“What do you mean by *limited issues*, Mr. Kenny?”

“I can handle it,” Sean said gruffly.

“What do the voices say?”

“Nothing too specific. More like a commentary on what I’m doing. It’s not like before.”

The doctor studied him for a few moments, then scribbled on his prescription pad. Sean shuffled in his chair.

“I’m changing your medication, and I want you to start keeping a log of your blackout periods.” He ripped the prescription from the pad. “Let’s try this out and see how you do.”

“Okay.”

“If you have any adverse reactions with this new medication, contact me right away. In the meantime, no driving. In any event, come back in a month and bring your blackout log with you. I don’t wish to scare you, but the blackouts could indicate something serious. You may need a brain scan.”

“We schizophrenics are not easily scared, Dr. Hunt.” Sean managed a weak smile.

“Do you have any plans to leave London during the next few weeks?”

“No.”

“In a month, then. Good day, Mr. Kenny.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Lola called just as Avery shut the door behind Father Pat. Lola had a knack for timing. “Well? Everything back under control?”

“Is it ever?” Avery picked up the gallon of water and walked towards the kitchen. “I gave mom a sedative while she was saying the rosary with Father Pat. I think he was grateful.”

“Yeah? Why do you say that?”

“He left the holy water as a parting gift. Hey, do you know if you need to refrigerate water after it’s been blessed?”

“I would, I mean it might be strong enough to cast out demons and all, but I don’t think it would kill bacteria or anything.”

Avery opened the fridge and put the container at the back, behind the orange juice and ketchup. She pulled out a bottle of wine and set it on the counter. “Thank you for today. You know I love you and all you do. I’m racking up quite a debt. If I ever have kids, I’ll owe you my first born.”

“No thank you, I’ve already reached my kid quota.” Lola laughed. “I think your mom’s a hoot. Life would be boring without her to jazz things up a bit. Was that pop the sound of you pulling a wine cork?”

“After the day I’ve had, I wish I had something stronger.” Avery let the wine glug into her glass until it brimmed. “Looks like I’m headed to New York with Jerry.”

A gasp came over the receiver. “No!”

Avery bent to slurp some wine, so she could lift the glass without spilling. “And better yet, guess who they positioned as the babysitter for Travis Bishop and his newest Jesus-Is-A-Vampire book?”

“You? Put the wine away. Just go ahead and pour yourself a glass of the holy water. You can’t do that. Can you? I mean they can’t make you take on that assignment, can they?”

“Jerry let me know that a job in this business is a precious commodity in this day and age.” Avery swirled the ruby wine in her glass and sniffed it appreciatively.

“Oh no, he didn’t.”

“Yup. Since I’ve never read Bishop’s book, I put it on my agenda for tonight.” Avery opened the cupboard and gazed at the supper possibilities. Cooking felt like more effort than she could muster at that moment. Even chewing seemed beyond her. She eyed the chocolate cake sitting on the counter.

“Lola!”

“Don’t tell Father Pat,” Lola said, “but I read *Nosferatu, the Lost Gospel* when it came out. I know it’s fiction and all, but I think this Bishop guy might be on to something. I mean, it all made perfect sense that Judas –”

“Hush, I don’t want to talk about it. I’m going to focus on the cake you left. I’m hanging up now to eat dinner. You’re the absolute best. Love you.”

Avery set her dish with the sizable piece of cake and her glass of wine on the dining room table by her laptop. She pulled her Kindle from its cradle and looked up Travis Bishop to download a copy of his work. Pushing the ‘read now’ button made her jaw clench. Manipulated. Used. Miserable. Words strung together like pearls on a necklace wrapped around her throat, making her choke on the last swallow of wine. Avery put the Kindle to the side and hefted a forkful of cake. “Only Lola could make a cake this sinful,” she said to the empty room. Her mother’s resonant snores rumbled their way down the stairs.

Avery scrolled through the happy chatter on her Facebook newsfeed. It was depressing to see all of those clever chin-up-and-carry-on quotations. Avery decided chatting with strangers would induce less anxiety than chatting with friends and acquaintances. Right now, she wanted to interact with people whom she could easily delete from her life if they felt at all burdensome. All she needed was a little distraction from reality. A moment of respite.

Three new people now followed her on Twitter, two of whom would sell her ten thousand new friends for \$12.99. She moved to ‘notifications’ where she saw a rather

funny thread going with Mason Beaty. He always seemed to show up with his quick wit. The last tweet said, *Avery's a good sport.*

Avery sat with that idea for a minute. Was she a good sport? She guessed in the Twitter world she was. It was all just make-believe relationships there. How deep could you get in 140 characters or less? She scraped the last of the icing off her plate and looked towards the kitchen. Should she get another slice?

A_Very @mason – Thanks for the kind words. Has anyone tweeted with @billey-o lately?

Yup, another piece was just what the doctor ordered. And another glass of wine. Avery thanked goodness for her high metabolism and an aerobics instructor who kicked her butt, or she wouldn't fit into the size four she'd worn her whole adult life. And this slice of cake would probably induce more guilt than it was worth.

When she sat back in her place at the head of the table, she saw Sean Kenny was online. Sean lived in London, England. Avery took a sip and wondered if Sean might run across Travis Bishop along the way. *Doubtful.* She checked the time stamp. Plus five, it must be near midnight over there.

Sean @A_very – He's been busy with a project, trying to stay away from social media.

A_very @SeanKenny – Do you work anywhere near the Notting Hill area of London?

Sean @A_very – No, why?

A_very @SeanKenny – Just wondering. As for Billy – O. . .

A_very @SeanKenny – "Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." – B. Franklin. Guess Billy-O's busy w/ the doing :)

Sean @A_very – Yes, well @billey-o is far too sensible to squander his life writing. Unlike us, eh? :)

A_very @Sean – "You feel squandered, Sean?" She asked, leaned forward, and quirked an inquisitive brow.

Sean @A_very – Ah, so you're in the mood for a game of Twitter-chess?

Avery grinned. 'Twitter-chess' was a game they had invented online some weeks before. The aim was to construct a story between them, one line at a time.

Avery @Sean – Yes, please. And you're stalling.

Sean @A_very – Okay, let's see.

Sean @A_very – Kenny shrugged and took a slow draw on his cigarette, keeping his eyes on the blonde. "Sometimes, sweetheart," he replied.

Avery looked at Sean's icon and wondered if it was truly him. And if it was him, if it was recent. In the photo, he looked remarkably like Gerard Butler. A yummy kind of face that would do great in the movies. Hair long enough to wrap her fingers in, messy – like he'd just been having fun in bed. But mostly she liked his eyes. They were kind and intelligent with maybe a shadow of sadness behind them. Avery wondered what could have happened that seemed to haunt him.

A_very @Sean – She contemplated him for a moment, then reached over & pulled the Dunhill from his lips. "You know I hate it when you smoke."

Sean @A_very – "When you moved out you lost the right to tell me not to smoke." He added with a smile, "By the way you've put on weight."

A_very @Sean – She responded with a slow smile. It didn't fool him. Her obsidian claws had swiped Kenny too many times not to brace

Sean @A_very – "Ah, how I've missed that smile," he said wryly, "Although not *that* much. So before we resume the bloodletting..."

Sean @A_very – . . .would you like to tell me why you asked me over, Avery? I doubt somehow it was for the pleasure of my company."

A_very @Sean – She lifted the tumblr of Macallan, let the fire slip down her throat. It made her voice husky. "Why did you need to see me?"

A_very @Sean – "Is what you mean." She fiddled with her empty glass. "I got your message, and I got. . . curious."

Sean @A_very – "You need to be careful. Curiosity does bad things to cats. It may do bad things to people too." The silence hung heavy.

Sean @A_very – After a minute, Kenny rose and ambled to the window. "I heard you were writing a book," he said, gazing out.

A_very @Sean – She crossed her legs & leaned forward to touch her ankle strap, displaying the low cut of her blouse, "So a warning, then?"

Sean @A_very – "Just advice. I'd hate to see anything happen to that body. I was very attached to it once. More than once as I recall."

Sean @A_very – (Stepping out of character for a moment, where can I find your books, Avery?)

A_very @Sean – Her body juddered. She tried to smooth over the reflex, letting her fingers skate over her hair, but he saw. "Kenny, plz."

A_very @Sean – (And I'm having so much fun! You can find me in various slush piles. . . sigh.)

Sean @A_very – He leaned in close and purred, "Call me 'Mr Kenny', the way you used to. You remember, right? Sure you do. I know you do."

Sean @A_very – (Surely not. There must be something of yours I can read – aside from your fun tweets that is. Ha!)

A_very @Sean – She turned her head away. But there it was – the smell of smoke, leather, and caprice. Her lip caught in her teeth. "Sean."

Just then, the snores from upstairs turned into gagging. Avery raced up the stairs. She flicked on the light. "Mom?"

Travis Bishop swirled his coffee cup and took a final swallow of the lukewarm cappuccino. A sour-faced barista cleared it away and gave his table a cursory wipe before returning to the counter where her colleagues were packing up for the night.

Travis scanned the near-deserted Paddington Railway Station and rubbed his eyes. His feet ached from hours of walking. He knew he should have eaten something, but the thought made him nauseous. In spite of his fatigue, he was hours away from sleep.

A scuffed notebook lay on the table in front of him, an elastic band holding its disintegrating pages together. He tapped a pen on the table top, creating a rhythm, trying to rouse thought in his sluggish brain.

“I’m afraid we’re closing now, sir.” The barista’s bored gaze came nowhere near his eyes. Instead, she stared at the stubble on his chin before moving on to his spiky hair. Her body language indicated suppressed impatience.

“I’m sorry. I’ll let you get home.”

She leaned forward, a flicker of interest in her stare. “Are you American?”

“I live there now.” Travis dipped his chin.

She nodded as if that answer clarified something for her then turned to stacking the chairs.

Travis stood, putting the notebook and pen in the pocket of his coat. “Well, goodnight, miss.” There was no response. He walked through the station and out onto Praed Street.

A slight breeze stirred the overcast sky. A group of young people spilled out of one of the pubs, laughing and joking. A man stood in the red phone box across the road. With a furtive eye, the man examined the postcards advertising massage services.

After a few steps, Travis paused outside the Hilton as a wave of emotion – a mixture of loneliness and homesickness – swept through him. He felt the need for human contact, however fleeting. Turning, he crossed the road, and made his way into the Underground Station.

The platform was dusty and airless. An elderly couple consulted an A-Z of London, and a street busker with dreadlocks lounged on one of the benches, guitar at his side.

No conversation to be had here.

After a minute, a train arrived and Travis stepped inside, sitting opposite a heavily pierced girl with thick eye makeup and a vacant expression. Pages from the *Evening Standard* and discarded flyers littered the seats. A faint acidic smell hung about the carriage, as if someone had recently vomited there. A robotic voice told him the doors were closing. Travis stretched out his legs, and made a mental note to clean his sneakers when he got back to his hotel.

At Notting Hill Gate, he changed onto the Central Line, heading east, and one stop later alighted at Queensway. In spite of the recent modernization of the station, the new lifts weren't working. Travis trudged up the stairs behind an asthmatic lady who clutched several plastic shopping bags.

Travis reflected that only a few months before, when he first arrived in London, he would have offered to help the woman with her bags. But he had since adopted the indifferent attitude of the city-dweller, so he followed her up the steps at a distance without comment. There was no hurry.

Taxis chugged along Bayswater Road. To Travis' right, the trees of Kensington Gardens appeared black and threatening. He pulled up the collar of his coat and turned into one of the side roads.

This part of London held many old hotels boasting nineteenth-century architecture, with balconies, and pillared entrances. The Hampton Hotel was one of these. While the exterior promised English grandiosity, the inside spoke more of faded splendour and underinvestment: tatty carpets and squeaking fire doors, cramped corridors and rooms whose furnishings had long been out of style.

Travis had obtained a good rate for a long-term booking, so it suited him. It offered him anonymity. Here, he was just another guest, not the author of a notorious novel.

He nodded to the Asian man at the desk as he passed through the lobby and took the two flights to his room. Stuffiness hit him as he opened the door.

Switching on the light, he clawed off his coat, and threw open the French windows to the balcony. He had a view of the street, and it dispelled some of the claustrophobia of his lodging. Travis took a deep breath.

His laptop stared at him accusingly from the small desk, but he ignored it.

Instead, he cleared away the papers beside the computer and dusted the desk with his sleeve. Opening the wardrobe, he rummaged in the bottom of his backpack until he found a small plastic bag of white powder. He moved back to the window and tugged the curtains closed.

Carefully, Travis allowed a small amount of the coke to spill onto the desk. Using a credit card, he shaped it into a line and inhaled it through a small straw. The hit was almost immediate as the cocaine absorbed through his nasal tissues. He sat back on the chair, allowing his senses free rein.

Euphoria flooded his system. His heart pounded as the street drug did its work. Energy vibrated through him.

Now he could do anything.

Travis wiped his nose with the back of his hand and returned the bag and the straw to their hiding place.

He stepped onto the balcony. Now, the street below pulsed with colour. The traffic rang loud in his ears. All the pressure, which had weighed him down, dissipated. He suppressed the urge to laugh.

That is some good shit.

Gone were the worries about his book advance and contractual obligations. Hurling into the chasm of forgetfulness were his blocked writing and those nagging doubts about his ability to deliver the overdue manuscript. He had written one bestseller that took the world by storm – he could write another.

Momentary giddiness almost tipped him over the parapet. “Jesus, careful, Travis,” he muttered. “You can’t really fly, you know.” Then he giggled. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Thank you *so* much.”



It was almost noon when Travis stirred from his bed.

His mouth was parched and a gathering of African drummers partied in his head. He threw on a robe, glugged a bottle of water from the fridge and swallowed a couple of painkillers. While he waited for the throbbing to subside, he munched a Mars bar, hoping the sugar hit would help him collect his strewn wits.

He powered up his laptop and reread what he had typed during the small hours of the morning. The cocaine high had told him his writing was inspired, but he needed to check.

Number twenty-three, the man had said. This was it.

Jesus Christ knocked on the door of the nondescript building in Whitechapel and waited.

The London fog swirled around the streets like a posse of restless phantoms in search of prey. The side street was empty except for a mangy dog rooting in an upturned dustbin. From an upstairs window nearby the sound of a raucous laugh floated through the night.

The hatch in the door slid back and the sudden noise made Jesus start. An eye peered at him through the opening, before the hatch slammed closed again. A chain scraped, and two heavy bolts squeaked along their runners. The door opened wide enough to admit the visitor, and Jesus squeezed through the gap.

Candles lit the hallway. It smelled musty. Patterned wallpaper peeled from the walls. He turned his head to focus on the black cat sitting on a small table; its eyes glowed in the flickering light.

The doorman reapplied the bolts and chain and indicated for Jesus to take the stairs to the left.

The wooden treads creaked, as he descended into the building's basement. His nostrils picked up the smell of incense.

At the foot of the stairs, Jesus entered a room of bare brick. Across the floor, scattered cushions supported men and women of various ages, as they reclined to smoke. Storm lanterns and large church candles arranged around the walls provided the

only illumination. In the corner of the room, a bearded dwarf crouched over some apparatus and sipped from a bottle.

Jesus took out some bank notes. The dwarf nodded and handed him a syringe and a length of rubber tubing.

The Son of God removed his jacket and eased himself down onto a pile of cushions in a shadowy corner. He rolled up a sleeve and tied the tubing around the top of his arm, flexing his hand until he found a prominent vein. The needle pierced, and he pressed the plunger. Jesus released a deep sigh and consulted his watch. He had about three hours before Mary finished her session with the Cardinal.

It gave him ample time to feed and to kill everyone in the building.

Travis scratched the back of his head and closed the file. It needed editing. A pop-up told him he had several unread email messages.

When he groaned, his stomach rumbled in sympathy.

His messages fell into three types: normal ones from family and friends; hate mail from outraged Christians; and unalloyed congratulations from unhinged fans. He didn't appear to have any ordinary fans.

The first email he opened was of the third variety.

Dear Mr. Bishop

Congratulations on exposing the Catholic Church for what it is: a breeding ground of evil and hypocrisy. I believe what you write is true, i.e. that Jesus was a vampire, and walks among us even now claiming the souls of the credulous and the idiotic.

I am a member of the Holy Church of Lucifer, and I write to ask if you would like to give a brief talk at one of our gatherings. . .

Travis hit the delete button without reading more. He brought up the second mail.

Hi Travis!

Great book, though I thought you might like to know I have incontrovertible proof Jesus was in fact an alien from a race of time-travellers who had envisaged humankind would destroy itself with nuclear weapons. . .

Delete.

Mr. Bishop

I shall pray for you and all those other deluded and evil persons who have read your book, Nosferatu, the Lost Gospel. This kind of gratuitous, lying filth. . .

Delete.

So much for fame.

He skimmed through the rest of his inbox and shut down the laptop.

Life would never be normal again.

He remembered the furious protesters outside his parents' house; his mother's distress; the vitriol in the papers; an onslaught of outraged news reports; and of course, piles of poison pen letters. He saw the tearful face of his fiancée as she announced the breaking off of their engagement. This last scene made frustration and anger well inside him.

Travis turned to the newspaper on his bedside cabinet to distract him from his thoughts. A picture of the Angel Tube Station caught his eye. It was on the front page of the British tabloid, the *Sun*, from two days ago. He picked it up to read:

ANGEL RAMPAGE CONTINUES IN THE CAPITAL

The killer, dubbed 'The Angel of Death' – since most of his murders take place close to Angel Underground Station – has struck again.

The Angel's fourth victim is Caroline Watts, 23, a telemarketer from Grays, Essex.

A jogger discovered her body in the early hours of Monday morning in the park adjoining Graham Street.

As with the other victims, the police have been tight-lipped about the precise cause of death, not wishing to encourage copycat activities or to reveal what they have learned about his methods.

Local residents are said to be living in fear.

"I don't know why the police can't catch this man," said Brenda Welsh, 31, a long-time resident of the area. "It's getting to the stage where we don't want to go out after dark."

A police spokesperson declined to comment.

Travis tore the article from the paper, folded it with care and tucked it into his notebook.

6

Sean disliked Sundays and preferred days off in the week, but he had to abide by the coffee shop rota like the rest of the staff. Sundays were days when Teagan had nothing to do and was liable to drop in on him at any time, to invade the peace of his apartment with her chatter and demands for attention. Fortunately, she never rose before noon on her days off. Now was the danger time. He'd spent longer on his computer than he planned. He might pay the price for it.

The relationship with Teagan – another occupant of the apartment building – was one he had drifted into. While the physical attraction between them was undeniable, her narcissistic tendencies and evident need for control were wearing. He wished he possessed the mental energy and resolve to bring their association to an end. But he did not. Confrontation was not something Sean Kenny relished.

I need to go out.

He pushed his chair back, walked to the window, and peered through the blinds. The afternoon sky over London hung heavy with clouds, but notwithstanding, people moved around in the street below. A disoriented backpacker – probably looking for Tower Bridge – consulted a map and scratched his head. Two battered skips sat on the road, piled high with rubble from some refurbishment project. In this part of London, there was always someone improving property in the hope of making a quick killing from the inflated housing market.

He looked around his flat. Everything was where it should be. He had cleaned the apartment that morning and done his laundry. In his 'second job' as unpaid janitor/rent collector for the building – which his father owned – there was nothing pressing that needed his attention. He had no reason to be indoors. A run along the South Bank was what he needed, and if it rained, it rained. He could always take shelter in the Tate Modern if necessary.

Besides, the worse the weather, the fewer people he would encounter. He could plug in his headphones, fix his eyes on the middle distance, and jog along inside his own personal bubble.

Sean changed into his running gear and grabbed his headphones. Before he turned off his computer, he reread the Twitter conversation on the screen of his computer and permitted himself a smile.

Avery's fun to tweet with. And witty. She pushes my creativity buttons, gets my artistic juices flowing. I almost feel like I used to – like I have something special to share.

He took a sip from the glass of water sitting near the edge of the desk.

What does Avery look like, I wonder. He examined the bland avatar on her profile and tried to conjure an image of his Twitter-chess partner. *Did someone draw this for her or did she pick it from some graphics site? I'd like to draw her.* Brunette? Redhead? Tall? Short? Morbidly obese? Married?

He dwelt on the word *married* awhile. She was bright, that was for sure. Maybe she was too smart to get married. Or maybe she had a face like a baboon's backside. Hell, for all he knew, she was gay.

He scratched at his stubble. It didn't matter. It wasn't as if they were ever going to meet. She was a literary agent, and he poured lattes. She lived on the other side of the Atlantic. With that kind of distance, what she looked like was meaningless. Fantasizing a relationship would be ridiculous.

Sean had stumbled over several Internet romances since he had been frequenting social networking sites. All of them appeared to peter out or end badly. Certain types of people seemed to lose perspective when they were online – became incapable of separating reality from make-believe. He knew all too well the dangers of that. The temptation to lose oneself in an imaginary world could be strong, particularly when everyday life held few prospects of excitement.

Sean addressed the screen. "I have to remember, Avery Goodyear – if that is indeed your name – I don't *know* you. And you don't know me. For which you should be grateful. You don't want to get involved with a man who talks out loud to his computer, do you?"

Sean took the stairs down two floors to the lobby where he moved silently past the door to Teagan's apartment and escaped into the blustery streets of the capital.

He pounded over the cobbles of Shad Thames, past the converted warehouses and the southern steps to Tower Bridge. *U2's Greatest Hits* rang in his ears while he sped past More London and the Globe Theatre. The immense grey dome of St. Paul's rose before him as he crossed the Millennium Bridge and turned right, heading towards the Bank of England. The City was dead at the weekend. Nearing the Tower of London, he began once more to encounter tourists.

The rain held off, but as the burn registered in his body, perspiration sucked his clothing to him. One way or another he was getting soaked. *Mens sana in corpore sano. A sound mind in a sound body.* It was an exercise mantra for him.

Sean stopped at a kiosk by Tower Hill Tube Station and bought a bottle of water. He pulled out his earphones and took a breather. The gawping vanguard of North American and Asian humanity paraded before him, strolling around the thick walls of the Bloody Tower. He tried to look at his surroundings with the amazed eyes of the foreign sightseer, but failed. It was all too familiar. Instead of seeing living history, he saw the blackened chewing gum on the pavements, the overflowing rubbish bins, the tacky souvenir T-shirts and the bored eyes of other locals.

Blonde. Avery's avatar is blonde. I bet she's blonde as well.

He deposited his empty water bottle in a trash bin and made his way over Tower Bridge as fast as the flowing tide of curious visitors would allow.

Avery Goodyear. A. Very. Good. Year. That couldn't be her real name, could it?

He turned back into Shad Thames. Almost home. The first drops of rain fell.

I bet Avery works out too.



“Mmm. You look all yummy and sweaty.” Teagan Adams leaned against the open door of her apartment, and Sean suspected she had been waiting for him. She wore a partially buttoned white blouse knotted at the front to expose her midriff, and an

improbably short denim skirt. Cowboy boots completed the ensemble. Teagan had taken some time over her hair and makeup, and in spite of himself, Sean felt his groin stir as she made her way towards him.

“Yes. I need a shower badly.”

She put her hands on his chest and looked up into his eyes. “I’ll come up with you. Let me pick up something first.”

She disappeared into the apartment and emerged again with a plastic bag. “Right, let’s go up.”

They took the lift and Teagan leaned back against the metalwork.

“What’s in the bag?”

“You’ll see.” A smile played about her lips. “I did some shopping for us yesterday.”

“For us?”

“Mm hmm.” She walked her fingers up his arm, making him itch, then planted a kiss on his bicep. Sean worked at not flinching.

He unlocked the apartment and Teagan followed him in. When she set her bag on his desk, Teagan looked at the computer light. “I swear you’re getting almost as geeky as my brother. Though, this tower system takes up so much room. Why don’t you get a laptop?”

“I like the bigger screen. Besides, I don’t need the portability.” Sean edged her to the side, logged out, and switched off the machine. “Give me ten minutes to shower.”

She pouted. “Don’t you want me to come in with you?”

“No. I’m disgusting. I need to get cleaned up.”

Sean closed the bathroom door. He considered locking it, but the sound of the bolt might send Teagan into one of her tirades.

His face stared back at him from the mirror. Dark hair plastered his head, but his cheeks held a healthy flush. *Stay fit. Stay well.*

He stripped off his perspiration-soaked clothes and stepped into the shower. He let the tepid water run over him while he searched for a way to get Teagan out of his apartment. It was obvious what she was there for, and it wasn’t to play Twitter-chess.

I need to be more assertive.

He dried off, then wiped the condensation from the bathroom mirror. His expression was tight and guarded. The stress relief from his run was now down the drain. He glanced at the floor where he'd let his sweaty exercise gear drop. He should have brought clean clothes in with him. Now, he'd have to parade in front of Teagan wrapped in nothing but a towel. And he could guess what she'd make of *that*.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Teagan was lying on his bed, propped up on her arm, the mystery bag positioned beside her. Sean raised an eyebrow but made no comment. He opened his wardrobe door.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" Teagan's voice sung out in a syrupy coo.

Sean's lip curled in distaste. "Getting some clothes."

She laughed. "That's not necessary. Come over here." She patted the mattress.

Holding the towel tightly around him, Sean perched on the edge of the bed as Teagan dumped the results of her shopping trip onto the duvet. A blindfold, a red ball gag, some restraining straps, a tube of lubricating oil, and something in a see-through wrapping. Sean picked up the package with obvious reluctance. The object was comprised of four globes of increasing size impaled on what appeared to be a plastic skewer. The label on the dubious *objet d'art* was in Japanese.

"What's this?"

Teagan crawled over to him, "I thought we'd try something different today."

"What the hell is it?" He held it out to her.

"They're anal beads. God, you're so innocent sometimes." She took the package and bit it open, handing him the toy.

He rolled it in his fingers. "You mean you shove these up --?"

Teagan's hand wandered down to Sean's towel, and she pulled to loosen the knot. "Yes."

Sean cleared his throat. "You know I have to go to work tomorrow, right? And that requires me to be able to stand and walk."

"They're not for you, silly. They're for me."

Teagan flung herself back on to the pillows. "Now, do you want me partially dressed or completely naked while you roger me to oblivion?" She held out her arms to him, her

wrists together and gazed at him with doe eyes. “Tie me, baby. Then you can do what you want with me.”

She'll be helpless, said the voice in his head.

Sean pushed against it. Tried to crowd out the volume and strength by making his own thoughts brighter. “Can’t we just screw like normal people, Teagan?” Sean’s voice rasped.

“You mean like *ordinary* people?” Teagan countered with contempt. “We’re not ordinary, Sean. We’re *special*. I want you to do special things to me. Things I’ll only let you do.”

The voice whispered something more from the centre of his mind, but Sean couldn’t make out the words. It sounded like vapour hissing through the heating pipes.

Teagan reached out and yanked Sean towards her. She lifted up and offered him a gentle kiss, then closed her teeth over his lower lip.

“Ow, Teagan, that hurts.”

She handed him the ball gag. “I won’t be able to bite when this is on, now will I?”

He pushed her onto her back, and she giggled. “That’s more like it.”

He grabbed the gag and threw it in the corner. “I’m not playing these sorts of games. I’ve told you before.”

Don’t you want her helpless, Sean? It will be so much easier if she’s tied up. The voice goaded him. This time it took up all of his brain space. Sean worked to find his own thoughts, but no words he owned would come. He shook his head, then Teagan slapped him. Hard.

“We’ll see about that. I’ll wear you down. If I don’t wear you out first.” She grasped a handful of his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. “Do me,” she whispered.

Do her, the voice insisted. *Tie her up and do her. It’s what the bitch wants.*

“This is not how I want it to be, Teagan.”

Yes, it is, Sean. It’s exactly how you want it to be. You know it is.

Teagan Adams couldn't settle herself to do anything. Even Lady Gaga blaring from her music system didn't dispel her restlessness. This wasn't unusual. Her brother, Clive, often complained that living with her was like sharing a flat with a spin-dryer that never switched off.

Cramps in her lower abdomen announced her period was about to start. The sex session with Sean had 'started her off', guaranteeing her a bad mood.

She took a notebook from a drawer stuffed with bangles, bills and unsorted underwear, and fished around for a pen. After finding one with ink in it, Teagan plopped on her bed to write lyrics.

Bleak is the new black.

She flicked through the notebook, looking at the words written in her cramped hand. Song titles leapt out at her; *Love Me Till I'm Dead, I Hate Your Hair Bitch, Flesh and Mucus, I Wanna Be Your Slave.*

I am the poetess of despair. And some day you're all going to love me.

Teagan stuck the well-chewed pen in her mouth, struggling for inspiration. She wanted to write an erotic song, something dripping in sex. Something that would knock everyone's socks off. She had given it the provisional title of *I'm a Bad Girl Too*. She had the tune in her head, but so far, the lyrics only extended to the first two verses and the chorus.

You treat me like a princess

Tie ribbons in my hair

You want to hold my hand

And kiss me like your lady fair

But baby that's not what I want

You're not my Daddy, boy

My needs are so much simpler

I want to be your toy

Chorus:

So put your hands around my throat

And squeeze me till I'm blue

Treat me like a bad girl

Coz I'm a bad girl too

She tapped the pen in a steady tempo on the page as the next lines came together.

I like whips and blindfolds

I'm a cheap and dirty whore

So tie a lead around my neck

And drag me round the floor

You can be my lollipop

And make me choke it back

Nobody need ever know

We've turned our souls to black

She closed the notebook with satisfaction and squashed it back into the groaning drawer.

The bag she took to Sean's apartment sat discarded among a pile of magazines. She had put so much thought into her gift. She wanted Sean to know how much she trusted him. That was what all that bondage stuff was about anyway – trust. Trust was important in a marriage. And Sean needed to marry her or her plans to become a superstar would fall through. She'd need to find a way to get him over his trust issues. And he had them in spades.

They had made love, but not before the usual argument about wearing protection. She wanted him 'bareback,' but Sean insisted on using condoms. Did he think she was

trying to trap him? Well, yes. She was. But not with a baby. A baby would ruin her figure and get in the way of her music career. No brats allowed.

“Are you worried about giving me an STD or do you think your dick will fall off from some disease I’d give you?” she’d shouted.

He’d won. He used the condom and none of the toys. They were expensive too, and it wasn’t like you could return them.

She kicked at the dirty laundry on her floor. How could she move their relationship along? Teagan was ready for stardom – before she got crow’s feet.

There was little point in going back upstairs to Sean’s flat since sex was now off the agenda for a few days. Of late, Teagan sensed Sean becoming standoffish with her, but she put this down to her pushing for him to be more adventurous in the bedroom. His upbringing fought against it. He’d succumb, though – in time. His reticence in this area was a puzzle to Teagan. All her previous boyfriends would have jumped at the opportunities she offered Sean – several of them would have gone a *lot* farther, once they realized she liked her sex on the rough side. But Sean was different. Maybe that was what had first attracted her to him.

Bored, and for want of other entertainment, Teagan opened the door to her brother’s room.

Clive had immersed himself in some online game that involved blasting apart with high-calibre weaponry anything that moved. Virtual blood spatter covered the screen. Dismembered limbs littered what looked like a basement floor. The volume shook the walls. Teagan reached over and turned it down.

“Don’t you ever knock?” Clive grumped. His eyes remained locked on the game.

“It would hardly matter if I did. You wouldn’t be able to hear me over the racket.”

“I had to drown out the Lady Gaga crap you were playing.”

“Clive –”

“Wait. I’ve got to finish this level.”

Teagan slumped onto her brother’s unmade bed as Clive’s onscreen persona switched his machine gun for a rocket launcher. With a tumultuous bang and a flash of white light a section of the basement wall disintegrated, revealing a mound of charred bodies. One of the creatures writhed to the top, but with two deft flicks of the control

pad, Clive dispatched the survivor, slicing him in two with a Samurai sword. A message appeared on the screen *NEST DESTROYED*, and Clive hit the pause button.

He swung his wheelchair around to face his sister. Crumbs nestled in his beard. Clive subsisted on crisps and biscuits. Sweat soaked the armpits of his black MegaDeath T-shirt.

Teagan pinched her nose.

“What’s up?” Clive drained his beer and tapped the empty can. “Be an angel and get me another, would you?”

“In a minute. Your room reeks of body odour. Have you even washed today?”

He burped. “I wash once a month whether I need to or not.”

“Funny.”

“Why are you in such a foul mood? Period started or something?” He grinned at her and lit a cigarette.

“Bugger off.”

“I can always tell,” he said, exhaling his first lungful of smoke. “*That* won’t please lover-boy upstairs.”

“Why do people feel sorry for the disabled if they’re all bastards like you? Here, give me the can. And I’ll empty your disgusting ashtray while I’m about it.”

Teagan swung herself off the bed, proceeded to the kitchen and dumped the rubbish into the pedal bin. She collected two cans of Carlsberg from the fridge, opened the ring-pulls and set them down on the coffee table in the lounge. “If you want your beer you’d better get in here,” she shouted through the open door. “I’m not sitting in your room with that smell.”

Clive emitted an oath and wheeled himself through to the lounge. He snatched up the can.

“Give me a cigarette,” Teagan said.

He pulled the packet and a lighter from his shirt pocket and handed them over. “I thought Sean hated the smell of smoke.”

“He does. But as you rightly concluded, it’s my time of the month, so I won’t be seeing Sean tonight.”

Clive opened his mouth to make a comment, but Teagan's warning glare forestalled him.

Teagan took a deep draw on the cigarette, leaned back on the sofa, and jiggled her right leg – a motion she knew Clive found annoying. He said it put him in mind of a parked car left with the engine running. She tried to feign a sense of calm – but she never relaxed. Teagan's mind raced like a lab rat trying to find its way out of a maze. Notwithstanding that she and Clive lived together, their orbits intersected only on occasions. This was just as well. They irritated each other. He confessed to her that every time she went up to see Sean he felt relieved: a few hours of quiet to kill some zombies, instead of becoming one.

“You need me,” Teagan said, staring at him through her smoke cloud. Her eyes were bright and challenging. “You're a cripple, and you need me.”

Clive dropped his head. Some of the ashes from his cigarette spilled onto his useless legs. He brushed at it, but some of the grey powder stayed on his trousers.

“Don't you?” She leaned forward to ruffle his hair, and he dodged her hand.

Teagan leaned back and positioned her feet on the coffee table. “I need to step up my game with Sean,” she announced.

“He's another loser. A shift manager in a coffee shop. You can do better. If you went on the game, you could make some serious money for us. You have the body for it.”

“You'd like that, little brother, wouldn't you? Pimping your sister. But it's not going to happen. Besides, I have plans for Sean. He's going to help me make it in the music business.”

Clive flashed her a look that said, *delusional*. “If you want to go into the music business, don't you think you should learn to play an instrument?”

“It's not necessary these days. Not with computers and whatnot. I just need someone to bankroll me the sessions in a recording studio. Once I have an album out, we'll be made. Then you can sit in front of your computer screen all day if you want to.”

Clive bristled. “Listen, my money from constructing websites pays half our rent.”

She dismissed his retort with a wave of her hand and slurped a mouthful of lager.

“What makes you think Sean has the money to pay for a recording studio?”

“He might not, but his daddy does. His father *owns* this building, remember. It has to be worth millions. Even without the building, his dad must be stinking rich. A partner in a law firm in Edinburgh? God knows how much he earns. I know he has a big house up in Scotland too, and a holiday place in Italy. And Sean has no brothers or sisters. Do the maths, lamebrain.”

Clive sniffed. “Yeah, well you might be an old lady before Sean gets his hands on any of the money. An Old Lady Gaga.” He chuckled.

Teagan’s nostrils flared. “For your information, Sean’s father is not in good health. He had a heart attack last year. He might keel over any moment. Then Sean will get the lot.”

“Of course you’d have an agenda.”

“I always have an agenda, little brother. Do you think I’m going to be a hairdresser for the rest of my life. Are you going to help or not?”

“What does ‘help’ entail?” Clive rolled his wheels forward and back by centimetres, as if he wanted to race from the room.

“I want to snoop around and see what’s on Sean’s computer. I want to be able to see what his dad is saying to him. Do you know how I can do that?”

“It’s easy enough. You just plug in a keystroke logger. Even you could manage it. If you get one that’s wireless, we can monitor his stuff from here. You’d have to get into his apartment when Sean’s not around, though.”

“I can manage that.” She stubbed out her cigarette, crossed to her room, and closed the door.

Within seconds, *Bad Romance* vibrated the walls.

Avery rummaged in the closet and pulled out a pink shift. “Do you like this one, Mom?”

“I don’t like clothes at all. Why wear them? They’re so impractical.” Ginny shook an agitated hand, speckled with age spots. The loose skin of her upper arms waddled back and forth. “You have to put them on, move them out of the way to use the bathroom, clean them, hang them. Just a bother if you ask me. No. I don’t like clothes at all.”

“Well, Fanny and her family are coming over, and you can’t be naked for that.” Avery reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of underpants and a bra. She stacked them on the bed next to where her mom sat wrapped in a towel. Ginny had combed her damp hair – now sparse and grey – straight back, and pushed it behind her ears.

“Fanny who?”

Ginny’s glare struck her back as Avery dug through the closet looking for her mom’s matching shoes. “Your daughter,” Avery said over her shoulder. “Fanny’s your elder daughter. I’m your younger daughter.”

“I don’t want her here.”

“Now, why not?” Avery squatted holding one beige sandal and one black flat. Either would go if she could find a match.

“Is she bringing those bastards here with her?”

“Mom, please. Those are your grandchildren you’re talking about.” Avery tossed the shoes back in the closet and knelt to pull out the house slippers she spotted under the bed. Her mom could go casual for the morning. Avery would look for the shoes if Fanny was willing to take their mom somewhere. Anywhere. And give Avery a little peace and quiet. “Stop calling them bastards.”

“What am I supposed to call them? They are bastards. Fanny wasn’t married in a Catholic church. In the eyes of the Lord, Baptist churches don’t count.”

“Mom, her husband is a preacher.” Avery worked hard to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “Of course she got married in his church. It’s a legal wedding. They’re married. There are no bastards. These are your grandkids.” Avery’s patience was wearing thin. They’d had this conversation so often that Avery dreamed it sometimes.

The bell rang, and Avery turned to go downstairs and answer the door. She stopped to look back. “Mom, get dressed, please, and come down to visit.”

Ginny stuck her tongue out at Avery.

Avery raised a stern finger. “And be on your best behaviour while they’re here. Don’t make a row.”

Ginny grabbed her bra, turned her back to Avery, and bent in half to fasten it behind her back, mooning Avery in the process.



They sat in the den, each of the adults lost in their own thoughts. The two boys ripped up Avery’s magazines, making them into paper airplanes that they would let fly through the air, landing hither and yon. Rather than pick them up and launch them again, the boys tore more pages out and folded new planes. Avery watched the recipe for the chocolate mousse she’d wanted to try, turn into the next projectile. This one landed in her mom’s lap, but her mother didn’t seem to notice. She was muttering under her breath about the delicious taste of strawberries.

Her mother had had a severe allergy to strawberries her whole life. They were never allowed to bring anything into the house with the word ‘strawberry’ on it – even if it was a laboratory created flavouring and posed no threat to her mom’s health. Oddly, as dementia took over her mom’s brain, even little things like this had changed. One day, Avery had come home to her mom eating from a huge bowl of strawberries the caregiver had picked in her garden.

“When I told your mom my strawberries were ripe, she begged me for a bowl of them. Said they were her favourite thing in the world to eat,” Sally had said with a smile.

Avery had grabbed the phone in a panic to call 911, only to see her mom was just fine. Actually, the happiest Avery had seen her in a long time. Could the allergy have been all in her mom's head? Could an anaphylactic reaction be psychologically based?

"Strawberries in the garden, warmed by the sun's rays," Ginny chanted as she rocked herself. "Sitting, and picking, and eating one after the other" She stopped and pounded a fist into her chest, as a string of barking coughs erupted from her chest.

Avery moved over to her, placing a protective hand on her mom's shoulder, "Are you okay?" She turned to her sister, "Fanny, could you get Mom some water?"

Fanny put her finger on the place she left off reading. "It's Stephanie, and no."

Avery's mouth pressed into a thin, tight line as she moved towards the kitchen, her fists clenched and her elbows locked as she walked. Her brother-in-law stood and followed her through the door. As Avery fished in the cupboard for a glass, he leaned a hip into the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Power move number twelve, her boss' go-to position. Avery prepared herself for the inevitable.

"Avery, I have a burden pressing on my heart." This was Leslie's concerned preacher voice – the one he deployed when he saw a sin coming on. "The Lord our God has asked to me to lay this at your feet."

Avery's hand stilled on the tap; the glass hovered mid-air. "Fanny told you about the book."

"She did, yes. She said your new assignment is to see that Satan's tool comes to fruition."

Avery turned to face her brother-in-law. "It's my job, Leslie. That job is how I keep a roof over my head. And how I pay for Mom's day care. It's how I eat."

"I'm not asking you to leave your employment. But you have to see you are in the unique position to be an instrument of Jesus Christ." He went to the table and pulled out a chair, the metal legs scraping against the tile and her nerves. "You can help shepherd this wayward lamb back to righteousness." He caught her gaze, his eyes filled with moral conviction. "Satan, the great enemy, is causing mischief and damaging souls. You have to intervene on the side of Jesus Christ our Lord."

"If I intervene for Jesus Christ and this book doesn't go to print, PMT will fire me. Fired. Do you know what kind of job you can get after you get fired? None. Zero. Zilch.

I'm over-qualified to be hired in a low-wage job, and people are scrambling to find any kind of work in my field. You're asking me to become destitute."

"I am not. No." He shook his head to emphasise his words "And if you were to lose your job preventing this book, the Lord would provide for you. You must believe that."

"Must I?" Acrid laughter slicked up Avery's throat.

Leslie raised his chin. "I would give you a job if it came to it."

"As what? Your secretary?"

"Part-time secretary. We don't have a full time opening."

"Are you hearing yourself?" Avery slammed the glass on the counter. "If I lose my job, then you get Mom. You get that, right?"

Leslie blanched. "Your mom," he stammered out, "does better with you than with us. She feels her Catholic background. . . She feels that I. . . She would be happier. . ." Colour rose in his cheeks as he puffed them out, then let his exhale hiss between his teeth, staring over Avery's shoulder at the wall.

"Maybe you can see I'm stuck and out of options? This isn't my dream assignment, believe me. But I can't police the world. I'm going to have to believe God understands what's going on. Maybe *He* even has a sense of humour about it. Maybe He thinks it's kind of funny, some guy wrote that Judas Iscariot bit his son on the throat, and that's why Jesus can't die. For all we know, God's up there reading passages out of *Nosferatu*, *the Lost Gospel* to Saint Peter, and they're rolling on the clouds laughing."

Avery watched anger brighten Leslie's pale blue eyes.

"Avery, be careful what you say." He pitched his voice low, biting out each word. "Your soul is already tainted by this project. Don't add to the sin by presuming God would have a sense of humour."

"Give me a viable option, hell, give me a quasi-viable option, and I'll take it."

"I don't want you to suffer the wrath of God. I don't want your soul to fall into perdition," Leslie shouted.

In response, Ginny's cracked screech of a voice rose in the living room with an operatic *Gloria in excelsis Deo*.

"Thanks," Avery bit out, looking towards the living room. "That's bound to last for the next five hours." She picked up the kitchen towel and swiped it across the counter.

She lifted her chin to read the clock. "It's almost four o'clock now. So you're heading home to do as you please. Meanwhile, I'm living my penance." The cloth dangled from her clenched fist as Avery pointed towards the cacophony in the living room. "Don't you think?"

Leslie stared at the table, an internal argument seemed to churn in his brain. Avery was too tired to deal with him. She grabbed up the glass of water and went to her mom, hoping to distract her with something to drink and cut a singing marathon in the bud.

Avery found her sister gathering the boys for their departure. A fake smile spread across Fanny's face. Her eyebrows lifted with nervous energy. "Gotta go," she said brightly, as she shoved her book into her purse and bee-lined towards the door.

Avery caught her sister by the sleeve. "Listen, Fanny."

"Stephanie," she hissed.

Avery rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I have to fly to Dallas next week for two nights. You'll need to pick up Mom and have her stay with you overnight. It's Wednesday and Thursday that I'll be gone."

Panic flashed across Stephanie's face.

"My flight should be back in time to be here when her caregiver leaves on Friday. But I'll call you with a heads up if my flight gets delayed." Avery pushed up against the wall as her nephews barrelled out of the door.

"Can't there be another arrangement?" Stephanie laced her fingers as she begged. "Can't we hire someone for the night shifts so she can stay at your house?"

"Can you pay for it? It's time-and-a-half, and my budget is stretched to breaking now."

"But you don't understand. The last time she stayed with us, she sprinkled holy water around the doorframes like a scene from *the Exorcist*. Then the next night, Leslie found her in the boys' room, standing on a chair reciting the rosary and trying to cast the demons out. He had to pull her bodily out of their room. I was down in the kitchen drinking the cooking sherry to get through it."

Avery folded her arms. "You're having her. And that's that."

“Goose must have swallowed twice his normal helping of manic juice this morning,” Janice said.

Sean looked across at the scrawny young man operating the coffee machine. As the steam hissed, Goose tapped his fingers together, his eyebrows pulled down in concentration. Goose had only two expressions: cogitation and surprise. Whenever he counted numbers in his head – which was most of the time – he bore the look of a self-absorbed professor. The rest of the time, he wore a startled rabbit mask.

“Today’s the twenty-third,” Sean replied. “He always gets agitated this time of the month.”

“Huh. And you guys say women are a pain with our menstrual cycles.” She adjusted the apron across her ample bosom and moved off to clear a table.

Goose stopped tapping, looked at his fingers and nodded in satisfaction. His prominent Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Caramel macchiato to go,” he announced.

The morning rush at the coffee shop had subsided. Sean preferred it when they were busy. That way Goose didn’t have time to talk to him about his latest crackpot ideas.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sean watched Goose scribbling something on a serviette, and his heart sank. Sure enough, within a few moments the trainee stood beside him, proffering the paper.

“Hey, Sean,” he said, “do you want to know what I discovered?”

“Not really, but I suppose you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“It’s about the new clothes shop that opened down the road. The one called *Insanity*.” He pointed at the serviette where he had written, *YIT NI SAN*

“Yes? Is this supposed to mean something?” Sean asked.

“I’ve rearranged the letters of the shop name.”

“Enlighten me.”

Goose licked his lips. His blue eyes appeared unnaturally bright. “Y *IT* is, ‘Why it’. *NI* is Japanese for two and *SAN* is Japanese for three. So, *Insanity* equals, *Why it 23?*” He waited for Sean to comment.

How ironic that I’m the one on antipsychotic medication. Because you, chummy, are certifiable. “Very interesting,” he said. Sean knew better than to get involved in a discussion about Goose’s obsession with prime numbers and especially the ‘magic number’ twenty-three, which, according to his gangling companion, held the secrets of the Universe.

“As soon as I can afford a car, I’m going to buy a Nissan. *Ni SAN.*” Goose scribbled the word on his serviette. “Twenty three.”

“Except that ‘Nissan’ has two ‘S’s in it.” Sean took the pen and wrote. “So that makes it *NIS SAN*, which presumably is Japanese for something else.”

Goose shook his head. “No. One of the ‘S’s is silent. That doesn’t count.”

The trainee’s habit of seeing that number carved into every aspect of reality showed no sign of going away any time soon. Since Goose had started working at Tower Bridge Beanz, Sean had sat stoically through recitals explaining, inter alia, that the 23rd letter of the alphabet, W, has two points down and three points up. That Alexander the Great was 23 when he cut the Gordian knot. There are 23 vertebrae in the human body. A complete turn of the DNA helix occurs every 23 angstroms. The first occurring prime number where both of the digits are prime and add up to another prime number is 23. William Shakespeare was born and died on 23 April. . . and so it went on.

In days gone by, Sean mused, people would have called Goose an idiot savant, possessing an unexplainable gift of tortuous logic with numbers but in all other aspects being the epitome of weirdness. Gustaw Belka, to give him his real name, had come to England with his mother after Poland was admitted to the EU, drifting through a series of menial jobs until he ended up at the coffee shop – probably after driving all his previous employers nuts. And ‘nuts’ was not a term Sean used lightly.

Even Goose’s name was propitious, the young Pole had once explained.

‘Gustaw’: add together all the letters using their place in the alphabet = 91

‘Belka’: ditto = 31

Thus gives 91 and 31

Rearrange into a mathematical equation, using the same numerical order:

$$9+13+1=23$$

Sean wondered some days if the magic number also equated to Goose's IQ.

“Good morning, Human Beanz.”

The customer greeting them was a trader in the City, an Essex boy made good. He regularly dropped by the coffee shop, although Sean suspected it was less for the quality of the coffee and more for the opportunity to torment Goose. ‘Dagenham Dave’ had the bully’s nose for a helpless victim: the only redeeming feature of the situation was that Goose’s complete lack of social awareness made him oblivious to the ridicule directed at him.

Dave was loud, coarse, and successful, and the only person Sean knew who still wore red braces.

“The usual?” Sean asked.

Dave gave a curt nod and shifted his attention to Goose. “Hey, Goosey. I thought I’d pick your brains about the latest Angel murder. Got any theories about our local serial killer?”

“I’m working on it,” the trainee replied. “I’ve drawn up a map of the murder sites.”

“Hmm. Disappointing,” Dave said, winking at Sean. “I thought you’d have solved it by now, a man with your brain power. Anyway,” he continued, taking something from his jacket and placing it on the serving bench, “I brought you a present.”

“A clicking pen?” Sean asked. “Oh God, no.”

Goose looked at it as if he’d never seen one before. Then much to Dave’s disappointment, he simply picked it up, put it in the breast pocket of his shirt, and continued making the coffee.

“Hey, what’s up with him today?” Dave whispered to Janice. “I thought a clicky pen would drive one of these OCD types crazy.”

“You have to click it first,” Janice said.

“Janice –” Sean began. But it was too late.

“Hey, Goose, can I borrow your pen back for a second?”

Dave clicked the pen once and scribbled something – presumably nonsensical – on the back of his cigarette packet. Goose stared at the pen and Dave clicked it twice more. Goose looked anxious.

Dave clicked it again and Goose relaxed, his eyes trained on Dave’s hand.

Dave clicked the pen and Goose’s right eye twitched.

“Give him the pen, Dave,” Sean said.

Dave smiled and passed it back. Goose pressed it once, sighed in relief and put it back in his pocket. He handed Dave his Americano.

With a grin, Dave collected one of the newspapers from the rack and moved to a nearby table. He beckoned to Janice. As the trader took his seat, Sean noticed Teagan’s entry into the shop.

“Hi, babes,” she said. “How’s my sexy Mr. Kenny today?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“I need my curling tongs, but I left them at your place. Can I borrow your flat key?”

“I don’t remember you bringing any curling tongs with you.”

“I showered after you left. Is there a problem with my using your key? Are you hiding something in your apartment I shouldn’t see?”

“No, of course not,” Sean said. *Better to just give her the damn key than to have a scene in here.*

Teagan put her hand out, and Sean removed the key from his bunch.

“Don’t worry.” She reached up to ruffle his hair. “I’ll bring the key straight back. Hi, Goose.”

Gustaw Belka was staring at her. “Teagan Adams,” he said in a flat voice.

Teagan looked uncertainly at Sean. “Yeah, that’s right, Goose.”

“Twenty three.”

There was a moment’s embarrassed silence, broken by the sound of three clicks from Dave’s table. He looked up innocently from his crossword, a second pen in his right hand.

Goose scrambled to get the pen from his pocket. He clicked it three times.

Dave focused back on the newspaper, pretending deep concentration, and clicked his pen twice.

Goose countered with two more clicks.

There was a momentary pause before Dave clicked his pen four times.

Goose clicked twice, waited a few seconds, then clicked twice more.

Janice giggled and held up a third pen.

Teagan turned to Sean. "What the hell is going on?"

"It's going to be a long shift," he said.

After work, Sean showered and made himself a tuna salad. He drank two glasses of water and one of orange juice. He never took vitamin supplements, which he found in the past could interfere with his medication. Instead, he relied on a healthy diet and a regular exercise routine to keep himself in good shape.

Although the afternoon light was fading, he took his easel and charcoals to a favourite spot next to Butler's Wharf, which afforded an uninterrupted view of Tower Bridge. Here, he set up his sketch.

In spite of the diners at the nearby restaurants and promenaders who could not resist peeking over his shoulder, Sean never felt pressured here. Interactions were casual and brief. Moreover, the open air suited him. Luckily, this evening wasn't too chilly. The white shafts of light piercing the grey autumn cloud made the sky especially striking, giving a dramatic frame to the well-known stone structure. It was an artist's moment.

But it was interrupted.

"Sean?" The hand on his shoulder brought Sean out of his isolation, causing him to drop the charcoal.

"Francis?"

"Hey, you're such a hard guy to get on the phone. Glad to run into you."

Francis Jeffries grinned at him. He had dressed, as usual, in designer clothing, a new TAG Heuer watch displayed prominently on his left wrist. A well-paid job in his family construction business ensured he always looked well groomed. A small fortune in dentistry twinkled at Sean from a face made orange from regular trips to a spray-tanning booth.

Francis – the only one of his former University friends who had stayed in touch – always made Sean feel uneasy and inadequate. And in spite of Sean's efforts to let the relationship die, Francis seemed determined to maintain it, for reasons Sean couldn't begin to guess.

His friend nodded at the sketch of the bridge. "Hey, not bad. Is it for sale?"

“It’s not finished.”

“Looks good to me. Want to grab a beer?” Francis clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes. “Oh, sorry, I forgot. You can’t drink, can you? It might make you go all Charles Manson again. How about a soft drink – on me. That can’t hurt, right?”

“Right. How about a coffee back at my place?”

“Fine. You have the coffee, and I’ll pick up a couple of bottles of beer on the way. You must have an off-licence somewhere around here.”

Sean wiped the charcoal from his hands with a soft cloth and took one final look at Tower Bridge.

“Oh, by the way, I bumped into Amanda the other day in Selfridges. She’s none the worse since you lost your marbles and stabbed her in the stomach. She’s just had her second kid.”

Sean folded the easel and tucked away his drawing pad. “Thanks for the memory, Francis. I hope you gave her my regards.”

“Hey, sarcasm doesn’t suit you, Mr. Kenny. Sure you won’t join me for a beer? You look like you could use one.”

I could – now, Sean thought.

In the distance, a rumble of thunder rolled over the city.

Darkness drew in.



Sean looked with apprehension at the pills nestled in the palm of his hand.

Every time his prescription changed, he suffered anxiety, worrying about possible adverse reactions. He knew how subtly the tablets could affect not only his brain chemistry but his nervous system. One time a new medication had caused tremors in his right hand; disastrous for his drawing and painting. When he was on clozapine, he had developed tardive dyskinesia, giving rise to muscle twitches around his mouth – although it had been mild, and with a change of meds it had disappeared and not returned. Not yet, at least.

Francis had stayed just long enough to make Sean feel bad about himself and to overload him with statistics on new house building in the UK, including a blow-by-blow account of how well his company's major new development in Islington was coming along. Francis spent much of his time there, often staying overnight during the week rather than returning to his wife and their two spoilt children in St. Albans. The Angel of Death serial killing spree that was happening in Islington hadn't dampened the enthusiasm of investors.

"Hell, you can get killed crossing the road," Francis observed. "Besides, the Angel goes after women and almost all of our potential purchasers have testicles."

Francis was not known for his political correctness towards the fairer sex, and Sean wondered what other things his friend got up to during his overnight stays in the capital. He doubted whether temporary celibacy featured high on Francis' list of priorities.

Sean swallowed the tablets and sat down at his computer.

Perhaps Avery would be online. Somehow messaging her calmed him, made him feel comfortable in his skin.

He hoped Teagan would stay downstairs. He couldn't face her noise. Not tonight.

The Twitter Notification screen came up.

A_very @SeanKenny – Are you around, Mr. K?

Sean smiled.

The sound of hymns filled the air, but only the stray high note filtered through the ear protection Avery wore as she frosted her cake.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket, and she pulled one side of the muffs free.

“Hi, Lola.”

“I called to see if you wanted company, but I can hear your mom’s feeling musical. So I’ll just ask how your day was instead.”

“Can’t blame you.” Avery licked the side of her icing spreader, smearing chocolate across her cheek.

“So what started her up?”

“Stephanie was here. She came by with her family after church.”

“Blessed Joseph. Did Leslie try to convert her again?”

“Not this time.” Avery opened the cupboard and pulled out a wine glass and a dessert plate – which she stored side by side for convenience. “This time it was my soul on the precipice.”

“Yours? Why? What did you do?”

“Oh, you know the usual – First I broke Old Testament law: I wore wool and linen blend; I got a tattoo; I served shellfish for lunch. Then I went for the New Testament and worked on a Sunday.”

“Four sins. Holy Mary. And I bet your head is uncovered.”

“Yep. If I’m going to hell,” Avery cut a giant piece of cake and plunked in on her plate, then shoved the cutlery drawer shut with her hip, “might as well go all out.” She shovelled up a bite of cake as a high note sounded overhead and held long and sharp in the air. “Leslie doesn’t like my new work project – thinks I should find a way to make it tank.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s self-sabotage.” Her friend’s voice bristled with indignation.

“He says I’m an instrument of the Lord,” Avery continued, walking towards the dining room.

“As long as the instrument isn’t a drum, and he’s trying to bang you.”

“Lolly, that’s gross. Don’t say shit like that to me.” Avery set her cake and wine on the table. “Ew, now I have to go wash my mouth out with vodka.”

Lola snorted. “Yup, me too. Better make mine a double. Ach. Kid’s got a bloody nose. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Avery sat down, pulling the sound cancelling muffs back into place. She opened her laptop, took a deep and satisfying slurp of wine, then draped a napkin across her lap. Avery was re-tweeting a haiku when a smile crossed her lips.

Sean @A_very – Hello there.

Sean had come online.

A_very @SeanKenny – Hi. Good day?

She had hoped he would be there. Whenever they tweeted back and forth, Avery had a good time. She could pull herself away from her life, and dream of faraway places and handsome knights.

Sean @A_very – Passable. It’s raining, so I didn’t get my jog. You?

A_very @SeanKenny – Better now.

Sean @A_very – Why? Something happen this morning?

A_very @SeanKenny – Oh my sister was over with her two boys.

Avery took another sip of wine and waited for his reply. She looked at the clock. It was six o’clock in D.C., which made it eleven o’clock over there. Avery had caught herself doing that calculation several times throughout the day, imagining what Sean might be doing at the various times.

Sean @A_very – Got a bit rowdy did they?

A_very @SeanKenny – They are IMHO over-fed & over-indulged. But no, they weren't the problem. My sister, Fanny, was all in my face today.

Sean @A_very – WHAT???

A_very @SeanKenny – I had a fight with my sister.

A_very @SeanKenny – Sometimes she's so involved in her own life, she forgets other people have stuff going on, too.

Sean @A_very – No. The sentence you used!

A_very @SeanKenny – Because Fanny was all in my face?

Avery grew impatient as no reply popped up. She picked up her empty wine glass and went into the kitchen for a refill.

Sean @A_very – I'm dying. Thank you!!! I can't remember the last time I've laughed so hard.

Oh, that's why he took so long to respond. She read back through their last couple of tweets, perplexed.

A DM message bubbled up on the right hand side of her screen, and Avery moved her cursor to open it.

Sean – In England, 'fanny' is the slang term for a female sexual organ.

Avery – OMG!!!! I'll never be able to un-see that! Now every time I talk to my sister, I'll be calling her the c-word.

Avery found herself grinning at the screen, ridiculously pleased her tweet had made him laugh.

Sean – So Fanny is a nickname for Stephanie. Is Avery a nickname? A Twitter handle?

Avery – No, Avery Goodyear is the real deal. My dad insisted on it.

Avery – When I was born, he pronounced that it was going to be. . .

Avery – A. Very. Good. Year. That’s his humor.

Sean – He sounds nice. Does he live nearby?

Avery – He passed away two years ago. So. Yeah. I miss him. We were buds.

Sean – I’m so sorry.

Avery – My turn. Is Sean Kenny your real name? How old are you?

Sean – Yes. And I’m 31.

Avery – I’m 35.

Sean – Close in age then.

Avery – Yup. Hey, you’re up late. I thought you had first shift tomorrow.

Sean – I do. I just thought you might be around & I wanted to say hi.

Avery felt herself blush and was glad he couldn’t see. How stupid was that? To get emotional over someone on Twitter.

Avery – Well, thank you. I have to get off in a second though. I have a Skype with one of my authors.

Sean – Yeah which one? Anyone I’ve read?

Avery – It’s a secret so no telling okay?

Sean – Yup.

Avery – Travis Bishop.

Sean – Oh, he’s here in town. I’m surprised no one’s nailed him upside down to a cross.

Avery – That’s why he left the States now, isn’t it?

Sean – News said the Americans weren’t handling the ideas in his novel very well.

Avery – What was the man thinking when he wrote that rubbish, huh?

Sean – That he’d be famous? Check. That he’d make a billion dollars? Check.

Avery – Not a billion, but close.

Sean – Here in the UK, I think we have more of a sense of humour about it. Do you like the bloke? What’s he like?

Avery – I can't tell you. We've only emailed. Tonight = first Skype. I'm a little nervous.

Sean – Why?

Avery – A lot is riding on my ability to 'manage' him.

Sean – So you weren't on the team for Book One?

Avery – No. That was my boss's baby. But now Travis won't work with him or anyone else. Except me.

Sean – Lucky girl.

Avery – Shut up.

Sean – Why will he only work with you?

Avery – No clue. My boss didn't say. I think maybe it's karmic retribution of some kind from the sins of a past life.

Sean – I love Bishop's book – I love the subtlety of his writing. It's quite funny don't you think? Especially the scene with anal. . .

Avery – STOP! Don't even go there!

Sean – Hahaha Okay. I won't go 'there'.

Avery – Do we have to keep talking about this? I come on Twitter to forget. . .

Avery rubbed circles into her temples. She couldn't get away from this damn book today.

Sean – I Googled. You must work for Pearson Micklewhite Todd *snicker*

Avery – Why *snicker*?

Sean – You work for PMT?

Avery – Yes. . .?

Sean – Hmm. I bet they call it something else over there. Here PMT = 'premenstrual tension'.

Avery – It's a whole syndrome over here PMS. . .

Sean – Ah.

Avery – British women must have it easy if it's just some tension.

Sean – You mean British men? LOL. Wish that were so. Hang on, someone’s at the door.

Avery – Go. It’s time for my Skype anyway.

Sean – Avery?

Avery – Yes?

Sean – I bet you’re shovelling chocolate cake in your mouth as fast as you can.

Avery – Ach! How did you know that?

Sean – Just breathe. Everything’s going to be fine. I’ll be here later if you need to talk it out.

Avery – You’re the best! Good night.

Sean – Good luck.

The impatient pounding sounded again. Sean looked at his watch: almost midnight. He held out the slightest hope there was a crisis somewhere in the building. Perhaps a toilet was overflowing or there was a poisonous spider infestation. But he knew he wasn't that lucky. He closed his eyes briefly before turning the knob.

Teagan stood provocatively in the hallway. A red satin corset lifted her breasts, pressing them together to form full, round globes, and it cinched her waist to emphasize her hourglass figure. She'd paired it with a matching thong and garters. Her black stockings and stiletto heels highlighted long, shapely legs. In one hand, she held a pitcher with orange liquid; in the other, she held two champagne glasses. Sean reached for her and yanked her through the doorway to her delighted laughter. He scanned the hallway to make sure Teagan's exhibitionism hadn't shocked any of his neighbours.

"Teagan, I have first shift tomorrow."

Teagan smiled at him and shook her head. "I don't care, baby. Tonight I'm going to make you feel so good." She poured her concoction into the glasses and put the pitcher into the fridge, moving through his apartment as if she belonged there, as if it were hers.

Sean felt agitation building under his breastbone. He needed to stay in control – stay calm. Drawing a breath into his stomach then filling his lungs, Sean counted to four before he let his exhale whisper out through his nostrils. How could he get Teagan to go home? Given the way she was sliding towards him, like a panther on the hunt, her chin dipped and her eyes hungry, Sean knew it was going to end either with him bedding her or a fight. Well, that was a given, dressed the way she was.

Teagan held out a glass.

"What's in this?" Sean asked, eyeing it with suspicion.

"It's a slow comfortable screw. Doesn't that sound good to you?" She pressed her body against his, rubbing a single finger down his arm.

"It sounds like alcohol to me." Sean held himself rigid. "You know I can't drink it. I'm on medication."

“Medication for what?” Teagan angled her head up and nibbled at his chin. “You look healthy enough to me. As a matter of fact, you look good enough to eat.” She stood on her toes and licked his earlobe. He stepped back.

“Nothing. An old sports injury.”

Teagan set the glasses on the coffee table. She turned and locked her hands behind his neck, then leaned back to catch his gaze. “Well, that’s okay. Cocktails aren’t the only way to indulge in a slow comfortable screw.”

“Something I ate isn’t agreeing with me, Teagan.”

“Silly boy,” Teagan reached for his hands and pulled him towards the bedroom. “You don’t need to play hard to get with me. I’ll respect you in the morning.” She pushed the centre of his chest until he sat on his bed. “No need to worry about condoms either. You know I’m on the pill. You trust me don’t you?” She ran her fingernails along his scalp, kissing along his brow. “Just think how good it’s going to feel, baby. Skin to skin. You slipping inside of me, feeling all of it.” She pushed him again so he was lying flat. His mind searched for a way to get her off him, to send her home, to leave him in peace.

You have the power. Make her.

Sean stared at the picture on the wall across from him. He worked to fill his brain with loud thoughts of his own choosing.

Take her with you. Take her to hell.

Teagan was on her knees, straddling him. Her hands were on his jaw, and he worked at not clenching his teeth. “I’m going to make you feel so good,” she rocked back and forth over him until he stiffened from the friction. “There, see? See how your body wants me? You want me so bad, and I’m going to let you take me wherever you want.”

To hell. To hell. She’s asking for it – listen to her. Give her what she wants.

Teagan’s hair fell like a curtain around their faces, closing Sean in, making him feel claustrophobic; he had to get her out of there.

Teagan threw her head back and laughed. “I’d love to know what you were thinking. You looked so wild and dangerous. That’s what I want, baby,” she crooned. “I want you crazy for me. Let it go. Do whatever you want to me.”

Sean decided his best shot at getting her away from him was to bang her fast and get it over with. He threw her down. Triumph lit her face as she shifted into a seductive pose. Sean reached over for the nightstand drawer, yanked it open, and grabbed a condom.

“No, don’t.” Teagan stilled his hand as he brought it to his mouth to rip the package open. “I want to feel you inside of me.”

“The only way I have sex is protected.”

“That’s with your past girls. This is me. I’m different.” She crooned, but a sharp edge punctuated her syllables. “I’m special. I’m your only. So we’re good.” She pushed away the hand holding the condom. “I’ll take care of the birth control, and you enjoy the ride.”

“Non-negotiable. Teagan, I’m not going to have any babies by mistake. There is no way I could take care of them right now. I can’t take on that kind of responsibility.”

“But. . .” Teagan’s lips formed into a practiced pout.

“No buts. Non-negotiable. Now lay back.” His forceful voice made Teagan giggle. She crossed her wrists and lifted them over her head, grasping at the headboard. He ripped the condom packet open. Without bothering to remove his clothes, he pushed her panties to the side.

He depended on the lubrication from the condom to help him get in and make quick work of the situation, and then she’d be satisfied and leave without throwing one of her fits. The pitch of her voice when she was mad always set off the voice in his head. It prodded him to make her shut up. Shut up. Shut *the hell* up. If all the noise would just stop, then he could think his own thoughts. He could be himself again. Avery made the voice stop. Avery was the calm in his storm.

Teagan was restless under him. “Are you almost there, baby?”

“Uhm. I’m not going to be able to finish tonight. I told you, I ate something that isn’t agreeing with me.” Sean pulled out and rolled beside her.

“It’s the damned condom.” Teagan spat out with vehemence. She reached over and pulled it off, throwing it onto the bed by Sean’s head. Then she was on her knees, bent over his groin. Using her hands and mouth, it wasn’t long before Teagan rocked back on her heels with a look of feminine satisfaction. She swiped her hand across her lips, then

bent for a kiss. Sean threw a protective arm across his mouth. “Oh, no, no, no. I don’t want to taste that.”

Teagan laughed as she curled her body over his, her leg holding him prisoner. “I was right, see? I know what’s best for you, Sean.” She walked her two fingers up his chest, then let her index finger angle his chin up to look at her. “Everything is going to turn out perfectly. I know what I’m doing.”

Teagan burst through the door wearing a satisfied smile.

“Just get done doing Seany-boy?” Clive asked.

“I rocked his world.” Victory coloured her words.

Clive’s gleeful, wicked grin stretched across his face, making his cheeks billow out like a chipmunk hiding its food. Teagan cocked her head to the side and studied him. This was the face he made as a kid before she discovered a snake in her bed or worms in her scrambled eggs. Her body tensed in anticipation.

“I wouldn’t be congratulating myself quite so quick if I were you, little sis.”

Teagan’s molars clamped down tight, and she swallowed.

“I think Seany-boy has a thing for a Twitter-girl.”

Teagan let out an exasperated sigh. “Is that all? He tweets with some woman?” Teagan swiped the air with her red manicured fingers as if to brush the notion aside. “I’m on Twitter, and I check his feed. There’s nothing there.” Teagan moved to set the glass pitcher of cocktails, still full, in the fridge.

“Nothing in his Twitter feed maybe, but you should see what’s going on in his direct messages.”

She spun towards Clive, the light from the open door outlining her body and throwing her features into shadow.

“How can you see his DMs?” she whispered.

“The keystroke device you put in the USB port on his computer this morning works remarkably well. Lucky he has a tower system, eh? He’d sure as hell spot the thumb drive sticking out if he had a laptop. Anyway, now I have his passwords, it’s pretty much carte blanche. You can see what he’s doing on email, Twitter, whatever.”

“Passwords. I hadn’t thought about that.” She moved towards Clive. “I thought I’d just get to see what he was typing. That’s what the geek in the spy store told me.”

“What good would that be?” Clive cast a derisive glance over his shoulder as he wheeled towards his room. “You’d see an email which says, ‘Sorry to hear that, Dad,’

and never know what the hell he was sorry to hear. You have to know what the other person is saying. Wait 'til you see what's being said to Sean."

Teagan trailed behind. Clive's goading presented nothing new. He was forever trying to bring her down. To make her small. To kill her plans. But Teagan knew she was born to be a star. All she needed was the tiniest bit of luck. People would hear her songs on the radio and go wild over their edginess and candour. She'd be rolling in cash just like J.K. Rowling, go to all of the best parties, mix with other artists like herself – Madonna and Pink. Of course, the Queen would ask to meet her. Maybe make her a Dame like Julie Andrews. A smile curved Teagan's mouth into a soft pink bow.

Clive pulled the papers from his printer onto his lap and used both hands to turn his wheelchair around. Teagan stood there with her dreams in her eyes. He gathered up the sheets and thrust them at her. "Here yah go. Take a look at these." He beamed with pleasure. "Yup. Whole other world when Seany's chatting up some chick named A Very Good Year on DM."

Teagan arched a perfectly plucked brow. "A Very Good Year? Sounds like a hooker name."

"Doesn't look like that kind of relationship."

Teagan's gaze scanned the words for sex and caught the word 'fanny'. But, no. He wasn't talking about this woman's fanny; he was schooling her in English slang. Teagan saw nothing worrisome. But Clive obviously thought there was something here, or he wouldn't be watching her with anticipation. She moved back to the living area – followed by a smirking Clive – where she curled on the couch to read more carefully. "Looks to me like Sean met an American woman, and he's laughing at her. He doesn't like her a bit." She raised her gaze from the page and fixed it on her brother. "He's just making fun of her and was kind enough not to do it in public. Look, 'Snicker. PMT equals premenstrual tension'," She read out. "Not exactly a love note."

Clive narrowed his eyes and canted his head to the side. "Really? That's your take on the conversation?"

"Really. She's some fat cow shoving chocolate cake in her face and acting like a dunce not knowing what she's saying. It's not sexy, that's for sure." Teagan flipped her hair away from her face and ran her hands over the button-down Sean had insisted she

borrow for her short trek back to her apartment, smoothing it over her bosom. She lifted the sleeve and sniffed; it smelled of laundry detergent and Sean. Teagan smiled her secret smile. “Sean’s in love with me. See? He even wants me to wear his clothes.”

“Ah,” Clive responded with a nod.

“Can I get those passwords from you then?”



Teagan squinted at the screen of her laptop.

Her bio says she's from Washington, D.C.

She looked at Avery’s avatar – a drawing of a pretty blonde woman. “I bet she’s a four-hundred pound toothless whale.” Teagan chuckled at the thought. Blonde. Ha! Sean loved her long black hair. Loved how she’d trail it down his body, making him shiver. Avery was nothing to worry about.

Teagan pulled up Sean’s feed and saw the public portion of his conversation with A_Very. The name looked so vain. *What kind of lame person would come up with that as a Twitter handle?* “Someone deeply in love with herself,” Teagan muttered under her breath. Then she moved over to the DMs and read the rest. The chat actually happened. Clive didn’t make this shit up to upset her. She wasn’t upset, Teagan reminded herself. This was nothing. The Avery tart was nobody.

Teagan glowered at her screen. Sean loved her and wanted to marry her and share his soon-to-be wealth. He just hadn’t realized it yet. He was shy and unassuming and couldn’t believe his good luck in getting such a hot girl, one with so much talent. Teagan braided her hair and wrapped it with an elastic band.

She needed to convince Sean she was his to have and to hold until death do them part. He didn’t need to be afraid of his feelings for her. Teagan held out her left hand and wondered what kind of diamond he would get her. She hoped it was big enough to spray rainbows across the room like Sofia Vegara’s. Of course, Daddy would foot the bill for his only son’s bride.

Sean posted a tweet.

Sean @A_very – Avery?

Wait a minute. Teagan looked over at the clock. She had left him almost an hour ago; he should be sleeping.

A_very @SeanKenny – Why are you still up?

Exactly. Why are you up, Sean? Teagan gripped either side of her monitor as if she wanted to crawl through cyber space and wring Avery’s neck.

Sean @A_very – Just checking on you. Are you okay? Do you want to tell me about it?

A_very @SeanKenny – I’m okay. Frustrated.

Sean @A_very – Let’s change the subject then. What are you writing now?

A_very @SeanKenny – Oh, I’m working on a short story. Romantic suspense. You?

Sean @A_very – I did a bit of art today.

A_very @SeanKenny – What kind do you do?

Sean @A_very – Well, I’ve done everything from oil to graffiti.

A_very @SeanKenny – So you’re Banksy?

Sean @A_very – Yup that’s me. NAW. Right now, I’m doing a little pencil work. Dabbling you know.

A_very @SeanKenny – Oh! I want to see!!!

Sean @A_very – Are you sure?

A_very @SeanKenny – Yes, please!

Sean @A_very – Give me a second. I’ll put it up on the Twitter feed.

He’s showing Avery his art? On Twitter? When she had asked to see Sean’s sketches, he’d said he was playing around, and he wasn’t any good. “Not for public consumption,” he’d said. And now when Avery asks, he’s willing to put his stuff out on Twitter for the world to see?

Sean @A_very – This is what I did this afternoon.

Holy shit, he was good. Teagan stared at the intricate pencil drawing, showing a Venetian scene. *I wonder if he'd like to do a nude of me? Then he could post that to Twitter. Everyone would know Sean belongs to me. And if he doesn't post it, I will.*

Sean @A_very – I was playing around, you know? Thinking I might like a vacation, hehehe.

A_very @SeanKenny – Venice. I'd like to go there. You're quite good, you know?

Sean @A_very – That's what all the ladies say.

A_very @SeanKenny – Cute. Have you been to Italy?

Sean @A_very – No, but one of my favourite plays takes place in Venice: 'Othello'.

A_very @SeanKenny – It's one of my favourites, too.

Sean @A_very – Love is not always kind.

A_very @SeanKenny – You're right. It can make one stark raving mad.

Teagan waited. That was it? They left the conversation there? A blue circle showed up on the DM. Teagan's skin heated as she clicked on the envelope.

Sean – Is this from personal experience?

A_Very – Well, you know, suddenly the world tilts, and then it's hard to find someplace solid for one's feet.

A_Very – My favourite line from Othello is "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul. But I do love thee!"

Sean – "And when I love thee not chaos is come again."

A_Very – So true, don't you think?

Sean – Are you in a relationship with someone now?

A_Very – Me? No. Not for quite a while. And you?

Sean – No. No one special in my life right now.

What the fuck? Laughter rang from Clive's room, and Teagan wondered if he was Skyping one of his friends, or if he was reading this too. She felt anger paint her face. *No one special in his life?* Teagan leapt to her feet, knocking over her stool. She picked up a pile of magazines and threw them viciously against the wall. Why would Sean lie to some fat cow on the other side of the world about her?

A_Very – You know that last line from Othello, “and when I love thee not. . .”

A_Very – That's happened to me. When some guy changed his mind, & then I'm standing there alone & floundering.

A_Very – Has that happened to you too?

Sean – I think for me it was the inverse – I loved a woman, and then perdition caught my soul & filled me with chaos.

Sean – It was really the most. . .

Sean – Ha! Those thoughts are much too dark for such a lovely evening. The storm passed. The stars are brilliant.

A_Very – You must have sent the bad weather our way. Here we're having a lightning storm. Don't be surprised if I suddenly disappear.

Yeah, I'd like you to suddenly disappear, Avery Goodyear. You and your Othello-quoting tripe. “Why didn't he come and get me if he needed company?” Teagan growled. She grabbed her pillow and hugged it as she paced back and forth across her room. “How dare Sean lead that woman on just to have something to do when he couldn't sleep?” For a moment, Teagan glared out the window into the still inky night. “Chaos?” She swung the pillow, knocking over her lamp and exploding the bulb. “I'll show you chaos come again.”

Sean Kenny opened the kitchen drawer and selected a long carving knife.
His hand trembled.

He looked at the blade glinting in the light. Sweat trickled down his face. His shirt stuck to him and his stomach muscles knotted.

He didn't want to do this, but the voice insisted.

If you don't kill her, she's going to kill you.

He shook his head and ran his tongue over his lips. From the bedroom, he heard the stereo play *Sympathy for the Devil*.

The voice spoke again. Urgent. Threatening. *Do it, Sean.*

Waves of heat crashed in his brain.

Do it now.

He grasped the handle of the knife and moved to the bedroom. The walls pulsed and blood throbbed in his ears.

She was bent over the music system with her back to him. As she turned, his hand thrust the blade forward into her stomach.

Sean awoke as his body convulsed.

He lay on his bed, fully clothed. Disoriented, he reached across to the nightstand and grabbed the glass. Sean took a long drink, trying to get his frantic breath to subside. He spilled most of the water down his chest in his haste. Perspiration bathed him.

A nightmare. Nothing more.

The digital alarm clock registered 06:23, and the glow of dawn illuminated the curtains.

Sean swung himself off the bed. His legs wobbled, and he almost tumbled over.

Why am I dressed?

Making his way to the bathroom, he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He slid the glass door closed and watched the steam form as the jets hit his body. Sean pushed his mind back to the previous night.

A memory surfaced of his exchanging messages with Avery over the Internet, then nothing. Had he merely fallen asleep on his bed? Had he blacked out?

The soap slipped from his fingers, as his hands trembled.

Blonde. Avery was a blonde. Like Amanda.

Perhaps that had triggered the nightmare. His recurring nightmare. But it had been so long since the nightmare had surfaced.

He turned off the shower, but stood immobile. He exhaled deeply.

Remain calm. You are in control. He reassured himself.

Sean stepped in front of the mirror, towelled himself dry, and brushed his teeth. *This is a normal day. I'm normal. Everything is normal. I had a nightmare. People do. Nightmares are not uncommon. They're normal.* He picked up his razor. His hands were steady. The tremor had stopped. He nodded with satisfaction, but nonetheless shaved with care.

He dressed, filled a bowl with muesli, and gazed out of the window while he ate. In the street below, nothing stirred. Sunday morning. The City slumbered.

Sean washed up his breakfast things, then took the plastic rubbish sack from the pedal bin and proceeded downstairs to the lobby.

The rear door of the building stood open. In the yard beyond, he could see Mrs. Patel, the small Indian lady who lived in one of the first floor flats. Dressed in a bright orange sari, she clutched her own rubbish bag and shook her head. She seemed to be in a state of distress.

“Hello, Mrs. Patel. Is something wrong?”

Then he saw it.

Spray-painted in black and red letters across the rear wall was the word, *CHAOS*. Intermingled with the lettering were crude skulls and what looked like lightning bolts. But perhaps they represented something else. Like serrated knives.

You could gut someone with those, said the voice.

“Vandals.” The elderly tenant tutted. “Why do they do this?”

Chaos, Sean. You remember chaos, don't you?

Sean stood rooted to the spot, his gaze imprisoned by the graffiti. His rubbish sack fell to the ground.

Of course you do, goaded the voice.

“Sean, are you all right?” Mrs. Patel’s expression showed her concern. “You don’t think someone broke in as well, do you?”

“What? Oh, no, no. I’m sure not.” He dragged his attention away from the wall. “It’s just kids.”

“I’ve always thought it was safe around here.” The discovery had clearly shaken the usually cheerful widow.

“The back door was locked when you came down, wasn’t it?”

She toggled her head in the Indian fashion.

Sean took the gesture to signify ‘yes’. He laid a hand on her arm. “You’re perfectly safe, Mrs. Patel.” Sean did his best to sound reassuring. “Here, give me your bag, and I’ll take care of it for you. Don’t worry, I’ll get this painted over. It’s only some teenagers with nothing better to do with their time.”

“They should bring back National Service,” she said and moved back into the building.

Sean examined the yard. A two-metre high wall enclosed the garden. A large wrought-iron and wood-clad gate led to the street side. The bolt and padlock were in place. Not impossible to get over the wall, but not easy either.

The painted words stared back at him.

He opened one of the large dumpsters and saw two spray-cans lying on top of the sacks.

Tidy vandals, said the voice.

“Shut up,” Sean hissed.

He threw the rubbish bags into the dumpster and closed the lid.

He took the small bunch of keys from his pocket and stepped back into the apartment block. The ground floor held the janitor’s cupboard. He checked the door. Locked.

His apartment key served as a master for every door in the building. He inserted it into the lock. Stacked neatly inside the storage area Sean saw his cleaning equipment and other utensils; hammers, saws, screwdrivers, paintbrushes, wood varnish, cans of magnolia paint and all the paraphernalia of building maintenance.

A previous tenant had left behind two cans of spray paint – for what purpose Sean could only guess – but their allotted place on the shelves was empty.

Had he thrown them away?

Or perhaps they weren't there because they were in the dumpster outside.



“You seem very subdued today, Sean,” Janice said.

“It’s just as well one of us is,” he replied, casting a glance in Goose’s direction.

The trainee was on his break, crouched over a table on which he’d stretched a large map of London. Goose shifted his weight from foot to foot, scanning the paper before him, his eyebrows jerking up and down as he wrestled with some intractable puzzle. Arcane scribbles and number sequences covered the map. A ruled line connected crosses marked at four points.

Janice sidled over to the table and studied the chart. “What the hell are you doing, Goose?”

His finger stabbed at the map excitedly. “These are the places where the four Angel murders took place. If you join them all up, two of the angles of the lines are *exactly* twenty-three degrees.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Janice asked.

Goose looked pained. “There is a pattern in all this,” he said, “if I could work it out. Crack the code. It’s all here somewhere. In among the twenty-threes.” He swirled his spread fingertips over the diagram as if he were a conjurer. “I have to find out what it is. Then we’ll know.”

Janice scratched her neck. “Know what?”

“The time and place of the next murder, of course,” Goose said.

Janice snorted. “You are fucking cuckoo.”

“Leave him alone, Janice.” Sean said. “And, Goose, put that stuff away. You’re freaking the customers out. Break’s over.”

Why couldn't I have a normal day today? Just one regular day, with normal people.

He took an almond croissant from the microwave and set it on a plate.

I need to be around normal people.



Sean arrived home after a wearing shift, carrying two tins of paint. He changed into some old clothes and went out into the yard.

It was a mess. Aside from the graffiti, he found the remnants of food and general waste strewn around. One of the dumpster lids lay on the ground.

The combination of an irresponsible tenant and the neighbourhood’s stray cats were responsible for the mess. The tenant in question, Sean had no doubt, was Victor Sauvage. Victor was an air conditioning sales rep from Marseilles, who, as well as having a Gallic obsession with seafood, had a complete aversion to considerate behaviour. He never sealed his rubbish bags and the effort of closing the lid on any dustbin was beyond what he was prepared to do. It wasn’t the first time Sean had had to clean up his mess, and he doubted it would be the last. The man was a burr in his shoe, a constant source of aggravation. Not only that, he was behind with his rent. Again.

Be calm. Sean cajoled himself.

A ginger cat sat on the wall licking its paw, watching Sean. “Did you do this?” he asked the cat.

The cat made no response. It stared at him until Sean threw a scrubbing brush at it.

Sean cleared up the mess, re-bagged the garbage and slammed the lid down on the dumpster.

Two hours later, as darkness gathered, two coats of dark red paint covered the offending graffiti. The memory of it, however, would be less easy to erase.

Sean sat down on the back step of the building to catch his breath. “I need food, a shower, and a conversation with Avery,” he said out loud.

He waited for the voice to comment.

Avery lay on her bed, letting the cool breeze from the air conditioning vent waft over her. Outside, a full moon backlit the pine trees. Like dancers, they swayed gracefully in the wind. Avery watched them, hoping their movements would hypnotize her, and she could get some rest. She hated sleeping on her back, but this was the only position that would allow her to wear the noise-cancelling headphones, otherwise her chance of drifting off was practically nil. Avery made a mental note to call her mom's doctor in the morning and see if he could do anything about her medications. This had to stop.

The flashing light on the telephone inched into her awareness. Avery glanced at the clock, almost 2 a.m. This was either a mistaken drunk dial or an emergency. As the thought slicked through her mind, she ripped off the earmuffs and punched the receiver button.

"Hello?"

"For Christ's freaking sake, can't you make her be quiet?"

Avery cleared her throat. "Excuse me?"

"It's Miles Harlow, next door. I know you're having a bad time with your mom and all. I sympathize, really I do. But you have to understand how well we can hear her over here, especially with the wind driving every freaking note towards our nursery. We had to move the baby in with us. We can't sleep through this. You have to do something."

"Oh Mr. Harlow, I'm so sorry. I had no idea you could hear her. I. . ." Avery couldn't tell the man she'd take care of it. If she had a way to take care of it, she'd be sleeping right now herself. Once her mom started singing, Avery just had to wait her out. Shit. "I'm so sorry." She finished lamely. Tears burned the corners of her eyes. "I'll do everything I can. I'm going to try to get her to the doctor again. She's. . . well, that's too much information. I'm doing my best."

"Seriously. Take care of this. I'll be generous and give you ten minutes. After that, I'm calling the cops – disturbing the peace. Noise ordinances do exist you know."

“I do know, Mr. Harlow. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“My buddy on the police force says I don’t have to put up with this shit. Seriously, shut it up, or I’m making the call. Do you want your mom to spend the night in jail?”

“Mr. Harlow, you have been so kind to call me first. I’ll do everything in my power to —”

“At this point, gag her. I need some sleep. My wife needs some sleep.”

“Yes. Immediately, Mr. Harlow. I’ll find a way get her settled right now. Okay?”

The crashing sound of a receiver slamming down on its base, made Avery jump. She stood there with her phone buzzing a ready signal, trying to figure out a strategy for keeping the police out of this. Maybe she could get her mom in the car and drive her around for a while. Ten minutes.

Avery ran to her mom’s room and clicked on the overhead. The light startled them both into wide-eyed stares. The shock of the sudden glare was enough to make Ginny close her mouth. The last note of *Adeste Fideles* hung in the air.

Avery wrung her hands. “Mom. What are you doing? Why aren’t you sleeping?”

Her mother stared at Avery. Opening her mouth wide, Ginny sucked in a breath.

Avery leaped forward and shook her mother by the shoulders. “Stop. Don’t you dare sing another note. Do you hear me?”

“Avery Grace Goodyear, how dare you manhandle me? When your father gets home he’ll know about this.”

Avery released her mother and clawed at her scalp, trying to get control of the anxiety and anger pumping through her veins. Her mom was not responsible; it was a disease. Hate the disease – not her mother, Avery tried to reason with herself.

“Mother, I’m sorry. Right now I need you to tell me why you aren’t sleeping.” Avery moved to the highboy where Ginny kept her medications. A contraption separated the prescriptions by date and time. When the time came to take a pill, a bell sounded, and the compartment popped open, that way Ginny wouldn’t forget how many tablets she’d taken and OD. Again. All of the opened boxes were empty.

“Mom, you took your sleeping pills didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Ginny pulled her sheet in front of her and looked at the floor.

Avery watched her mother carefully. “Mom, did you take your sleeping pill tonight?”

Ginny cast innocent eyes towards Avery. “Yes. I took a shower, dressed in this gown, took my pills with a glass of water, and said my rosary.”

Avery expelled an exhausted sigh.

“Mom, why didn’t you take your pills?” Avery tried to modulate her voice to sound as friendly and supportive as possible. She picked up the wastebasket and searched through the debris. She opened the drawer of Ginny’s nightstand. “Mom, we need to find your pills. Where did you put them?”

Ginny slid to the end of the bed and put her hands flat on either side of her. “Avery Grace, don’t you sass me. I told you, I took the pills.”

“Get up.”

“What? No. Leave my room this instant or your father will be angry when he gets home from work. You’re certainly working yourself into a long and arduous punishment, young lady.”

Avery reached for her mother’s wrists, planted a foot on the bed for leverage, and pulled. With Ginny standing beside her, Avery lifted the corner of the mattress. There lay dozens of pills – blue, white, yellow and two-tone. Avery scraped them onto her hand and held them under Ginny’s nose.

“What is this? What did you do, Mom? No wonder you’ve been off your rocker. You haven’t been taking your medications.”

Ginny shook a defiant finger in Avery’s face. “Who are you to tell me, your mother, what to do?”

“I’ll tell you who I am. I’m the daughter who’s keeping you out of a jail cell tonight.” Avery moved to the bureau where she put down the jumble of drugs. She picked out two of the little white ones and advanced towards her mother. “Here you go, open up.”

Ginny sealed her lips in a tight pucker.

Avery reached for her mom’s jaw, but Ginny twisted her head to the side.

“I swear to god, Mom, you’re going to take these if I have to sit on you and force them down your throat.”

“Why?” Ginny’s voice trembled with emotion. Fear and sadness filled her eyes.

“Why are you helping them?”

“Helping who?”

“Sally and the others. They’re trying to kill me, Avery. They want me dead. Then they won’t report it. They’ll shove my body into the deep freeze downstairs and leave me there, frozen like a human ice cube.”

“What?” Avery scanned her mother’s face and only saw conviction there.

“They want my money, Avery, my social security cheque. Once I’m dead, they can keep taking it for the next thirty years without anyone knowing the difference. Unless we lose electricity. Then maybe my body would stink and the neighbours would call the police to figure out what the smell was.”

Avery stood there flabbergasted, as she listened to her mother unfold her delusions.

Ginny had laced her fingers and held them in front of her face like a beggar. “But then I saw the delivery man bringing the box, and I asked Sally what was in it. She fessed up and said it was a generator. So now I know they’re prepared to keep my body frozen even if the electricity goes out.”

“Mom, no one wants you dead.” Avery pushed away the whisper that she would feel relief without the burden of her mom’s illness. Then she remembered her dad, dying in the hospital, crying, pleading, and pulling from her the promise she would take care of her mom – keep her out of the institution for as long as humanly possible. Avery focused on the pills lying on her palm, and she thought she was getting to the end of her strength. She just wasn’t sure if she had hit the mark yet where her dad would agree she had done her very best. Avery desperately wished her dad had been clearer about those parameters when he had asked her for this sacrifice.

“I’m not going to prison for the rest of my life for the chance at sixteen hundred a month of social security money split with your caregivers.”

“Not you Avery, Sally and the others. They’re plotting. I know it. And they’re stealing my clothes, too. My things. My things are all disappearing.”

The tension behind Avery’s temples beat a palpable rhythm.

“Okay, Mom. We need to talk about this sometime. But right now it’s two in the morning. I need to get some sleep.”

“Well, go on ahead, then, you’re the one who barged in here and put the light on.”

“Take your pills, and we’ll both get some rest.”

“No!”

Avery lunged forward, grasped Ginny’s jaw at the tender spot where the upper and lower jaws came together, and squeezed. It was the same move her mom used on her when she was a little girl and refused to have her mouth washed out with soap. It worked like a charm. Ginny’s mouth popped open. Sweating and shaking, Avery shoved the pills down the back of Ginny’s throat then released her.

Ginny was sobbing when Avery handed her the glass of water.

“Now get in bed, Mom. Don’t you dare open your mouth – not one single note until tomorrow morning, do you hear me?”

Her mother nodded, her childlike eyes filled with hurt.

Shutting off the light, Avery moved down the stairs. She’d need to ask the doctor if she could have a shot for her mother instead of the pills. In the kitchen, Avery lifted the lid off the cake plate and considered the last piece of Devil’s Food. If she continued to eat cake like this, she was going to be an elephant no matter how hard she pushed herself in her aerobics class.

She opened the lid on her laptop, checked her email, nothing in her inbox from Travis, darn him. She sent him a reminder.

Next Chapter Outline

Hello Travis,

Checking in with you. We had agreed you’d have your next chapter outline sent to me this weekend. Can you send it to me now?

Avery Goodyear

As Avery glanced through her Facebook feed, she heard a ping.

RE: Next Chapter Outline

Avery don’t you need your beauty sleep? Hope my missing deadline isn’t what’s keeping you up.

Do you think it would push anyone's buttons this time if I make Mary Magdalen go back to work?

T.

RE: Next Chapter Outline

Back to work? What do you mean?

Avery Goodyear

RE: Next Chapter Outline

Well, she was a prostitute before she met Jesus...

T.

Avery stared at the screen. She was at a complete loss as to how to respond. Her head came down to rest on her arms as she willed herself not to think, to let her mind go blank. It occurred to her there were only snippets of her day that were bearable – sometimes driving in her car, talking to Lolly, and Tweeting with Sean. She rubbed the heel of her palms into her eyes. What a pitiful excuse for a life.

Clicking over to her Twitter account, Avery did a quick calculation. Maybe she could catch Sean before he left for work.

She saw Sean had posted to her earlier in the day when she had been out running errands ahead of her trip to Texas. She looked at the simple, 'Hey, Avery, are you around?' That was it – his only tweet on Sunday.

A_very @SeanKenny – Sorry I missed you. Have a happy day.

Avery was scrolling through her notifications when she saw. . .

SeanKenny @A_very – What are you doing up? Is everything all right?

A_very @SeanKenny – Just one of those nights. Some noise was keeping me awake.

SeanKenny @A_very – Sorry. Maybe some warm milk?

A_very @SeanKenny – Are you off to work?

Sean Kenny @A_very – Grabbing a bite of breakfast, then I'll go. I have a minute.

A_very @SeanKenny – I'm headed out on a business trip for the next couple of days – lit. festival.

SeanKenny @A_very – Brilliant. You should have fun doing that. Change of scenery.

Avery thought about her mom upstairs and Jerry at the office. She rolled her eyes. Which was easier to handle? She didn't want to deal with either.

A_very @SeanKenny – It feels like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

SeanKenny @A_very – There's a story there.

A_very @SeanKenny – I'll tell it to you, someday.

Avery waited for his next tweet. After a few minutes, she went into the kitchen and made herself a cup of Sleepy Time tea. *He's probably brushing his teeth.*

Mug in hand, Avery moved back to her computer. There was nothing new from Sean. She blew across the surface of the tea, and waited. Avery thought about Sean and how little she knew about him. Somehow he'd become a balm for her. She really depended on their connection as a sort of touchstone to get her through the day. She glanced up at the clock. No real point in going back to bed now. Her plane left at six. She'd need to start getting ready in an hour and get over to Reagan National before she got caught in traffic and missed her flight.

Clive pounded on the door of the bathroom. “How much longer are you going to be in there, Teagan?”

“As long as it takes,” she yelled back, turning her attention away from her mascara for a moment. “I’m the one who’s going to work. You can look like a slob all day, but I need to be presentable.”

He cursed before wheeling himself back into the lounge.

Neither sibling was in a good mood after a disturbed night. Not being a heavy sleeper, Teagan had heard Clive pottering around at three o’clock and had thrown on a robe and opened her door to find him in his pyjamas watching a movie.

“Do you know what time it is, for fuck’s sake?”

“I can’t sleep,” he replied irritably. “There’s too much banging going on next door.”

“What do you mean ‘banging’?”

“I mean Sauvage is banging the crap out of some tart, and she’s making so much noise it’s coming through the walls. They’ve been at it for over an hour. I don’t know where he gets his fucking energy from.”

“He’s making sure he gets his money’s worth.” Teagan said.

She went through into Clive’s bedroom. The unmistakable sounds of sexual gymnastics – muted, but clearly discernible – cut through the quiet of the night: a squeaking bedframe, the thud of the headboard. The woman was vocal in her encouragement, although Teagan thought it sounded a little *too* enthusiastic to be genuine. She hit the wall several times with the flat of her hand and shouted, “Can you two finish up soon? We’re trying to get some sleep in here. Either that or put a gag on her.”

The sounds stopped. Teagan put her ear to the wall but could hear nothing. She guessed that Sauvage moved his girl *du jour* to the spare bedroom to conclude their transaction.

Sauvage often brought women back to his apartment and, from what they had observed, it never seemed to be the same one twice. She and Clive assumed his trysts were more financial than romantic in nature.

“He must spend a bloody fortune on prostitutes,” Clive grunted as Teagan reappeared. “I don’t know why he doesn’t use a jar of chopped liver.”

“He’s French,” she replied, as if that explained everything.

Now it was morning and crankiness was the prevailing mood in the Adams’ apartment. Teagan stepped out of the bathroom. “It’s all yours, Your Lordship. And if you’re going to take one of your legendary dumps, please spray with the air freshener afterwards.”

Clive glowered at her. “That graffiti crap was you, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” Teagan moved towards the kitchen.

Clive wheeled right behind her. “I mean the spray painting on the back wall. The *CHAOS* shit. That had your name all over it. Just like when you were at —”

Teagan rounded on her brother. “Shut up, Clive. Shut. Up.”

“It *was* you.”

“Shut the fuck up, Deadlegs.”

“It’s because Sean was talking to the blonde about Othello. I know. I read it.”

Teagan pushed her face up close to Clive’s. “Yeah, well, reading can be a dangerous thing, little brother.”

Clive met her gaze without blinking. “Where’d you get the paint?”

Teagan swung away from him reaching for the kettle. “From the janitor’s cupboard, if you must know.”

“And how did you get in there?”

“I had a copy of Sean’s key cut. It’s a master. Opens every door in the building. I thought it might come in handy.”

Clive laughed. It was not a humorous laugh. “You are one sly bitch, Teagan.”

She gave an ironic bow.

“Although maybe not so bright.”

Her eyes flashed at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if you have given the game away to Sean about our hacking into his systems? Bit of a coincidence that “Chaos” showed up within hours of him talking to the American, don’t you think? Seany-boy may be many things, but he’s not stupid. He may not know who did the graffiti, but I’ll bet he’s already changed his passwords.”

Teagan put the water on to boil. “So what if he has? Our little device on his computer will give us the new ones.”

“Only if he hasn’t found *that* too.” Clive sneered.

“Sometimes, Clive, I think it would be kinder if you had died in that accident instead of just losing your legs.” Teagan reached over and stroked his hair. “Kinder on you, I mean. To be imprisoned in a useless body with no hope of ever walking again. It must be hard. Try not to let it make you bitter.” She kissed him on the brow and disappeared into her room, kicking the door closed behind her.

Firing up her laptop, her fingers moved over the keyboard. She found she still had access to his Twitter account: Sean had not changed his passwords.

Why not?

Clive was right, of course. Damn him. Her escapade with the paint could have blown everything. Had Sean put the episode down to a staggering fluke, an accident of fate? Perhaps he hadn’t got around to changing his passwords *yet*? Whatever the explanation, she would let herself into Sean’s apartment next time he went out, and remove the bug from his computer. That would eliminate any trail. If he changed his passwords later, she could always put the bug back. Now she had untrammelled access to his flat courtesy of the copied master key.

Teagan frowned. Sean had had another conversation with that woman. Avery Goodyear’s last tweet to him was from a few minutes ago.

A_very @SeanKenny – Did you leave for work already? I wanted to make sure I said goodbye to you before my Texas flight. It’ll be a few days before I’m back on Twitter.

WTF? He was talking to her before he left for work?

Teagan typed.

SeanKenny @Avery – Leave me alone. I don't have time for your shit.

She stood up and paced around the room, uncertain what to do next. No further tweets appeared on the feed. Teagan consulted her watch. She had to leave for work.

If Sean sees THAT, he'll know.

She went back to the laptop and deleted the tweet, hoping it wasn't too late.



By the time she had been at the salon for two hours, Teagan had convinced herself all was well. Never one to brood on her actions for long, she turned her attention to the next stage of her campaign to cement Sean's affections. The Avery Goodyear thing was a meaningless blip, one of those stupid 'virtual' things that happened on the Internet. The bimbo was thousands of miles away, not worthy of further consideration.

Teagan hummed to herself as she worked on Mrs. Blenkinsop's perm.

"You seem thoughtful today, dear."

"Man trouble, Mrs. B."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's nothing I can't handle. I need to remind my boyfriend how lucky he is to have me."

"Make him feel guilty," her customer confided in a whisper. "It always works with my husband. Play the cute card. Something which makes him feel *committed*."

Teagan chuckled. "You are an old slyboots."

"Men are simple creatures, once you know how to manipulate them." Mrs. Blenkinsop examined her nails. "I think I need a pedicure too. Do you have time?"

"For you, all the time in the world."

Play the cute card. It sounded like good advice. But how to put it into effect?



Arriving back at Shad Thames after work, Teagan bumped into Mrs. Patel clad in a red patterned sari and struggling through the lobby with carriers of shopping.

“Let me help with those bags.” Teagan offered. Teagan had taken a liking to her fellow tenant, ever since the old Indian lady had told her she was one of the most beautiful girls she had ever met. They took the lift to the first floor.

“Would you like to come in and have a cup of tea with me?”

“I’d love to.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to, you know.”

“The alternative is making dinner for my grumpy brother, and I’d like to put that off for as long as possible.” Teagan waited as Mrs. Patel unlocked the door.

While Mrs. Patel poured tea and chattered about the Angel murders, Teagan gazed out of the lounge window, looking into the back yard. The ginger cat perched atop the freshly-painted wall; its paw brushing over its whiskers.

Mrs. Patel set two saucers on the table. “Did you see that awful graffiti?”

“Yes.” Teagan dropped her eyes as the Indian woman moved to the window.

“Terrible. It took Sean hours to paint over it. Mind you, he’s done a good job.” She nodded at Sean’s handiwork.

“Yes, he has.”

“And the poor man had to clear up the mess made by Mr. Woodley too. Mr. Woodley loves to root through the bins. Bad Mr. Woodley.”

“Who’s Mr. Woodley?” Teagan asked, images of undesirable homeless-types leaping into her mind.

Mrs. Patel pointed at the cat. “That’s Mr. Woodley,” she replied. “The tom cat. I call him that because my dear husband and I used to have a neighbour by that name when we lived in Wolverhampton. He also had ginger hair, although his first name wasn’t Tom.”

Play the cute card, thought Teagan.

A cat.

Perfect.

Adjusting the shoulder strap on her briefcase, Avery waited for the elevator to arrive. Now that the day was over, Jerry's cologne smelled sickly-sweet and stale, exciting her gag reflex. Avery sidestepped away from him, trying to cover the move as a shift of balance. The bell dinged and the doors slid open. Jerry placed a possessive hand on her lower back as he shepherded her in. Avery tensed at his touch.

They squeezed into the crowd and turned towards the closing door. Jerry's hot breath whispered in her ear. "You know, it's kind of a shame we have to go through this pretence about booking two rooms."

Avery shot a glance over her shoulder. "It's not happening."

He chuckled. "No?"

They moved to the side as people arrived at their floors. The pushing jumbled her into Jerry's arms as he steadied her. Avery let her breath hiss between her teeth. Finally, on the ninth floor, they both exited. Jerry propelled Avery down the corridor by the elbow.

She stopped abruptly to face him. Pitching her voice so her words didn't carry into any of the other rooms, she pulled her briefcase between them. "I'm serious. It's not happening ever again. Clear?"

"Sure. But then again, I've heard that before haven't I?" He sent her an audacious wink, and Avery wanted to smack the smugness right off his face. She glared disdain at him and moved up the hallway. Jerry's laughter followed her.

In her room, *finally* alone, Avery kicked off her high heels and stripped off her pantyhose. She headed straight to the shower where she let the pulse of hot water loosen her muscles. Her thoughts trailed back to the time before her old boss moved on to greener pastures. Avery had liked her job – travelling to other cities, meeting famous authors and those still in the fingers-crossed stage of the publishing game. It had always felt more like a party than work.

But the industry was changing now. There was unrest, a feeling of endangerment, as if literary agents were going extinct, clinging to their jobs by their fingernails. People were scared. It made them talk too loud and drink too much. The pervasive undercurrent of stress was not Avery's alone. But it added to Avery's tension headache.

She stepped out of the tub, wrapped a towel around herself, and wandered into her room. At least she would sleep tonight; that was worth the long flight. She wondered if she should give Fanny a call to check and see how Mom was doing, but made herself a Rum and Coke from the minibar instead.

Her phone played Barry Manilow's *Copacabana*. "Hi, Lolly."

"Hey there. I need to talk to an adult right now or my head's going to explode."

"Rough day with the kids?"

"I have them each in a corner. They've been there long enough the little ones have curled into balls and fallen asleep. But they're alive."

"Good to know." Avery picked up the room service menu, glanced at it, then threw it onto the bed beside her.

"Sounds like your day was no better than mine. Maybe Mercury's retrograde or something."

"Something." Avery stretched out her legs and took a long swig from her glass.

"No good manuscripts?"

"Nothing new. Everything is same old, same old. Rename the characters and tell the identical story."

"Hmm. Well, since you have nothing interesting to say about your day, let's get right to it. Why are you drinking alone in your room, talking to me, when you could be downstairs rubbing elbows with some hot author?"

"How do you know I'm alone in my room? Why do you think I'm drinking? Silence met Avery's questions. "Okay, you're right, I'm drinking. Just the one. Maybe two. I need to take the edge off so I can get to sleep."

"Jerry's not playing nice?"

"Too nice. He wants me to sleep with him."

"Well, you did kind of set the precedent when you rocked his world last Christmas. You can't really blame the guy."

“It was a mistake. A great big, hormonal, I-lost-my-damned-sanity-for-fifteen-minutes mistake.”

“Still, Jesus says you’re a slut.” Lola said.

“Gosh. Thanks.” Avery laughed, feeling the tension start to ebb.

“Now listen, if you start to fall prey to Jerry in Texas, remember the Bible didn’t make any stipulations about using the back door.”

“Lolly!” Avery gasped in mock horror.

“And I know for sure, because I asked Father Pat.”

“You know that man is going to have an aneurism and die, and it will all be on your conscience.”

“Oh, he loves it. I’m not sure he understands all of it, but he schedules extra time for me at the confessional. By the way, I saw Sarah at the club Friday morning, and she said she was heading into the city to have lunch with her hubby. Did you see her?”

“No. Well, yes, I saw her. I didn’t talk to her, though. Jerry met her in the lobby.”

“Let me guess. She came through the door. You spotted her. You felt so guilty, you ran to the ladies room and hid until you were sure she left.”

“Yup.” Avery took the final gulp from her cup.

“I know you feel bad. But you need to move past this. I wish you’d find a nice guy. Someone who treats you like you deserve to be treated.”

“You and me both. Right now, there’s nobody on the horizon, and no way could I have a relationship. I have Mom.”

“Someone who loves you would help you with that burden.” Lola’s voice had just a touch of pity in it. If it came from anyone else, Avery would have been offended. But she knew her best friend spoke from their long history and mutual devotion.

“Yeah, well, if he loved me, and then this situation happened, I might agree. But who in his right mind would wade into my pool of crazy?” Avery cleared her throat. “Speaking of guys who wouldn’t care to swim around in my pool, guess who called me this morning.” Avery took advantage of the pause to mix a bottle of orange juice with a tiny bottle of vodka from the fridge. She also grabbed the peanut butter cups and went back to the bed.

By the time she lay down, Lola had worked her way to an answer. Avery listened to the shocked inhale.

“Brad?”

“The very same.”

“Holy Mother Mary. What did he want?”

“He’s coming to town and wants me to go have dinner with him.”

“Oh no. No. No, no, no. Bad idea. You aren’t thinking about saying yes to him are you?”

“I told him I’d check my schedule when I got back to D.C. That gives me some time to figure out how I feel about it. I was a little in shock when he called.”

“The answer is *no*. No thinking. You put him through freaking med school, and the night of his freaking graduation, he tells you he’s in love with a nurse and leaving you. And now you’re considering sitting down to a polite meal with the guy?”

“I . . .” Avery bit into the chocolate, wishing it were a cake. “I never said it would be polite.”

“Okay, look what happened last Christmas. Jerry – even though he dumped you to marry someone else – reminds you of all the good times. Oh, how great you guys were together. What fabulous chemistry you’ve always had. And you give him a quick bang. Now remember that you had it so much worse for Brad. You were going to marry the guy and live happily ever after with him. What happens when he reminds you about how it was between the two of you? Are you going to sleep with him too?”

Avery shoved the second Reese’s in her mouth. “It won’t be like that. He married Penny. He’s off the market.”

“And that’s stopped you? Jerry married Sarah. You messed up once, and now you’re drowning in guilt.”

The odd combination of orange juice and peanut butter made Avery feel nauseous. Or maybe it was just remembering all that crap. Maybe talking to Lola wasn’t the best idea right now. Lolly knew too much to gloss over her shitty day.

Avery wished it wasn’t after midnight over in London. She’d like to tweet with Sean, maybe get a male perspective on the whole Brad conundrum. Well... what she’d

really like was an explanation about why he had been so rude to her on Twitter before she left.

Leave me alone. I don't have time for your shit.

“Lolly, I have to go throw up. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Travis looked at his watch, rechecking the time difference between London and Dallas. Yes, it was time for the Skype call with Avery Goodyear. He was not looking forward to it. Based on their interactions so far, she seemed competent enough, if a little prissy, but at least he knew he wouldn't be dealing with the type of ass-kissing he had had to tolerate with Jerry. That she disapproved of what he was writing was beyond doubt, but a fellow writer at the agency had recommended her, so he'd gone with it. At this point, he was wondering whether that was one of his better decisions. He clicked the video call button.

After a few seconds, her face came up on the screen.

At least she's pleasant to look at.

"Good morning, Travis. Afternoon, rather."

"Hello, Avery. How's life in Texas?"

"Busy. Let's get straight to it, if you don't mind. Jerry's brought forward our next meeting to nine o'clock, so I only have an hour."

Good. "So where do you want to start?" he asked, a twinge of anxiety tightening his chest.

"Did you get the synopsis written?"

"Um, not exactly."

Impatience flickered across Avery's face. "Then I'm not sure what we're going to talk about. We need to start nailing some things down. So far you've given me snippets, but I need more concrete product from you."

"How about I talk you through it?" He volunteered reluctantly.

Avery picked up a pen. "Okay, it's a start."

Passing a hand across his chin, Travis realized he hadn't shaved. "Excuse the stubble," he muttered. "I'm cultivating a Bohemian look."

"I have an hour, Travis." Avery was thin-lipped and clearly not in the mood for small talk.

He decided to dive in and get it over with. “From the top, then. You remember where *Nosferatu, the Lost Gospel* ended?”

“Shortly after Christ rises from the dead, he and his disciples go their separate ways. Something about Palestine not being a big enough place to support a colony of vampires without attracting undue suspicion. That was just after the part where he floated over the Sea of Galilee.”

Her tone was even, but Travis detected a hint of distaste behind the words. “The new book opens two thousand years later. Jesus and Mary Magdalene are in current-day London, and the surviving disciples are scattered across the planet. We discover Luke and John were killed by vampire hunters and Thomas – still full of doubts – is a mercenary in the Congo.”

“And what about St. Peter?” Avery asked, looking as if she dreaded hearing the answer.

“Ah, Peter is between a rock and a hard place.” He paused for her to laugh at his joke.

“Yes. Very clever.” She didn’t look as though she thought it was clever. “Continue.”

“He’s searching for the Holy Grail, since a fakir told him that if he drank once more from the chalice he would become human again.” Travis paused while Avery scribbled his words into a notebook. He pushed on. “Anyway, Jesus survives by drinking the blood of criminals and lowlife and thus enforcing a kind of vigilante justice on those who have escaped the arms of the law, or think themselves beyond it. So he’s still a good guy, really,” Travis added sheepishly, before hurrying on. “Mary has reverted to her previous trade as a prostitute. Female vampires don’t have to feed so much, so she can take enough blood to live on from her clients during rough sex sessions. She’s very popular with her customers because she doesn’t need them to wear condoms since vampires can’t get pregnant and are immune to sexually-transmitted diseases.”

Avery’s eye twitched.

“I’ve written this one scene where she’s having a BDSM session with a Sheikh in a Mayfair hotel –“

“Stop,” Avery raised a hand. Travis saw her swallow hard. *Very* hard. “You can’t have a Muslim in the story. Not one paying for sex.”

“He’s just a minor character, Avery.”

Avery’s face loomed larger as she leaned closer to the screen. “Do you want a *fatwa* on your head? Do you want to end up like Salman Rushdie?”

Travis pouted. “I don’t know why people get so excited. Religious mythology is just that – mythology. It’s a damn story, after all. All religions are based on fairy tales anyway. All I’m doing is taking characters, that never existed in the way they are portrayed, and giving them a twist.”

“Listen, Travis. For you religion may be a joke, but for billions of people it represents an important belief system. For some folks, it’s all that keeps them going. Why do you think *Nosferatu* was received the way it was?”

The author gave a shrug. “All right. It’s not important for Mary to bang a Sheikh. I’ll make him a rabbi instead.”

“No!”

“A West African prince?”

“Not a person of colour either. Make him a corrupt politician, or something.”

“From the Philippines?”

“If you must.”

“That way I can make him a devout Catholic too. Should add a certain irony to the proceedings, don’t you think?”

“Without a doubt,” she said dismissively. “But what is it you said about Mary *going back* to her vocation as a prostitute? Serious Biblical scholars say she was nothing of the kind, and in fact came from a good family. Those men in the Church who wanted to relegate females to a minor place in the Christian religion smeared her name.”

“I’m not writing for serious scholars.”

“So it’s fine to spread ignorance and prejudice, to perpetuate untruths?”

“It’s not my job to educate the world, Avery. Most people think Mary was a prostitute, so that’s how she stays.” He folded his arms. “Anyway, that’s how I described her in the first book, so I can’t very well change horses now, can I?”

“Most people also think Judas was a bad guy, but you made him the hero.”

“He had to be. It’s his kiss – i.e. the bite on the neck – that saves Jesus by turning him into an immortal who can rise again and roll away the stone. Without Judas and the

Chalice of Blood there would be no story.” Avery tilted her head back as if asking Heaven for self-control. He gave her a moment to collect herself.

“Never mind. Keep going,” she said.

Travis cracked his knuckles. “Right. Well, here’s the crux of the second book. Mary doesn’t know it, but before Christ met her all those centuries ago, he fathered an illegitimate son with a young Jewish girl from Nazareth. Judas discovered this after Christ left Palestine, and he decided to take the girl and the child under his protection. When the girl dies of the plague, Judas bites the boy – named Moloch – to save his life. Moloch, however, is a nasty piece of work and when he turns sixteen, he tries to kill Judas. Judas flees to Persia and Moloch disappears, only to reappear in London two thousand years later.”

Avery opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

“Meantime a serial killer is haunting London, murdering young girls and draining them of blood. It is, of course, Moloch, and when Jesus encounters Judas in an opium den and hears the story, he realizes he’ll not only have to tell Mary about his offspring, but he’ll also have to destroy his only son to prevent a bloody apocalypse. So I’m kinda throwing in a Book-of-Revelation thing too, with God’s grandson in the role of the Antichrist.”

Avery laid the pen down. “I see. And that’s it?” she asked evenly.

“Not quite. There’s a subplot about Judas, a performing monkey, and a dwarf, and some stuff about Peter’s quest for the Grail, but I won’t go into that now as you’re pushed for time.”

“Little person,” Avery intoned mechanically. “And do you have a working title for the book?”

“I’m thinking, *The Evil Blood of Christ*.”

“Right.”

“But I’m open to ideas.”

“Good.”

“I’ll knock this synopsis out for you today and email it over, okay? I promise.”

“Can’t wait.”

Travis scratched his chin. “You look like you’re in shock.”

“I’ll survive.”



The cell phone jumped to life and Travis pulled it from the pocket of his jacket. It was the ringtone assigned to his mother. He finished his beer in one gulp and pressed the answer button as he moved towards the pub’s door, squeezing through the crush of bodies. “Give me a moment, Mom, I’m trying to find somewhere quiet.”

In the cool evening air, Travis turned into a side alley next to the King’s Head. The area was unlit, and deserted apart from an old man taking a leak behind one of the bins. He pulled up his zipper and strolled past Travis without a word. He smelled of beer and cigarettes.

Travis leaned his back against the pub wall and spoke into the phone. “Sorry, I’m out for a drink in a local pub. Too much background noise to talk. It’s fine now.”

“I hope you’re not drinking too much, Travis,” his mother said.

“No. These English beers are too bitter for my taste. Just absorbing some local atmosphere to use in my book.”

“I thought I’d better call. It’s been some time since we’ve heard from you. I worry.” His mom’s tone was friendly enough, but there was no masking the accusing undertone.

“I’m fine. My nose is firmly to the grindstone. I have a deadline to meet, so I guess I’ve been a bit absorbed recently.”

“Well, as long as that is all it is.”

“Yeah, that’s all. So how are you and Dad?” Travis attempted to deflect the conversation from himself.

“We’re both good. The nasty letters seem to have run their course. At least until your next book comes out.”

Travis pulled the phone from his ear and counted to five. When he lifted it again, he couldn’t decide what to say next. His mother forestalled him.

“I bumped into your ex-fiancée at the Mall yesterday.”

“Oh?” Travis paced the alley. “What did Kay have to say?”

“Not much. She’s moved out of the phase of feeling sorry for herself and now says she feels your writing the book was a betrayal of her. I told you she was a self-centred little princess. Now she’s showing her true colours. I could have slapped her right there in public. In fact, I very nearly did.”

“What did she say *exactly*?”

“She felt like you’d plunged a knife into her.”

Travis fished in his pocket for a cigarette. “Nice.”

“I don’t think we’ll be having her family round for Thanksgiving. Not that people are exactly queuing up to spend Thanksgiving with us anyway. They think we’ll be serving barbecued babies.”

He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke billow in the air. Something small and black scuttled from the alley.

He was sick of apologizing, sick of his mother’s martyrdom. Perhaps it was about time she considered what *his* life was like. His father’s approach was different. He simply stuck his head up his ass and pretended nothing was happening. “It’ll blow over,” he had said while his wife fussed over the sudden drying-up of invitations to social gatherings.

Outcasts.

“Travis? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here.”

Two cigarettes later, the call was over. He wanted to get back to the hotel and snort some coke, but first he would have another pint. He wanted to drown the acrimony in his throat with brown ale. Travis pulled open the door to the King’s Head. There were no seats. He stood at a corner of the bar, breathing in the musty smells emanating from the woodwork and the more elderly patrons.

After a few minutes, he became aware of a middle-aged woman with a wonky front tooth staring at him from farther down the bar. She wore a shapeless brown cardigan, pink-framed spectacles, and makeup that looked as if she had applied it with a trowel. Travis worked to avoid eye contact, but she seemed to be on a mission. She slipped off her stool and, carrying her drink, zeroed in on him.

“You’re Travis Bishop, aren’t you?” Her voice screeched.

“Sorry?”

“You’re Travis Bishop. I’ve seen your picture on the television. You’re the one who wrote that book about Jesus.” She adjusted her glasses and peered at him.

People near Travis stopped talking, and swung around to look at the sudden curiosity huddled in the corner. The Cardigan Lady blocked Travis’s exit.

“I’m sorry, you’re mistaken,” he said.

“You’re American though. I can hear from your accent. Are you sure you’re not him?”

Not unless I want to end up in a noose. “I’m sure,” Travis downed his pint, placed his glass on the bar, and pushed an opening so he could leave. He wondered whether he would have to deny himself three times before the cock crowed.

The plastic seat was hard and uncomfortable. The sun had hit an angle where it glared directly into her eyes, and there was a tantrum-throwing toddler screaming at her feet. Yet Avery felt only relief. The ticket agent overbooked the return flight, and Avery was one of ten bounced passengers. She couldn't catch another plane until six-thirty. That meant her mom had to spend another night at Fanny's house. When Avery placed the call to tell her sister the news, Fanny actually blubbered into the phone. "Enjoy," Avery muttered, pushing the end button.

She scanned the waiting area. A handful of restaurants clustered nearby. She checked her watch, three-twenty. A snack would be nice, but every place looked crowded, and Avery didn't want to give up her seat. As awful as it was, at least she wasn't sitting on the floor like many of those around her. And she had the good luck of being positioned next to a wall socket. Avery plugged in her laptop and booted it up.

Scanning through her emails, Avery saw nothing urgent. Sycophantic thank you letters from the authors she'd met over the last three days comprised most of them. She'd asked for the first two chapters from most of the writers. It was hard not to, they were so earnest about their work. The truth was, not a single plot line interested her. What they needed at PMT was something exceptional – a stand out. If only she could find it, then Jerry might take her off the Travis book.

Evil Blood – what nonsense. Horrible. Avery scrubbed her hands over her face. She wished Travis would get finished writing the manuscript so she could do her job then move on. Like swallowing down cod liver oil, she'd pinch her nose and do what had to be done.

Avery stared past the luggage carts on the runway where men and women in their florescent green jumpsuits scurried about. She focused on the horizon, and sighed deeply. She seemed to do that a lot. Lolly thought it was a sign of depression. But Avery didn't feel depressed, just. . . overwhelmed.

An arctic blast from the air-conditioning system swept the room. Pulling her suit jacket closer, Avery leaned her forehead against the window and closed her eyes. “*Evil Blood*, can you imagine?” She’d have to work with Travis on a name for the new book; something less likely to get her stoned in the streets.

Travis hadn’t been what she expected. Most of what she knew about him was from the information listed on his book jacket and PMT’s media kit. She knew he was young, but at twenty-seven, he seemed more like a dishevelled college student or river-rat than a worldwide bestselling author. Avery watched the few TV interviews he had allowed – until they became too dangerous because of the number of protesters.

Although born in London, Travis had been uprooted at an early age when the family moved to California – consequently his accent was American. Both his parents had accepted teaching appointments at Berkeley where they made names for themselves as prominent academics in physics. Avery wondered if his parents’ achievements had led to his writing such a book. Had he been desperate to make a name for himself? To eclipse his parents’ success? Did she care? Well, yes and no. Avery wanted to put this project in her rear-view mirror, and that meant she needed a way to prod Travis along.

When she made the Skype call, Avery had anticipated Travis being adversarial and clipped like he had been in his interviews – cold, maybe. . . Avery shook her head. She couldn’t figure him out. Avery had to admit she felt a little protective of him. Sure, she wanted to throttle him with both hands tightly around his neck, but something about him pulled at her.

Again, she wondered why he’d decided to write this particular kind of book. Maybe if she asked him sympathetically, he would give her a genuine answer.

Travis didn’t look healthy. Avery wondered if all of the stress was getting to him, and how he coped with the crap he’d put on his plate. Maybe he had some pointers she could use in her own life.

Her phone beeped. Avery looked at the screen: Jerry. Booking issues didn’t affect his seat. He’d probably already landed in D.C. That’s what happens when the boss flies business-class, and she was relegated to the back of the plane, flying coach. Jerry had no idea what a favour he had done her by leaving her behind. Avery smiled and turned the ringer off.

Then she thought about Sean. She hadn't checked in with him since Monday morning. Her hand hovered tentatively over her laptop keys. Should she send him a message? What did it mean when he said, 'Leave me alone. I don't have time for your shit'? It had been the riptide dragging her thoughts out to sea ever since she had first read the words. She couldn't fathom what she had done to upset him – how she could have offended him so much that he would send such a message. She hadn't been brave enough to follow up since.

Avery admitted to herself, in a very small voice in the back of her head, that she depended on her chats with Sean. He somehow made her feel pretty, and fun – lighter. Yes, she felt buoyed up after her Twitter chats with him. Avery was afraid to lose the sliver of herself, which he exposed. She thought the little glimmer that shone when she played with Sean on Twitter was who she really was when she wasn't trapped by her life. Avery stared down at her Twitter feed, trying to compel herself to type.

SeanKenny @A_very – Are you home safely?

Avery looked at the message for a full minute, wondering how she should reply.

A_very @SeanKenny – It's very odd, don't you think, that whenever I'm about to send you a message, you beat me to it?

SeanKenny @A_very – Ha! I've noticed that myself. I guess I'm pulled to your magnetic personality.

A_very @SeanKenny – That sounds like it might hurt.

SeanKenny @A_very – Not so far.

A_very @SeanKenny – I think you might be psychic or something.

SeanKenny @A_very – Something. I'll admit it is a little eerie. Sending DM.

Sean – Like right now, your words feel tired to me and uncomfortable.

Avery – See? You are psychic. I'm stuck at the airport 'til late evening.

There was a long pause and Avery felt her muscles tighten. She realized she was preparing for another rebuff.

Sean – No. It's more than that. I'm worried now.

Avery – I have a question for you.

Sean – Shoot.

Avery – Did I upset you Monday morning?

Sean – Only that I didn't get to wish you a safe trip. Someone banged on my door & when I got back you didn't answer me.

Avery read the DM over three times. Then she went back and searched Sean's feed. He hadn't been on Twitter since their exchange. Looking back at the right date and time, the rancid tweet wasn't there, instead she found:

SeanKenny @A_very – I wish you were able to get some sleep. I'll worry about you travelling already tired.

SeanKenny @A_very – Did I miss you? Be safe. Have a blast. And if there's an open bar, have one for me.

Huh. Avery looked out the window, vaguely aware of the plane taxiing up to the ramp and wondered how old her mom had been when her dementia began. What were the first signs? Maybe she was losing her mind.

Avery – Sorry, no. I didn't see this. But I was thinking of you.

Sean – Are you okay?

Avery – I have a lot to think about, I'm having trouble sorting it out.

Sean – I'd be happy to help. It's kind of hard with 140 characters. Here's my email if you want: SeanKenny@Overture.com

Avery – Thank you. I'll email you now. I'm: AGoodyear@Americanya.com

Avery sat back with a little smile on her face. Okay – something weird had happened with their last communication. Maybe she had been so tired, she had read someone else’s tweet coming through on her feed and assumed it was Sean’s. What did it matter? Sean hadn’t said he had no time for her shit. He had wished her well. And now, he wanted to talk with her more.

She clicked over to her email and started:

Hi Sean.

Well, this feels weird not to try to stuff my thoughts into a small space – like a middle-aged woman trying to fit into her prom gown again. It’s so spacious over here on email – why didn’t we do this sooner?

I want to thank you for your kindness and concern. Actually, something came up while I was in Texas, and I’m just not sure what to do with it. I’m not even sure I should be bugging you with it. But. . . anyway, here’s the story in a nutshell.

There is this guy, Dr. Bradley Lyons, well, Brad to me. We dated all through college, and when he went to med school, he moved in with me. I supported him all the way through. We planned to get married after graduation. And he did get married after graduation, only not to me – to another woman he was seeing on the side. That was a long time ago – almost a decade.

As I headed out to Texas, he called me, said he’s coming into town, and wanted to take me out to dinner. I don’t want to see him. I have no reason to see him. My best friend, Lola, says it’s a HORRIBLE idea to see him.

But if I don’t see him, I’ll feel like a coward. He didn’t tell me what he wanted.

Okay – guy’s point of view what do you think?

Avery

Avery decided she couldn’t wait any longer for the restroom. Turning to the grandmother sitting beside her holding a sleeping grandchild, Avery whispered, “If you’ll watch my seat for me while I run to the ladies, I’d be happy to bring you something to drink.”

The woman gave Avery a smile and mouthed, “black coffee”. Fatigue pulled at the corners of the woman’s eyelids, and Avery thought it made her look very sad. She put her coat on the seat, gathered up her purse and briefcase, and headed down the corridor. When she got back and handed over the requested drink, the look of gratitude on the woman’s face made Avery happy she’d offered.

She popped her laptop open to find Sean’s reply.

Hi there,

You’re right. This does feel better. A guy could stretch out his legs and get comfortable with so much typing space to relax in.

My knee-jerk reaction to your dilemma is that you should stay away from this bloke. Tell him to bugger off. (Along with some other expletives I edited out.)

Avery read the line again. *Sean sounds jealous.* Avery’s stomach warmed, and she felt the corners of her eyes crinkle as she smiled at the screen. Or maybe she was reading it wrong and he felt offended on her behalf.

And now, I’m thinking it through. . .

Imagining your reaction if you don’t go and see him, you’ll keep running it through your mind until it drives you crazy. I’d say for sheer self-preservation you should show up. Maybe not for a whole dinner – maybe a cocktail. That way, if he says something which sets you off, you can throw your drink in his face and saunter off like a femme fatale. Wear all black.

Now it’s your turn for handing out advice. I have my own man troubles. There’s a bloke here named Goose who works with me. Have you ever heard about the significance of the number 23?

Sean

Anger tightened around Teagan's mouth as she glared at the computer screen. *Sean sent the American slut his email address?* She waited, but no other DMs popped up on Sean's account. It meant he and A_Very had moved over to email, and Teagan would have to wait to find out what they said. *I'm going to put a stop to this*, she promised her laptop.

Teagan looked past the monitor sitting on her dressing table, and leaned closer to the mirror to examine her face. She was beautiful, she told herself. Her eyes were a deep shade of blue with flecks of white and yellow, and she made the most of them with perfectly applied makeup. Thick lashes and starlet eyeliner made her look like a high-end model. She tilted her chin up and shifted her head from side to side to consider her bone structure. She had the best of both of her parents' features – her father's sleek diminutive nose, her mother's oval face with the hint of rounded cheekbones. Teagan picked up her blush brush and swept highlighter towards her temples. She reached for her lipstick. "I'm like Megan Fox – only much prettier," she thought, dabbing her full lips with cherry-lollipop colour.

Teagan blotted her lipstick on a tissue and flipped her head forward and back, making her hair look tousled and wild. She cocked her head to the side, peering up through her lashes as if she had a naughty secret to tell. This look inevitably got her what she wanted from a man. And what Teagan wanted was for Sean to stop chatting with A_Very. Teagan's hands clamped into fists in her lap.

The yowling from the stray cat in the garden set Teagan's already banded nerves into overdrive. Usually, if she gave the stupid moggy something to eat, he would shut up. Teagan moved to the kitchenette. What she had to do was distract Sean from the American bitch's problems. *And, I have the very outfit to do it in*, Teagan mused, pulling a can of sardines from the cupboard.

She needed to up her game. Perhaps Sean only saw her as a seductress. Maybe he liked to save women from their problems – wanted to ride to their rescue like a white

knight. Hard to picture Sean in shining armour, though. A thought formed as Teagan abandoned the opened tin and moved to her bedroom closet.

She dressed herself in an off-the-shoulder gypsy blouse draped over the curves of her trussed-up breasts. A flowing, ankle-length black skirt and wide leather belt finished her outfit. Her feet, she left bare. She was the heroine from the cover of any romance novel. Now she needed her prop, and she'd be all set.

Moving into the yard. Teagan held the tin of sardines. "Here kitty, kitty, kitty," she crooned softly. The cat didn't approach. Teagan pulled a morsel of fragrant flesh from the tin with a plastic-gloved hand. Damned if she was going to show up at Sean's smelling like a fishmonger's wife. Teagan tried to tame her impatience. Every second the cat took to come to her was time Sean focused on A_Very big pain in her ass.

Finally, with a singsong voice and a quick last-second hook, Teagan scooped the cat into her arms. She ditched the gloves and tin, then made her way up the stairs to Sean's apartment. How bewitching she looked! She made a mental note to include this scene in the lyrics of the song she had started that afternoon.

Teagan knocked and waited while footsteps padded towards her. The door swung open to reveal a shirtless Sean, standing with his arm across the jamb. She ducked under his arm and into the room. She turned and struck a seductive pose, dipping her chin so her hair would sweep over and accent her breasts while she batted her eyelashes.

"What have you got there?" Sean asked, pointing at the cat.

Teagan moved towards the kitchen where she helped herself to a saucer and some milk. "This is the poor kitty who was crying outside." She set the saucer on the floor and placed the cat down next to it. She crouched in such a way that her skirt swirled romantically around her. Hunching her shoulders to show her deep cleavage to its best advantage, Teagan petted the cat with languid strokes.

Sean stood in front of her, scratching his hand through his unruly hair. He did a good job of taking care of his body. Unlike her slovenly brother, Sean hit the gym regularly and ran most days. And since he was about to become wealthy too, he turned out to be a very nice package, indeed. Letting him fall in love with her wasn't a hardship.

"Isn't he beautiful? I think we should adopt him." She focused for a moment on the cat lapping up the milk as if it were his last supper. "He can be our baby." She angled

her head back to catch Sean's gaze. "But we need to name him." She rose gracefully to her feet. "What do you think?"

"Pets aren't allowed in the apartment, Teagan. Sorry." He moved over to the table and switched off his computer.

Teagan followed him to the couch. When he sat down, she curled up next to him and laid her head in his lap. "Are you just back from the gym?" She ran a hand over his chest, pulling at the scattering of hair. His arms lay wide across the back of the sofa.

"No, I took a shower, and I'm headed to bed."

She leaned in and breathed deeply. He smelled of warm, spicy soap. "Perfect timing, then," she whispered. Her hands slid up his chest and around his shoulders to loop his neck. She could feel his muscles tensing beneath her as she pulled herself in to kiss him.

Sean turned his head to the side. "Teagan I . . ."

Teagan shifted. She gathered her skirt up to her hips and moved to straddle Sean's thighs. She lowered herself like a dancer, circling her hips to create a little friction against his lap, then sinking back down to kiss him again.

As she tangled her fingers into his hair, a pounding on the door interrupted her. Sean moved Teagan to the side and strode to the entryway.

Teagan followed to see who was there. It was her prat of a neighbour, Sauvage. Just like him to keep her up all night banging whatever he could drag home from the bar, and then when she was staging this beautifully romantic moment, there he was in his full potbellied, bald-headed, garlic-stinking glory.

"I don't have your money," Sauvage spat out without preamble in his thick accent. "You will have to wait."

"Rent is due on the last day of the preceding month. It's in your lease. You're two months behind now. I'm going to fill out the paperwork to evict you," Sean said evenly. "You know that, right?"

"And let the flat be empty? Then you have no money anyway." Sauvage gave a greasy laugh. "No. You'll wait. Think about all the work to put that apartment straight for the next person. You are busy. You have no time."

Teagan moved into the kitchen. Since Sauvage had killed the mood, she would have to do something else to put Sean into a domestic mind-set. She picked the cat up off the

counter, where it had been prowling for food, and tossed him lightly to the floor. Her stomach growled as she opened first one cabinet, then the next, looking for something to cook for them. Sean didn't normally keep snacks. She settled on a jar of peanuts and popped the top.

"I can make the time," Sean told Sauvage. "As a matter of fact, I can use the time I usually have to spend cleaning your piss off the walls. I don't know what they do where you come from, but here we use the loo when we need to take a leak, not the yard."

Sauvage pulled himself up to his full height. He was half-a-head taller than Sean and with that gut outweighed him by a good twenty kilos. Teagan moved to stand slightly behind Sean. It's what a wife would do – show a united front. Teagan poured a handful of nuts into her palm and popped them into her mouth. Sauvage gasped and pulled his arm across his face, jumping back.

"Get those away from me," he shouted.

Teagan held up the jar of nuts. "What, these?"

"I have an allergy. Get them away." Sauvage was now red-faced and cowering against the corridor wall.

Teagan reached past Sean to hold the jar towards Sauvage and shook it, making the peanuts rattle. "Look Sean, it's like Kryptonite for super-sausages."

Sean turned and herded her back to the kitchen. "Stop." He shook a commanding finger at her.

Teagan rewarded his forceful tone with a compliant smile. "Yes, darling. If you say so." She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek sweetly.

Sean returned to the hall with Sauvage, shutting the door behind him.

Teagan could hear their angry voices going back and forth. She hoped Sean would kick the guy out of the apartment. Maybe the next tenant wouldn't cook such stinky foods that left stale vapours lingering for days. Yes, getting rid of Sauvage would solve a host of problems. Besides, if he wasn't paying Sean, then that was money out of their pockets. That wouldn't do. That was money she needed for her shot at the limelight.

The cat balanced on the back of the couch, clawing at the fabric when Sean burst back into the apartment. He grabbed the cat, and put him out on the fire escape, slamming the window back into place.

Teagan searched through the back of his cutlery drawer.

“Sean where do you keep the knives?” she asked, coming up with a butter knife in her hand. “This is all I can find.”

“I, um. I don’t have any.”

Teagan stared, a frown line appearing between her brows. “I don’t understand. Who doesn’t have a knife? I can’t even find a normal dinner knife, let alone something to carve meat.”

“I don’t eat any foods requiring knives.” Sean shifted from foot to foot.

“But knives come as part of the set.” Teagan gestured at the open cutlery drawer. “You get forks, spoons, servers, and knives in the same box. What did you do with the knives?”

Sean turned his back on her, and left the room.

Teagan moved to the fridge and scanned the shelves, then she tried the freezer. Sure enough, there wasn’t a single item anywhere that required anything beyond a butter knife. That was kind of curious. No. Weird. It was downright weird. Teagan went to find Sean, staring out the window gripping the moulding. He looked like he was waging an inner battle, his lips twitched as he muttered under his breath.

Suddenly, he lurched around, grabbed Teagan by the wrists, dragged her to the bedroom, and pushed her onto the mattress. Teagan giggled.

“Be quiet,” he growled. “I’m serious. Not a single word out of you.” He yanked off his sweatpants while Teagan posed like a pinup girl. She hoped Sean would keep manhandling her. She liked this new assertive Sean. An assertive Sean would tell the American woman to go to hell. And an assertive Sean would claim her as his wife forever and for always. As Sean reached under her skirt for her panties, Teagan’s blood thrummed with victory.

“You look tired, Sean,” Janice said. “Why don’t you take a break? Goose and I can manage for a while. It’s not like we’re busy.”

Sean looked at the gangling mass of twitchiness propped against the display cabinet. Goose rubbed the fingers of his right hand across his thumb, an intense look of concentration on his pale face. His lips moved silently to some internal dialogue. After a few seconds, the trainee became aware of Sean watching him, and he hurriedly finished his tapping and moved off to clear some tables.

“I think he’s getting worse,” Sean said.

“If that’s possible.” Janice thrust a newspaper at Sean. “Here. Go and sit down for ten minutes.”

Sean carried a glass of orange juice to an armchair. Opening the tabloid, he turned the pages listlessly. As usual, there was a lot of lurid speculation about the Angel of Death, but no real ‘news’. With the journalists whipping up fear to increase circulation, it was small wonder the population of the capital was in a state of suppressed panic. Sean could hardly focus on the words, and he put the paper aside. His eyeballs itched. That was what a night with Teagan in his bed had done for him.

Sean’s latest medications seemed to make him sleep more heavily than usual and conjured up some weird, psychedelic dreams; but there had been none of that the previous night. The robust sex session with Teagan had been troubling enough, but then she announced her intention of staying the night. Sean had been grateful that the sweaty lovemaking had shut out the dreaded voice in his head. Too exhausted to argue with her, he’d given in.

He wished he hadn’t.

Teagan had tossed and turned continually, and got up twice in the night for drinks of water – both times asking him if he wanted anything.

Just before dawn, an alarming dream woke Sean from his fitful rest. In the dream, he strangled a woman with a black cord. As he sat up, he saw Teagan’s body slumped

across the edge of the bed, and for a moment hallucinated that some of the hair lying across her neck was the cord in question. He leaned across her, putting his cheek near her mouth until he detected her breathing. Teagan's mouth was open and saliva dampened the sheet.

Now you sleep, he thought.

He slid the duvet off him, climbed carefully out of bed, and put on his robe.

The living room smelled of piss. Teagan must have let the cat back into the flat during one of her nocturnal trips for water. The animal sat on the back of the sofa, its claws digging into the material. It gazed at him belligerently and, as if to emphasize its claim to the apartment, one of the seat cushions was damp and stained. Cat hairs clung to the fabric. Sean picked up the cat and dumped it without ceremony into the hallway. He cleaned up the mess, showered, and dressed in record time, giving Teagan no opportunity for a repeat of the previous evening's entertainment.

"We'll get a litter tray for little pussy," Teagan announced when she surfaced. "It's no big deal."

No big deal for you, perhaps. He bit his tongue.



That morning at Tower Bridge Beanz passed slowly, giving Sean too much time for reflection.

His confrontation with Sauvage had further agitated his jangling nerves, and at some stage, he knew he'd have to take action. The tenant was rude and beyond perverse. It was some time since Sean had been in the Frenchman's flat, but he feared the worst. At the very least, he'd need to get a cleaning crew in. And then, there would be all the bureaucracy and unpleasantness of the eviction. English law hardly favoured the landlord in such circumstances.

On top of that, he had to manage the situation with Teagan. When he stood back and examined the situation, he could see how he'd drifted into a relationship with her. He'd been lonely, and she'd been available. She was an attractive girl and the sex had been

good, at least in the beginning. Now it was bordering on weird, and Sean had more than enough weirdness in his life. But Teagan was also a tenant. It complicated matters. Why couldn't Teagan be more like Avery?

And then, there was the issue of his blackouts and the new medication. The blackouts were the most worrying thing of all.

Standing at the till, Sean's chest tightened. A sudden rush of heat covered him in perspiration. A throbbing began around his temples, and he thought for a second he might pass out. Pressing the palms of his hands hard on the counter, he tried to steady his breath. Perhaps the new pills affected his blood pressure. He struggled to clear his head of invasive thoughts. They began as indistinct whispers, forming into words.

Janice is rather plump, isn't she? said the voice.

Sean's head jerked instinctively towards the female barista.

Do you think she would puncture and deflate like a balloon if you stuck a knife in her?

Sean's hands trembled, and he gripped the counter.

Or would she gush blood like the other one? And maybe die on you?

The pen clicked four times in Goose's hand. Someone laughed. Steam hissed.

"Two grande lattes to go."

And maybe die on you? What do you think, Sean?



"Thank you for seeing me at short notice, Dr. Hunt."

"My receptionist said you sounded distressed on the phone. You're lucky we had a cancellation today."

"Yes. Lucky, that's me."

The doctor peered at him. "I'm going to check your blood pressure."

The room was unnaturally quiet as Hunt fixed the strap on Sean's arm. "Normal."

He put the stethoscope to Sean's chest. "Heart sounds fine. I'm going to shine a light in your eyes."

“I know the drill.”

The doctor resumed his seat on the other side of the desk.

“Do you think it’s the new meds? Maybe we should change them.”

“I think it’s too early for that. Have you been keeping a record of your blackouts?”

Sean nodded and pulled a notebook from his pocket. He opened it and handed it across the desk.

The older man put on his glasses. “Hmm. Three incidents of time unaccounted-for since I last saw you.”

“Yes. Each lasting a few hours – at least, so far as I can tell. All in the evenings. On each occasion I woke up afterwards on my bed fully dressed.”

“You’re sure this isn’t exhaustion?”

“I don’t think so. I work in a coffee shop so I hardly have the most stressful of jobs. And although I exercise, I don’t overdo it. I’m *very* careful with my health and diet, Dr. Hunt.”

The physician handed back the notebook. “Tell me about the voices.”

Sean swallowed. Through the open window of the office, a siren shrieked in the distance.

“There’s one voice. A man’s voice. I hear it after dark, when I’m feeling anxious. But today, I heard it at work. It’s the first time this has happened. That’s why I thought I’d better see you straight away. Up until now, I’ve been able to control it; it’s not intruded on my daytime.”

“What does the voice say?”

“It encourages me to violence.”

There was a short silence. Dr. Hunt adjusted his glasses on his nose. “How, specifically?”

“Specifically, violence towards women. Usually involving a knife. But I don’t own any knives.” Sean continued quickly. “I haven’t for years. And before you ask, I haven’t indulged in any violence. Not of any kind.”

The doctor’s voice took on a kindly tone. “Mr. Kenny, I am sure you are well aware that, contrary to popular myth, people who suffer from schizophrenia are seldom violent. You yourself have only had one violent episode, and that was a long time ago. I’m not

saying we shouldn't take these latest occurrences seriously, but you should keep things in perspective."

Sean looked down at his hands. "Thank you for that."

"Is the voice becoming a more frequent occurrence?"

"Yes."

"What do you think is triggering it? You said your work is not stressful, but is there anything outside of work? Some family matter, perhaps?"

Sean scraped his teeth over his lower lip. "To all intents and purposes, I have no family. I haven't spoken to my mother in over ten years and my father is a solicitor in Edinburgh who only talks to me when he has to. Having a schizophrenic son is a great source of shame to him."

"Do you have a partner? A girlfriend?"

"Yes and no." He laughed. "That sounds like a schizophrenic joke, doesn't it?"

The doctor looked at him sternly. "This is not a joking matter, Mr. Kenny."

"Sorry. I have what you might call a casual girlfriend." He paused, uncertain how to continue. "She enjoys – shall we say – rather exotic lovemaking. I'm not sure that's helping."

"Define *exotic*."

Sean explained, a blush on his cheeks.

"Yes, well," said the doctor, "it may be best to avoid that type of activity until we get things sorted out."

"You think she might be bad for my health, doc?"

"Or perhaps you might be bad for hers," was the pointed reply. "Although I think it unlikely," he added hastily.

"Ah. I am suitably chastened."

"Anything else which might be causing you stress?"

"There is a troublesome tenant in the apartment block I take care of who is giving me grief."

"I thought you said you work in a coffee shop?"

"My father owns the apartment block. I collect the rents and sort out maintenance and so forth. It's normally pretty straightforward."

“But not at the moment?”

“No.”

“It sounds like you need to get rid of this tenant.”

“I wish.”

“Anything else?”

“My semi-girlfriend got me a cat that seems intent on destroying my furniture.”

“So far as possible you need to eradicate the things in your life causing you stress, Mr. Kenny. It’s impossible not to have *any* stress, but don’t take on anything unnecessarily.”

“I understand.”

“Any physical symptoms?”

“I’ve noticed a slight shaking in my hands at times, and I’ve been having headaches recently. Other than that, no.”

The doctor picked up his pen and wrote in Sean’s file. “I think it might be problematical to change your medication so soon. You may just be going through a period of adjustment. But to be on the safe side, I am going to arrange for you to have a CAT scan. I’ll also arrange for you to see a psychiatrist. Neither of these things will be quick, I’m afraid. You know how the National Health Service works. If we lived in a truly civilised country, you would be permanently under the care of a psychiatrist, not some overworked general practitioner. Everything is about money these days,” he concluded.

Sean sucked in his cheeks. “Do you think I might have a brain tumour?”

“Let’s not run ahead of ourselves. In view of your medical history, it is tempting to assume your current difficulties connect with your schizophrenia, but there may be a physical cause. We need to do some tests and rule out what can be ruled out.”

“I understand.”

“If your auditory hallucinations intensify, or you start feeling the urge to act on what they tell you, come back and see me immediately.”

“Am I in danger of being sectioned again?”

Dr. Hunt put down his pen. "It is possible," he said. "But so far, you have behaved responsibly, and you're clearly doing your best to manage the situation. Let's hope it doesn't come to that."



The cursor blinked at him from the computer screen. He wanted to talk to Avery, but what would he say? He was afraid his depressed mood would convey itself over the ether. On the other hand, messaging her always made him feel better. His cell phone rang. It was Francis.

Maybe talking to Francis was preferable to talking to nobody. If only marginally so.

"Hello."

"Hi, Sean. You doing anything right now?"

"Not really."

"Feel like a run? It's a beautiful evening, and I know how much you like pounding the pavements."

Sean considered. The alternative might end up being another night with Teagan. "Okay. I guess I'm up for it. Where?"

"Take a cab up to Islington. I've worked out a great route. We pass lots of pretty ladies on the way. You know Claremont Square?"

"I think so. It seems a long way to come for a jog though."

"Don't be such a girl. Call me when you get there."

Oh, what the hell.

Sean changed into his running gear and went downstairs to find a taxi. The exercise would take his mind off things, and he was accustomed to letting Francis' chatter go over his head. Burn off some stress and anxiety.

Eliminate stress from your life, said the voice. The cat. Savage. Teagan. You need to get rid of them all.

Avery took a long pull from her straw. The frosty green smoothie filled her mouth with a hint of citrus and freshness. She had curled up at the end of the settee in her office, looking over the few pages she had dragged out of Travis.

The corners of her mouth tugged downward, and her eyes barely blinked as she read the lines. “What?” she turned the page. “That’s not even anatomically possible. There’s no way in hell Mary Magdalene could do something like that.” Shoving the paper to the side, Avery lay back and stared at the ceiling, her hands on her head. “We’ve sunk to representing porno. . .” She let her arms fall across her eyes. “My life is shit.”

Copacabana jingled her cell phone resting on her desk. Avery knew Lola would only interrupt her at work for an emergency. Moving quickly in her stocking feet, Avery snatched up the phone.

“Hi, Lolly. What’s going on?” Her guarded voice sounded tight and flat in her own ear.

“Just a heads up, I’m heading over to the Giant Foods grocery store now.”

A frown crossed Avery’s forehead. “Okay. Um, I don’t think I need anything.”

“Sally didn’t call you?”

“No. What’s Mom done now?” Avery traced her path back to her shoes and slipped them on.

“Ginny went missing for about an hour. The police found her, though.”

Avery pulled her purse from the lower drawer, and dug around for her car keys. “Sally called the police, but didn’t call me?”

“No, the police found Ginny all on their own.”

Avery stilled. Her hand came up to cover her eyes. “Is Mom under arrest?” She whispered into the phone. “What did she do?”

“Not under arrest, no. Giant Foods doesn’t want that kind of publicity.” Laughter danced through Lola’s reply.

Avery felt the blood drain from her face. “What did she do, Lolly?” Avery’s hand moved to her throat. She sank into her desk chair.

“Well, the best I can tell from the very lovely Officer Thibodaux is that your mom thinks her babysitters are trying to poison her. She says she hasn’t eaten for days because they’re all trying to kill her, freeze her, and take her social security cheque.”

“Oh, God.”

“Apparently, they’re also stealing all of your mom’s clothes, because she. . .” Lola broke off talking. She was laughing too hard to make her words understood.

“Lolly, please. Please. Lolly, stop. What about my mom’s clothes?”

“Well, she isn’t wearing any. She walked into Giant Foods stark naked except for her bedroom slippers and was strolling up and down the aisles putting things in her cart.”

Avery lapsed into stunned silence. She pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it.

“Are you there? Are you all right?”

Avery put the phone back to her ear. “Fine. Go on.”

“The manager called the police. The police called an ambulance. Your mom called me. I called Sally. This is sounding a lot like the ‘There Was a Crooked Man’ nursery rhyme.” Avery imagined the grin on Lolly’s face.

“I’m glad you’re having fun.” Bitterness coated her words.

“Oh, Avery, lighten up. This is hysterical. You’d think so too if you were seeing this from the outside in. I’ve packed an outfit for your mom. I’ll get her dressed and take her back to your place.”

“Completely naked?”

“No, she had her slippers, remember. But yes, otherwise she was sporting her birthday suit.”

“I. . . I have no words.” Avery stammered out. “What am I going to do with her?”

“Look, I’m picking up a chocolate cake for your dinner tonight. I’m pulling into the parking lot now.”

“Lolly, thank you. Thank you for doing this for me. I truly appreciate you.”

“Are you kidding? This is a good time – now if you asked me to change your mom’s diapers at some point – then yeah, you’d owe me. So Devil’s Food or Death by Chocolate?”

“Neither. I have the dinner with Brad tonight.”

“Holy Joseph, with all of this going on, I completely forgot. Well, I’ll stay at your place then and help you get dressed. You’re sure you want to see Brad tonight?”

Avery could hear the car door shutting and traffic noises in the background. “No. But I’m going to anyway.” Avery said, moving towards the elevator. “I’m heading home now.”



“Whatever they put in those shots is a pure miracle.” Lola said from the hallway.

“Mom’s asleep?”

“Yup. Look. If you don’t use the whole shot on her, leave a little bit in the syringe, you know? I’ll buy them off you. There are some nights at my house when I want to drug the entire congress of baboons who’ve taken up residence there.”

“Flying from your chandeliers and eating all the bananas in one sitting?” Avery called from the bathroom.

“You’ve been to my house. You know what they’re like. Anyway, think about it. It could mean some extra income. Alice arrived to relieve Sally, by the way, so your mom’s covered for the evening.”

“Thanks, I’m done in here.” Avery opened the door wrapped in a large towel, her wet hair hanging past her shoulders, steam following her into the hall as she moved towards her bedroom.

“This is a good idea?” Lola trailed behind her.

Avery didn’t answer.

“Seriously, girlfriend, you still have time to back out. Why are you doing this?”

Avery pulled the hair dryer from her drawer. “I talked to Sean about it. You know, male point of view and all.” She watched her friend’s reflection in the mirror as Lola

kicked off her stilettos and crawled onto Avery's bed, arranging the pillows behind her head, thoroughly at home.

"Sean thinks I need to go see Brad and figure out who he is now. I've changed in the last ten years. Surely, he's changed in the last ten years." Avery turned and gave Lola a wry smile. "You, my friend, have never changed."

"Ha! So, Sean thinks you can go and get a taste of reality. See if Brad's turned into an over-fed SOB. No, wait, he already was an SOB."

"Exactly his point. What if I don't like who Brad's become? That would certainly put any feelings I have for him to rest, wouldn't it?"

"You have feelings for him still?" Knitting her brow, Lola reached behind her and stacked the pillows so her head came up higher.

Avery pulled a comb through her hair and thought about it. The room fell into a comfortable silence. "I remember my feelings for him, remember loving him, and my sexual attraction – how Brad made me feel."

"So you go see him, you realize you don't like who he is now and you're seeing reality instead of the ghosts. It makes sense. I like how Sean thinks."

Avery pulled a comb through her hair. "Yeah, I like how he thinks, too." Her voice trailed softly into the distance. She stared, unseeing, out the window for a long minute then recovered herself. "The only problem I can see with his argument is that it could go both ways, you know? What if Brad is *better* than I remember, meeting him could gin up those feelings again." She turned and looked Lola directly in the eye.

Lola held her eyes wide. Avery watched as her lips rolled in and pulled into a tight line, and she knew her friend was anxious for her.

"Sean says I'm brave, and I can face up to this." Avery said with a speck of defiance.

Lola slowly nodded. "In most cases, I would agree. But right now you're running on no sleep. You have a bat-shit crazy, drugged-up mom passed out in the room next door. You have the book assignment from Hell. And your boss is a lecherous piece of crap. Your cup runneth over, my friend."

"Speaking of Jerry, he pinched my butt today as I was walking out the door."

"No! What did you do?"

“What can I do? What options do I have? I wanted to yell that if he touches me again, I’m quitting, period.” Avery’s face broke into a huge grin.

Lola shot her an *I-don’t-get-it* look and shook her head.

“I work for PMT. Period? Oh, never mind. That’s a joke for Sean.”

Lola’s face shifted as she held back a smile and canted her head. “Girlfriend, listen to you. You’ve got it bad for Twitter-boy.”

“What? I do not.” Avery moved to her closet.

“Sure you do. You’ve got your little private jokes you’re playing on. You’re taking his advice over mine. And I’m you’re oldest and bestest friend. You bring him up in nearly every conversation. I think you’ve been bitten by the love bug,” Lola crooned.

Avery emerged with a dress bag and shoebox.

“Lolly, it’s hard to crush on someone on the other side of the Atlantic, whom I’ve never spoken with let alone seen. He’s just…” Avery stalled and searched for a word. “I don’t know. He’s a nice, dependable, steady guy who pulls me away from the bile pool I’m usually treading in.”

“Did you buy a new dress to see Brad?”

“Um, yes.” Avery picked up a little pink bag with silver tissue.

“And new lingerie?” Lola was up on her knees scooting to the end of the bed to pull the bra from its nest.

“Well, my dress needs a demi-bra, and I didn’t have one.” Avery’s tone was matter-of-fact.

“And these?” Lola dangled a pair of black lace boy-shorts from their little pink bow.

Avery snatched them away, “They match the bra, and I like to wear a matching set.”

“For whom do you like to wear a matching set?” Lola snatched them back and climbed off Avery’s bed. “For you? Or do you think maybe Brad might get to see these tonight?” Her voice trailed behind her as she left the room. “What we need here is insurance.”

Avery was blow-drying her hair when Lola came back in, carrying a pair of Ginny’s oldest, greyest, biggest granny-underwear.

Avery turned a puzzled face to her.

“Cock-blocking panties,” Lola called over the whirl of the dryer.



Avery thanked Alice at the door for taking on the extra duty and handed her an envelope with her pay.

Pulling off her high heels, she massaged her feet against the hardwood floor to find relief from the pinching new-shoe pain that radiated through her toes. It was over. Thank God. Avery dug her cell phone from her bag and quick-dialled Lola.

“I’m home,” she said without any introduction.

“Alone?” Lola asked.

“No, I’ve got Mom with me. I left Brad at the restaurant.”

“How’d he look?”

“Older. Much older. He’s not taking care of himself. He’s got almost no hair. So yeah, the only thing that resembled the boy I fell in love with were his eyes. They’re still beautiful.”

“And you kicked his ass in the little black number you were wearing.”

“Pretty much.” Avery chuckled. “No, it wasn’t like that.”

“What was it like?” Lola sounded like she was settling in for a good story. But suddenly Avery was very tired. Done talking.

“Well, he flew out to see me. He felt he needed to apologize in person for the way he treated me.”

Lola gasped. “He’s dying?”

“No.”

“He’s in AA?”

“No, Lola, he’s getting a divorce. Penny was having an affair for the last couple of years with the CFO of their hospital and decided to dump Brad and marry the other guy.”

“A taste of his own medicine.”

“Boo. That was an awful joke.”

“I’ve got another one – she turned up just like a bad penny.”

“Double boo. With that, I’m going to bed.”

“Did you accept his apology?”

“No. I just said, ‘It’s water under the bridge.’ It is. I felt nothing for him. It’s kind of a relief.”

“But you’re still headed for the cake platter.”

Avery smiled into the phone she had wedged between her shoulder and ear as she lifted the top of the cake dome. “This piece of cake is for Mom’s Giant Foods run, not for Brad. And thank you, it was nice of you to dress my mom and feed my habit. This looks delicious.”

“Anytime. I love you. You know that. Now eat your cake and get some sleep.”

“Yup. G’night.”

Avery sat down at the dining room table with her sliver of cake, and glass of red wine, feeling proud she hadn’t buried her face in the whole thing and gobbled it down piggy-style – not that she didn’t think she deserved it after today.

Avery checked the clock. Sean didn’t tell her what his schedule was this week. But she felt the pull to connect with him. She wondered if maybe they both had receptors, and she could have psychic knowings about him being online too. She typed ‘Twitter’ into her search bar.

SeanKenny @A_very - “Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.” – William Shakespeare

A_very @SeanKenny - From ‘All’s Well That Ends Well’?

SeanKenny @A_very – Yes, well one can hope that’s the case.

A_very @SeanKenny – That things will end well? Hmm. Something happen today?

SeanKenny @A_very – Just thinking some things through. How could you love someone and not trust them? Trust you’d be safe with them?

A_very @SeanKenny – You’ve got me there.

SeanKenny @A_very – How are you? Did you have another Skype with the mystery author? How is the plot coming along?

A_very @SeanKenny – Now that would be letting the cat out of the bag.

SeanKenny @A_very – Humph.

A_very @SeanKenny – Really? Not a cat fan?

SeanKenny @A_very – In general no. At the moment decidedly not.

A_very @SeanKenny – LOL. Why? What happened?

SeanKenny @A_very – Oh the girl who rents downstairs came by the other day with the alley cat who’s been yowling all night long, keeping everyone awake.

A_very @SeanKenny – She brought it to your apartment? Why?

SeanKenny @A_very – I don’t know. She wanted to feed it. Wanted to keep it as a pet.

A_very @SeanKenny – And you said no?

SeanKenny @A_very – Absolutely, I said no. I shudder to think of the flea infestation. I’ll have to do a pest bomb.

Avery decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. She could sense Sean needed cheering up. Perhaps a game of Twitter-chess?

A_very @SeanKenny – Sorry that’s happening. *shudder* . . .

SeanKenny @A_very – Huh?

A_very @SeanKenny - "The space ship shuddered as it moved through the wormhole."

SeanKenny @A_very - (Oh, you're ending the day with a Twitter-chess challenge, huh?) "Her green skin glistened with fear."

A_very @SeanKenny - (Bahahaha! No stop, I was kidding! Try this,) You were warned Jasper.

A_very @SeanKenny – NO WAIT – I’ve got it.

A_very @SeanKenny – “I’m an adventure junky not an adrenaline junky. What have you gotten us into?” Her nails sank into his forearm.

SeanKenny @A_very – “Thanks for that,” he remarked sardonically, looking at the blood on his arm. “I’m glad I had a tetanus shot, DARLING.”

A_very @SeanKenny – “Whisper, you idiot.” She crouched, balancing precariously in her stilettos. Sweat dripped down the backs of her thighs.

SeanKenny @A_very – “Aw, chill. They’re long gone.” He stood up and a bullet whizzed past his head shattering the bar mirror. “Or maybe not.”

A_very @SeanKenny – She reached out her hand for the bottle of Kentucky bourbon, gulped down a shot of courage, then gripped the neck like a club.

SeanKenny @A_very – “So you’re bringing a bottle of bourbon to a gun fight now, huh? You’ve got balls, sister, but you’re gonna get us both killed.”

A_very @SeanKenny – She glared her disdain at the back of his head, fantasizing about pushing him into the open and hightailing it out the back.

SeanKenny @A_very – “Anyway, we do have an alternative.” He reached into his jacket pocket. “A grenade?” she exclaimed. “Where did you get that?”

Avery laughed out loud. Sean was imaginative, she had to give him that.

A_very @SeanKenny (Breaking character – WHAT?!?!?! The guy is carrying a grenade in his coat pocket?)

SeanKenny @A_very (Shhhh you’re ruining the flow – just go with it)

A_very @SeanKenny – “Oh, great! Shout it out for everyone to hear Y don’t u” He bit down on the pull-pin, ripped it free and spat it to the side.

SeanKenny @A_very – With one movement, he lobbed it towards the recess where the gunman hid. “Oh f*ck!” The man yelled, leaping through the window

A_very @SeanKenny – Sean grabbed Avery’s wrist & unceremoniously jerked her to the ground as the shards of glass and mirror glittered the air.

SeanKenny @A_very – They lay on the floor, bleeding and covered in glass. “Just like old times, eh luv?” He smiled. “Buy me a coffee?”

A_very @SeanKenny – Avery rolled onto her back, letting her lungs expand & contract. “Screw you.” She exhaled. “I told you I was done with your sh*t.”

SeanKenny @A_very – “Yeah, right.” He snorted. “I forgot you always prefer a glass of bourbon to anything. Apart from a bottle of bourbon.”

A_Very @SeanKenny – The ringing in her ears made Avery reach up – her hand came away bloody. When she turned and focused on Sean’s face, she gasped.

SeanKenny @A_very – Big deal, so I won't be winning any beauty contests any time soon. But please spare me the fake sympathy," he snarled

A_Very @SeanKenny – "Fake?" She shuffled her knees closer and plucked the spike of windowpane from under his eye. "That hurt. Your comment I mean."

SeanKenny @A_very – "Yeah, well. . ." He muttered. "Maybe I'm a bit grouchy because people keep shooting at me. Plus, you refused the coffee."

SeanKenny @A_very – 2am. Once you've removed the broken glass from my face, I'm off to bed. Got your email, will respond tomorrow when I have a brain.

A_Very @SeanKenny – You're all patched up.

SeanKenny @A_very – "Now let's get out of here before I say something nice, which I'll regret later." END OF CHAPTER

A_Very @SeanKenny – Applause. Sweet dreams.

SeanKenny @A_very – Goodnight, Avery.

If only real life could be so exciting, and so much fun. Avery Goodyear sighed.

Travis rubbed his eyes and swigged from the Coke bottle.

His room felt very small. He rose from the chair and opened the windows to the balcony. A blast of cold, wet air billowed the cream curtains around him. He pushed them aside and stepped forwards.

A light drizzle fell on the darkening streets of London. Umbrellas waved and wobbled along the pavement. The traffic rolled half-heartedly over the damp tarmac, the cars bumper-to-bumper, coughing out fumes as their engines idled. In a hotel on the opposite side of the road, a young woman leaned over a balustrade, smoking a cigarette. She wore a chemise. Her long brown hair hung untidily across her face. She seemed not to notice the rain. In the room above her, the silhouette of a man paced back and forth. From the position of his right arm, it looked as if he was talking on a cell phone. His left arm made urgent movements as if to emphasize a point. A car horn sounded. Another horn answered the call.

Travis left the windows open and sat back at the desk. The blue glow of the laptop gave his face a corpse-like appearance. He took another pull of the Coke. It was warm and flat, but he didn't care. However imperfect, it was a little taste of home. He looked at the computer screen and wondered vaguely what Avery would make of what he had just written.

"The sun shines on the pious," thought Judas Iscariot.

It was indeed a hot day for the curious, the faithful and the cynical alike; all crowded into St. Peter's Square for the Pope's address. Crammed onto a mere forty-four hectares, Vatican City – the smallest independent nation on the planet – looked resplendent in the bright sunlight. The Late Renaissance edifice of St. Peter's Basilica towered over the scene, its stone saints gazing down benevolently on the assembled masses. The renowned architectural historian, Banister Fletcher, had referred to it as "the greatest of all churches of Christendom", and Judas agreed wholeheartedly with

this description. And Judas was, after all, in a good position to judge after two millennia of wandering. Catholic tradition decreed that St. Peter's body was interred there, but on this Judas would demur: Peter was in West Africa and, so far as Judas knew, still very much alive.

He moved through a group of nuns, passing close to the square's huge granite obelisk supported by bronze lions. Like Judas, the obelisk had done some wandering, and he retained a certain affection for the geometric structure. It had originally been erected in Heliopolis, Egypt, almost four-and-a-half thousand years before. The Emperor Augustus moved it to Alexandria, but Judas had initially encountered the granite in the Circus of Nero in Rome, where it held vigil over countless Christian executions. It had arrived at its current site in 1586 at the behest of Pope Sixtus V, and Judas had been in the city during the thirteen months it took to re-erect it.

Many human lifetimes ago.

The Bishop of Rome appeared on the balcony and after a while, the crowd fell silent. The Pope began his address. It boomed out over the loudspeaker system. It was not always easy to catch what the Pontiff was saying, but the theme sounded to be on the subject of fidelity and betrayal.

Even after two thousand years, the mention of 'betrayal' still rankled with Judas. The self-interested authors of the New Testament had portrayed him as the man responsible for Christ's death; the apostle who had sold out his saviour for coins and later, consumed by guilt, hanged himself. Though some of the Gnostic texts had praised Judas as the best of Jesus' followers, those scriptures had not made the 'official' Biblical canon. Consequently, Judas' reputation – even his very name – was synonymous with treachery.

"If only all these people knew the truth," he thought, "that without me there would have been no Resurrection, no living Christ, no Christian religion at all. Without me bestowing the gift of immortality, the man on that balcony in the white robes might be a nightclub bouncer, and the two billion Christians on Earth would all believe in something else."

The address finished and Judas shook his head.

He had to get to London. Moloch was there. The London murders widely reported in the international press bore his stamp. Judas had seen it all before, but this time, he had to bring it to an end.

And Jesus? He was also in London, and there were many things he didn't know. Things Judas should have told him centuries before. The day of reckoning was drawing near.

Judas exited the square to the Via della Conciliazione, and crossed the Ponte Sant'Angelo. He did not look back.

Avery would probably hate it, although she might like the historical references – there was, after all, a certain amount of research he had done on those matters. In spite of her encouragement, Travis knew she gritted her teeth to get through this assignment. At least she was civil and told him what she *really* thought. The fact she could disapprove of his books yet still want to be helpful, said a lot for her.

Unless it just said she was frightened of losing her job.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. Then he typed the heading for Chapter 23. Travis looked at the screen and the screen looked back at him. The cursor blinked, demanding input. But no further input was forthcoming. He wanted some coke. Not the type that came in bottles. Problem: he didn't have any.

But he knew a man who did. A very short man with a ginger beard and a bad temper. A man who hung around outside King's Cross Station. Not far from Angel. Perfect. Travis tossed the empty drink bottle into the bin and took out some newspaper cuttings from a drawer. They were predominantly about the Angel of Death. He flipped through them with a smile, then put them away again.

Travis powered down his laptop and pulled on his coat. He checked his wallet, stuffed a telescopic umbrella into one pocket, his tattered notebook into another, and closed the doors to the balcony. As he did so, he noticed a light go out in one of the bedrooms of the hotel opposite. While he couldn't be certain, it looked like the room where he had seen the woman smoking earlier.

He dropped his room key at reception and emerged onto the pavement. While the drizzle was light, a few unprotected minutes of it would see his coat soaked through, so

he opened the umbrella hoping a sudden rush of wind wouldn't turn it inside out – as had happened to him often.

A woman descended the front steps of the hotel across the road. Young, he thought. She'd tied her dark hair back. She wore a long, cream-coloured coat, had a bag slung over her shoulder, and carried a red umbrella. After a few paces, she paused to light a cigarette, then turned right, heading away from Bayswater Road.

Travis waited for a few moments, then crossed the street, squeezing between the gridlocked cars. He trailed the woman from a distance of about twenty yards. It wasn't necessary to get too close. Even in the fine rain and the darkness, her red umbrella was easy to follow. After a couple of minutes, the woman took another right turn, which would take her in the direction of Paddington Station.

On Craven Road, Travis let her get farther ahead. Several roads crisscrossed over this main artery, and he was concerned he might catch her up if the traffic lights weren't in his favour. And he did not want to catch up with her. Not yet.

By the time he reached the corner of Gloucester Terrace he had lost her. She must have gone into one of the houses. He scanned the windows, disappointed.

The rain had eased off. Travis shook out his umbrella, collapsed it and slid it back into his pocket. He looked around. Here there was hardly anyone on the streets and little traffic on the roads. The streetlamps punctuated the night and threw an oily shine onto the wet pavements. A little to Travis' left was a red phone box, papered with advertisements for massage services. He pulled open the door. The 'masseuses' appeared to be either skinny Eastern Europeans or large, ample-bosomed coloured ladies, some of whom, the advertisements ran, were 'new in town'. The phone box stank of piss and dirt. Travis picked up the receiver. There was no dial tone.

An image of Avery Goodyear suddenly came into Travis' mind. Well groomed, attractive, bright. Clean. He would talk to her again soon.

He pulled up the collar of his coat and made his way towards Praed Street, a favourite haunt. There he would take the Underground to King's Cross – and his rendezvous with the dwarf. 'Little person', as Avery would say. Travis planned to do a line of cocaine in the toilets. Then, maybe find himself a woman. It wouldn't be hard. There were plenty around King's Cross, of all shapes, sizes and colours, money being

their common denominator. That was all you needed for sex in the seedier parts of the city. That and the ability to choke back the feelings of self-loathing, which inevitably arose.

A big black woman would fit the bill tonight. One who didn't care about anything, one who had given up the struggle to maintain dignity in an indifferent world. Preferably, one who would do it without a condom.

Russian roulette was, after all, fast becoming his sport of choice.

Clive sat in the lounge playing some *shoot-em-up* game on the TV when Teagan arrived home.

“We’re out of milk,” her brother said without glancing up from his game.

She threw her umbrella in the corner, placed her handbag on the table and glared at him. “Well, nothing stopped you from wheeling yourself down to the shop and buying some while I worked. The last time I checked, this building had a wheelchair ramp. You’re a lazy bastard.”

Clive punched the air. “Yes! 23,000! Top score!” He put down the controller and reached into the large bag of crisps on his lap. “We’re out of beer too.” He stuffed his mouth and looked at Teagan expectantly.

She put a hand on her hip.

“It was raining,” he said.

“And it’s fucking raining now. Or hadn’t you noticed?” She snatched the packet away from him. He wiped his greasy fingers across his sweatshirt.

“Anyway, I’ve got some good news for you, big sister.”

“Let me guess.” Teagan yanked off her coat and shook it. “The doctors say you can walk again?”

“Funny. No, the good news is I’m going to get out of your hair for a weekend. I’m going away with the boys in two weeks’ time. We’re going shooting.”

“You mean you, Metalhead and Gort are going to spend two days in a garage, playing games on your laptops, then downloading porn when it gets dark?”

“No. I mean shooting with guns. Real ones. Gort’s family owns a farm near St. Albans where we can go out in the fields and do some target practice. Metalhead knows a guy who can sell us pistols and ammunition. It’s all set up.”

“You’re buying a *gun*?”

“Yes.”

“This would be an illegal gun, presumably?” Teagan imagined her brother being wrestled to the ground by the police for having a gun. Visualizing him in handcuffs, gave her mood a boost.

“Well, I won’t have a licence, if that’s what you mean.”

“You want to keep a loaded firearm in the flat? And how much is this gun going to cost?”

Clive snorted. “Chill out, Teagan. I’ve got money from the website jobs I’ve been doing. You’re always moaning about my geeky, non-macho lifestyle. You should be pleased.”

“And how are you going to get to this farm? None of you owns a car.”

“Metalhead’s borrowing one from a friend.” Clive snatched his bag of crisps back, tucking them protectively into the space beside his chair. “He’s got a driving licence.”

“And they’ll strap you to the roof rack, I suppose.”

Clive picked up the controller. “There’s no talking to you when you’re in one of these moods. Maybe while I’m away, you and the man upstairs should take the opportunity to spend a romantic weekend together. Assuming he’s not too busy wanking over Avery Goodtimes on Twitter, that is.”

Teagan turned away to hide her irritation. “I’m going to see if I can borrow some milk from Sean. I’m not going out in the rain again.”

“Good idea,” Clive called after her as the noises of warfare erupted once more from the television. “Ask him if he’s got any beer while you’re up there.”

“He doesn’t drink.” She slammed the door behind her then made her way up the stairs to Sean’s apartment, giving herself time to calm down. “Damn Clive,” she muttered. “I should have fixed my makeup. Combed my hair. I look like a drowned rat.”

The door to one of the other apartments on the third floor stood open. Boxes were stacked in the hallway. New tenants were moving in. Teagan could hear people shuffling and the sound of furniture dragging on the wooden floor. She hesitated a moment, then decided introductions could wait. She knocked on Sean’s door.

After a few seconds, Sean answered. He was stripped to the waist and wearing a pair of yellow rubber gloves. “Oh, Teagan. I thought it might be the Bannisters wanting something.”

“Are they the new people next door?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing?” Teagan asked, moving past him and seeing a bowl of soapy water and suds covering the sofa.

“I’m trying to repair the damage done by your cat. It keeps peeing on the sofa. Apparently, it thinks itself too good for the litter tray. The bloody thing’s feral. And look what its claws have done to the upholstery.”

Teagan’s gaze rested on Sean’s bare chest. “You look sexy in those gloves.”

He wrenched off the gloves and threw them in the bowl. “It’s no laughing matter. There are cat hairs everywhere. And I mean *everywhere*. It has to go.”

“Aw.” She stuck her lip out in a pout. “Where is little kitty?”

“Outside. Where it belongs.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“God, I love it when you get all forceful.” She took a step towards him, but he moved away.

“What do you want, Teagan? As you can see, I’m busy.”

She sighed. “Oh, all right, Mr. Grumpy. I came to see if you could lend me some milk. We’ve run out.”

“There’s a full bottle of skimmed milk in the fridge. Help yourself.”

“Don’t you have any full fat?”

He picked up the cleaning supplies and set them on the table. “No. Skimmed only. Take it or leave it.”

She opened the fridge door. “I’ll take it.”

Sean slumped onto a wooden chair. Teagan put a hand on his shoulder. “Is that all that’s bothering you, sweetheart? The cat? You seem very tense.”

“I had a run-in with our friend – and your neighbour – Mr. Sauvage. He’s now well behind with his rent, and I’m fed up with finding his mess everywhere. Plus, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you about the noise and the ‘friends’ he keeps bringing back. Poor Mrs. Patel thinks she’s living in a brothel. All I seem able to get out of Sauvage is a grunt and a Gallic shrug. Now I’m going to have to sort him out.” Sean shrugged away from Teagan. “I’d like to force-feed the bastard some peanuts,” he added.

“What good would that do?”

“Didn’t you get it during our last confrontation with him?” Sean swung round in his chair to face her. “He’s seriously allergic to peanuts. Show him a peanut, and he writhes around like a vampire presented with a crucifix. Apparently, he swells up like the Michelin man.”

“I’d like to see that. Do you think his penis swells up too?”

“Now *that* I wouldn’t know about.”

“Speaking of which.” Teagan lifted her skirt and lowered herself onto Sean’s lap. “How about I come around after I’ve cooked my fat, lazy brother some dinner and give you a relaxing massage?” She trailed kisses over his neck.

“I can’t,” he said perfunctorily, easing her off him. “I have things to do this evening.”

“Like what?”

“I have all the monthly accounts to do for my father. This place doesn’t run itself, you know. And the paperwork always takes me hours. By the time I’m done, I’ll be good for nothing but sleeping. *Alone*,” he added. “Now, vamoose. I need to finish making this sofa fit for a human to sit on. If you’ve got nothing to do, go and say hello to the new tenants. They’re a nice married couple.”

“Where are they from?”

“Birmingham. He’s an actuary.”

“His wife must have a very high boredom threshold. I hate the Brummie accent. It’s so. . . *regional*.”

“Don’t forget your milk.”

Teagan found Clive engrossed in his game when she returned.

“Skimmed milk,” she announced.

“Yuck. How is lover boy?”

“Shut up.”

“What are we having for dinner?”

“Instant noodles followed by a bar of chocolate.”

“Sounds like a feast. Though I’m going to have to start watching my diet if I’m going to make the Paralympic shooting team.”

“Dream on, little brother. You’ll do well not to shoot yourself in the head. Though if you do, you’ll miss your brain by about three feet.”

“Hilarious. You going up to Sean’s later?”

“No. He has paperwork to do.”

Clive snorted. “Yeah, *right*. More like he has some American bimbo to do over the Internet.”

“Be quiet out here. I want to write some lyrics.”

Teagan lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She couldn’t come up with a single line. For once, Clive seemed to be acting with consideration, and she could hardly hear the explosions. She thought that perhaps while her brain marinated ideas, she should transfer some of her other lyrics from her notebook onto a file on her laptop. Long hand was Teagan’s preferred method of working. Hand writing her poetry felt more organic than using word processing software. She put it onto the hard drive only *after* she’d perfected her words. For sure, it wasted time re-writing, but – she told herself – she was an artist. All artists had to suffer.

Suffering. . . A light bulb went on in Teagan’s head.

Sean had been remote with her recently. He needed to understand the depth of her feelings for him, how primal they were. She’d email him a copy of her recent poem, *Menstruation*. It struck her as a romantic thing to do. The poem was edgy, visceral, and entirely appropriate. Plus, sending Sean an email had a certain fighting-fire-with-fire quality to it. If Avery Badyear could use the Internet to talk to Sean, then so could she. Teagan switched on her laptop and typed.

Sean,

I know you’re busy this evening, and you won’t read this until tomorrow, but I want you to know I’m thinking of you, sweetheart. Here’s a poem I wrote which I have dedicated to you.

MENSTRUATION

*My ovaries are overfull
About to overflow
And down the slimy birth canal
The sole way they can go*

*Every single month the same
This river of desire
Even as my stomach burns
With all-consuming fire*

*I suffer thus for you,
O man, you cannot have a clue
My face is flushed, my breasts are flushed,
My eggs are all flushed too*

*This little death, this agony,
I think of you astride me
A woman's lot is not so hot
When you don't stay inside me*

*You want no kids, I understand,
It's really all I can do
That's why my bed is running red
From only loving you*

*All my love,
Teagan xxx*

Teagan smiled.

“If that doesn’t convince him I love him, nothing will,” she said aloud. She hit the send button. She yawned and looked at her watch. It was after midnight. She hadn’t

heard Clive moving around for some time, which meant Sauvage wasn't humping some tart next door, and her brother was asleep. She needed to get to bed too, but first she'd check Sean's Twitter feed.

WTF?

Teagan's throat tightened. He was online to the bimbo right now. So much for his fucking paperwork.

SeanKenny @A_Very – I won't bore you with how tedious and stressful today was.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Maybe you need to get a pet?

SeanKenny @A_Very – Ha. Funny you should say that.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Expound, please. Don't leave me hanging.

SeanKenny @A_Very – A girl in our apartments decided to 'adopt' a ginger tomcat and dumped it on me recently.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Awww.

SeanKenny @A_Very – Never mind about 'awww'. The damn thing has ripped up my furniture and peed all over the sofa.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Oops!

SeanKenny @A_Very – Everything is covered in cat hairs. And I mean EVERYTHING. Is it legal to strangle a cat, do you think?

A_Very @SeanKenny – I don't think so. Poor you. Who's this girl? A friend of yours?

SeanKenny @A_Very – Why? Are you jealous?

A_Very @SeanKenny – Ha! Just curiosity – no wait, that's how the cat dies.

SeanKenny @A_Very – She's nobody you need to worry about.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Just your local crazy cat lady, eh? Well, every neighbourhood has one.

Teagan slammed down the cover of her laptop.

Crazy cat lady, eh?

The lights were out in the lounge. Teagan tiptoed across the room and put her ear to Clive's door. Her brother was snoring. She picked up the bunch of keys from the table

and stepped out into the deserted lobby, listening carefully for approaching footsteps or voices.

Selecting Sean's master key, Teagan inserted it into the lock of the janitor's cupboard. She switched on the light and searched the shelves until she found a coil of thin metal wire and a set of cutters. She snipped a length and formed a slipknot at each end. Teagan clicked off the light and closed the door.

The cat sat on top of one of the bins cleaning itself. As Teagan expected, Sean had not allowed the animal back inside the building. Though the rain had stopped, the back yard shone with water in the weak moonlight filtering through the clouds. Teagan scanned the windows overlooking the yard. As far as she could tell, no witnesses would see what happened next.

She stroked the cat and whispered soothing noises to it. It responded by purring, and nuzzled itself against her. "You trust me, kitty, don't you?"

Teagan pulled the cat gently into her arms and walked slowly to the large gate. Still making cooing noises, she stretched up, and with difficulty managed to get one of the ends of the wire noose over a spike topping the wall. With a final glance around, Teagan slipped the other end of the wire over the cat's neck. The animal seemed unconcerned.

"Sean doesn't love you, I'm afraid." Her tone was tender and calm. "So you have to go."

She stepped away quickly and dropped the cat.

Avery sat immobile. She was poised, tight as a spring, ready to eject herself from Jerry's office. Her hands and feet tingled with electricity while her nervous system processed the unfolding scene. Jerry was scaring the bejeezus out of her. She couldn't remember the last time her scalp prickled with fear. She had never seen the man this unhinged before.

With unblinking eyes, Avery tracked Jerry as he prowled five steps, and then retraced his path. Back and forth. Back and forth. His face fired a brilliant red hue, deepening to a purple across his throat. His arms went from clasped behind his back to fists shaking in the air – the calisthenics of the overwrought.

In Jerry's impassioned speech, his words leapfrogged one another, making them incoherent. All Avery could do was wait and hope the blaze would cool. It was taking a long time.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?" Jerry's fists balanced his weight on the top of his desk as his face jutted forward to glower at Avery.

Avery shook her head.

"Where is the damned manuscript?" Spittle sprayed the air, leaving a strand dangling from his lips.

Avery didn't move. Words failed her.

"Have you any clue what's at stake here?" He batted the phone from his desk. It hit the wall with a deadly thud, leaving a dent behind. "Our heads are collectively on the chopping block. You get that, right?"

"I'm not sure I know what you want me to do here." The tone of her voice came as a shock to Avery. She sounded composed and reasonable, extremely professional, and not at all like the chewed-up-and-spat-out-piece-of-garbage feelings poisoning her insides. "I cannot make the words come out of Travis's head, through his fingers and onto the screen. There is only so much someone can do from the outside."

Jerry stalked around his desk, his hands held wide as if to wrap them around her throat.

Avery jumped up and circled to the back of her seat, using it as a barrier between them.

He grasped the arms of the chair, put a knee on the seat, leaning within an inch of Avery's nose. "I don't care what you have to do." His voice had dropped to a menacing whisper. "I don't give a flying *fuck* if you have to move in with him and babysit his every move. He has a fucking contract. He owes us a fucking book." With each staccato sentence vehemence ramped up Jerry's volume. "And you will hand me that fucking book before Christmas." Jerry raised himself to standing. "Or so help me. . ." He was up on his tiptoes with an arm over his head, pointing a finger like a weapon down at her head. Reflexively, Avery ducked.

"Jerry, he's in London," she whispered.

"Then get your fucking ass on the fucking plane and go to fucking London. There are no more jobs open for agents. No matter what we've accomplished in our careers, if we fail to deliver the Travis Bishop book and get fired – and make no mistake, we will be fired – our careers are over. *Over*. This will *not* happen. You will hand me the manuscript, and it will be the best damned, fucking manuscript PMT ever touched. Do I make myself clear?"

"I understand you want me to go to London to babysit Travis. I'm not in a personal position to pack up and head to England for an arbitrary amount of time. Quite frankly, Jerry, I think you've lost your mind. I'm glad to strategize with you. But I will not stand here one more second and have you cuss at me and threaten me. I promise you if this continues, I'm walking out the door, heading to HR, and filing an abuse report." Avery's mind stood back and watched with awe. She couldn't believe she sounded so solid and strong when this whole time all she had wanted was to curl up in the corner and whimper like a beaten dog. But look at her; she was doing great.

Jerry stilled.

Avery wondered if she had, over the months and years she had known him, by degrees, ceded power to him to the point that he thought this kind of behaviour was

acceptable. Somehow, she held herself responsible for his tirade. Somehow, it was all her fault.

Jerry's voice lowered to terse professionalism. "I've made flight arrangements for the twenty-third. I will accompany you over, as I have meetings with our London office about international rights. You will plan to be in London for a minimum of ten days. A minimum." He enunciated each syllable slowly. "And when you come back, you will have the manuscript in your hand."

Avery opened her mouth. Jerry's hand came up like a stop sign. "Not a single word. Get out."

Avery walked from the room with as much poise as she could muster. When she got to her office, she was shaking violently. She yanked her purse from the desk drawer and pulled out her compact to inspect her neck. Splotchy red welts ran all the way down her chest. Avery slung her purse over her shoulder and headed to the pharmacy for an antihistamine, hoping it would calm the hives.



Sitting in her driveway, Avery called her sister. She might as well get this over with out of the earshot of her mother. Neither of them was going to be happy. Oh, well.

When the call connected, all Avery could hear was background noise. "Fanny?"

"Hang on. I'll get my mom," one of her nephews huffed rudely.

Avery took another slug of Benadryl, paying no heed to the dosage warning on the label, and resisted scratching. She wanted to peel her skin off and throw it out the window. Even though it was a cool November day, Avery blasted the air-conditioning. It offered her a modicum of relief.

"Why are you calling?" Fanny sounded put out.

Avery felt a sudden wave of satisfaction flow through her, knowing she was about to dump her mom-burden squarely onto Fanny's lap. "I'm just giving you a heads up. I need to leave town the week after next, on the twenty-third."

"The twenty-third is a Sunday. Leslie's working that day. We'll be at the church."

“Well, I guess Mom will be there with you. She’ll need to stay Saturday night at your place. I’m sure I’ll have an early morning boarding time, and it’s an international flight.”

“What do you mean *international*? Where are you going?”

“London.” *Sean. Sean’s in London.* The thought fluttered softly through her awareness.

“It seems like a long way to go for a day or two. Can’t someone else go for you?”

“Not this time, and it’s not for a day.”

“You’re supposed to do Thanksgiving at your house again. I guess you’ll have to do the shopping and preparation before you go.”

“I’m not going to be back in time for Thanksgiving. You’ll have to have everyone over to your house. You can do the work for once.”

“Well, I . . . Surely, your boss won’t keep you away through Thanksgiving. It’s a national holiday, for goodness sake. Tell him you have plans. Explain you have twenty family members headed your way.”

“No. That won’t be possible. You’ll have to take over. And I’ll call you with my return date once I know when it is.”

“Wait. What? You don’t know when you’re coming home?”

“Minimum of ten days. But there’s the possibility I need to be there until Christmas.” Avery savoured saying the last sentence.

“But Mom. . .” Fanny’s voice squeaked out.

“Is your responsibility.” Avery tried hard to keep the glee from her voice. She suddenly felt vengeful for having shouldered the cost and the responsibility almost completely alone. Fanny got the husband, her own home, children, and the freedom to come and go as she pleased, spend her money on what she chose. Those jealous thoughts churned angrily through Avery and seemed to suck all of the air from the car. She climbed out, panting, ripping at her skin with her nails.

After she hung up with Fanny, she made a second phone call.

“Lolly, how would you feel about getting rip-roaring drunk tonight?”



Avery sat at the kitchen table wiping tears from her eyes that she blamed on the onion she was cutting.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Lola asked.

“In a minute. Let’s start with you. How was your day?”

“Fine. The kids were all in school. My mother came over in her full OCD-mood. So I needed to leave the house while she sterilized everything.” Lola took the chocolate cake out of its box and positioned it on the cake stand.

“God, you’re lucky. I have to pay Sally extra to run the vacuum or dust the furniture.”

“Mom would come over and do your house too, but Ginny scares her to death. Mom thinks dementia is contagious.”

“But she watches the kids all the time, so you can come be with me.”

“Yeah, well, she thinks it’s contagious after you’re fifty, so I have a few more years.”

“What did you do, go shopping?”

“I went to confession.” Lola poured Chardonnay into their tulip glasses.

Avery stopped mid-chop and held Lola’s gaze. Lola’s eyes lit up with laughter. She winked at Avery. “Bless me, Father Pat, for I have sinned.” She chuckled.

Avery slid the onions onto a plate and washed the cutting board. “Lola, I tell you, you’re going to be the death of that man. What did you tell him this time? You couldn’t very well say you like it best when your husband ties you up and uses the whip. Andre is out of town, and Father knows it.”

“You’re right.” Lola swirled the wine in her glass, then took a long swig. “So I took my copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* with me and read some of the passages.”

“Lolly, you didn’t. Stop. You’re pulling my leg.”

“So, I’m paraphrasing this bit about vibrating eggs and butt plugs, and he stops me and says, ‘Wait, I didn’t catch that last part, dear. What exactly is ‘rimming’?’”

Avery sputtered as wine went up her nose. She gasped and doubled over laughing. “Lolly, you didn’t.” She crouched down to the floor. “Oh God, you’re going to make me pee.”

Lola looked down at her friend with a grin and wiggled her brows. “Right, girlfriend. Now I’ve made you laugh, you owe me an explanation for this drunken girls’-night-in.” All levity wiped from her face. “I’m thinking it must be pretty bad.”

Avery had given up on her glass. She tilted down the last drop of wine from the bottle, savouring the cool crisp taste. She drew in a deep breath and told Lola about her encounter with Jerry. “. . . And that was my day.”

Lola stood at the sink peeling shrimp and tutting her tongue against her palate. “Girlfriend, you’re going to end up in the hospital.” She glanced over her shoulder at Avery. “Or maybe the nut house from all this hoo-hah. What crawled up Jerry’s ass? He’s usually a pig, but he’s not abusive.”

Avery shot her a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, he’s not clear about his sexual boundaries when it comes to you. But you have to admit this is pretty far out there.”

“The president of PMT himself called and chewed Jerry a new one. Everyone’s losing their minds over this darned book.”

“But you get a free trip to London for it.”

Avery nodded and opened a new bottle.

“Jerry won’t be in London for long. You’ll get a break from your mom for a while.”

Avery nodded again.

“And Sean lives in London. Oh, Avery, that’s a very pretty shade of pink you’re blushing.”

“That’s not a blush. That’s hives.” She reached out and grabbed a tomato to cut for the salad.

“So you’ll get to meet your Twitter-boy.” Lolly grinned widely. “Are you excited?”

“I’m on the fence. I actually don’t think I’m going to let Sean know I’m in London.”

Lola shut the oven door with her foot and turned to Avery. “Why’s that?”

“Well, his picture looks exactly like Gerard Butler.”

“And that would stop you?”

“I asked him if it was his real picture.”

“And?”

“He said yes.”

Lola moved the pasta pot to the stove and lit the burner. “So?”

“Look at my life, Lola, I’m not that lucky. Aside from you, I only have certifiably crazy people filling my freak-show of an existence.”

Turning to push her hip into the counter, Lola pursed her lips. “What are the chances he is who he says he is?”

“If you look at my life-line, not that good. He could be some grossly over-weight, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, balding-with-a-comb-over, retiree in upstate New York.”

“Or he could live in Australia trolling the Internet for vulnerable women, enticing them into sordid cybersex relationships, and then writing about them – putting it out on Smashwords and Amazon for all the world to read? Huh? What then?”

Avery took another swig from her wine glass, “Or he could be a woman.”

“He could be ninety-two, toothless, with a colostomy bag, needing someone to push his wheelchair.”

“Ew!” Avery scrunched her nose.

“Let’s find out!” Lola switched off the flame and dashed to the dining room. “See if he’s there.”

Avery shot Lola a dubious look, then pulled up her Twitter account.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Sean, are you around?

“Why am I doing this Lolly?”

“We need some proof about who he really is. I’m laying money on the nursing-home guy needing someone to smuggle cigarettes in to him, so he can suck the smoke in through his trach-tube.”

Suddenly, Avery felt green. Maybe she didn’t want to find out the truth. Maybe living in her little fantasy world was just fine, thank you very much. Why rock the boat—when she was clinging to the side of it for dear life? She played that thought through her head again. It seemed true. Shit.

Avery leaned heavily on Lola as her corner stone, the person who supported the structure of her existence. If something, somehow, pulled Lola away from her, everything in her world would collapse.

But Sean. Sean was hope. Hope for what? She wondered, and then the trickle of comprehension came to her and all of the air left her lungs. She hoped Sean would pull her out of the water onto that metaphorical boat, and they could sail into the sunset.

Lola sat quietly as the cogs whirred in her friend's mind, giving her the space and time to work through whatever it was she'd latched on to.

Avery clawed at her chest as the hives sparked. This fantasy about Sean was not healthy, and she knew it.

SeanKenny @A_very – Hello there. Just home from the office? How was your day?

A_Very @SeanKenny – Good. Yours?

SeanKenny @A_very – Finished up a jog, so I'm feeling very serene.

A_Very @SeanKenny – It's kind of late for that, don't you think? What time is there?

SeanKenny @A_very – Midnight. So yes, late. But I needed to get out of my apartment and at this hour it was the only excuse I could come up with.

A_Very @SeanKenny – I'm not sure I understand.

SeanKenny @A_very – Long story. I'll tell you by email. I read the chapter you sent me. Very good, indeed. I have some suggestions, though.

Lola nudged Avery. "Ask him."

"Ask him what?"

Lola pushed Avery from the seat and sat down in front of the keyboard.

A_Very @SeanKenny – So, tell me the truth. Is that your picture in your icon?

SeanKenny @A_very – Sadly so.

A_Very @SeanKenny – It's a very handsome picture.

"Lola! No."

Lola grinned and pressed the send button.

SeanKenny @A_very – Well, thank you. I wish I knew what you looked like – unless of course you actually are a cartoon, in which case, I apologize.

A_Very @SeanKenny – I'll trade you. Screen shot for screen shot.

“Lola! No.” Avery hissed, reaching up to smooth her hair and adjust her blouse.

SeanKenny @A_Very – I'll show you mine if you show me yours? That sounds like the very indecent proposal I got when I was in grammar school.

A_Very @SeanKenny – What happened?

SeanKenny @A_Very – I became very aware girls and boys have different plumbing systems, and I got paddled. Well worth it though.

SeanKenny @A_Very – Give me a second. And I'll tweet my picture. Hang on.

Avery's eyes grew wide, then she dashed up to her room, pulled on a turtle neck to hide the hives, brushed her hair manically, swiped on some bright red lipstick and ran back down the stairs.

Lola got up from the chair, laughing heartily. She reached out and unceremoniously tugged Avery's shirt smooth over her bust and arranged her hair. When Avery thought she looked presentable, she clicked the screen-shot button. Lola leaned over the laptop.

“Um – not a good look for you, Avery. You need to take it again. Think something less panicky. Puppies. Think puppies.”

Seven screen shots later, Avery's face had let go of the manic energy and had softened into a gentle smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes. She posted it up on Twitter before she lost the nerve.

A_Very @SeanKenny – Tah dah!

Sean had already posted his picture. He was at a table near a dark window. Behind him, she could see a small, tidy kitchenette. And there was Sean smiling at her from a

poorly lit room, wearing a running tank that exposed his gym-hardened shoulders. A clock radio sat behind him; it read 12:03. Avery glanced at her watch it was now 7:15 her time. This was his actual picture.

“Holy Joseph.” Lola grabbed the corners of the laptop and turned it towards her. “He’s freaking gorgeous.”

Avery pulled the screen back in her direction and drank in Sean’s image. His tousled brown hair hung a little damp from his sweaty run. It was short enough to be clean-cut and long enough to be unruly. Manicured stubble made him look fashionably edgy. But it was his eyes that transfixed Avery. They reminded her of the ocean – bluish-green with flecks of white, and thoughtfully deep. She read a hint of laughter in them. The crooked smile he offered up had her smiling back. Avery felt the compulsion to lean forward and kiss his lips. She might have done it if Lola wasn’t sitting next to her, mouth hanging open.

Avery flipped out of the full-screen shot back to Twitter. Sean had not replied.

Lola danced her way into the kitchen singing Savage Garden’s *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, and came back with another bottle of wine. She filled their glasses. “Looks like you’ve hooked yourself a real catch.”

Avery sat with her hands clasped in her lap. Still nothing from Sean. Shit. Avery picked up her glass and drained it in one swallow, offering it back to Lola for a refill. “We’re pen pals. That’s it,” Avery said. But she knew it wasn’t true. Sean had become something pretty darned significant in her life.

SeanKenny @A_Very – Avery, I’m stunned. I thought you were probably very pretty, but in my mind, it was more like Bonnie Hunt-wholesomeness.

A_Very @SeanKenny – You don’t think I look wholesome? Bonnie Hunt is who my sister looks like.

SeanKenny @A_Very – Um wholesome? No.

Lola grabbed the keyboard.

A_Very @SeanKenny – What then?

“Lola stop it. He’s going to think I’m fishing for compliments.”

SeanKenny @A_Very – I’m sending you a DM.

Avery looked at the response. Sudden anxiety inflamed her nerves. She sat on her hands to keep from attacking the welts with her nails. The message had dropped into her DM box, but she didn’t want to open it. After her day today, she was pretty certain Sean was going to say, “Nice knowing you,” and move on. Lola eyed her curiously then bumped Avery with her hip, egging her on. Avery reached for her glass of wine and took a drink. *Here goes nothing.*

SeanKenny – You are breathtaking. I had no idea. After seeing your picture, I need to talk with you. To see that you’re real.

SeanKenny – The voice in my head is saying I’m hallucinating. If you’re toothless and bald-headed. I need to know it right now.

SeanKenny – Do you want to Skype?

Dumbfounded. It was the only word to describe Avery in that moment. Lola reached over and shook Avery’s shoulder. “He wants to Skype. How awesome is that?”

Avery turned a blank face to Lola.

“Your mom’s fully sedated. She won’t bother you.”

Avery said nothing.

“Look, I’ll hide out of the picture. If it gets too bad, you signal out of his view, and I’ll call you. You can say you have to go.”

Avery nodded and put her hands on the keys. “I’ve been drinking a lot. Am I slurring my words?”

“Not that you’d notice.” Lola encouraged her.

“If I start to make a fool of myself, you’ll intervene. You’ll pretend to come in, and you’ll stop me, right?”

The corner of Lola’s mouth came up. “Why are you stressing about this?”

“I like him as a Twitter-friend. I like how easy we are together. Skype.” Avery held up her hands and spread her fingers. “It could go well, or it could be a disaster, or it could be kind of flat. No matter what it is, our relationship will be different. We’ll never be able to go back to what we had earlier in the evening. It’s changed. Skyping might be awful, and then our friendship will collapse. Go away. And that will be the end of it.”

“Holy Mary, you have it worse than I thought,” Lola said.

“I don’t.” Avery countered. “He’s a Twitter-friend.”

“Prove it.” Lola challenged.

A_Very – Okay, Sean. It sounds like fun. My Skype address is AGoodyear. Meet you over there.

Someone hammered on the door.

Sean lifted his head and wiped the drool from his mouth. He lay face down on the damp sofa, still wearing yesterday's clothes. His limbs ached. A vague smell of cat lingered on the cushions. His head clanged. He sat up, rubbing his shoulders to relieve the crick in his neck.

The hammering continued.

Rising to his feet, Sean stumbled forward, his legs weak and cramped.

Sauvage stood in the hallway, a briefcase in hand, dressed in a business suit. For once, he looked more presentable than Sean. He cast his eyes over the younger man's dishevelled appearance.

"What is it?" Sean's tongue felt thick.

"You have a dead cat outside."

"What?"

"Somebody hanged a cat over the gate at the back. You have to move it. I need to get my car out, and I'm not going to touch it. That is *your* job."

It was the ginger cat. *Of course it was.* The animal was suspended against the wooden gate, its fur beaded with water droplets from the light morning drizzle. Its eyes were open and blood covered its mouth.

"This type of thing would never happen in France," Sauvage said, lighting a cigarette.

Sean fetched a stepladder from his janitor's cupboard, while the Frenchman impatiently revved his car. Clambering up the rungs, Sean removed the wire from the spike, then opened the gate to allow Sauvage to drive out.

The bins were full of the new tenants' cardboard packing boxes, and Sean had to remove some and squash them down to make room for the corpse. He piled some of the rubbish on top of it in case Mrs. Patel made an unwelcome discovery. She was already jittery after the graffiti incident, and Sean didn't wish to add to her fears.

He examined the gate. How could someone have been high enough up to throw the cat over such a tall gate? Sean put away the stepladders and wiped his hands on a towel. As he left the storeroom, he bumped into Clive wheeling himself through the lobby.

“Hi, Sean,” he said. “I’m just off to the games shop. God, you look terrible.”

“Someone killed the ginger cat last night. I’ve been getting rid of it.”

“What – your cat, you mean?” Clive rocked his chair forward and back.

“My cat? Oh, yes. My cat.” He noticed the tremor in his hands.

“How did they do that?”

“Metal wire around its throat.”

“Like a noose, you mean?” The colour drained from Clive’s face.

Sean nodded. “Don’t say anything to anyone, will you? Especially not Mrs. Patel. Sauvage knows about it, but nobody else. I don’t want people getting upset.” He closed the storeroom door and checked that it was locked. “I need to think about putting up security cameras. Of course, you can tell Teagan,” he added.

“Teagan – yes. She’s already left for work.” Clive spun himself around and seemed anxious to go. “Well, I’ll see you later.” He called over his shoulder. “I hope the rest of your day is better.”

“Me too.”

The first thing Sean noticed when he entered his apartment was that his computer’s power light was on even though the screen was blank. He tried to remember the previous evening. He’d been talking to Avery, then. . . nothing.

Had he passed out while they were talking?

Sean touched the keyboard and the screen sprang to life. He scrolled up his Twitter feed and was relieved to see they had signed off in an orderly manner. Then he spotted something else. A little further back.

SeanKenny @A_Very – Everything is covered in cat hairs. And I mean EVERYTHING. Is it legal to strangle a cat, do you think?

Half an hour later, having made another entry in his blackout diary, Sean was on his way to work.

That was fun, wasn't it? said the voice.



Janice tilted her head in Goose's direction and whispered, "What's he doing now?"

"Consulting star charts, if you must ask," Sean said.

"Like astrology, you mean? Horoscopes?"

"Kind of. He's seeing if there is any connection between the Angel murders and the position of the heavenly bodies."

Janice rolled her eyes. "Maybe it's time he consulted a doctor. I hear there are OCD medications that might take the edge off." She moved over to Goose and touched his shoulder. She pointed at the astral map. "Hey, Goose is that what I think it is?"

Goose looked up. "What?" he asked excitedly.

"It *is*," Janice clapped her hands.

"What? What, Janice? What have you seen?"

She traced her finger over the pictures. "Yes, it's here. Look. The prophecy. When the moon is in the Seventh House and Jupiter aligns with Mars. It's the Age of Aquarius."

Goose gulped. "Aquarius?"

Sean sighed. "She's pulling your leg, Goose. It's a line from a song. From the musical, *Hair*."

Goose radiated confusion. "Hair?"

"Hair today, gone tomorrow; that's my motto. That and make money, lots of it. Good evening, Human Beanz. My usual please." Dagenham Dave had arrived.

"Oh, great," Sean muttered to himself.

Dave grabbed Goose's map. "What's this, Goosey? You planning the location of the next *Star Trek* convention, are you? Bring my coffee over, Janice, there's a darling."

Goose followed the trader to his table. "I think there's a connection between the Angel victims and the position of the stars."

“Never mind about the fucking heavenly spheres, have you worked out how he’s killing the tarts yet?”

“Nobody knows,” Goose said. “The police won’t release any details. They’re keeping it secret because they’re worried about copycat killings.”

“Yes, I know *that*,” Dave replied, patting the trainee on the head, “but a smart guy like you should be able to work it out. What do you think? Does he shoot ‘em?”

Goose shook his head. “Too noisy, I would think.”

“Does he garrotte them?”

Sean’s stomach muscles tightened.

“Maybe he kills them with kindness,” Janice piped in.

“I’m glad you all think it’s funny,” Sean said. “How would you feel if someone you knew got murdered?”

“Oh, lighten up, coffee man.” Dave put an arm around Goose’s shoulders. “Listen, Goosey, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree with all this maths and physics stuff. I think this Angel bloke is Japanese.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Now if you’d studied the customs of the Far East, like I have, you’d see some obvious connections.” Dave winked conspiratorially at Janice as she placed the coffee cup in front of him.

Janice put both her palms to her cheeks and gasped in mock-enlightenment. “Japan! Oh, Dave, you’re a genius!”

Goose’s head shot back and forth between the two of them, like an umpire at a tennis match. “Tell me!” His knees jiggled.

Dave licked his lips. “Well,” he began, “I was going to share this with the police first, but I guess I can tell you. You’re familiar with the *Kama Sutra*, right?”

“Not really,” Goose replied.

“Never mind. It’s a kind of Indian manual for sexual positions. But what most people here in the West don’t know, is that there is also a *Japanese Kama Sutra*. It’s like the Indian one, but designed for shorter people. Anyway, they have a position in there called ‘The Angel’ and guess what *number* the position is?”

Goose’s tongue was almost hanging out. “Twenty-three?”

Dave clapped him on the back. “Exactomundo, Sherlock. You can figure out the rest, right?”

Goose squeezed his eyes shut tight and started moving his fingers across his thumbs rhythmically. “But that means. . .” he said. “That means. . .” He opened his eyes and scanned the star chart while Dave and Janice smirked.

Goose snapped his fingers three times. “The Rising Sun,” he said. “I need to work on this.” He folded up the chart.

Teagan swung through the coffee shop, and all eyes turned towards her. She stopped in her tracks, her gaze moving from side to side. “Have I walked in on something?”

“Teagan Adams,” Goose said.

“Er, yes.” She looked across at Sean who merely raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

“You always order green tea.”

“That’s right, Goose, I do,” she said with care.

“Number twenty-three on the menu board.” Goose continued to stare at her.

“Is it?”

“Teagan Adams. Twenty-three.” Goose blinked and bit his lower lip. “*Japanese Kama Sutra* is only seventeen letters. Something’s not right. Dave, something’s not right.” He wrung his hands with agitation. “It’s a prime number, but. . .”

“Don’t worry, son,” Dave soothed. “You’ll put it together soon enough. Now calm down.” He indicated Teagan. “This pretty lady likes you, you know. I mean she *really* likes you. Haven’t you noticed her casting glances at you each time she comes in here?”

Goose looked at the immobile Teagan. “Green tea,” he said.

“Exactly. Twenty-three. You two could be a match made in heaven.”

Teagan shook her head and headed for the counter, where Sean stood. “What the fuck is going on here, Sean?”

“Goose is having one of his bad days, with a little help from his friends.”

She watched the trainee return to his work area and start slicing a panini. “Is he dangerous, do you think?”

“Only if you listen to him. So what brings you here? Have you finished work?”

“I’ve been home. Clive said someone killed our cat.”

“Yes.”

She reached out and took his hand. “Are you upset?”

“I felt upset when I saw it. And when I had to dispose of it.” When Teagan frowned, he added, “I’m sorry, that sounded callous.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything.”

More customers arrived.

“I have to get on, Teagan.”

“All right then. I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t you want anything?” Sean asked.

“No, I just came over to see you.”

The door closed behind her.

“Good-looking girl,” Dave remarked.

And she enjoys it rough. That’s a bonus too, said the voice.

“Do you think Teagan likes me?” asked Goose. “I mean *really* likes me?”



Sean sat in his armchair, lost in thought. From time to time, he gazed at the sofa then at the litter tray, which still sat in the corner of the room. His blackout diary lay open on the arm of the chair. Two of the entries coincided with the appearance of the graffiti and the demise of the cat.

“It’s coincidence,” he said aloud. It didn’t convince him.

He glanced over at the silent computer. Much as he would like to talk to Avery, common sense told him a long run would be better for him, even if it was still raining.

His cell phone buzzed.

The display indicated it was his father. It had been a few weeks since he had last heard the deep, funereal voice laced with the sound of the North. Sean sat up in his chair and pressed the answer button.

“Hello, Dad.”

“Hello, Sean. How are you?”

I could have a brain tumour, my schizophrenia is raging, I'm having periodic blackouts, and I might have choked a cat to death last night. Otherwise, I'm fine.

"I'm fine."

"Listen, I don't want to alarm you, but I've had a minor heart attack."

Sean's own heart skipped a beat. "What? Where are you? Are you still in hospital?"

"No, I'm home. Everything's fine. I thought I should let you know."

"Dad, a heart attack is serious. This is your second one. I'll fly up and see you."

"No." The reply was quick and definitive. "It's not necessary."

"Not necessary? Christ, you could have died."

"Now you're being overly dramatic."

"I still think I should come up to Edinburgh."

"I don't want you to." His father's voice was flat, brooking no argument.

Anger flushed through Sean. "Why? Are you worried I'll go crazy and attack you? Are you still so ashamed of me that you'd sooner die than see me?"

"Now you're being stupid."

A pause followed. Sean groped for something to say that wouldn't inflame his father and aggravate his condition. He let the silence hang. He waited for his father to speak.

"Listen. It's nothing, Sean. I'll be back at work next week," his dad said. "And as for my not wanting to see you, of course I do. We'll work something out. At Christmas, perhaps."

Perhaps I should tell him.

"Sean?"

No. I can't. Not now.

"Sean, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. It's cool, Dad, I understand."

"There's no need to worry about me."

"I hear you."

There was another awkward pause.

"Is everything well in London?"

"It's cold and wet. Like Edinburgh, I imagine."

"Indeed."

As the call ended, a knock sounded on his door. Teagan's knock.

"Hi, Sean. Need some company? I know I do." She peered past him at his computer screen. "Not playing on the Internet tonight?" She moved over to the sofa and plopped down. "That's good."

"It's not a good time."

"Why?" She pulled a pillow over, gave it a few punches, then set it back in the corner.

"Look, I can't talk about it right now –"

"It's never a good time these days, is it?" Her mood flipped to annoyance. "Is there someone else you'd rather be talking to? Or making out with?"

"Will you keep your voice down?"

"Or what? Eh? Or what?"

"Look." Sean stroked his hands over her shoulders to calm her. "I've had a terrible day, Teagan. This morning I found the cat – 'my' cat – hanging dead in the yard, and now I feel awful about putting it out last night. If I hadn't, it might still be alive. I've had to put up with Goose's insanity all afternoon. And to top it off, I've got all this crap with Sauvage not paying his rent. I need time alone right now."

For a moment, it looked as though Teagan might argue, but then she said, "Sauvage is a bastard. None of this is your fault."

Sean stared down at his feet.

"So are you going to spend the evening on your computer?"

"No. I thought I'd go out for a long run."

"In the rain?"

"The walls are kind of closing in on me this evening. I need to wear myself out, and I don't mind getting wet. I didn't sleep well last night."

Teagan put her hand to his face. "If you promise to stay offline, I promise to leave you alone tonight. You spend too much time in front of that screen. It's bad for your eyes. No wonder you can't sleep. Your mind must be buzzing. You'll give yourself a brain tumour if you're not careful. I've heard that can happen. Deal?"

"Deal. I'll have a run, then go to bed. I wouldn't want to get a brain tumour, would I?"

She hesitated. “Are you sure those are the only things bothering you?”

“I’m sure.”

“What the heck?” Teagan pounded on her brother’s door.

“It’s unlocked.”

Teagan grabbed the handle and jerked the door wide. Fists on hips, she glared at Clive.

“It’s not me. Sauvage is getting it in one last time before he scuttles off to work.”

“What is wrong with that man? Listen to the ruckus. I thought you were having a seizure, taking out all the furniture as you writhed about on the ground.”

“That’s a pretty picture. Thanks for that. But honestly, if I were dying, I don’t think I’d scream out, ‘Grab my ball-sack and pinch it hard, baby,’” he said, deadpan. “You have to give the man his due, though; he’s got his bedstead knocking a constant beat up against my wall. Too bad he didn’t consider a career in the music industry instead of air conditioners. He has impeccable rhythm.”

Teagan stormed over and banged her fist against the wall. “Hey can you get your rocks off already? A person can’t think with that noise going on.”

As if her words were the needed catalyst, there was a crescendo of moans. The last strangled note held for an uncomfortably long time, then silence.

Teagan rolled her eyes, and turned her attention to her brother.

“We need to talk,” he said in a way that Teagan knew it would be Clive doing the talking, she the listening, and it was going to be unpleasant.

She sat down on the corner of his bed, pushing the nest of crumpled blankets to the side. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I know what you did to the cat.”

Surprise flickered momentarily across her face. But he had spoken in such a matter-of-fact way that Teagan didn’t bother to defend herself.

“And that’s after I warned you about the spray painted message on the wall. What did you think you were doing?”

Teagan glared at her brother.

“You didn’t think Sean would find it curious that he was spouting Shakespeare on Twitter, and the very next morning, his words are thrown back in his face?”

Teagan made no response, so Clive pushed on.

“And what about yesterday? Sean expresses displeasure over your damned cat ploy, and then the cat ends up dead. That wouldn’t raise your antennae that something is seriously off?”

Teagan’s lip curled, signalling her disdain.

“I thought we were through all that crap once you were out of school and away from that crowd. Fuck it, Teagan! You can’t do this anymore.” Clive reached up and massaged his shoulders. Pain hardened his face.

“You need a bloody physical therapist,” Teagan said without sympathy.

“I’d love one – but the government thinks I should wait and see if I don’t miraculously heal all on my own. Now listen to me. I’m serious here. Sean is not an idiot. He’ll put two and two together if you’re not careful. The idea of you marrying him and being financially secure, once his dad dies, is a good one. I’m all for it. I wouldn’t mind a little security and maybe a little luxury to trickle my way from the match. And I’m willing to help you. Hell, I already got the codes for you. But you have to be smarter than this. You can’t let your knee-jerk, adolescent, psycho-schemes mess things up. Do you understand?”

Teagan stood. “Are you done?”

Clive’s face screwed up as he dropped a shoulder and froze. “Fucking hell that hurts,” he grunted.

Teagan sighed. “Where are your muscle relaxers?”

“I’ve had them all. I’m out, and the doctor won’t write a new prescription until the end of the month.”

“Sean has something he uses for an old sports injury. I’ll go upstairs and get them for you.”

“Sean’s at the coffee shop already.”

Teagan pulled her keys from her pocket. “I don’t need Sean at home. I made a copy of his master. Remember?”



Teagan held the bottle in her hand. ZYPREXA one 10 mg pill daily. Daily? What kind of sports injury would require a daily dose of pain medication. How would pain medication last for twenty-four hours? She shut the medicine cabinet, tucked the bottle in her pocket, and stuck her head out of Sean's door. Casting a look left then right, she eased into the corridor and double checked that she had her keys and the door had locked behind her.

Back in her room, she opened her laptop and typed 'Zyprexa' into the Google search field. Up popped a list of articles. She clicked on 'uses'. Dementia in elderly patients – no, that couldn't be right. Agitation and hallucinations in schizophrenics. Nope. Bipolar disorder. Double nope. Sean was nothing if not even keel.

She read the label again and compared it to the spelling on the search engine. Zyprexa was for crazy people. Was Sean crazy? Maybe he got hit on the head when he was doing his sport. Teagan realized that Sean had never told her what sport he had been playing or what had happened to him.

"He looks healthy," Teagan was pacing her room muttering to herself. "He acts healthy, too. I've never seen him do anything odd. His conversations always make sense. It's not like he sits around wearing an aluminium hat. No nothing odd. . . ." Teagan's voice wavered off. "Except there are no knives in his apartment. Nothing sharp at all." Teagan stalled in front of her window and watched two little kids outside trying to light a cigarette.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think that's connected. It's bizarre. But Sean has access to all kinds of sharp tools for his maintenance work. If he was afraid a voice in his head was encouraging him to slash something, you'd think his dad would just let him have the apartment for free and not make him work for it with a fucking saw blade available."

Did she want to marry someone who might follow the voices in his head, cut her up into manageable pieces, and roast her in the oven? "He seems fine for now." She soothed herself. She'd just have to get him to marry her and stay married to her until she

made her first million. Then she could quietly divorce him, and he could be as big a nutcase as he wanted to be. But not until after their divorce.

And she would *not* be mentioning any of this to Clive. She'd simply tell him she couldn't find any medication. Teagan crept back upstairs and replaced the pills where she had found them. She would have to keep a close eye on Sean and see if she could spot his problem.

She stopped by her apartment again, grabbed her bags of rubbish, and walked them to the outdoor bin. As she made her way back inside, she found her path blocked by Sauvage.

"Oh, fuck. It's you."

The Frenchman glared down at her, "You think you were clever this morning, banging on my wall that way?"

Teagan saw Sean walking towards them across the lobby. "I don't have to deal with you for too much longer. You're about to get the boot."

"Says who?" Sauvage pitched his voice to intimidate.

"Says me." Sean rounded Sauvage and stood next to Teagan. "I filed the paper work with my lawyer. Now all we need is the official stamp, and I can chuck your shit out the window."

Teagan wrapped her hand through Sean's arm and huddled close, as if he were there to protect her.

"You think it will be that easy?" Sauvage's smile was unpleasant.

Teagan could feel Sean's muscles bunching under her hand. She was afraid Sean might pummel Sauvage to a pulp. Then he'd be in prison, and she couldn't very well seduce him into marrying her when he was locked up, now could she? "Ignore him, Sean. Best rid. He has no money now, and he'll have no money later. Anything he has he spends on booze and whores."

"It takes a whore to know one, little Miss BDSM." Sauvage pointed an accusatory finger. "I recognized your shopping bag the other day. I know what they sell in those places." He smiled nastily, turned on his heel and pushed out through the front door of the lobby.

Teagan pulled Sean away, and then made to follow him up to his apartment.

Sean stopped on the second tread. “Teagan, look, I ran back to pick up some paperwork I forgot. I’m heading straight back out.”

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Sean shot her a quizzical glance. “I’m fine. Why?”

Teagan shook her head. “Just checking.” She made her way back to her apartment where she lay down on her bed. Staring at the ceiling, Teagan let her anger at Sauvage boil. Someone needed to teach him a lesson. Make him pay for all the grief he caused. Maybe even get him to leave the apartment on his own. And she was just the girl to do it. She needed to protect Sean’s and her future. All Teagan needed was the perfect plan. One that Clive would never guess was her doing.

Teagan picked up her pen and notebook and started a new page. She wrote *Grinding Sausage* at the top of the paper then underlined it.

When Teagan looked up from her page, it was almost time for lunch. She had hoped letting her inner muse loose on the paper would help her come up with the perfect strategy. All she had was slashing – slashing tyres. She’d done that before so Clive would know and give her hell. Slashing furniture. She could go in with Sean’s key and vandalise his place. But then, Sauvage kept his apartment such a wreck that unless she destroyed the furniture and spray-painted the walls, the slob wouldn’t even notice. *Or he’d call the police*, she mused. She and Sean would be the ones Sauvage would point the finger at. Sean would have an alibi, being at work and all, and she’d have Clive to back her up. She rolled her eyes.

Teagan’s mind was working on overdrive as she made her way to the kitchen. She pulled out a frying pan to make hamburgers. After sticking fries in the oven to bake, Teagan poured oil into the pan and switched on the hob.

She looked down at the label and a wicked grin stole over her face. Teagan turned the heat off again and sneaked towards Clive’s room. Trying not to let the door squeak, she poked her head around and saw her brother flopped across his bed, head back, fast asleep. She closed the door behind her.

Teagan pulled on a pair of dishwashing gloves and picked up the oil bottle. Moving carefully, she slipped down the hall and put her ear to Sauvage’s door. She tapped

lightly. Teagan had heard his clunker of a car drive off about a half-hour before, but she didn't want to take any chances.

With Sean's key, she let herself in. She moved purposefully to the kitchen and searched the shelves for Sauvage's cooking oil. His bottle was three-quarters full. She compared the colours of the two oils and decided that while hers was slightly darker, it wasn't enough that anyone would notice. She placed Sauvage's canola oil on the counter and squatted down to see the level of the oil in the bottle, then she poured most of it down the sink drain. Very slowly, Teagan refilled his bottle with her oil. She wiped down the bottle with paper towels to absorb any spills, replaced the cap, and set it back in its place. She took a moment to scan the scene. Everything looked precisely the way she'd found it. She scuttled to the door, checked that it locked behind her, and ran the few steps to her apartment. Once inside, she threw back her head and laughed.

A little later, she called Clive to eat.

"The apartment looks nice," he said.

"Hm. Thanks." She shoved some fries in her mouth.

"What are you doing for the rest of the day? I have my friends coming over, and I was hoping you'd pick us up some beers."

"Sure," Teagan said with a smile. "I have some groceries I need to get anyway. We're out of baked beans and peanut oil."

The clock on the wall ticked loudly. Avery balanced her chin on her fist and stared out of her office window at nothing in particular. Every once in a while, a small red leaf from the dogwood tree released its last grasp and took flight on the breeze, descending daintily to the ground. A swan song – the idea drifted through Avery’s thoughts. She roused from her reverie and glanced at the clock. Five more minutes. She sighed, picked up her pen, and began tapping out a matching staccato beat. She had no idea what she was going to say. What could she say that hadn’t already been said?

Despite the chilly weather, Avery was overwarm. She shrugged off her suit jacket and draped it across the back of her chair. Wisps of hair tickled her cheeks in a distracting way, so she coiled their length into a makeshift bun and stuck a pencil through the knot to hold it in place. She reached into her purse for her compact – not that the man would notice what she looked like, but Avery knew she’d catch her image in the Skype window and that always made her fidgety. She inspected her face and what the mirror reflected was decidedly sour.

Not good.

With another glance at the clock, Avery stood and did some arm swings, and neck rotations like a boxer getting ready to step into the ring. That was how she felt – like she was about to get the shit beaten out of her. The Skype music made her jump. She sat down hurriedly, scooted her chair in, and pressed the accept button.

Travis’s face filled her screen. “Hey, can you see me? You’re not showing up. Wait. Wait. There you are. Hello, Avery.”

“Hi. Is your lighting bad there?”

“Why? You can’t see me?”

“You look deathly ill, Travis. Could you put on another light?”

Travis rose from his wooden chair and Avery saw his body. His clothes hung loose and baggy. And not particularly clean. He had lost a lot of weight since their last Skype discussion.

“How’s that?” he asked, taking his seat again.

“Travis are you all right?”

“Yeah, why? Don’t I look it?” He caressed the beginnings of a beard. “Is this what has you concerned? I’m growing it for anonymity’s sake.”

“Someone’s recognized you then?”

“Some woman in a pub. Nothing to get excited about. I denied it was me.”

“That sounds very St. Peter-esque of you.”

Travis tilted his head and offered up a smile that had a whisper of authenticity to it. “Funnily enough, that was my very thought in the moment. Maybe I’m rubbing off on you, Avery.” He paused for her response and when she failed to say anything at all, he added, “Or maybe I’m just rubbing you the wrong way. Right, let’s get to it. I’ve been making progress on the whole Jesus’-son-as-the-anti-Christ theme. Judas is about to spill the beans to Jesus, so he’s headed to London.”

“It has a very Arthurian tone to it. Mordred kills Arthur in the last battle.” Avery said, pinching her nose. Silence followed as she gazed at the young man in front of her. Ten years her junior, but light years ahead in the infamy and fortune category. That she could have any sway over him at all was a ridiculous proposition. “Travis, I’m just going to say it straight out. You look like hell.”

“Thank you, and you on the other hand look deliciously like a naughty secretary. I like you in glasses with your hair done up that way.” He smirked.

Well, I guess I deserve some kind of cut for my remark. Avery reached her fingers up under her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She was exhausted and really, truly, deeply did not want to be having this conversation. She kicked off her high-heels under her desk. “If it’s okay with you, I don’t want to talk about this book. I’m worried about you. One human being to another. I’m very serious, you don’t look well, Travis. Have you been ill?”

“That sounded damned sincere.”

“It is sincere. You’re thin. You’re grey. You’re dirty. This book is not worth driving yourself into a crisis. I want you to talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Honestly? I’ve been drinking a bit too much. I’ve been sleeping a bit too little. And I’ve found a new fondness for nose candy.”

“Travis.”

“Other than that, I don’t particularly like British food, or the weather, and the state of their teeth. . . it’s very distracting. I can’t even have a decent conversation.”

“You’re feeling isolated, and you’re experiencing a bit of culture shock returning home after all these years?”

“That would be the icing on the cake of my issues, I would say.”

“Are you doing anything to keep yourself well? Do you get out for some fresh air and exercise?”

“Fresh air in London is a little hard to come by. But I am exercising. I find it lovely to take a walk at night. I’ve been hanging out near the Angel Tube Station.”

“The Angel Station? Is that significant somehow? Something to do with your plot line?”

“In a way, yes. Have you heard there has been a spate of murders here?”

“The way you say that makes me think this isn’t your everyday, run of the mill, urban murders between drug gangs.”

“You’re right. These are special murders.” A slow smile crept across Travis’s face. Even in the dark, Avery could see his pupils dilate. A ribbon of apprehension threaded through her consciousness, and she was suddenly very glad they were an ocean apart.

“It seems there’s a serial killer on the loose. He – and I’m saying he but of course no one knows for sure – is striking women in the Angel Tube environs after dark.”

Avery cleared her throat. “Only women?”

“Only women, so I feel safe enough, wandering around. The deaths are causing a certain wariness in the residents in the area.”

“Imagine that.” Avery tried but failed to conceal her sarcasm.

“It’s quite good you know – in terms of the atmosphere of my book to see how everyone reacts when they know they lead decent lives, but at any moment the Angel of Death might swoop in and suck their souls from their bodies.”

Avery’s hand wrapped around her throat, and she ducked her chin.

“The Angel of Death,” Travis continued, “is the name the papers have given him. It has a certain poetry to it, don’t you think?”

Avery stared at Travis.

“I’ll send you some clippings, if you like. I have a collection of them. Quite interesting, I think. They’d be better with some facts included, but the police are keeping everything under wraps – afraid if they expose the *modus operandi*, they’ll set off a copycat, or make the Angel change his tactics and up the ante with his killing method.”

“That’s horrible, Travis. I . . . I . . . I hope you’ll be safe.” Avery whispered.

Travis cocked his head to the side. “Did I scare you?”

Avery took a moment before she responded. She focused her gaze over the top of her screen. Once she had formulated a reply, she leaned closer to the camera.

“I think I’m feeling afraid for you. I don’t like what I’m seeing.”

“Ha! You sound like my mother.”

Avery pressed her lips together. She *felt* like his mother. She thought he absolutely needed a spanking and some hot chicken soup.

“Right, so let’s get on with the book,” Travis said.

“Let’s talk about the title instead.”

“Still not keen on *Evil Blood*?”

Avery sucked in as much air as her lungs could hold, making her nostrils distend, and then let her exhale out in a whoosh. Travis raised an eyebrow.

“I was thinking, *Wilde Abyss*.” Avery sat motionless, watching Travis’s face for a reaction.

His eyes shifted up and his lips moved as he mouthed the words to himself. “That’s from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.”

“Right.” Avery nodded. She reached over and picked up her sticky note. “The whole quote goes – ‘Into this wilde Abyss the warie fiend/ Stood on the brink of Hell and look’d a while,/ Pondering his Voyage; for no narrow frith/ He had to cross.’”

Travis scratched his beard then scraped his teeth over his top lip. “And here the ‘warie fiend’ is Moloch?”

“That was my thought.” Avery laid the sticky note back on her desk.

“*Wilde Abyss*,” he repeated. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

It was a serious question, and Avery thought it required a serious answer. She sat with it for a moment. Did she like Travis? “To be honest, I don’t know you well enough to say whether I like you or not. Chatting on Skype and sending emails back and forth is

hardly the way to get to know someone. Is it? And all we've ever talked about are your books, and those I decidedly do not like." Avery held up a 'stop' hand and leaned in to the camera. "I don't like the themes. I find the subject matter to be abhorrent. But your writing," she locked her gaze with Travis', "your writing is good. In places it is poetic and moving. I've found myself wondering why you chose this particular plot line to write."

Travis shrugged. "Poetry is not a big seller now, if it ever was. And breaking into the literary market – well, you know the odds. You're in the business. I believe I read it was more likely to get hit by lightning or to win a state lottery jackpot than to have a bestseller."

Avery patted her hair, then pulled the pencil from the bun, shook her head and replaced the knot. Travis had leaned closer to the screen and watched her intently. "Do that again," he demanded.

Avery's brows drew together. "What?"

"Do that whole hair-move again. You're holding it in place with a pencil?"

"Yes. . . but. . ."

"It's perfect for a scene I'm writing. Do it again," he insisted.

Very self-consciously, knowing he was scrutinizing her every move, Avery repeated the action. She gave a self-conscious laugh. "I feel like I just made a Breck commercial."

Travis didn't answer. He was bent over, scribbling furiously into a notebook. Avery waited patiently as he read back his words to himself and stooped again.

"Okay, good," he said. "*Wilde Abyss*. I don't hate it. Why not call it *Superior Fiend*, for that matter? That's also from *Paradise Lost*. 'He scarce had ceased when the superior Fiend/ Was moving toward the shore'. That could easily refer to Moloch."

"Honestly? *Superior Fiend* sounds like a grade B horror flick or an Indie film on YouTube made by some bored high-schoolers."

"Not everyone's mind will jump to Milton?"

"I'm afraid not. Do you have a lot of poetry at the tip of your fingers like that?"

"Oh, yes. My mother thought I had a gift with words at an early age. Ever since I was five years old, I had to memorize a poem a week. And then, she'd put the name on

an index card. On Sundays she would have me recite the poem I had just learned plus one selected at random.”

“That’s – wow – that seems like a lot for a five-year-old.”

Travis shrugged. “I didn’t think it was such a big deal. Once I’ve seen words written down they go right in, sort of like a cloth cleaning up a spill.”

“Do you remember your very first poem?”

“Yes, sure, it was Ogden Nash. ‘The cow is of bovine ilk.’ And the next week I moved up to *The Purple Cow* by Gelett Burgess.”

“I never saw a purple cow/ I never hope to see one’. . . I learned that in second grade – Mrs. Pate. So your mom had you do fifty odd poems a year and by the time you had been doing this for a decade you could easily pull five hundred poems forward as you wished?”

“Pretty much. Though when I was in high school, she had me memorizing longer poems so I was no longer held to the one a week.”

“Long like what?”

“Milton, Homer, Beowulf, Shakespeare.”

“Holy moly, I’m impressed.” Avery sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She took a moment to study Travis. He didn’t seem to mind the silence that formed between them. “You know Travis, I did a little digging into your background, and I found your Cayote Buttes poetry series under your real name.”

Travis nodded, but looked wary.

“They were stunning works.” She cleared her throat, giving herself a second to decide if this were a good path to follow. *What the heck*. She plunged on. “I felt your poems viscerally – right down to my toes. Your words shifted my body chemistry. My emotions were some kind of art medium you could manipulate into something I hadn’t recognized in myself before. I had to take a walk after I read them to let the buzz move out of my body – my house seemed too small to contain me as I shifted.” Avery took deep breath and kept on despite her discomfiture. “Those poems for me went beyond anything I had ever experienced before. It was like a conversion – like a Caravaggio painting.”

Travis had his face pushed up to the camera, listening intently. “*The Road to Damascus?*”

“Yes, that one. And I got angry. Really angry at you.” Avery’s fingers spread wide as she gesticulated. “You have the talent to touch someone’s most tender protected inner self. My tender self.” She laid her hand on her chest. “And then you go and write this shit about Jesus Christ. It’s actually physically painful for me to work with you on this project. Especially now that I know what you are truly capable of. It’s like Michelangelo doing a paint by numbers for the tourists. Talk about a sin. In all of this mess, the book is not the affront. The insult is that you have a talent that I’ve never experienced before, and you basically shit all over it.”

“Avery, your language!”

Avery clamped a hand over her mouth, appalled she had taken the conversation this far.

Travis laughed heartily. “I’m kidding. Just kidding.” He sobered. “That was very – well – overwhelming to hear. What do you propose I do?”

“Write this damned book. Put it to bed. Take your money and spend some time travelling. Go to a beautiful island and let your Travis Bishop life go. You’ll have plenty of money to last you. Use it to support yourself as you write the real stuff.”

“That would be the technical literary term, ‘real stuff’?”

“You get what I mean,” Avery said.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” He rubbed his palms together. “What do you need to accomplish today on this Skype call?” His tone turned crisp and businesslike.

Avery sighed and shook her head. “Nothing. I just wanted to touch base.”

“Well, I think you did that in spades.”

“That I think I did. Goodbye then. We’ll talk again next week. Think about the title and keep writing.”

“I will. Bye, Avery.”

Her screen beeped and Travis disappeared.

With her head in her hands, Avery tried to soothe her spiked emotions. *What have I done?*

“I’ve been thinking about what Dave said a few days ago. You know, about the Japanese Kama Sutra?” Goose said.

“Oh, yes?” Sean replied wearily. *Why are there never customers around when you need them?*

The trainee thrust a sheet of paper at him. “Japanese cities.”

“Is this supposed to mean something to me?”

“You’ve heard of Tokyo and Kyoto, right?”

With reluctance, Sean took the paper.

TOKYO

$T + O + K + Y + O$

Sequence of the letters in the alphabet

$$20 + 16 + 11 + 25 + 16 = 88$$

If you sum the numbers in the sequence you get

$$2 + 7 + 2 + 7 + 7 = 25$$

KYOTO

$K + Y + O + T + O$

Sequence of letters in the alphabet

$$11 + 25 + 16 + 20 + 16 = 88$$

If you sum the numbers in the sequence you get

$$2 + 7 + 7 + 2 + 7 = 25$$

“And?” said Sean.

Goose twitched impatiently. “Both cities have five letters. Five is a prime number. If you add the sequence of letters for both cities, they both come to eighty-eight. Then if you sum the numbers, and add them together, they both come to twenty-five. And what

is more, if you look at the bottom line for each city, they both contain three sevens and two twos. Seven and two are also prime numbers.”

“I don’t see the magic number twenty-three anywhere.”

“Both come to twenty-five. *Both of them*. And there are *two* cities. Deduct two from twenty-five and you get –”

“Goose, stop. Listen to me. There *is* no Japanese Kama Sutra. Dave was having a joke with you.”

Goose blinked. “What? But the link to the Angel of Death –”

“I’m sorry to disillusion you, but not everything in life is related to the number twenty-three.” Sean put out his hands. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

The trainee huffed. “Ten, of course.”

“Not twenty-three? Are you sure?”

“Ten. But, if you count the spaces between your fingers, there are eight spaces. You also have two hands –”

“Stop! I don’t want to hear it. Tell, me, if I punched you twenty-three times, would you shut up?”

Janice leaned in. “You only need to punch him once. Then he’d punch himself twenty-two times to complete the circuit.”

Sean sighed. “Goose, go and unpack the deliveries.”

Janice giggled as Goose trudged off to the storeroom. “Want me to give him a clicky pen so he’s got some company in there?”

“Not unless you want me to punch you as well.”



Sean still didn’t have a date for his CAT scan, but he tried not to let it worry him. He had enough on his plate. Sometimes, he told himself, having a brain tumour might not be so bad – at least it would mean the voices in his head were the result of an organic condition, and not reasserting schizophrenia. But he knew this was some philosophical defence mechanism kicking in, preparing him for a worst-case scenario. He wanted to

talk to someone about it. The best person would be the counsellor Dr. Hunt was supposedly getting organised. But Sean hadn't heard anything about *that* either.

The only other serious candidates for a comforting shoulder were Avery and his father. To speak to Avery would be to endanger their relationship – and his interaction with her was one of the few bright spots in his life at present. He had already informed her of his father's heart attack, and that was enough gloom to be going on with. Once he started telling her about his medical issue, Sean was sure his whole history would come pouring out. To see her blue eyes flood with horror was not something he was prepared to risk. Not yet.

And as for his father. . . Even leaving aside the old man's heart issue, there would be little point in burdening him with the problem; if indeed 'burdening' was the right word. Empathy was not Kenny Senior's strong suit. Sean would await the result of the brain scan. If the news was good, no discussion would be necessary. If it was bad well, he would cross that bridge if he came to it. Meantime, he found excuses to call his father on various matters relating to the apartment building. The voice at the other end of the phone might be terse and gruff, but at least he knew his parent was still alive.

Sean did, however, have some reasons to be cheerful.

Since the night of the cat's death, he had suffered no more blackouts. While the voice still whispered to him occasionally, it was not too intrusive, and it never spoke for long. He dared to hope his body was adjusting to the new medication. Perhaps normalcy was returning.

Moreover, Teagan was giving him space at last. He had seen her only twice in the last week, and one of those times was at the coffee shop. For some reason, she was keeping a low profile. Knowing Clive was away this weekend, Sean had steeled himself for forty-eight hours of non-stop demands for attention, but that had not materialised.

It was too much to hope for, however, that Teagan had grasped he wanted to cool things down between them. For anyone else, his reluctance to make himself available and general demeanour would have been enough to signal the dalliance was over. But she was too thick-headed, too absorbed with herself and her needs, to think about why he no longer made time for her. Nevertheless, Sean welcomed the break.

That evening, and in spite of the annoying episode with Goose, Sean felt upbeat. He was looking forward to talking to Avery on Skype. To make the time pass quicker, he tidied his canvases in the spare room, deciding which ones to jettison. As he sorted the paintings and sketches, his eye fell on his old guitar. He couldn't remember the last time he'd picked it up. It was horribly out of tune, and needed restringing, but he took it with him into the lounge and laid it against the back of the sofa. As he did so, he caught a faint whiff of cat, and his light mood disappeared.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. A Teagan knock.

Teagan looked worried.

“What is it?”

“Sean, there's a funny smell coming from Sauvage's room. Clive's away and, well, I don't know. I figured I'd better tell you.”

They made their way downstairs. Sean had thought he had detected an unpleasant odour when he arrived home, but it had slipped his mind. “When did you last see him, or hear any noises from next door?”

“Days ago,” Teagan replied. Her face was pallid and her eyes looked very black.

“Come to think of it, I haven't seen him since the morning I found the cat.”

“Do you think he's away travelling, and he's left some food out?” she asked.

As they approached Sauvage's flat, there was no ignoring the stink emanating from within. Sean rapped on the door. There was no reply. He felt his heart pulsing in his chest as he reached into his pocket for the master key. He had to push hard to open the door: something heavy was obstructing it.

The stench of rotting meat assailed them as Sean stepped into the flat.

Sauvage lay on the floor. The Frenchman was dead, and had been for some time. Flies buzzed around the body, and Sean could see maggots squirming on the corpse's eye sockets. Two of the dining chairs lay upended, and food – scattered across the table – looked like it was moving. Sean put a hand to his mouth to forestall the gagging reflex. “Stay back, Teagan.” He eased her out into the hallway and closed the door behind them. “I need to call 999,” he said. “Now.”

“Is he dead?”

He's very dead, said the voice. *But he had it coming. Right, Sean?*

The police and paramedics arrived within minutes.

Sean gave a brief statement. Yes, I found the apartment locked. As far as I know, only Mr. Sauvage, and I have a key. No, he hasn't been around for days. Yes, he lives alone. No, I don't have details of his next of kin.

"I expect we'll find a contact number somewhere," said the young police officer cheerily. "You said Mr. Sauvage was a salesman? He should have some business cards. We can talk to his employer. That flat's going to need fumigating."

"It's not a problem."

"Meantime, you might want to get some air fresheners in the lobby. It pongs a bit."

"Yes."

"The ambulance guys think he died of anaphylactic shock," the young policeman's partner confided to Sean, as they took the body out. "Looks like the seafood did for him. You wouldn't think prawns were dangerous, would you? Anyway, no foul play, so everyone can relax. Of course, there'll have to be an autopsy."

"*Seafood?*"

"Yes. An allergy. Blew him up like a balloon, and he choked on his own tongue. Apparently, that can happen in seconds in an extreme case. Nasty way to go."

After the police left, Sean sent Avery a brief email, outlining events. He had missed the appointed time for their Skype call, and there was no way he wanted to talk to anyone now, not even her. Sean wished for the day to be over. He wanted to go to bed. And to think that only a couple of hours before, he had felt happy.

Did you kill him, Sean? whispered the voice.

"No, I did not," he said aloud. "This time I *know* it was nothing to do with me."

He splashed cold water on his face. Before he turned in, he had better check on Teagan. She might be in shock. Teagan was anything but in shock. She seemed energised by the experience.

“Clive got home about fifteen minutes ago.” She pointed at her brother. “You should have seen the look on his face. When he saw the police car, he thought they’d come to arrest him for illegal possession of a firearm. His geeky friends were shitting themselves outside.”

“Shut up, Teagan,” Clive barked.

“A firearm?” Sean asked, not understanding.

“Just leave it, Teagan, will you?” Clive shouted, wheeling himself into his room. “A man is dead, for fuck’s sake,” he called over his shoulder.

Teagan shrugged. “I won’t be shedding any tears for that asshole.” She turned to Sean. “He had it coming, didn’t he, Sean?”

Sean looked at her, his face a mask of incredulity.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” She reached out for him, but he pulled away.

Disgust swirled inside him. “We’re finished, Teagan.”

“What?”

“We’re finished. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Sean, you’re upset about the police being here and –”

“No. I’m talking about *us*. I can’t do *us* anymore.”

She took a step back and looked at him in disbelief .

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s over. I’m sorry.”

He walked out across the lobby, leaving a thunderstruck Teagan standing in the doorway.

The Skype call connected immediately.

“Hi, there.” Avery lowered her eyelashes as a flush warmed her cheeks. Suddenly shy, she fidgeted, her hands in her lap.

“Hello.” Sean sounded subdued.

Avery raised her gaze to take in his image. A long silence followed. “You look tired. How are you?” Concern infused her voice.

Sean didn’t answer; his gaze drifted, settling on something across the room.

“I’ve been pretty worried about you since I got your email,” she admitted. “If you’re not up to a conversation right now, I understand.”

He focused on her eyes again.

Avery leaned forward. “Though, I hope this is okay. I’d like to be here for you.”

“This is good, thank you.” He jostled his chair around and positioned his elbows on the desk.

“I don’t want to pry, but would you like to talk about what happened? How is your father?”

“No news is good news on the dad front. If he calls *me*, I’ll know things are getting bad. Stoic he is.”

Avery pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Like father like son?”

“Oh no, this apple fell far from the tree. I am nothing like my father. And he would enthusiastically concur.”

“So you’re more like your mom? I don’t think you’ve ever mentioned her.”

“Well, nothing to reveal there. I haven’t seen her in over a decade. She took off with a work colleague on a business trip, which was actually her moving out and moving on – to Spain to be exact.”

“Wow. That must have been a shock.”

“For my dad, perhaps. I was away at Cambridge, and I hadn’t grown out of my teenage narcissistic stage then. As long as it didn’t affect me directly, it didn’t matter.”

He shrugged. “Besides, she wasn’t your normal cake-baking, kiss-you-goodnight kind of mum. She was more of the drama-making, vodka-swilling kind.”

It seemed to Avery that Sean’s tight-lipped half-smile punctuated the end of his sharing about his parents.

“What about you?” Sean asked. “I know your dad passed away. Do you see your mom often?”

“I think that might be a good story for another day,” Avery replied. “Are things calming down at your apartment building?”

“Yes, well, the police were in and out, and I’ve had to hire a special cleaning unit to put things right. I’ve never dealt with this sort of thing before.”

“Was his death part of a crime?”

“The fellow had an allergic reaction. They think it was to shellfish as he died of anaphylaxis. He was having his favourite – shrimp and pasta.”

“His favourite?”

“Yeah. I thought it was weird too. But I Googled it. It said sixty percent of people develop an allergy as an adult even if that person has eaten shellfish all their life. And that once you have it, you’re stuck with it.”

“But anaphylaxis is so extreme – you’d think he’d have some type of clue before this.”

He leaned back in his chair as if distancing himself from his words. “You’d think, and he probably did and ignored the warning signs. That’s what the paramedic thought anyway.”

“I’m so sorry this is happening. Were you very close?” Avery asked gently.

Sean shook his head. “No. Actually, he’s one of the few people in my life I actively disliked. I’d been to see the lawyer about evicting him and was counting down the days until I could boot him out the door. I wanted him gone, you know? But not *gone*. I never wished him ill – well, not in reality. When I was dealing with his messes, I did occasionally wish for divine retribution.”

“Those sentiments are understandable. I’ve had days like that myself. It’s a very human reaction, I think.”

“Was today one of those days?”

Canting her head, Avery asked. “How did you know?”

Sean rubbed his index finger at the corner of his mouth. “You have a little chocolate icing, just there.”

Avery scrubbed at the indicated spot with her fingers then pushed her face closer to the camera.

“Yeah, you’ve got it. So what happened?”

“My mother.” Avery mouth twitched. “When my dad was dying, he asked me to move home and look after my mom, who is not well. And she’s having a bad day today.”

“Does your sister Fanny help out?”

“Fanny. . .” Avery began but she saw Sean focus over her shoulder. Turning her head to see what had caught his attention, she saw her mom standing behind her. She had dressed in mismatched church clothes with a shower cap arranged at a jaunty angle on her head.

“Avery, I can’t find your sister. It’s time to go. Your father is waiting in the car. Here, let me do your hair.”

“Mom.” She turned back to Sean. “Let me Skype you back in a few minutes.”

“It’s fine,” Sean said as Ginny’s brush landed on Avery’s crown.

Avery pushed her shoulders up, turtling her head as best she could. “Mom, that hurts. Please stop.” Avery reached out to end the Skype call, but Ginny smacked her hand.

“Don’t fuss with the television. If you hadn’t been watching the cartoons instead of getting ready, we wouldn’t be late for services.”

As Ginny took a swipe through her hair, Avery reached again for the laptop. A second smack landed. Avery jerked her hand back, wincing.

“Avery, I’m going to go make myself a cup of tea. You do what you need to do, and I’ll be here when you’re ready.” Sean got up and disappeared from view.

“Mom.” Avery strained for patience. “It’s November, two thousand and fourteen. Fanny is a grown woman with two children and a husband. They live five miles away.”

Ginny pulled Avery’s hair into a high ponytail.

“I am not a little girl. I am thirty-five-years-old. Dad is not out in the car. Dad passed away two years ago.”

Ginny’s voice drowned out Avery’s recitation with a sonorous *Lumen Christi*. She produced a tasselled curtain tieback and used it to make a bow around the ponytail. Coming around to Avery’s side, Ginny clasped Avery’s chin in her fingers and rotated her head left then right. “Very pretty. Now go get in the car with Dad, and tell him I’ll be out right after I find Fanny.”

Avery stood up, took her mother’s hand, and pulled her upstairs to the master bedroom. Closing the door, she bolted it from the outside. It was her only option when her mother lost touch with reality. Avery looked at her watch. It would be hours before she could give her mom a shot.

She slugged her way to her bedroom where she removed the fabric and elastic and pulled a comb through her hair. After reapplying some gloss, she brushed blusher over her cheeks to mask her wan complexion. Avery was stalling going back downstairs. *Okay so now he knows, so what? He’s a pen pal, and he lives far, far away.*

On the way back to the dining room, Avery stopped in the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea from the now tepid pot. She slid onto the chair, watching Sean’s face focused on some task. When she placed the cup and saucer on the table, the rattle caught his attention.

“Everything okay?” he asked, swivelling to face the screen.

“Everything is normal.” Avery rubbed her fingers back and forth across her forehead. “Is that okay? I guess it has to be. What are you doing?”

“A bit of drawing. See?” Sean held up the picture of a caged bird.

Avery thought it was a metaphor for her but didn’t ask. “Lovely,” she said.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to say really. It is what it is.”

Sean nodded.

“I see a guitar behind you. Do you play?”

“I used to. It was a ploy, you know, to meet the girls. I didn’t play in a band or anything, but I’d go sit under a tree and strum.”

“And the chicks flocked around you like you were scattering bird feed?”

“Ha!” For the first time in this Skype call, the smile reached Sean’s eyes.

“Would you play something for me?”

Sean looked around at his guitar, then back at Avery. “What, now?”

“Yes, please.”

“Oh, no. I’d be too embarrassed. Another time maybe. It’s been a while, and I need to scratch some of the rust off with a bit of practice.”

“Well, maybe when I come to London then?” The words slipped out before Avery had put thought behind them.

“You’re headed to London?” Sean’s posture changed, his shoulders straightened back to their full width. He no longer looked caved and crumpled.

“I’m flying over on the twenty-third.”

“For how long? Is this work? Something to do with the Bishop bloke?”

“Yes, I need to make sure he keeps the accelerator pedal pushed down. We’re coming up on deadline. I’ll be there a minimum of ten days, so maybe you could show me around a bit. I’d like to see ‘real’ London, if that’s all right.”

“All right? It’s brilliant! You know, sometimes when I’m out for a run, I’ll see something and think – if Avery is ever in town, I’d like her to see this.”

“Do you?” Avery smiled, and they lapsed into their own thoughts. Some moments went by without a word between them.

“Tell me something. Travis Bishop emailed me a fat file of news clippings about the Angel of Death.”

“Yes, it looks like we have a serial killer on the loose in London.” Sean pinched his lower lip between his thumb and index finger.

“Should I be worried?”

A shadow moved across his eyes. “I don’t think it’s a problem. Where you’d be staying, you won’t be in danger. And you won’t be moving around the city on your own at night. So. . .”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to see where you work.” Avery shifted the conversation. “I’d like to meet Goose. I want to know what numerical gymnastics he can perform with my name.”

“Yup. We’ll try to time it right so Dagenham Dave is there to wind him up.”

“That’s the man’s given name? ‘Dagenham Dave’? What a mouthful.”

“No, no, it’s just Dave. ‘Dagenham Dave’ was a wide boy in an Ian Dury song.”

“Which explains absolutely nothing to me. I have no idea what a ‘wide boy’ could mean besides someone who enjoys too many pastries. “

“Ah, well to continue your education in matters British, a ‘wide boy’ is someone who is an insincere person, a con-man, a snake-oil salesman, someone obsessed with making ‘loads of money’. Okay, Eliza?”

“Thank you, Professor Higgins. Can I spit the marbles out of my mouth now?”

Teagan waited impatiently for the plump woman ahead of her to make up her mind what she wanted.

“I’ll have a low-fat latte to go.”

“A large one?” Janice asked, a professional smile glued in place.

“No, a small one. I’m watching my weight. But could you put some whipped cream on top?”

Janice called the order to Goose and handed the woman her receipt. She fiddled with her change purse before stepping aside.

“Hi, Janice.”

“Hi, Teagan. We haven’t seen you around for a while. Day off?”

“Yes. I’m going over to the West End to do some shopping, but I thought I’d stop by. Is Sean around?”

“He’s taken a day off too. Said something about looking around some art galleries to relax.” She leaned towards Teagan and lowered her voice. “He told us about the guy dying in your apartment building.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Horrible. Imagine suffocating like that. Feeling your tongue swell up, your throat closing, and knowing you were going to die.” Janice shivered. “And he was your next-door neighbour, I gather?”

Teagan nodded. “He was French.”

A tetchy voice from behind Teagan said, “Is there any chance of getting some service? Some of us don’t have a day off.”

“Sorry, sir. Do you want anything, Teagan?”

“Um. . . I tell you what, give me an Americano to drink here. Single shot.”

Behind the coffee machine, Goose’s head flicked round anxiously. “Not a green tea? Are you sure?” He pointed at the menu board. “Americano is number eight.”

“She wants an Americano, Goose.” Janice sounded stern. “Get her one, please.”

“Well. . . all right. If you’re sure,” the trainee replied with reluctance.

Teagan collected a newspaper from the rack and looked for a free table. There was only one left, tucked around the corner. A barista, whom Teagan had not seen before, was clearing away empty mugs and plates. She gave the table top a peremptory wipe before stepping aside to let Teagan sit down. Teagan unfolded the newspaper and the front-page headline leapt out at her.

ANGEL OF DEATH KILLING METHOD REVEALED

The man who had found the body of the Angel’s last victim had given an interview to the tabloid, revealing details that the police no doubt would have preferred kept quiet. The article went on to quote an ‘expert’ who set out why such a murder technique would be so effective.

From Mr. Jeffers’ description of the body, Dr. Russell has been able to reconstruct the murder, and hence the MO of the Angel of Death.

“A single slash with a sharp knife across the femoral artery [at the hip joint near the inner thigh] results in massive blood loss. The victim would bleed out very quickly, probably losing consciousness in a matter of seconds – a minute, at the outside. Furthermore, the victim would go into shock, and therefore may not even call out for help. Not that anyone could do anything to save them at that point,” Dr. Russell told our reporter. “Once the artery is cut, the bleeding is prolific and, to all intents and purposes, unstoppable. The deed would take seconds, and the assailant could then make his escape, confident the wound he inflicted was fatal.”

A diagram showed a black-clad figure standing behind a woman. His left arm held her tightly to him while the knife in his right hand pierced her right thigh.

“Here’s your Americano,” said Goose, setting down a tray. “I brought you an orange juice too. I thought you might like it. It’s number thirty-one on the menu.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Goose hovered. “I see you’re reading about the Angel.”

Teagan looked into the eager face towering above her. “Yes. Why does he do it? I can understand why you might kill someone you don’t like, but why would you kill someone you don’t even know?”

“It’s his nature.”

“You mean, like he *has* to do it?”

“Um. . .” Goose made a face, then sat down on the spare chair. “It’s not so much that he wants to do it. Not ‘wants’ like you might want a cup of coffee. And it’s not that something forces him to do it. It’s more like that’s what is *planned* for him.” He stopped.

“Go on.”

Goose stared at her.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. This is the point where the person I’m talking to usually tells me I’m crazy.”

Teagan sipped her coffee. “No, I’m fascinated. Tell me more.”

“*Really?*” He was like a dog that had expected to be kicked, but instead found itself being patted on the head.

Teagan smiled in encouragement.

Goose cracked his knuckles. “Well, most people think there is such a thing as free will, but there isn’t. We all have a destiny, something that is right for each of us alone. If it is meant to happen, it *will* happen. Our actions are already mapped out. What the Angel does might horrify some people, but it’s not *personal*, you see. That’s what people don’t understand. Everyone has to do what they have to do. It’s what the numbers tell us, if we can just decipher them.”

Teagan put down her coffee cup. “So what you’re saying, is that what I do isn’t right or wrong. It’s just right for me, and that’s all that matters. My destiny is written in the stars.”

Delight spread over Goose’s features. “Yes! You understand me!” He paused. “Except, it’s written in the numbers, not in the stars. Especially the prime numbers,” he added.

“Goose!” It was Janice. “We have a shop full of customers here. Get back on the machine.”

The trainee rose to his feet. “Don’t forget to drink your orange juice, Teagan, will you? Because. . .” His face twitched. “Well, it’s good for you, that’s all. Nothing to do with numbers. Not much, anyway.”

“I won’t, Goose. And thank you. This has been very helpful.”

He loped off.



The conversation with Goose had indeed been helpful. As Teagan tottered along Oxford Street in her high heels, Goose’s words resonated in her head. Sean’s trainee might be an oddball, but some of the things he said made sense to her. His ideas blended with other thoughts and lifted her spirits.

Sauvage’s death had affected her. It would have been overstating matters to pronounce that what she felt was guilt. Although she had not intended to kill the Frenchman – merely to give him an unpleasant surprise – she *had* killed him. But the initial shock, coupled with the fear of discovery, had given way to an altogether different emotion – an excitement, a thrill that she had the power to end a human life and escape unscathed. One might almost call it exultation. It had been so. . . easy. And it wasn’t as if Sauvage was any great loss to anyone, was it? It was his destiny to die. It was what the Universe planned for him. Teagan had simply been the instrument of fate. She was not to blame. Goose was spot on.

A sense of grievance still rankled within her, however. In recent days, she had given Sean space and time to himself. Instead of going upstairs to see him, she had gone off clubbing for a few nights with the girls from the salon and indulged herself with some retail therapy – as she was doing now.

Sean’s outburst supposedly ending their relationship was the result of stress, Teagan was certain. He had, after all, discovered a dead body only hours before, and the clearing

up of the subsequent mess would be down to him. He wasn't himself. He needed some period of reflection.

Yet the days had passed. She had seen Sean a couple of times in the lobby, and there had been a polite exchange of greetings, but nothing more. Perhaps he was embarrassed by his behaviour, or shy, or didn't know how to take back his words.

Meanwhile, he continued to prat around on the Internet with the American woman. Avery Badyear. It was delusion of the first order to think anything meaningful could come out of a long-distance relationship conducted through Twitter and emails. They hadn't even met, for God's sake. So why did Sean persist with it when there was a real, flesh-and-blood woman downstairs? One who wanted him?

Men were stupid.

Teagan stopped at the window of a department store. In the last few minutes, the sky had darkened. Rain was imminent. It was time to go inside and buy something. Something sexy.

Avery Bloody Goodyear. I wish it was your destiny to die.



The acquisition of a pair of red stilettos, two sets of black lace panties, some designer jeans, and an expensive mascara put Teagan in a more positive frame of mind. She had spent much more than intended, but would worry about that later. She considered calling Sean's cell phone to suggest they meet up, but decided instead to check his recent Internet exchanges to see how the land was lying. With her shopping bags flapping around her in the London drizzle, she hailed a taxi to take her home.

Clive was in his room, working on a website design for a client, a large packet of crisps open beside his laptop. He acknowledged his sister's arrival with a half-hearted wave but kept his eyes on the screen.

Contrary to her impatient nature, Teagan had refrained from reading Sean's Internet correspondence over the last few days. Still buzzing from the Sauvage incident, she had not wanted to see words that might wind her up still further, but she could restrain

herself no longer, and now was the perfect opportunity. Sean would be out for hours yet, so she could sign into his email account without concern that a pop-up would tell him he was already logged on elsewhere.

There was correspondence with his father who, it appeared, had had a heart attack. *That* was interesting. Small wonder Sean had not been himself, if he had been keeping that bottled up. But as she continued to mine Sean's account, she saw he had not been keeping this news to himself. He'd shared it with the American woman.

And that was not all he had shared with the blonde bimbo. He had sent her a copy of Teagan's *Menstruation* poem. The demeaning language he used to describe it made her blood boil. Did he not realise the poem was her way of exposing her deepest self to him?

Avery's reply, however, was worse.

Poor Sean. I can see now why you'd regret getting tangled up with that girl, even if it was on a casual basis. She sounds a little. . . 'intense'. (Okay, I'll admit, 'deranged' was the first word that came to mind) You must be relieved that relationship is over, although I guess it's going to be tricky for you given she is one of your tenants, and from time-to-time you are bound to bump into each other.

Teagan's hands clenched, and it took great effort not to smash her fist into the keyboard and hurl the laptop to the floor. A *casual* relationship? *Deranged*? Who the fucking hell did this woman think she was? She read on grimly.

You wanted to know the details about my trip to London. I know we discussed some of this on Skype but, well, I want to make sure we're both singing from the same hymn sheet.

I'll be landing at Heathrow around 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, November 23, on flight UA 176.

It was sweet of you to offer to meet me at the airport, but my boss will be with me, so it would be awkward.

I'll be staying at the TravelLite Hotel, in Notting Hill, which is not far from where Travis is staying. It looks acceptable. It meets PMT's budget, which seems to be the main criterion.

On Monday, I'll be with Travis, trying to help him breathe some life into his new vampire epic. That evening my boss and I have a meeting with some associates. Yawn.

I have nothing planned for the Tuesday evening, but since I don't know how things will go initially with our wayward author, we'd best plan to meet up on the Wednesday evening. Let me know when and where you'd like to meet. Let's NOT meet at my hotel. I don't want to take the chance my boss would see you and decide he wants to join us. That would definitely put a damper on things.

I'm looking forward to meeting you in person and visiting 'real' London. My flight back to the States isn't booked, but I'll be in town at least ten days. Everything depends on Travis. I'm sure he doesn't want me hounding him all day, so we should have plenty of time together. I hope. Thank you for taking time off work for me. That's very sweet of you.

I'll pick up a SIM card at Heathrow, as you suggested, and email you the new number.

Speak soon.

Avery xxx

Teagan pushed herself back from the keyboard in disgust. *So the bitch is coming to London in a few days' time, is she? And they've been talking on Skype. . .*

It was all clear to her now. The woman had been undermining her, belittling her, making sure Sean stopped seeing her. Avery wanted Sean for herself. Perhaps she was going to move to London permanently; or maybe, she wanted to string Sean along like some Internet sex toy.

Sean was too naïve to see it for what it was, too sucked into the whole social network quagmire. Teagan needed to save him. And she needed to re-establish their bond. How could she do that with Avery in the picture? Unless Avery could be taken out of the picture.

Clive yelled, "Any chance of a cup of tea, sis? I'm parched in here."

Teagan closed the lid of the laptop and composed herself. Her eyes had a faraway look as she made her way to the kitchen. A resolution formed in her mind, and her movements became more animated.

Carrying Clive's mug of tea, she bounced into her brother's room and set the mug down next him.

"Thanks," he muttered.

She sat on his bed. "Clive?" she cooed.

"Uh." His fingers moved across the keyboard.

"Show me your gun."

Clive stopped typing. "What?"

"Your gun."

"What do you want to see that for?"

"I'm showing an interest in my brother's hobbies."

He looked at her with suspicion. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing," she said with a sweet smile. "I want to see it. I've never seen a gun in real life."

"It's in my bedside drawer. You're all right. It's not loaded."

She lifted it out of the drawer. The metal object was heavy and held a certain menace. Teagan weighed it in her hand. "What sort is it?"

"A Russian Baikal, converted to fire 9mm bullets." Clive's voice resonated with enthusiasm. "Metalhead told me they get modified in Germany. They put a longer barrel on and do other shit to it so it doesn't blow up. I wanted a Glock, but it was going to cost me the thick end of two grand."

"And how much did this cost?"

Clive scratched at his beard. "Let's just say, enough. The ammunition's the expensive bit. It's around five quid a bullet."

"Wow! Does it have a silencer?"

"Yeah, that's in the drawer too. But I won't be using it. Half the fun of being out shooting is hearing the bangs. Plus, I'm not a fucking assassin."

Teagan grinned. "Well, if we ever get short of money, maybe you could take that up. *The Wheeled Jackal.*"

“Funny. Not.”

“Where do you keep the ammunition?”

“Not in the same drawer, idiot. What do you want to know for?”

Teagan raised an eyebrow. “Because you’ve got an illegal weapon, little brother. This stuff should be hidden somewhere safe in case the Boys in Blue ever turn up. I’d suggest you wrap this up in a cloth and put it behind the fridge. Give me the ammunition, and I’ll hide it at the bottom of my big makeup box.”

Clive shrugged. “I suppose you’re right. I don’t want you firing it though. The ammo is in my underwear drawer, at the back.”

“I have no intention of firing your ruddy gun,” she said. “But there is something you can do for me.”

“Ah, here it comes. I knew there’d be something. What?”

“Do you think your geek friend could get his hands on a nice big knife for me? Like those ones the SAS use?”

“What for?” His voice was flat.

Teagan emitted a dramatic sigh. “It may have escaped your attention – since you spend most of your time in Willy Wonka Land – but there is a serial killer in town. And there are plenty of undesirable types around gagging to gang-rape an attractive young woman like me. You have no idea.”

Clive scrunched up his face. “You need some pepper spray. Or maybe a Taser,” he said.

“Oooh,” she said, clapping her hands, “I like the sound of a Taser. You could disable someone with one of those, then do what you liked to them. Are they legal? Can Metalhead get one for me?”

“The answers are, ‘no’ and probably ‘yes’. In that order. Metalhead knows a few dodgy people. It won’t be cheap, though. On second thoughts, maybe you should stick to pepper spray. You’d end up electrocuting yourself with a Taser. Plus you can deploy pepper spray much quicker.”

Teagan nodded. “All right, pepper spray. And get me one straightaway. And a knife.”

“You don’t want one of those army jobs. They’re far too big for you, and hard to conceal.” Clive turned back to his laptop and typed. “How about this one? Or similar? They’re sharp mothers. Will cut through most things.”

Teagan looked at the screen.

CRKT Sting Knife. USA made.

“Made in the US,” she said. “Perfect.”

“And this is purely for self-defence, right, Teagan? You’re not Lara Croft, you know. And I don’t want to hear about any more dead cats, either,” he warned.

“Just one dead cat, maybe.” She ruffled his hair. “Now drink your tea, then ring Metalhead.”

Avery stood with her hand on the doorknob and her heart in her throat. She looked in on the chaotic scene. The cushions were off the furniture, drawers upended, the lamp lay on its side. It took her an agonizing minute to process the mess, then slowly her brain thawed. Someone had broken into her house. Her mom and Sally were nowhere visible. Fear dried her mouth, as she dialed 911 on her cell phone. Just before Avery pushed the send button, she heard shrill laughter from the backyard.

Avery skulked around the corner of her house, hovering near the bushes. Her high heels sunk into the mud. Poking her head around the corner, Avery watched her mother play hopscotch with Sally. Her mom's face was bright and happy; Sally looked like she needed a drink. As Avery moved nearer, Sally waved at her, then gazed towards the sky. Avery was sure she was offering up a prayer of thanksgiving.

"I'm so glad you're home. Father Pat's on his way and so is Miss Lola."

Avery nodded, not sure she wanted to hear what came next.

"The Devil got into the house, again. Miss Ginny did her best to catch him, but he was wily, you know."

"Devilishly clever," Avery said.

Sally scowled. "He wasn't in the drawers. That's for sure. Miss Ginny, she searched each and every one of them."

"I saw. How did you get her out here?" Her mom threw a stone that landed in square seven. Ginny began hopping towards it. Avery noticed Sally had drawn the whole hopscotch outline for two-footed hops so her mom wouldn't have to try to balance one-footed.

"Well, I got the broom and watched as Miss Ginny looked under the tables and cushions, so I could swat him if he showed his ugly face. But the old Devil slithered around faster than Miss Ginny could keep up. Then he got into your drawers."

Sally's facial muscles were stiff, and Avery realized Sally was probably scared she would get into trouble for the catastrophe in the house.

“I called Miss Lola,” Sally said. “And she called me back to say the Father was on his way to bless the house. She said Father Pat wanted us to go outside and play until he could get here with the holy water. I had it on speakerphone. When Miss Ginny heard, she said she wanted to play hopscotch, so here we are. She wouldn’t put on any more clothes. I kept her moving so she wouldn’t get cold,” she added.

Ginny was wearing a pair of her husband’s old jogging pants pushed up to her thighs, and his tank top. Her legs were white as howlite with blue marbling. Her breasts skipped and swung untethered. On her feet, she had a pair of bedroom slippers, but she seemed to be coping with their flapping as she jumped forward and reached down triumphantly to pick up the rock.

Sally clapped. “You win again, Ginny so you get to keep going with your turn.” Ginny went to the top of the squares and tossed the rock again.

“I’m so sorry this happened, Sally. Go on. You got her outside. Looks like you’ve been playing for a while,” Avery said with as much kindness as she could muster. Her head whirled with all the things she had to get done before she left for London. And now this.

A chili pepper red Suburban pulled into the driveway. Avery went to the corner of the house and waved. Lolly got out, a full grin decorating her face. “I heard there was a hunt for the Devil going on here, so I brought Andre’s fishing net.” Lola rounded the car. She looked stunning as usual in a tailored sunset orange dress with turquoise stilettos: she should be at a photo shoot for a fashion magazine, not tottering up the drive with an oversized and incongruous green fisherman’s net dangling above her head. “Father Pat’s behind me. He got caught by a red light.”

Avery rolled her eyes and planted a kiss on Lolly’s cheek. “Welcome to the funhouse.”

“I brought two chocolate cakes. It sounded like Sally might need one too.” Lola turned her head towards the green minivan coming to a stop on the street. “Now it’s getting good.” She cupped her hand to her mouth and called out, “Ginny, Father’s come to chase the Devil away. It’ll be safe to go inside in a minute.”

Ginny Goodyear sprinted around the corner of the house, past the two gaping women, towards the good Father. Her breasts flew high with each gallop forward, lifting

her shirt and exposing the wilted skin of her belly. Avery made a grab for her, afraid her mom might trip, but Ginny evaded her.

Avery watched as the priest pulled a jug of water from its Giant Foods bag. He was making a quick sign of the cross over it when Ginny wrapped herself around his neck, talking animatedly.

Leslie's sedan pulled up behind the minivan. Avery dropped her face into her hands. "Oh, holy hell," she whispered.

"I called them," Lola said.

"Why would you do that?"

"You, my dear, have entirely too much on your plate tonight, getting ready for London. You don't have time for a fiasco. I thought it would be best if Ginny went home with your sister now. I'll pack up her suitcase and drop it by Fanny's on the way to my house. Tonight, we'll focus on beautifying you for the trip. I went shopping." Lola winked.

"But Leslie's here."

"Yup. I thought that might make this even more fun."

"Lolly, you're the only devil around."

Lola and Sally were in the living room putting things back in order. Ginny had Lola's fishing net in her hand as she walked on tiptoe behind Father Pat, ready to swoop up the Devil if he were to show his face. Father intoned a prayer in Latin – at least it sounded like Latin to Avery. For all she knew he was making up gibberish. He had a coffee mug of holy water. He dipped his fingers in and flicked as he went. Father Pat looked very tired and very put-upon. Avery had a sneaking suspicion he did all this for her mom because it made Lola happy and when Lola was happy, she was very entertaining. Avery felt sure that the priest relished her confessional days.

Leslie sauntered over and took Avery by the elbow, propelling her into the kitchen where she found her sister had made herself at home with a glass of sweet tea and a giant slice of cake. Fanny shovelled up forkfuls like it was her last meal. Leslie pulled out a kitchen chair and looked at Avery sternly. "Sit."

Hey, who do they think they are, taking command of my house? Avery stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest and widened her stance.

Leslie moved to stand behind his wife, resting a hand on her shoulder. They looked like they were posing for an election poster. “This cannot continue,” he said.

“Okay.” The tension under Avery’s eyes made them squinty and uneven. “Solve the problem while I’m in London.” She leaned against the counter, suddenly exhausted.

“I’m concerned about bringing *your* mother into *my* home. I think it’s too dangerous for my children.”

“Fanny’s mother. Fanny’s home. Fanny’s children. Fanny’s problem. I won’t be here to take up the slack.”

“My wife has been working her fingers to the bone preparing to take up *your* slack. Because of you, she needs to feed twenty people.”

“By working her fingers to the bone, you mean she had to call a dozen caterers before she could find someone to take on the task last minute?” Leslie didn’t answer, so Avery pushed on. “I bet you’re worried the reason Fanny found someone available was that they’re from an Indian restaurant, and couldn’t care less that it’s American Thanksgiving. What? You don’t like curried turkey?”

Avery wondered how Leslie could gyrate his face into that bizarre combination of surprise and fiery brimstone.

“Yes, I know all about her trials.” Avery grabbed a mug to make herself tea. “Fanny’s called to complain already.” She moved the kettle under the faucet. “Fanny also complained about having to hire extra time with your housekeeper, and that Sally was going to charge her another fee because Fanny wants Sally to pick Mom up at her house in the morning, keep Mom here at my house during the day, and bring Mom back at the end of Sally’s shift. Go ahead and talk about slack, why don’t you? Seems like everyone is picking up the slack except my dear sister.”

“Can you blame me for not wanting her at my house during the day? Look at this place. It’s a pigsty. And she breaks your things.”

Leslie patted Fanny’s shoulder. “Have you made arrangements to pay Sally while you’re away?” he asked Avery.

“I’m not paying Sally while I’m away.” Avery cranked the gas knob on her stove with vehemence. “If you’re using Sally, you’re paying Sally. I pay Sally, because I have to go to work during the day to support Mom and me. Fanny, on the other hand, is at home.”

“I am rarely at home,” Fanny countered.

“You’re at home when you’re not having your pedicure done and lunching with your friends. How you spend your time is your choice. You could choose to spend it with Mom. If not,” Avery shrugged, “it’s your dime, not mine. And as I say that and see how clear it is, I’m thinking that when I get home, different arrangements need to be made. You can keep Mom during the day, and I’ll pick her up after work. We’ll split the time fifty-fifty. It will be me who gets to have pedicures and finally go on a much needed vacation.”

“But you’re going to London now,” Fanny whined.

“This is *not* a vacation. This is a pain in my ass.”

Leslie sucked in a sudden breath and turned a shocked pink. “Language! And those provisions will not do. I will not allow my wife to persist under such stress. I will not allow my home to become a shambles.”

“But it’s all well and good for me?” Avery asked, spiking a single brow.

Father Pat put his head around the corner. “Knock knock.”

“Thank you so much, Father.” Avery moved to hug him. “You are such a blessing to our family. Can I get you something to drink?”

“A cup of tea would be lovely.” He tilted back the last of the holy water like it was a shot of whiskey and held out his empty mug. “And if you don’t mind, perhaps a slice of the chocolate cake?”



“Ouch! Holy hell, Lolly that hurt.” Avery turned her head to look at her bleeding underarm. “How in the world did I let you talk me into this?”

“You must be in love.” Lola batted her eyelashes. “There is no other reason for a woman to jerk hundreds of hairs out of her skin other than to ensnare a man’s heart. Hold up your other arm.”

Avery reluctantly lifted her hand in the air while Lola smeared on the hot sugar wax. “You do this all the time, Lolly, and you’ve been married forever.”

“Right, well, ensnared is one thing. Keeping them entangled is another.”

“Entangled in what?”

“My bed sheets,” Lola winked. “Deep breath in.”

“Ah ah ah ah. God. Are we done?”

“Moustache and eyebrows next.”

“I don’t have a moustache!”

“Oh yeah? What do you call that?” Lola held up a hand mirror.

“I call it natural. And I call it blonde so no one can see.”

“Londoners don’t go for hippies. And people can see it. Roll you lips in.”

Avery clutched the rim of the toilet. She wouldn’t have tolerated any of this if she weren’t so stressed out about what Sean would think when he saw her in person. “Oh, thank goodness. Done.” Avery said as Lola tossed a cloth strip into the overflowing trash bin.

“Not so fast, young lady. I haven’t done your bikini line yet.”

“Why would you? No need for that. No one’s going to see down there. I swear.”

“Hmmm. Maybe you’ll get lucky.” Lola held up a finger. “Not Jerry, mind you. Lean back and put your feet on the tub. I went to the store and bought you some pretty little under-things as a birthday gift, and we don’t want you look like an unweeded garden.”

“I’m going to be gone for ten days-ish. What kind of girl do you think I am?”

“I think you’re the kind of girl who hasn’t gotten any game in almost a year now.” Lola blew on the stick to cool the wax. “The kind of girl who’s been disappointed by her exes’ sad lack of ... skill.” She reached over, skimmed the goop onto Avery’s upper thigh, and rubbed the cloth into place. “And the kind of girl who’s been chatting up a gorgeous guy with a panty-dropping accent.” She waggled her eyebrows and ripped.

Avery screamed, her hand clamped tightly over her mouth.

Lola ignored the tears that sprang to Avery's eyes and dipped the stick back in the pot. "And he plays guitar. So he must have dexterity in those fingers." She smiled conspiratorially at Avery as she worked on the next strip. "I think you're the kind of girl who deserves a good time."

Avery thought she was the kind of girl who deserved a brandy.

Wrapped in her terry cloth robe, Avery stood in the driveway, hugging Lola tightly. "You're the best friend any girl could ever want." She laid a loud smacking kiss on Lola's cheek.

Lola hugged Avery hard. "Stop. You're going to make me all weepy. What am I going to do without you and your mom to break up my day?" Lola pulled back to look Avery in the eye. "It means I'm going to have to hang out with the baboons." She smiled her soft motherly smile.

Avery suddenly longed for her own baboons to cuddle and smile about. Her mind flickered to Sean. And she wondered. . . Avery quickly shook herself free from the thought. That was dangerous ground to tread. She had never even met the man. . . now she was going to meet the man. Holy moly.

Waving at Lola's car as it backed from her driveway, Avery knew there was no way she was going to pull a happily-ever-after from her London scenario. Happy endings belonged to other people's story lines. All she could hope for was a manuscript so she could keep her job, a tour of 'real' London from Sean, and perhaps a deepened friendship. Better to nip any other fantasies in the bud.

Travis flicked open his notebook and read.

In the fevered imaginations of the Church Elders, apostasy circled the faithful like a pack of wolves, probing for weakness. For the religious establishment, it was essential that orthodoxy was preserved, and an unchanging structure. Their followers must not begin to question. No whisper of interpretation should cloud their pristine belief. But above all, if control were to be retained, they must obey. . .

Would his readers even understand what that first sentence meant, let alone the rest of the paragraph?

Travis was sure Jerry Meyers would not understand it. The man was a Philistine, in the modern meaning of the term. How that odious individual had slithered his way up to his current position in Pearson Micklewhite Todd could only be guessed at, but Travis was sure it involved a fair amount of ass kissing. He wondered how much Meyers' ham-fisted handling of authors was to blame for PMT's growing crisis. For PMT was in trouble, that much was sure.

Travis was aware of three 'known' authors who recently had given the agency the boot, and there were others in the pipeline. His recent acquaintance, the thriller writer Don Black, jumped ship to Freeman Bushell, emboldened by the discovery of some rather inept legal drafting in his agreement with PMT. Travis had the same pro forma contract. If Travis were to move to a new agent too, it would rub Meyers' nose in it and, with any luck, get the bastard sacked.

The writer was feeling particularly vindictive towards the PMT man since Meyers had phoned to inform him Avery would be coming to London to help him finish his manuscript. The tone had been patronising, and it was all Travis could do to keep his temper.

Who the fuck does he think he is?

In spite of the fact that the call had been some hours before, the author still seethed. Once he finished this book, he'd leave PMT. Of course, in all likelihood, Avery Goodyear would be flung out on her ear too, but Travis couldn't concern himself with such things, even if the woman had been helpful. Besides, he was doing her a favour. From what he had gathered, it was only a matter of time before Meyers showed her the door.

Travis put his notebook on the desk and stepped onto the balcony to breathe the night air. If there were vampires in London, they would be hunting now. But Travis didn't believe in vampires. He believed in pain and desire, and not much else.

Across the street, the window where he had seen the girl with the red umbrella was black. Since he'd followed her that time, she had disappeared, like so many others he encountered in this alien city. So many people, who knew so little about each other; so many lives being lived in parallel. *How seldom we touch each other. The more of us there are, the less the contact.*

He was putting off writing. He knew it.

Procrastination sang its siren song. Though he was making progress with *Superior Fiend* or *Wilde Abyss*, or whatever the hell he was going to call the book, there remained much to do.

Tonight, however, wouldn't be given over to the god of the laptop. Tonight he would go out.

He pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans and called his parents' house. While he waited for an answer, he surveyed the untidiness of his room. A plastic sack in the corner contained several days' dirty washing. The few books he had brought with him, including *The Catcher in the Rye* and his own poetry collection, were strewn across the unmade bed, along with a map of Central London and newspaper cuttings about the Angel. He looked over at his closed laptop, sitting on the desk. An hour before he had snorted a line of coke there. It seemed appropriate.

"Hello."

"Hi, Mom." There was a pause. "It's Travis."

"I gathered that, Travis. Nobody else calls me 'Mom'."

"Witty as ever."

“Isn’t it late there?”

“Yes, pretty late. I thought I’d give you a quick call.”

“Is everything all right?” There was a note of concern in her voice.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“There was something on the news about that Angel person killing again.”

“No, Mom. No more killings. You’re referring to the newspaper story that broke about how he’s been offing the victims with a blade. It’s whipped up quite a media storm with the tabloid in question being accused of irresponsibility.”

“Are you sure?” His mother sounded doubtful.

“Yes. I’m following the story closely. He doesn’t know it, but this guy is providing some fodder for my book.”

“Still shooting for the sensational, eh, Travis?”

“You know me.”

Travis waited while his mother thought of something to say. Conversations of late were becoming more difficult. There were only so many ways he could say, “I’m writing,” and only so many ways his mother could say, “Everything’s the same around here.”

“So ... will you be home for Thanksgiving?”

“I can’t. I have to work. The agency is sending someone over to nursemaid me. They’re worried I won’t make the deadline.”

“Will you make the deadline?”

As long as my coke supply doesn’t dry up, yes.

“Yes. It will be tight, but yes.”

“Good.”

Another silence.

“So. . . are you turning in now?”

“Not yet. I’m going to take a walk first, get some air. It’s *not* raining, for a change.”

“Is it safe walking around London at night?”

“It’s safe for me. Maybe if you are a young woman, not so much.”

“Be careful, all the same. You’re not allowed to have guns in England, I know. Carry a walking stick or something. And stay out of the unlit areas. I worry about you.”

“There’s no need to worry. I’m a big guy. They should be more scared of me.”

The call over, Travis sat on the bed, wondering whether he should do another line of cocaine.

I need to make the most of it. When Avery gets here, it’s going to be more difficult. I wonder what she’ll be like in the flesh. In. The. Flesh.

Travis lay back among the newspaper cuttings and permitted himself a brief fantasy. Perhaps some intelligent, attractive female company would do him good. He had been on his own a long time. Ever since his fiancée dumped him. Betrayed him. Yes, *betrayed*. That was the right word. And it wasn’t as if she were the first woman to do so.

No wonder people found Judas’ story so compelling. It touched them in a way they could understand. Everyone was betrayed. Sooner or later.

He pulled on his coat, and as he did so, his mother’s words flashed through his head. *Be careful. . . Carry a walking stick or something.*

He opened the drawer of his bedside table and removed a long knife, encased in a leather sheath. He tucked it into the inside pocket of his coat, and went out into the night.

Sean was going to meet Avery in a few days. *Actually* meet her. Every time the thought popped into Sean's head, a wave of excitement rippled through him. It was like being a kid again, anticipating a big piece of birthday cake.

Like so much of what had been happening around him recently, it felt unreal. Up until now, Avery had been pixels on a screen, a voice coming out of a speaker. But on Wednesday evening, she'd be sitting across a table from him. He would be able to reach out and touch her.

He had chosen the restaurant for their initial meeting with care. First impressions were important. The venue had to be sophisticated, but intimate. After hours of fretting, he settled on *Luigi's*, an Italian restaurant a short walk from Piccadilly Circus. To seal the choice, Luigi's served a killer *Death by Chocolate* dessert. Avery would like that. Sean grinned at the idea.

If there was no rain, after the meal they could stroll around the busy heart of the city. London always looked its best after dark, and most of the Christmas lights were already up. He wanted Avery to be impressed. He would take her to the Globe Theatre, to the Tate Modern and the National History Museum. They would go for a slow spin on the London Eye. He had even worked out different itineraries depending on the weather.

But what if the chemistry he thought they had was illusory? What if the reality turned out to be a disappointment for her and for him? That would be a hard landing. He'd already invested a lot of himself in their relationship, he realised. Avery had become the calm centre of his existence, the tranquil eye of his personal storm. How much would he reveal of his history to her? And how would she react? So many questions, so many possibilities. Sean tried not to dwell on this perspective for too long. When they met, somehow he would *know* what to say. What would be would be. Destiny would either take a hand, or not. Besides, there were other things to think about.

Sauvage's brother had called him.

"Mr. Kenny?"

“Speaking.”

“This is Marcel Sauvage, Victor’s brother. The police gave me your number. I hope this is a convenient time for you?” The voice had an unmistakable French twang, but it sounded more cultured, less aggressive than that of Sean’s former tenant.

“Yes, it’s fine. M. Sauvage, please accept my commiserations. This must be a difficult time for you.”

“Thank you. I’m calling to say I’m in London. I flew here immediately after the police called me to make a formal identification. They got my number from Victor’s employer, since I am his next of kin.”

“I see.”

“I wonder if I could come to the apartment and collect Victor’s personal things. Next, I have to sort out his car; and then there is the shipping home of the body and the funeral arrangements.” It sounded as if he were ticking off a list.

“Yes, of course. I’ve moved Victor’s things into an empty apartment. I had to . . . um. . . arrange for his flat to be cleaned.” Sean bit his tongue. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to know that. When would you like to come over?”

“Is this evening too short notice?”

“Not at all. Shall we say around seven o’clock? Just buzz for me, and I’ll let you in. I’m in apartment thirty-one.”

Marcel Sauvage had the same distinctive features and build as his brother, but Sean guessed he was a few years older. Marcel had also inherited Victor’s share of the politeness gene. He was quieter. World-weariness sat on his shoulders. Sean showed him the boxes containing the meagre possessions of his late sibling.

“I think all of this will fit into my hired car,” he said. “I will sort it out at my hotel. There is no point in keeping Victor’s clothes.”

“Here is his key fob, including his car keys. If you need to leave the car parked out the back for a few days, that’s no problem.”

Marcel gave a curt nod and turned to Sean. “Did my brother owe you any money on his apartment?”

“We don’t need to talk about that –”

“So he did. I’m not surprised. Victor was always a little too free with credit. How much?”

“He was two months behind with his rent. Though I do have his initial deposit.”

“You must be a patient man, Mr. Kenny.” The Frenchman handed him a business card. “Email me the details, and I will arrange a payment to your bank account.”

“You have quite enough to deal with at the moment. It’s not necessary.”

“It is. For me,” he said firmly. “And I need to ask you to help me get these boxes downstairs and into my car. One more favour. If you would be so kind.”



“I can’t pinpoint it exactly, Sean,” Goose said, “but it will definitely be soon.”

“What will?”

Goose shook his head and blinked twice. “The Angel. Haven’t you been listening?”

“Goose, I listen to you when I have to. Haven’t you realised that yet? What are you talking about?”

The trainee pulled a scrunched-up piece of paper from his pocket and began to unfold it.

“Oh, no.” Sean held up a hand. “I don’t want you to show me any of your hieroglyphs or deranged mathematics. Just tell me in simple language what you want. And hurry up, we’re busy.”

Goose’s face drooped in disappointment.

“He’s going out looking for the Angel of Death,” Dave piped up from his customary table. “And he’s been learning some Japanese so they can chat.”

“You’re doing *what*?”

The gawky youth made to answer, but Dave cut him off. “Goose wants to get up a posse to go with him and roam the streets of Old London Town. He’s done the maths. Next attack this week, according to Goosey. It’s in the stars. Fancy signing up as a deputy, Sean? Personally, I’d love to, but I’m washing my hair for the next five nights.”

“I’ve drawn up a grid,” Goose said, “and a system for covering the roads within a half mile of the Angel Underground station. If there were four of us, and we walk at a steady pace, two of us could intersect on average every six minutes. That means, over a period of four hours –”

“Four hours? You’re proposing we walk around in circles for four hours?”

“No, not in circles. Like I said, I have a grid –”

“And what, may I ask, are you going to do if you find the Angel? And how are you going to recognise it’s him anyway?”

“Easy,” Dave explained. “He’s a tall Japanese guy with fangs, wings and a great big dirty knife.”

“I need to get a proper job. Like in a circus,” Janice said. “It’s doing my head in working here.”

“I don’t care what any of you think.” Goose huffed in a rare display of temper, his face flushed. “I know what I know. I’ll go out on my own if none of you want to come with me. But I won’t be able to cover the ground as often as a group of us would. So it’s more likely I’ll find the next body than find the Angel. And if that’s how it turns out, that will be on your consciences.” He stormed off to the restroom.

Sean rubbed his eyes while Janice rolled hers.

“That boy’s a natural,” Dave said. “He should be on a reality television show.”

“Or in a padded cell,” Sean muttered, “for his *and* our protection.”



The text message said, *Fancy going for a run again one evening if it's not too wet? I'm staying in town all week. Call me. Francis.*

Sean stared out the window of his apartment. Winter was on the way. The days were already much shorter. Another year almost gone. The twenty-first century was building up to a canter; soon enough it would turn into a sprint. The race of humanity continued, with no finishing line in sight, merely the backs of the runners ahead of you.

Grow up, breed, die; and along the route, try to take in some of the sights.

A ping from his computer interrupted Sean's contemplations.

It was an email from an address he didn't recognise, and it had dropped into his 'spam' folder. Under usual circumstances, Sean would have hit the delete button, but the subject of the mail caught his eye: *Avery's Birthday*. It was from someone called *evillolly@americanya.com*.

He decided to take a chance and open it, hoping his hard drive wasn't about to be engulfed by an unwanted virus.

Hi, Sean.

We haven't met, but I'm Lola, a good friend of Avery Goodyear, whom I know you know VERY well. LOL.

I hope you don't mind, but I wanted to drop you a quick message to let you know it's Avery's birthday on Wednesday, November 26. She might not have told you, but she'll be 107 years old on that day.

She'll kill me if she knows I told you so shhhh. I thought you might want to know, as she'll be in London with you!

Gotta go. I have some kids to murder and a husband. Don't know which of them gets it first.

Best,

Lolly

Things were looking up, Sean reflected. *At last*, maybe he was heading into a good patch.

Sauvage would no longer be keeping him awake with worry. His father seemed to be fine. It was some time since his last blackout. Teagan had stopped pestering him. Avery was coming to London.

The only cloud still hanging over his head was the CAT scan, which they still hadn't scheduled. Maybe he was not a man with active schizophrenia at all. Diagnoses of mental illness were notoriously unreliable, according to his research. The symptoms of one condition often masked the symptoms of other underlying conditions. They all fed on one another. His medications over the years might have been suppressing one thing

while bolstering another condition. It happened. When he suffered his breakdown over a decade ago, they'd given him a brain scan, along with a lot of other tests. But what if they missed something? What if a tumour had been there but nobody spotted it? Was it possible one had been growing all this time, unnoticed, while his behaviour was attributed to other factors?

However, such was his mood of optimism, he pushed away the dark cloud. Positivity was the key note of his day. Good things were happening. He needed to grasp onto that. Sean typed.

Hi, Lolly.

Thanks for the tip-off. I'll be sure to arrange something special for Avery's birthday.

Unless she tortures me, I won't tell her you let the cat out of the bag.

If you are contemplating murder, do it humanely if you can.

Thanks again,

Sean

He sent the reply. A sense of calm descended on him. He felt happy, even.

I'm glad you're happy, Sean, said the voice. *Would you like to feel even happier?*

“Metalhead dropped off something for you today,” Clive said, as Teagan came in through the front door. “He was disappointed you weren’t here.” He gave his sister a knowing look and winked.

“Wow! For a knuckle dragger, he can move fast when he wants to, can’t he? Where is it?”

“On the table. He’s left you the bill too. Though, if you offer him a blowjob, he’d waive it.”

“No thanks. I don’t do virgins.” Teagan opened the package. Nestled in bubble wrap, and encased in a sheath was a black, razor-edged blade. She gripped the handle and felt the weight and the balance of the knife in her hand. “This is fucking awesome. Is it the same one you showed me on that web site?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Clive continued to keep his attention on the TV screen, where some young woman wearing a tight red cat suit, armed with an enormous crossbow, stepped her way over a pile of dismembered bodies.

Teagan rummaged through the wrappings. “Where’s the pepper spray?”

“That’s going to take a while. The only reason you got the knife so fast is that Metalhead bought it from a shop. He didn’t have to talk to his dodgy contact.”

Teagan looked incredulous. “You can buy something as lethal as this in a shop? On a Sunday?”

“If you know where to go, yes.” The music coming from the TV grew louder.

“What *are* you watching?” Teagan asked, as some clawed creature tore a jagged hole in the girl’s clothing, exposing her breasts.

“It’s called *Venus with Crossbow*.”

“So – SciFi porn.”

Clive considered. “Pretty much.”

While Clive took a bath, Teagan played Lady Gaga's *Judas* and moved around her room like a dancer, rotating and side-stepping, then making slashing movements with the knife. She explored different ways of holding it, passing it from one hand to the other, moving the obsidian blade in small circles, then thrusting forward as if she were a swordsman. The apparent bravado could not, however, conceal a growing nervousness. Teagan was acutely aware of her inexperience in handling such a weapon. Her plan suddenly appeared much more difficult to execute than when it had first manifested in her mind. She switched off the music, threw the knife onto her bed and slumped down beside it.

She had spent time on the Internet researching lethal knife attacks, and had even found a video showing the supposed method the Angel employed in despatching his quarry: step close behind; left hand around the victim's chest to pull her back; and as her hands rise automatically upwards, slash across the exposed thigh. Apply the point of the knife and draw back deep and quick to cut the artery.

Teagan experimented on an old pillow. Her new knife was *very* sharp. She shredded the fabric with little effort. But piercing through human skin, severing an artery, she knew, would be a different matter. Avery would resist the attack. Any hesitation, even a momentary delay, any miscalculation of the angles, and she could fail. If Avery saw her face, no matter what it took, Avery had to die.

Teagan wondered how tall Avery was. She wondered what would happen if she pulled Avery back against her, and she lost balance, or her grip on the knife wasn't right? What if the American wore a loose skirt, and the blade became entangled? What if she wore a long, thick coat? It *was* November, after all.

She had hoped to use the pepper spray as an incapacitating tool to give her extra time. But Teagan would have to stand in front of Avery to use it effectively, not behind her as the killing method dictated. Moreover, if she deployed the spray, Avery would likely scream blue murder. The noise would attract attention. Attention would mean witnesses. And Teagan couldn't have any witnesses.

Doubt gnawed at her resolve.

But then she caught sight of her bedroom clock. It was almost eight. Avery Goodyear's flight would have landed an hour-and-a-half ago. She was here. A surge of heat burned Teagan's chest.

I have to make this work. My future is on the line.

She looked at the black blade.

It's that woman's destiny to die. And I am the instrument of that destiny.

Grasping the knife, she rose to her feet and practiced the movements repeatedly – step forward, pull back with left arm, slash with right – until she thought they were firmly locked in her muscle memory. Teagan synchronised her breathing with her actions, closed her eyes, and continued in this fashion until perspiration trickled down her back, until she could do it without thinking. If she sped up, there might even be time for two cuts. She could do this. She *could*.

Teagan took a breather. Clive was still in the bath, singing some Heavy Metal anthem. She turned her mind to other logistical aspects of her plan.

Shortly, she would have Avery's UK cell number, courtesy of Sean's account. Teagan needed this to get Avery to somewhere quiet and, if possible, to forestall her meeting with Sean on Wednesday.

Teagan picked up her notebook and pen and wrote.

1. Obtain AG's UK cell number.

2. Buy disposable SIM card and put it in my phone.

3. Text message AG saying (i) I am Sean; and (ii) this is Sean's new cell number; and (iii) rearrange meeting for Tuesday evening instead of Wednesday. So if AG tries to call/text Sean, she'll be calling/texting me.

4. Text message Sean saying (i) I am Avery; and (ii) this is Avery's new cell number as have had to discard the one bought at Heathrow (not working). So if Sean tries to call/text AG, he'll be calling/texting me.

5. Find suitable place near the Angel to do the bitch. Get her to meet Sean/me near there. I say, "Sean's held up. He asked me to take you to him."

6. KILL her.

7. Dispose of my new SIM card.

8. Sean and I live happily ever after. And I become a super star. The end!!!!

Goose was right. One could easily reduce life to numbers.

Teagan ripped the page from the book, memorised the list, and tore it into tiny, unreadable pieces. The vehemence of the action increased her confidence. She had a firm strategy. Destiny now had a timetable. Even so, she knew, there were things that could go wrong. Sean might try to communicate with the bimbo via the Internet, so the timing of her text messages was going to be crucial.

And she still fretted over the technique associated with Avery's demise. The knife grinned at her. She needed a backup method. And it was obvious what it had to be.

While Clive continued to warble in the bathroom, Teagan removed the wrapped package from its hiding place behind the fridge and carried it into her bedroom. She looked at Clive's gun and the silencer and added the bullets from her makeup box to the objects laid out on her bed. Screw in the silencer, pop in the ammunition, switch off the safety catch, and squeeze the trigger. Bingo. Provided the 'modified' weapon didn't blow up in her hand, that is. But Clive had already used it. It should be safe.

Teagan was only too aware she had never fired a gun, but it couldn't be so difficult, could it? She knew there'd be a kick when it went off, but it wasn't as if aiming would be a problem. She'd be firing into Avery from point-blank range. Once the American fell to the ground, a shot into her skull would ensure she was dead. Teagan had her backup plan. If the knife didn't work – and she'd make a judgement call at the time – the gun would.

Of course, Avery's death couldn't be blamed on the Angel if she had to go down the gun route, but there would be nothing to trace the killing back to Teagan, at least as far

as the police were concerned. *Teagan didn't even know Avery Goodyear existed, did she?* She smiled at her own cleverness.

Clive would realise what had happened. Avery's death would be reported in the papers. There would be missing bullets. Would he be able to tell that she fired his gun? Clive was a slob, but he wasn't a stupid slob.

But she could handle Clive. When she'd been getting up to all sorts of shit in her teens, he had kept his mouth shut. And there had been some pretty wild shit. Enough for her mother to send her off to that patronising psychologist whose car she had found it necessary to trash.

Would Clive rat her out to the police? No. He'd be too concerned with his own situation to do that. There would be a lot of bluster as he fretted and fussed and panicked, but in the end he would do nothing. Teagan knew her brother. She could manage him.

She returned the ammunition to her makeup box, rewrapped the gun and silencer, and put them back in their hiding place. Clive continued to wallow in blissful oblivion, like a hairy hippo, in his surely-by-now lukewarm bath.

Tomorrow evening she would explore the streets and green spaces around the Angel. She'd wait until after dark. She wanted to find the shadowy, ill-lit areas, to choose the perfect spot for Avery Goodyear's rendezvous with Fate. Then she would send the text messages, and set in motion the chain of events that would secure her own future.

Monday evening: find the location.

Tuesday evening: do the deed.

The blonde harpy would never meet Sean on Wednesday.

Whether by blade or by bullet, the American's life would be over in forty-eight hours.

And no guilt would attach to Teagan's Teflon conscience. She was merely acting as the handmaiden of the gods, executing the will of the prime numbers, carrying out the order of the heavens.

Teagan returned to her room. She felt calm. Justified. Prepared.

She put on Lady Gaga's *The Fame Monster*, and sang along, using her hairbrush as an improvised microphone.

The flight to London was a miserable start to what Avery feared would be a terrible misadventure. She found herself seated next to an extra-value-meal-sized man whose stomach took up both of the armrests, leaving her pinched up against the window. The kid behind her swung his foot, chunking her in the back with the precise timing of a metronome. But the crowning glory came when the woman in the row ahead of her became magnificently airsick during the turbulent crossing. The woman moaned throughout the rest of the trip that she was going to die. Avery popped Advil, trying to stave off a migraine.

At one point, Avery inched her way down the row for a bathroom break. She peeked through the drawn curtain at the business class passengers. Jerry had his seat kicked back, drinking a scotch on the rocks as he chatted up the lady on his left. When he laughed at one of the woman's jokes, Avery wanted to go up and strangle him. Jerry should at least be gentleman enough to split the time in the luxury section with her.

At Reagan International, Avery had seen Jerry only briefly. He exited the lounge and boarded ahead of everyone else – even before those with mobility issues and small children. She, of course, had been last on. And he had the audacity to wink at her from his faux-leather comfort as she lifted her overnight case high and sidestepped like a cow being shuttled to her pen.

At Heathrow, Jerry waited at luggage claim for her, looking well rested and chipper, still with sharp creases in his trousers. She, on the other hand, looked like two-week-old lettuce forgotten at the back of the fridge. They had left D.C. at six on Sunday morning and by some luck had made it quickly through UK Immigration. By seven-thirty that evening London time, they stood in line at the taxi queue. Relief coursed through Avery when their turn came. She desperately wanted to sit down somewhere quiet and close her eyes. But as Jerry climbed into the cab, he blocked her way with an arm.

“Sorry, I’m going to take this cab.”

Avery stared, confused.. They had registered at the same hotel after all.

“I’m headed out for dinner and drinks with the boys from the London office. You understand.” He pulled his leg in and slammed the door. Leaning forward, Jerry gave the cabby instructions without a single backward glance.

The man behind Avery yelled at her for clogging up the line and hustled around her to the waiting taxi. Avery wheeled her bag to the trunk of the next cab. She worked at recovering her equilibrium as her taxi swirled through the confusion of London traffic towards the hotel.

“Something’s different about Jerry,” she muttered. It was as if she were a stranger. Or a ghost. Or someone he’d written off as no longer important. Nausea had her pressing the back of her hand to her mouth. Had Jerry already decided she’d fail? Was he getting ready to fire her? No. Wait. That didn’t make sense, she reasoned. If she failed and the manuscript didn’t show up by the deadline, they would both be canned. Jerry didn’t seem concerned about his future. He looked downright cocky.

Jerry’s new tone niggled at the back of her brain as the hotel door attendant collected her bag for her. It wormed its way into her consciousness all through the fish and chips she ordered from room service, and it disturbed her dreams, making her sleep fretful.

That morning, her hot shower was a blessing, the coffee pot set up in the corner of her room a godsend. She glanced around the lodging. It would serve her needs. It seemed quiet enough. Clean enough. Nothing fancy. Nothing too grim. And it placed her close enough to Travis without feeling like she was sitting in his backyard. She’d been afraid Jerry would book her in a room next to Travis so she could observe his every move.

She checked her watch. Nearly eight-thirty in the morning Greenwich Mean Time. Three-thirty in the morning back home. She should be deep asleep, dreaming of something lovely – a Tahitian beach, a Tequila Sunrise in a pineapple, someone rubbing sunscreen into her shoulders with strong hands. Instead, she was up, squirting Visine into her bloodshot eyes, and cussing Jerry under her breath.

It was Jerry who insisted she spend the morning with Travis, and then join him and some of their PMT colleagues for tea. He expected Avery to give him an accurate update

of the state of the manuscript after the London people headed back to their offices. This told Avery that Jerry had given himself time to rest and adapt to the new time zone.

She was starting to hate him.

Sitting in the back of a taxi, Avery focused on the notes in her lap. This whole driving on the left-hand side of the road thing was going to take some getting used to. As the cars roared up on her right, Avery found herself jamming a foot down on a non-existent brake pedal – heart in her throat, adrenaline spiking her blood. She blamed her panic on the traffic patterns and not the fact she was about to knock on Travis Bishop’s door.

“We’re passing Kensington Gardens, Miss.”

“Oh,” Avery said as if that meant something to her. She glanced out the window at the nearly naked trees and thought it would be a creepy place at night. A shiver zipped up her spine making her scalp tingle. Too many days dumping adrenaline – her system was primed for misfiring.

Avery could feel tears pressing behind her eyes, asking for release. She was exhausted. Wrung out.

Get your emotions under control before you meet Travis, or you’re going to end up as a big blubbing cry-baby and wouldn’t that be professional?

Avery tried to jot a quick note on her pad, but between the jolting of the taxi and the tremor in her hand, what she wrote on the paper was illegible. While the pot of coffee she drank in her hotel room lit fire in her nerves, it left her brain mostly numb.

Maybe numb is good.

The taxi double-parked and the cabby announced her tab. After swiping her credit card through the machine, she opened the door, and climbed warily out. The cabby drove off immediately, leaving Avery alone on the pavement. She took a moment to enjoy the lovely pillars and welcoming balconies on the façade of the nineteenth century architecture. It was unexpected. Avery had pictured Travis living in some glass modern monstrosity, devoid of character. Anonymous.

She was about to climb the stairs when Travis came through the front door.

“It is inhumane for you to set up a meeting this early, Avery. I never get up before lunch.”

“Hey, there.”

“Come on then,” he said, scampering down the worn marble stairs. “I need to get some coffee and breakfast in me if you want any shot at all at my being coherent.” He moved past her and Avery had to quickstep to catch up – his legs were very long. Travis wore jeans and tennis shoes. His pea coat hung over a fitted grey T-shirt; his hands thrust deep in the pockets. He could easily be a liberal arts student at any Ivy League college. He looked like he had partied too hard at the frat and now needed to buckle down and prepare for an exam. His mind seemed to be churning, but he didn’t share any of his thoughts. They walked in silence.

Rounding a corner, Travis pushed the glass door on a little restaurant. The bell rang cheerfully. They were the only customers. The rest of the work crowd must have already left for the office, and the waitress looked like she’d hoped for a break.

Travis ordered beans on toast with eggs and broiled tomatoes. And a cup of the strongest coffee they had. He looked at Avery.

“Um. May I have some toast please and a glass of orange juice?” she asked.

As the waitress went off with their order, Travis unrolled his cutlery from its paper napkin. “It’s not even four o’clock in the morning for you.”

Avery nodded.

Travis eyed her. “Do you always start your day at the crack of dawn?”

“Never. This was at Jerry’s insistence.”

“He’s a prick, and you look like shit.”

“No argument on either count.”

He looked up as the waitress placed the blue ceramic mug in front of him. Avery accepted her orange juice with a smile.

“Right then,” he took a sip of coffee. “Here’s the plan. You’ve got me up, and Jerry wants you to babysit me. So, we’ll eat a bite and go back to my hotel.” He stopped and consulted his watch. “By the time we get back, the maid should have been through with clean linens. You’ll lie down and get some sleep, and I’ll sit at my computer and press

the keys. On the way over here, I got a flash of inspiration.” He grinned. “See? All I needed was my muse to fly into town.”

“Where are you off to?” Clive asked, as Teagan pulled on her jacket.

“Out.”

“At this time of night? On a Monday?”

“I’m meeting a couple of the girls from the salon for a drink, if you must know.”

“You’re not even glammed-up. Old jeans, hippy jumper. God, you’re even wearing flat shoes.” he appraised her. “I didn’t even know you owned any flat shoes.”

“Well, now you do.”

A crafty look came into her brother’s eyes. “Hey, you mustn’t let your standards slip. Now that Seany-boy’s dumped you, you’re back on the market. You need to keep looking good or you’ll never get yourself another meal ticket. Sorry, I mean ‘soul mate’.”

“As if you would know anything about it.” Her reply carried a trace of bitterness. “Anyway, Sean has *not* dumped me. I’ve told you, we’re just taking a break.” She grabbed her clutch bag and headed for the door.

“Sure you are.” He chuckled and went back to reading his magazine.

Outside, the night air was cold. Teagan zipped up her jacket and headed for Tooley Street where she hailed a taxi. “Angel Underground Station, please.”

“Are you sure, miss?” The bespectacled driver looked at her through his rear mirror. Something like concern glimmered in his eyes.

“Quite sure.”



As Goose locked the front door of his apartment, he hesitated. Had he closed his bedroom window? He’d better check. He reopened the door and walked back into the cramped flat he shared with his mother. Mrs. Belka was out office cleaning. She often

worked late into the night. In spite of the years she had spent in London, her English was still poor. Cleaning was one of the few jobs she had been able to find where her lack of language skill did not count against her.

Goose switched on the light in his room and inspected the window latch. Yes, locked. He gave the handle a small push to make sure. Then he pushed it again and nodded in satisfaction. He tapped the pane twice.

As he was about to leave, he noticed that one of the corners of a wall poster depicting the layout of the Underground had come adrift. He looked at his watch with a degree of anxiety, then carefully removed his shoes and climbed onto his bed to reattach the stray corner with a new blob of Blu Tack. He straightened out the bed covering with care, put his shoes back on, and tied the laces in a double bow.

Goose closed the front door behind him once again. Had he switched off his bedroom light? He opened the door a little. The flat was in darkness. Yes, the light was off. He double-locked the front door, tapped the frame three times, and set off down the hallway at a brisk pace.

Spurning the lift – the smell of which caused him disquiet about lurking bacteria – he walked down the flights of stairs to the ground floor, counting the steps on the way. Five landings, twenty-three steps between floors, three fire exits. All prime numbers. The natural order of things.

Once on the street, Goose pulled on a pair of mittens, which his mother had knitted for him, and looked up. No stars pierced the blackness of the sky. Clouds masked the moon. Even on a clear night, the light pollution of the city made life difficult for a watcher of the heavens. But Goose knew where the important stars were, even if he couldn't see them.

He consulted his watch again, then loped off in the direction of Islington High Street, and the Angel Tube Station, his breath leaving a thin vapour trail behind him.



Teagan paid the taxi and alighted at the entrance to the Angel Underground Station. A river of tired humanity coursed around her.

Way too many people about.

She leaned against a wall and consulted the small *London A-Z* she had brought with her.

Now to find a suitable location where Avery could be disposed of. Teagan wished she knew this part of London better. The criteria that it had to be a quiet area and not too well lit pointed to a road that was not a public thoroughfare; one that taxis would not use for short cuts; overlooked by as few houses as possible; and a place where the Angel had not already struck. Teagan did *not* want to be returning to the scene of a previous crime.

She decided to check out the areas marked as public parks or 'green' spaces first, working away from the Underground in a roughly circular direction. In fact, she had to find two locations: the place she would meet Avery – preferably outside a pub – and the place she would dispatch her. No more than two minutes of walking between the two, would be ideal.

As she started her search, Teagan rehearsed in her head what she would say to the American.

Hi, you must be Avery, judging from the description Sean gave me. I'm Janice from the coffee shop. Very pleased to meet you. Sean told us all about you. I know you were expecting Sean, but he sent me to collect you. A little bird told him it's your birthday tomorrow, and since he can't meet you then, he's organised a little birthday surprise for you today. Sorry to be so mysterious, but don't worry, it's only a two-minute walk. . .

The fact that Teagan was so intimately acquainted with Sean and Avery's correspondence would enable her to sound knowledgeable, to gain Avery's trust. Even so, she didn't want to have to talk with the woman for too long. She might say something that would arouse Avery's suspicion. Teagan would have to be at her sweetest and most gushing. For two minutes, anyway.

She walked around Claremont Square and Myddleton Square Gardens: neither was appropriate for the task in hand. The closeness of Sadler's Wells Theatre, and the 'rat

run' of Roseberry Avenue, ruled out Spa Green Garden. She had been out on the streets for almost an hour. Her feet, unaccustomed to the specially-purchased flat shoes, were beginning to hurt.

At least it wasn't raining.

Teagan headed east where, having crossed City Road, she began to encounter a mix of low-cost, bland apartment buildings sitting cheek by jowl with traditional London terraced houses. Small, sometimes overgrown areas of trees and plants peppered the area. This looked more promising.

In Lamb Street, she noticed a gastropub, The Bishop's Mitre, and she jotted down the name and address in the back of her A-Z. A couple of hundred yards away was a road that had run-down houses on one side and a small, neglected park on the other. Double yellow lines meant there were no parked cars and, Teagan was delighted to see, two of the streetlights weren't working, creating delicious pools of gloom. The park gate was broken off its hinges, and the pathway beyond disappeared into darkness. *Ideal*. Even if there were people on the street tomorrow – and there weren't any tonight – Teagan could take Avery into the park, making reassuring noises as necessary.

She took out her phone containing the new SIM card and paced in front of one of the functioning street lamps. Her next move was tricky. She had to get Avery here tomorrow evening. And in the meantime, she had to keep Sean and Avery from communicating with each other.

Teagan pulled up Avery's number and composed a text message.

Hi, Avery. This is Sean. Excuse the unfamiliar number but my phone and all my Internet accounts have been hacked. Please call or text me on this number for now. More bad news: I can't make Wednesday evening. Could we meet tomorrow evening 8:00pm at the pub The Bishop's Mitre on Lamb Street? Just get in a taxi and give the address to the driver. Fingers crossed you're free! Sean xxx

She pressed the send button. *This was it*. She was past the point of no return. Of course, evidence-wise, the text message would be on Avery's phone, but by this time

tomorrow that phone would be smashed and lying in a bin somewhere, along with Teagan's discarded SIM card.

She pulled up Sean's number and typed a second message.

Hi, Sean. This is Avery. Excuse the unfamiliar number, but the SIM card I bought at Heathrow stopped working, so this is my new one. More bad news: all my Internet accounts have been hacked, so I won't be online for the next couple of days. However, you can get me on this number if you need to. Text me if I'm not answering. Looking forward to Wednesday evening at Luigi's! Avery xxx

Teagan sent the message and let out a deep breath. Her phone pinged. Avery had replied.

Hi, Sean. Sorry to hear about the hacking. Yes, I can meet you tomorrow evening at 8:00pm at The Bishop's Mitre. No relation to Travis, I hope? Can't talk now, I'm still at dinner with our Associates. Avery xxx

Teagan laughed, returned the phone to her bag, and punched the air.



Goose marched in slow steps, following the predetermined route. He was on his third circuit and experiencing an unaccustomed calm. The shapes of people and buildings floated past him with a comforting familiarity. In his mind's eye, the fractals and patterns that were usually a source of torment resolved themselves into a harmonious rotation, mirroring his own movements. His head turned to the left, then to the right, in a smooth rhythmic motion, as his eyes scanned his surroundings. A sense of expectation clung around him.

Then, as he turned into a quiet side road, he stopped abruptly. Twenty yards from him stood Teagan, illuminated by a street lamp. Behind her, black trees demarcated a

small public park. She hadn't seen him, so focused was her attention on her phone. Goose leaned back against the wall of the building, unsure of how to proceed.

He saw the girl punch the air, her face ecstatic.

And then he saw something else.

A figure, its face obscured by a black hood, appeared behind her. Its left arm reached around her. Teagan's clutch bag fell to the ground. There was a flash of metal as something descended across her upper leg. She pitched forward.

"Teagan!"

The black-clad apparition looked up, snatched the dropped bag, and fled.

The attack had only taken seconds.

Goose scurried to the fallen girl. Blood spurted from a wound in her thigh, and her face registered shock and disbelief. She opened her mouth but no sound came.

"Teagan," he said again softly.

She reached out towards him, but he pulled back.

"I can't touch you. There's blood."

They both stared at the dark liquid pumping out of her, soaking her jeans, flooding onto the pavement. Her breath came in gasps as she tried to stem the flow with her hands.

"I can call for an ambulance," Goose said, "but it will arrive too late."

Uncomprehending eyes stared at him. Teagan was losing consciousness.

"You need to understand, Teagan, this is not *personal*." Goose's voice was gentle, soothing. "He can't help it. It's the Angel's nature, his destiny. Just as this is yours."

Janice arrived at Tower Bridge Banz as Sean unlocked the front door.

“What do you want first,” she said, “the good news or the bad news?”

“I’ll take the bad news.”

“Goose’s mother phoned me. He’s going to be late this morning.”

“Great. What’s the excuse?”

Janice followed him inside and shuffled behind the counter to drop off her bag. “Hard to tell. Mrs. Belka’s grasp of English isn’t so great, as you know. Plus she has a thick accent and tends to gabble.”

“Was the Angel mentioned, by any chance?” Sean asked, with heavy irony.

Janice made a gesture of *who-knows?*

“I bet he wandered the streets of Islington for half the night, and is too tired to come to work.”

“Mrs. B sounded a bit excited. Kept mentioning some bloke called ‘Perliss’.”

“*Perliss?* Never heard of him.” Sean shrugged. “I’d be in a state of permanent excitement if I had to live with Goose. The woman must either be a saint or as loopy as he is. I’d guess the latter.”

“Never mind. We’ll manage, Sean. My boyfriend says I’m wonderful in a crisis.”

“What was the good news, by the way?”

“There isn’t any,” Janice said breezily.

At just after ten, the morning rush having abated, Sean glanced up to see Goose pushing through the shop’s door. Dishevelled, with red-ringed eyes, Goose stood at the entrance.

“Ah,” said Janice, “the wanderer returns. Hurry up and change. I need a break.”

Goose didn’t move. He gazed around the shop as if he’d never been there before. His arms hung by his sides.

Sean and Janice exchanged a look.

“Are you all right, Goose?” Janice said.

The trainee appeared to be trying to remember something. Something important.

Janice touched his sleeve. “Gustaw?”

“I saw him,” Goose said.

“Saw who?”

“The Angel. I saw him. He takes trophies. He took her bag.”

Janice was about to protest, but Sean raised a hand. “He’s in shock, Janice. Goose, come and sit down.” He led the trainee to a table while Janice attended to a customer. “Tell me what happened, Goose.”

“I’ve been at the police station for hours,” he said, his energy starting to return. “The police wanted to talk to me.” He suddenly became aware of his surroundings. “I’d better get changed.”

Sean put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Never mind about that. Why did the police want to talk to you?”

“Because I saw the Angel last night,” he said, with impatience. “I told you. I saw the Angel of Death when he killed Teagan.”

An embarrassed silence followed. Everyone in the shop turned to stare at Goose.

“You know,” he went on, “Teagan Adams. The girl who orders the green tea.” He pointed at the menu board. “Number twenty-three.”

“Just be calm, Goose.” Sean patted his hand. “You’re a bit confused. Teagan is alive and well. You’ve had some kind of a shock. Listen, take the day off and rest. Janice and I can manage.” A snort came from behind the counter.

“I’m not confused.” Goose’s expression had an earnest, insistent quality. “I was *there*. I was on patrol, like I told you I would be. The Angel was all in black, with a black hood, so I couldn’t see his face. He had a knife, and he did it the way they said he did in the paper. He cut across Teagan’s thigh, and she died. I couldn’t stop him.”

“Goose, why would Teagan be hanging around in the backstreets of Islington? Look, I’ll bring her in here tomorrow, and put your mind at rest.”

“You can’t.” Goose banged the table and the sudden violent movement made everyone jump. “She’s dead. I watched her die.”

The customer at an adjacent table held up his smartphone. “Hey,” he said, the colour draining from his face, “you’d all better take a look at this. This news report says another woman was killed last night near the Angel Underground Station. The police haven’t released her name, but they say there was a witness.”

Sean felt something icy cold tighten inside his chest.

Goose folded his arms. “You see. I told you. I *told* you this would happen. It’s all in the stars.” He tapped Sean twice on the knee. “And in the prime numbers,” he added solemnly.



Sean barely remembered the rest of his shift. The day passed in a blur.

Goose’s story was incredible, but it appeared to be true. The Internet and TV news were abuzz with the story of the Angel’s latest attack. Sean couldn’t process the information. *Teagan. Dead.* It didn’t seem possible.

And for Goose to have been the one to find her. . . ?

Goose’s Angel Patrol. The idea he and Dagenham Dave had ridiculed. Yet, staggeringly, Goose had been right. Sean wasn’t so credulous to attribute the encounter to any star charts or mathematical reasoning or the machinations of Divine Fate. It was by pure chance Goose had stumbled upon the Angel. But Sean could not rid himself of the disturbing notion that if he *had* taken Goose seriously and joined the patrol, Teagan might still be alive.

No, that was nonsense. He couldn’t think like that.

Sean stood outside Clive’s apartment, summoning up the courage to knock. Part of him still felt like this was some horrible mistake. A bad dream. But he had to be sure. And if it were all true, Clive was going to need his support. He knocked. After what seemed like minutes, the door opened.

One look at Clive confirmed the worst.

“Clive?”

“Teagan’s dead.” His words were leaden, expressionless. “The Angel killed her last night.”

“I know.” Sean dropped his eyes.

“How do you know?” He sounded angry.

“A guy who works at my coffee shop was the one who found her. Goose is his name. Has Teagan mentioned him?”

Clive shook his head. “No. Well, she may have. I don’t know.”

“Can I come in?”

“Be my guest.” He wheeled himself into the lounge. Sean followed and sat on the sofa, unsure what to say next. Unreality hung in the air like a sword.

After an awkward silence, Clive gave a sigh. “I still can’t believe it. The police had me at the station for three hours today asking all sorts of questions. They needed me to identify her.”

“That must have been terrible.” Sean’s words sounded inadequate. But what *would* sound adequate in these circumstances?

Clive stared at the blank television screen, his hands folded in his lap. After a few seconds, it was almost as if he had forgotten anyone else was with him. The door to Teagan’s bedroom was closed, and Sean wondered how long it would be before her brother found the courage to go in there. Turning the handle would release a tidal wave of memories.

“Have you eaten anything today?”

A slight shake of the head.

Sean went to the fridge. There was little in it. “I’ll go out and get you some shopping. Maybe a pizza, eh?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“How about a cup of tea?” Without waiting for a reply, Sean filled the kettle from the kitchen tap and switched it on. He rinsed out two mugs and dropped in tea bags. “Milk and sugar?”

“Just milk.”

The kettle took an age to boil. Sean searched in the cupboards for biscuits, but found none.

“Here you go.” He placed the mug in Clive’s hands.

He took a tentative sip.

“Listen, Clive, I don’t like to bring this up, but there will likely be journalists sniffing around wanting to interview you, and photographers. If you like, I can move you into the vacant flat on the second floor for a few days. At least that way, you won’t have people outside your window with cameras.”

Clive’s mind was somewhere else. Then, just as suddenly as he had gone quiet, he began to talk. “She said she was going out for a drink with some of the girls from the salon. But why Islington? Why near the Angel? There’s nothing much there. Why not go to the West End? And why didn’t she take her knife with her?”

“Her knife?” Sean asked, puzzled.

“Yes. I got her a knife for self-defence. Just a couple of days ago. She’d said she was worried about going out after dark. She was getting some pepper spray too.” He shook his head. “Why didn’t she take her knife? Especially if she was going up *there*. It doesn’t make any sense.” Silent tears ran down his face. “I’ve always thought her so capable, you see. Of the two of us, she was the tough one. The survivor.”

“Clive, I’m – sorry.”

Clive continued as if he had not heard him. “The police officer who talked to me is pretty sure it was the Angel. It could have been someone pretending to be him, especially after those arseholes in the newspaper published that stupid article. But the police don’t think so. Their forensics will be able to check whether it was the same type of knife that killed the other women. The details of *that* weren’t in the paper. Then they can release Teagan’s body.” His hands began to tremble, and his voice faltered, but then he recovered himself. “You say this guy – Goose – found Teagan? Was he the witness the media are talking about? The police wouldn’t tell me anything about that.”

Sean answered quietly. “Yes.”

“Did he – see it happen?”

Sean nodded.

“So he saw the Angel? He can describe him?” Clive leaned forward and Sean noticed the spittle on his beard. He smelled of stale sweat.

“All he can say is that he was tall and muscular-looking. He wore black clothes, including some kind of black hoodie. He didn’t see his face.”

“So he doesn’t even know what colour he is?”

“No.”

“Well, that should narrow it down to a few million people. Fucking useless.” Clive swallowed hard. “Was he there with her when she died?”

“Yes.”

The man in the wheelchair was drowning in an ocean of sorrow. He needed a lifebelt. Any kind of lifebelt.

“She died in the arms of a friend, Clive. Goose did his best to comfort her, to ease her passing.” Sean knew it was an out-and-out lie, but it was what Teagan’s brother needed to hear. Anyone familiar with Goose would know that having him there would be anything but a comfort. This was not the time for honesty.

Clive’s control finally gave way to wracking sobs. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” He put his hands to his face.

Sean moved closer and put his arm around him. “I’ll help you with all the funeral arrangements and everything, don’t worry.”

“It’s not just that, I don’t know how I’m going to be able to afford to go on living here. Teagan used to pay half the rent and utilities. I’ll have to move out straightaway, find somewhere cheaper.”

“Whoa, whoa, stop, Clive. Just stop. If you think I’m going to throw you out on the street after this, you’re very much mistaken. For the next few months, pay what rent you can afford until you get yourself sorted out, okay? Don’t worry about it.”

Clive stared at him. “Will your father agree to that?”

“Of course. Just because he’s Scottish, doesn’t mean he’s not human. I’ll talk to him. It’ll be fine.”

“You’re a good man, Sean. I’m sorry Teagan and I. . .”

“What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter now.” He seemed to reconsider. “Actually, there is something I should tell you. I guess. . . I guess I owe you. . . something.”

“What’s that?”

Clive sat for a moment. “Teagan is. . . was. . . no Mother Teresa. She was pretty wild. She was my sister, and the only one I had, but I don’t have any illusions about her. Just because she’s no longer around, doesn’t mean I’m going to start wearing rose-tinted glasses. Some of the weird stuff that’s being going on around here – you know, the graffiti and the cat – Teagan did it. I’m sure it’s been creeping you out, so. . . there it is.”

The words struck Sean like a hammer, and he pulled back from Clive. “Teagan spray-painted the wall and killed the cat? Why would she do that?”

“She used to have these rages sometimes. I’m sure you’ve seen some of the milder ones. She thought you were losing interest in her, and got mad about it. As for the cat,” Clive shook his head, “I don’t believe she meant to kill it. It just got out of hand.”

Teagan had done those things? Not him? Sean realised Clive was staring at him. He made an effort at normality. “I see. Well, thanks for telling me.” He spoke with as much calm as he could muster. “The graffiti she painted. *Chaos*. It’s. . . it’s such a strange coincidence that she would write that. I’d used that word in a direct message on Twitter the same evening the graffiti appeared.”

Clive’s face creased in anxiety. “Oh? Well. . . um. . . uh. . . ‘Chaos’ was the name she wanted to call her band.”

Sean considered this piece of information. “Her band?”

“She had this dream of being a singer, you must know that,” Clive said shakily. “That ‘Chaos’ band name . . . just one of those weird coincidence things. They happen.”

“I see.”

“The police said the Angel took Teagan’s bag with her cell phone in it. But they can still check her records from the phone company’s servers. As her boyfriend, you should expect a visit from them.”

Sean barely heard him.

“We’re still cool about the rent though, yeah?” Clive continued. “Just because I told you about Teagan being a nut-job doesn’t change anything, right?”

“It doesn’t change anything.”

But for Sean Kenny it changed everything.

Sean prowled around his apartment, restless, unsettled, his mind a swirl of conflicting emotions. He would never again see Teagan; never again hear her trademark knock on the door or see her flirtatious smile. Never. Guilt for the way he had ended their relationship surged through him. But amongst the tumult of disbelief and shock, another thought pushed its way through.

Relief.

Based on what Clive had said, he was not responsible for the bizarre things that had been happening around him. He was not a danger to others. His medication worked. He didn't manifest violent, uncontrolled behaviour. Chaos had not come again. Perdition had not seized his soul.

He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. The eyes regarding him from the mirror had a new and unfamiliar sensation lurking behind them. He dared to consider it might be *hope*.

“Hey, voice in my head, don't you have anything to say to me now?”

There was no reply.

He studied his face as if he'd never seen it before. It was the face of a man who had for twelve years buried himself away from the society of others. Those people who encountered Sean Kenny would say of him, he was a quiet man. One whom it was difficult to get to know. A man without passion.

In the time that had passed since university, he had deliberately avoided excitement. Pharmaceutical crutches had sustained his debilitated existence. The man on the ground floor might be the one in the wheelchair but he, Sean, had been the real cripple. The fear of mental anarchy that simmered behind the calm exterior had made him a prisoner. He had made himself a prisoner. It was time to open the door of his cell.

The voice remained silent, and the reflection in the mirror permitted itself a smile. Avery had nothing to fear from him. He towelled his face dry and went back into the lounge.

Avery.

He yearned to talk to her.

Suddenly, concern for her safety gripped him. Her business would take her nowhere near the Angel's area, and her hotel was miles from Islington. If nothing else, the Angel

was consistent in his geographical preference. Yet in spite of his new resolve, the day's events had unsettled Sean, and he felt the need to hear Avery's voice.

He picked up his cell phone and called the new number she had texted him the previous evening. Number unobtainable. He tried again, with the same result.

"You're being stupid," he said to himself. "Avery is fine. Maybe she's busy with Travis and turned her phone off to ensure she can't be interrupted."

He looked at his computer. According to her text, Avery was off the Internet grid too, so there was no point in trying to get hold of her that way. And what would he say to her anyway? That his ex-girlfriend was murdered? That would panic the hell out of her. There was no choice. Sean would have to sit on his hands for the next twenty-four hours until he met Avery at Luigi's. Meantime, he would concentrate on staying calm.

After all, he didn't want to be a gibbering wreck the first time he and Avery met.

Jerry is ridiculous.

This was the mantra that circulated through Avery's thoughts. He was insisting she spend her whole day, every day she was in London, babysitting. Maybe Jerry pictured her with a whip in her hand and every time Travis's fingers stopped pecking at the keyboard, she'd crack it across his desk. How anyone could write with another human breathing down his neck was beyond her. Surely, Travis couldn't work that way. Avery knew if she sat there glaring and hassling the man, he would write crap. So she and Travis had worked out a strategy.

Avery had arrived that morning after the maid had come through. She wore yoga pants and a stretchy shirt. It was the closest thing she had to pyjamas that was publicly acceptable. She had brought her Kindle and noise-cancelling headphones and curled up on Travis's bed, calling as little attention to herself as possible.

Travis liked to work with the lights off and the drapes closed. He said the sunlight was too cheerful and crept into his writing; he needed things dark. Avery didn't mind a bit. She had read and cat-napped through the day.

When her stomach felt hollow, she picked up the key Travis left next to the coffee pot and carried her shoes as she tiptoed out the door. She followed the path to the little café where they had had breakfast the day before. Avery ordered the beef stew, which arrived with a thick slice of homemade bread slathered in butter and sprinkled with herbs. She picked out a to-go meal for Travis, taking a stab at what he might like.

Back in the room, Travis had sat with eyes half-closed, his thoughts floated somewhere in his inner sanctum, weaving words into sentences. Without looking at the keyboard, his fingers danced fluidly. Every once in a while, his lips would move as if he were feeling the rhythm and beat of the words. He was more like a musician at a piano than an author at a keyboard.

Avery quietly placed his lunch on the desk, the key next to the coffee pot, then curled up for another nap. *I could get used to this lifestyle.*

When five o'clock had arrived, Avery folded the extra blanket and put it back on the closet shelf. She fluffed the pillow, gathered her purse and took a glance at Travis. His eyes rested on his empty coffee mug, but she knew he wasn't in the room. He was flying high in his imagination. His fingers moved briskly over the keyboard. *How can he do that for so many hours without rest?* When she wrote, Avery had to take breaks to play video games, check email, fritter away time on Twitter. Maybe this was what made the difference between her writing and the writing of an international bestseller – the ability to hit the zone and sustain there. Well, that and sensationalism. One should never discount the power of angry righteousness.

That had been her day, and now it was evening. Avery closed Travis's door with extreme care. Hoisting her briefcase strap more comfortably on her shoulder, she headed down the staircase.

Travis told her yesterday that she wouldn't find a cab on his street; she'd have to walk towards Kensington Gardens. Last time she needed the cab, Travis had escorted her. He'd been the one to raise his hand and catch the cabbie's eye. Travis was a big guy, and Avery had felt safe knowing muggers looked to the vulnerable for their prey. Travis didn't look vulnerable. Truth be told, with his hair standing wildly on end from his day of head-scratching, and shoving his hands through its waves, he looked a little deranged. If Avery had seen him on the street, she would have given him a wide berth.

Now she stepped outside into the cold. It was already dark and even though street lamps punctuated her route every few yards, the unfamiliarity, knowing there was a serial killer actively searching for women to slice, had Avery pulling her coat tighter. She glanced furtively over her shoulder as she moved quickly forward.

Kensington Gardens was every bit as spooky as Avery had thought it would be when she passed it the first time. Thick fog made everything seem otherworldly. And images of Travis's vampires did weird things to her imagination.

She stood alone on Bayswater Road whispering an incantation to make a taxi materialize. She stomped her feet for warmth and pushed the strap of her case into place. Relief sang sweetly along her nerves as she saw the taxi roll to the curb beside her. Avery had read in one of her 'tourist in London' books that she had to address the cabbie

from the outside, asking politely to be taken to, “TravelLite Hotel, in Notting Hill, please?”

Five thirty. Another two-and-a-half hours until she met Sean. Say a half-hour or so to get to the pub. She had two hours to get ready. In D.C. it was around lunchtime. Avery thought she’d better call home and make sure her mom was doing all right. She felt a little guilty. She hadn’t checked in since Lolly helped her mom into Fanny’s car four days ago. Did she want to let it go and not call? *Yes, to be honest, but once I know she’s okay, I’ll be able to relax a bit more. Take a hot bubble bath, so I don’t look like shit – as Travis so honestly and correctly stated yesterday.* Avery pressed the button on her phone.

“Hello?” Fanny’s voice sounded annoyed.

“Hey, Fanny, it’s me checking in.”

“Whose phone is this?”

“Mine. I have a different SIM card here because my normal one doesn’t work in London.”

“Well, no wonder you didn’t ring me back. You should have told me I couldn’t get you on your cell phone.”

“Fanny, please stop yelling at me. I’m not one of your children. You have my phone number now but use it for emergencies. I’m here working long hours. And remember, I’m five hours ahead of you. It’s dinner time for me.”

“Don’t yell at you? Of course I’m going to yell at you. Call you in an emergency? There *was* an emergency.”

“An emergency? What kind of emergency? I’m in freaking London, Fanny. If there’s an emergency I can’t do anything about it. What happened? Is it Mom? The boys?”

“It’s Mom. Of course it’s Mom.”

“What did she do? Where is she?”

“She’s in the hospital. They’re moving her to a care facility tomorrow morning.”

Fear doused Avery’s skin like ice water. “What happened?”

“She was supposed to be taking a nap.”

“A nap where? Was she at my house? Was Sally with her?”

“No, Mom had to stay with me at my house because Sally had appendicitis and had to go to the ER. Very inconsiderate for her to do that on a weekday. You’d think she could have waited until the weekend. So I had Mom. Mom went to the guestroom for a nap, and I went to the grocery store.”

“You left her alone? Did she take her blue pill?”

“I have no idea if she took the pill or not. What was I going to do, finger-swipe her mouth to see if she had it hidden in her cheeks? And yes, I left her alone. She is an adult, after all.”

Avery’s eyebrows pushed upwards. She clamped a hand over her mouth to keep the expletives from flying out.

“Anyway,” Fanny continued, “Mom went outside and found the boys’ roller skates. She tried to use them, fell, and wrenched her ankle. A car stopped and called 911. I came home to find the ambulance outside.”

“Nothing’s broken?”

“She got skinned up, and she was confused – what’s new? The occupational therapist says Mom can’t manage hopping on one foot with a walker or crutches, especially with stairs. Since we don’t have a bath on the first floor, the doctor said we should put her in the nursing home until she’s mobile. So she’s not going to be with us. You’ll get back before she’s healed.”

“You sound chipper.”

“Your darned tootin’ I am. She’s been driving everyone bonkers with her hymns. Her voice is like nails on a chalkboard. It fires up every nerve in my body. She will *not* be coming back to my house. Not ever. Do you understand, Avery? If you have to go out of town, you’ll have to make arrangements like these. I am not doing Mom. And Leslie wholeheartedly agrees with me.”

A headache formed in Avery’s left temple. She would be terrible company if this turned into a migraine. It was a stupid idea to call home and get reassurance that everything was okay. When was it ever okay at home? “I have to go, Fanny. Glad Mom is safe. Tell the boys I have treats for them when I get back. I won’t be calling again until I’m in the States.”

“Fine. Goodbye.” Fanny cut the line.

Avery toed off her shoes and moved towards the bathroom. What she wanted was a long hot soak. What she needed was a vacation at a spa with daily massage and acupuncture regimens. Avery turned on the tap and adjusted the temperature. The water in London smelled funny. She went back to her suitcase, pulled out her perfumed body wash, and headed back to the tub, leaving a trail of clothes behind her. Yup, at a spa they’d feed her gorgeous foods packed with health, Avery thought, sinking into the water. If she were there, Avery would drink enough Cosmopolitans to keep a happy buzz, and she’d read trashy, girly novels and never wonder, not even once, if that were the plot line that would make PMT rich and happy. And she would laugh just because she could, and it felt good.

Avery emerged and swiped the condensation from the mirror. She looked rested, thanks to Travis’s preoccupation, and relaxed, thanks to her bath. A little makeup and she might look pretty tonight.

Back in D.C. as she was packing, Avery had agonized over what to wear when she met Sean for the first time in person. A lot of strategic thought was required. She wanted to show off her best asset, which she thought was her hourglass figure. She wanted to seem casual and friendly, flirty and fun, smart and sympathetic. Maybe, possibly, a little bit sexy? It was a lot to ask from one outfit.

Avery had decided on the sweater Lolly gave her as a going-to-London/early birthday gift. The cerulean blue did nice things for her eyes, and the soft mohair, with its deep V cut, moulded to her breasts as it draped. Lolly said Sean would want to pet her like a bunny, and Avery wasn’t averse to that thought. No, not averse at all. She coupled the top with a pair of fitted black jeans. She scooped her hair up into a messy bun, and she wore her librarian glasses. It was as close as she thought she could get to ticking all the boxes of her requirements list.

She glanced at the clock radio. *Yikes! Where did time go?* Avery grabbed up her purse and made her way to the lobby.

“The Bishop’s Mitre on Lamb Street, please,” Avery told the cabby.

Once she had settled in, the driver slung his arm across the back of his seat and swivelled around. "Am I picking up anyone along the way?"

"No, thank you. Only me."

"You're headed over to Lamb Street alone? Are you sure you think that's a good idea?"

What an odd question. "I'm meeting someone for dinner."

"Didn't mean to pry," he said, clicking on the turn signal and pulling into traffic. "You have an American accent, and I thought you might be new in town."

"Yes, well I flew in yesterday. But the friend I'm meeting lives here in London."

As Avery paid her fare, the cab driver gave her a worried glance and said, "You be safe now. I'd head right inside, you know?"

Avery was too nervous to focus on his words. She took a minute to run her hands over her clothes and pat her hair so she looked neat when she entered. A quick glance at her watch told her she was already five minutes late. Avery thought that would be acceptable, as it gave Sean an opportunity to find seats for them.

The crowded pub mostly held blue-collar men with pints in their hands, yelling at the TV where a rugby match was in full battle. Avery stood at the door where there was a little open space, thinking Sean would see her and signal her over. She scanned the room. As the men's attention drifted her way, Avery began a slow circuit. No Sean. Perhaps he was using the restroom. Avery tried to pick a strategic spot, where he could find her easily. The barman caught her eye as he swept his rag over the counter, sopping up the beer spills from the last cursing sports fan, jeering at some play gone awry. Avery gave him a little wave. "May I have a Coke, please?"

The barman clunked a heavy-bottomed glass in front of her and stretched the nozzle from his machine to fill it. No ice.

Avery sipped the room-temperature Coke, her gaze fixed on the front door. Minutes ticked by. Avery shifted from foot to foot. A man was blatantly staring at her, his eyes rosy from too much lager. "Hi," Avery said to him. "Could you tell me, please, is this The Bishop's Mitre on Lamb Street?"

"Yup," he said, then belched loudly.

Avery checked her phone. No texts. No missed calls. The din in the pub was deafening. Avery put what she thought to be an ample sum on the counter with a nod at the barman then wandered outside. She had to move a half a block away to find some quiet. Standing under a tree, Avery pressed the number she had stored in contacts. “Number unobtainable,” the mechanical voice pronounced. Avery stared at her phone. Huh? She dialled the number by hand. “Number unobtainable.”

Avery checked the screen for the time. It showed 8:38. Sean had stood her up. No. That couldn’t be right. It seemed out of character. Avery felt sudden concern for his safety. Perhaps there had been a fender-bender on the way or another crisis had come up at his apartment building? No. He would have called to warn her. His dad? Maybe he was dealing with some emergency about his dad’s health?

Avery shook her head, perplexed. On a whim, Avery looked up the phone number Sean had given her before she came to London; perhaps he had got it working again. She dialled it in. Her heartbeat was distracting her. Too fast, too hard, her heart seemed to take up too much space in her chest cavity. She was panting when she heard, “Hello?”

“Hello, I’m trying to reach Sean Kenny?”

“Avery?”

“Yes. Hi, Sean. I think I’m a bit confused. I’ve been here waiting for you for over a half an hour.”

“What? Are you at Luigi’s? We were going to meet tomorrow night. What phone are you calling from?”

“I’m calling from my phone – this is the number I sent you when I arrived at Heathrow. I’m not at Luigi’s. You texted me to come here tonight instead.”

“I texted you? No, I didn’t text you.”

“But you gave me a new number. You said your accounts had been hacked into. Then there was no reply on that number.”

“I . . .” Avery could hear confusion in Sean’s voice. “Maybe I *have* been hacked into, and this is somebody’s idea of a joke. Shit. I’d better change all my passwords. You better do the same.”

“Well, so I . . .” Avery trailed off

“Where are you?”

“I’m at The Bishop’s Mitre on Lamb Street.”

“Lamb Street?” Sean sounded loud and aggressive. “Are you inside?”

“No. I’m down the block. There’s a lot of yelling going on in the pub.”

“Avery listen to me. I’m coming to get you. You’re to go into the pub this minute. Start moving. I’m staying on the line until you’re safe. Go stand next to the bar, away from the door. “

“Um, okay. . .” Avery scuttled back into the pub.

“It sounds like you’re inside now. Are you?”

“Yes. What. . .? I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“I’m coming. Stay put. We’ll figure this out when I get there. You are not to go outside, Avery, do you understand?” The last three words he hammered out in a staccato beat.

“I won’t. I’ll wait right here.”



Sean burst through the door of the pub, scanning the occupants. When his eyes came to rest on Avery, relief flooded him. He elbowed his way to her side and grabbed her into a tight hug. “God,” he said. They stood like that for a moment, neither moving, until a rugby play made the bar erupt with angry yells.

“Come on.” Sean grabbed Avery’s hand and pulled her along as he wended his way back towards the door. “I asked the cab to wait for us.” He blocked the exit as he searched left and right then tucked his arm around Avery, shielding her with his body as he pushed her into the cab. The cab driver turned his head for instructions. “Piccadilly Circus, please.”

Sean sat back against the seat, and pulled Avery against him, his arm holding her possessively in place. He ducked his head and breathed in the scent of her hair. He planted a kiss on the top of her head. “Hi,” he whispered, “I’m Sean.”

Avery leaned back, swivelling her head. “Why were you so scared?” she asked.

“Lamb Street is right around the corner from. . . have you read the papers today? Seen the news?”

“No. What happened?”

“The Angel killed another woman last night, and it was around the corner from where you were.”

“The Angel?” He saw panic in her eyes.

“But. . . Sean, why would you ask me to meet you in such a dangerous place?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t.”

Avery pulled her phone from her pocket, scrolled to the text message, and handed it to him. A shadow crossed over his face.

“I must have been hacked. I never sent this message, and I certainly would never have put you anywhere near where Teagan —” Sean stopped mid-sentence squeezing his eyes shut. He rubbed his brow with thumb and forefinger.

“What about Teagan? That’s the woman you were dating?”

“Teagan. Yes, the girl I was sort of seeing. She was the victim. The Angel killed Teagan last night.”

Avery pushed herself away from Sean and looked him full in the face. A kaleidoscope of hurt and shock left him off balance. She gathered Sean into her arms, and drew his head down on her shoulder.

They held each other without a word until they heard the cabby clear his throat. “We’re here.”



Sean sat opposite Avery in the noisy steakhouse. His first instinct had been to get her somewhere safe, public and well lit. Now he wondered if that was such a good idea.

It was not at all how he had wanted their first meeting to go. He was acutely aware that he was scruffy and disheveled from his horrific day reflecting on Teagan’s murder. Avery, by contrast, looked amazing. When he had realized where she was when she called, he had grabbed a jacket and flagged down the first taxi he could, telling the

driver to get to Lamb Street as fast as possible. Sartorial elegance was the last thing on his mind then; but now that the initial scare was over, he felt self-conscious about his appearance.

A small child toppled onto the floor next to their table and sent up a wail. His harassed mother scooped him up and headed for the toilets.

“Sorry,” Sean said. “Your first impression of London must be pretty. . . awful. And this,” he waved a hand in the air, “is not exactly the fine dining I had in mind for us.”

A coy smile played around Avery’s lips. “Oh, I don’t know. It’s not every day a girl has a white knight riding to her rescue.”

“Ha!” He combed his hand through his hair. “I don’t think I’m presenting at my knightly best.”

“You look very nice. If it were me leaping off the couch, rushing out into the night, you’d get much worse. I assure you.”

He shrugged. “You’re very understanding. And you are stunning, by the way.” It was true. She was.

She dropped her eyes. “Thank you.”

Sean cleared his throat, fumbling for the right thing to say. Any prepared speeches were out of the window now. “Are you all right? This must have shaken you.” He reached over the table and grasped her hand. To his surprise, she squeezed his fingers and held on.

“It all feels a little surreal, to tell the truth. It will hit me later. But. . . I’m glad to be here with you.”

Conflicting emotions fought for supremacy within Sean Kenny. The bizarre events of the day pushed all manner of hormones, neurotransmitters, and god-knew-what-else through his body. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but he did know that neither response would be appropriate. And now, here he was, sitting opposite *her*, the woman he’d dreamed of meeting for months. “It feels strange for me too,” was all he could say.

“Of course,” she responded, “hearing about Teagan and everything today. It must be a bit overwhelming. And then my call.” She shook her head.

“That too,” he said, “but I meant meeting you in person. I feel I know you so well, yet. . . Um. It’s odd. But nice odd.”

A waiter appeared, and their hands released while they hurriedly consulted the menu.

“Your soup of the day and a house salad, please,” Avery said. “And a glass of red wine.”

“The same, but bottled water for me.”

The waiter jotted his notes and walked away without a word.

Avery focused troubled eyes on Sean. “So you had no idea all of this was happening? The police hadn’t come, and Goose sprung this on you at work? That’s horrible. I can’t imagine how you contended with the day. You couldn’t very well drop everything and close up, could you?”

“No, well, Goose was in a pretty bad way. There was nobody who could take over for me.”

“So you worked your whole shift not sure. . . ? Why didn’t you call her brother and. . . ? No. You were right. How insensitive would that be if you rung him up and said, ‘Hey, can I talk to Teagan.’ Of course you would have waited to see him in person. That must have been agony. I am so sorry, Sean.”

Sean watched her mouth while she talked. He wasn’t sure he dared look in Avery’s eyes for too long. God, he needed to pull himself together. Fortunately, Avery didn’t appear apprehensive. He must look a lot more controlled than he felt. All he wanted to do was take her hand again, but he couldn’t come up with a good enough excuse for doing so.

“I’m fine, really. I’m more worried about you and this stupid hacking thing. No doubt it was some juvenile idiot’s idea of a joke, but it could have had serious consequences. If something had happened to you. . .”

“But it didn’t. I’m good.”

“This certainly wasn’t how I envisaged our first meeting. Sitting in a second-rate steak bar talking about a murder.”

Avery leaned forward. “This account hacking may have happened a while back. I had a strange message from you which later disappeared. I thought at the time I might be going nuts.”

“We *definitely* need to change all our passwords.”

They compared the text messages on their phones. It was beyond bizarre. And the coincidences of timing and location were striking.

Sean shook his head. "I don't know what to make of any of this, but I have to talk to the police about it when they interview me. It might be relevant to Teagan's murder. Although for the life of me, I can't see how."

"The police will interview you?"

"They're bound to. They'll want to talk to everyone who knew Teagan."

"Oh, Sean. I'm so sorry."

They slipped into silence as the waiter approached with their food. He filled their water glasses and asked if they needed anything. Sean pulled his gaze from Avery. "Thank you, but that will do for us."

He picked up his soup spoon, hoping his hand wouldn't tremble. It didn't.

Avery offered a sympathetic smile. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He paused and swiped non-existent crumbs from the table. "Of course I am."

Avery's eyes were warm with kindness. It was almost too much for Sean. Compassion was something to which he'd become unaccustomed. Sean blew out a long breath. *How can I ever tell this lovely woman about myself?* He glanced towards the door through which he would expect her to run if the word *schizophrenia* were mentioned. Fear would appear in those beautiful eyes; fear that the voices would jump up shrieking, and he would destroy the restaurant. Hell, she might even think he was the Angel.

"Let's not talk about me," he said. "I want to talk about you. I want to know all about you, Avery. However small, however inconsequential the details. Everything." He raised his glass of water. "I don't usually drink alcohol, but tomorrow, we'll toast with champagne. For tonight, welcome. I'm so happy you're here."

“Calm down, I don’t understand what you’re saying to me. Sit down. Are you sitting?” Lola’s voice came over the cell phone speaker.

“Yes.” Avery gasped. “I think I’m going to faint. Oh, God. I feel nauseous.”

“You’re having yourself a rip-roaring anxiety attack. What have you got in your room? Some Valium? Alcohol? How about Benadryl? Do you have Benadryl?”

Avery scanned her room. “I have tea. Earl Grey. The room is spinning.”

“Lean over and put your head between your knees. Deep breaths. In-one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three. And out. One-thousand-one. . . I sound like I’m sitting through a damned Lamaze class. What in the world happened that you’re this messed up?”

Avery didn’t respond. She focused on pulling air into her lungs and pushing it back out again.

“If Jerry’s put a single hand on you, I’ll show that philandering-no-good son of a —”

“Jerry didn’t make a pass.” Avery sat up and dragged a wet washcloth over the back of her neck then flopped back on her bed. “I’m not equipped to be an adult, that’s all there is to it.”

“It’s your mom then? Do you need me to go run interference?”

“Mom’s in a nursing home. I’ll explain it to you when I get home. I’m actually relieved about Mom. No, this is about Sean.”

“What about Sean? You found out he’s married and has fourteen kids?”

“No, Sean isn’t married, and he’s even cuter in person than he is on Skype.”

“So what’s making you so nuts?”

“Nuts. Ha. That about sums up my time here in London.”

“Oh, come on.” Lola chided. “It can’t be so bad, you’ve only been there for three days.”

“Right, well let’s see. Jerry’s got something up his sleeve. He’s shunning me with our colleagues and making me spend eight hours a day with Travis.”

“Travis is being a pain in the neck then?”

“Funny. But there’s more to my list. So yesterday I went to meet Sean.”

“Wait. You’re not supposed to meet Sean until tonight. I bet he couldn’t wait to see you. Did he bump the dinner up?”

“Someone did. Not Sean. I got a mystery message to go to a pub, and it happened to be near the Angel Line.”

“That’s where the wacko is offing the girls? I don’t want you to go to that part of London.”

“No shit, right? I had no idea I was headed down there. So, I’m standing there alone in the bar. No Sean. I go outside to call him, and he freaks out and comes racing to my rescue like some medieval knight.”

“What?”

“So he takes me to another place, and he’s telling me all this, and then he tells me – are you ready for the icing on this cake? The girl he used to date – you know the one with the menstrual love poem – was the Angel of Death’s latest victim, and someone murdered her the night before, not two-minutes’ walk from where I was standing, trying to reach him.”

A pause answered her. “Avery, he’s pulling your leg. It’s not a great gag, telling you the poor girl is dead. . .”

“No. No. He was perfectly serious. Someone hacked my phone and told me they were Sean and arranged to meet me there and neither of us knows who or why.”

“Huh. Well it was a hell of a first date. Shit. Hang on. I need some Benadryl so I can process this.” Avery could hear cabinets slamming. “Nope, only kid-strength. I’ll just do a vodka shooter. So let me get this straight – he says this girl’s been killed and by the way you were standing near her blood stain?”

“Pretty much.”

“What did you do?”

“I don’t know. I was kind of in shock. But I think I handled it all right, but who can tell? And it’s worse than that. It’s so much worse.”

Lola sucked in a huge breath. “He’s the one killing the girls?”

“What? No! It’s just that when he ran into the pub, the way he looked at me with utter and complete relief that I was okay. God. And then he rushed over and gathered me in his arms. Held me there like I was precious. I felt so safe, you know?” Avery was up and pacing in her bra and panty hose, shaking her hand like it was on fire. “It was so perfect in his arms and I . . . I . . .”

“Holy Mary and Joseph, you realized you were in love. No wonder you’re having an anxiety attack. Avery Goodyear!” Lola shrieked. “You’re in *love*. Oh I’m so happy for you. This is wonderful. Well, not wonderful that he lives on the other side of the Atlantic. And, yeah. The whole coffee shop as a career thing is pretty bad. But you *love* him.”

“I think I might.” Avery sank onto the bed. “Oh, God. I need to. . . breathe. I need to. . . not pass out.” She stuck her head back down between her legs.

“It’s been a while since you fell in love with a guy. Freshman year in college, in fact. This is *supposed* to feel like butterflies and rainbows.”

“Feels more like angina and an asthma attack.”

“So maybe as we age, we interpret things differently.”

“What am I going to do, Lola? This has disaster written all over it.”

“Lie back. Close your eyes. And without thinking, tell me what you want right now.”

“To be back in Sean’s arms where everything is safe and good.”

“Ah. See? Not so hard. Are you meeting him tomorrow night?”

“Yes, I was trying to decide on a dress to wear.”

“Do red. I saw in an article the other day about psych studies that show when a man sees a woman wearing the colour red, his mind goes straight to thinking about sex.”

“I picked out a green dress. What do they think when they see green?”

“Sex.” Lola’s laughter bubbled through the receiver. “I can’t imagine a man who isn’t constantly thinking with his . . . little head. I honestly don’t think it matters what you wear.”



Avery glanced around the restaurant as the hostess showed them to their table. Sean's hand rested on the small of her back. He wore a charcoal grey suit with an open-collared shirt that made Avery a little giddy when she met him in the hotel lobby.

Seated in a secluded alcove with a view of a garden lit by twinkling Christmas lights, Avery smiled. "This is very romantic."

"A definite improvement on yesterday evening, I hope. I'm glad that's behind us." Sean grinned and for the first time, Avery saw he had a little dimple on his left cheek.

"I hope you like Italian," he said.

"Very much, thank you. How was your day?"

"My day is over, and we will only be talking about happy things, like how beautiful that red dress is on you." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly. "How was your day? Did you nap to the pitter-pat of words being tapped into Travis's laptop?"

"I had a most excellent day, actually. I started at Travis' room, not sleeping, but reading a trashy novel, until lunch. Then I took a cab to pick up my boss. He wanted to have a quick meeting because the New York office needed him back in town ASAP. I put him on the plane and now he's gone, no more Travis-sitting."

"What was the meeting about?"

"Hammering home the idea that my job was in imminent danger if Travis doesn't hand me a manuscript by the deadline."

"And the deadline is?"

"The twentieth. So, a little more than three weeks from today."

"You seem comfortable with that."

"I am. Travis thinks he'll be done by the beginning of next week. But he wants to keep Jerry in the dark for a while as payback."

"Remind me never to get on Travis's bad side. I'm not great around passive-aggressive types. So Jerry's gone. Travis is on task. What, oh, what shall you do with your time?"

"I thought I'd take one of the cheesy tour buses around. And I'd dearly love to go to the Globe Theatre. And before I came to London, I thought I would like to rent a car and

drive to Chawton to see the Jane Austen House. But now I've seen how crazy the driving is – maybe I can find a tour for that as well.”

“I can take you. I'll hire a car.”

“Would you? That wouldn't be boring? I can't imagine you're an Austen fan.”

“I'd go for the pleasure of your company. We can take a picnic if the weather's not too foul. You can have a good look at bucolic England.”

A waiter arrived and poured red wine into Sean's glass. Sean sipped and gave a small nod. “I hope this is all right,” he said. “I ordered the wine and appetizers when I made reservations.”

Before she could answer, another waiter stepped forward and placed a vase of red roses on the table near the wall where they could be enjoyed but well out of their way. Sean reached for the card and handed it to her.

Happy Birthday, Avery. “With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.”

“*The Merchant of Venice*. But how did you know today's my birthday?” Avery asked, her eyes crinkling with a bemused smile.

“Oh, a little birdy told me.”

“A birdy, huh? That's a pitiful lie. Is that the best you can do?” She canted her head.

“I'm serious. It was this one.” Sean took a box from his pocket and placed it in front of her.

Avery pulled at the blue silk ribbon and slowly opened the top. There, in a little nest of velvet, sat a silver necklace with a bird that resembled the Twitter icon.

“How we met,” Sean said. “You know, there's no other way I would have known you existed. What a loss for me if I had never come to know you.”

Avery held it up. “Could you help me?”

He took it from her. “You want to wear it now?”

“Yes, please.” She lifted her hair out of the way.

Sean rose, walked behind Avery, fastened the clasp, and fixed a kiss on her bare shoulder.

“How does it look?”

“Great. Do you like it?”

She fingered the pendant. “It’s very romantic of you. But you didn’t answer my question. How did you know it was my birthday?”

“Oh, it must have come up in some conversation.”

“I’m sure I didn’t tell you.”

“No?” Sean tugged at his collar.

“Lolly told you, didn’t she?”

“I, um. . .”

Avery laughed. “Don’t worry, I know you swore not to tell me. But Lolly can’t keep a secret to save her life. Right after you responded to her email, she called to tell me all about it. So I knew you knew.”

“But you weren’t going to tell me yourself?”

“No. I wasn’t.” Avery glanced down at her lap.

“And that was because. . .”

“We hadn’t met. I didn’t want you to think you were obligated in any way. It felt weird. I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want to think about it. Thirty-six. Ugh.”

“Is this all right, though?”

“Oh, it’s absolutely lovely. You couldn’t have made this any nicer.”

“What about if I gave you this?”

Avery accepted the flat package from Sean’s other pocket. Pulling away the gift wrapping, Avery found a handmade card that Sean had sketched of the two of them arm in arm, walking by a river. Inside were two tickets to see *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

“Oh my.” Avery glanced up at Sean’s expectant face. “We talked about this in a Twitter conversation.”

“Yes.”

“You are such a talented artist, Sean. This is so obviously us. What a precious gift.”

He reached across the table and took Avery’s free hand, smoothing his thumb over her knuckles. He lifted his glass towards her. “A toast to surprises – happy ones – and to bright futures. I hope all of your birthday wishes come true.”

Avery lifted her glass to accept his words.

Sean's gaze searched her face. "Do you know what you'll wish for when you blow out your candles this year?"

Avery tapped lightly on the door. Soft footfalls approached then stopped. She raised her bottle of beribboned champagne in the air so Travis could see it through his peephole. The door immediately swung open.

“A woman bearing gifts is always welcome,” he said.

Avery laughed and moved into the room. For the first time she was seeing it with the drapes open and the lamps lit. The carpeting was stained and the furniture more than a bit shabby. This place came nowhere near her expectations upon first arriving in London. She had assumed Travis would be living the high life – both figuratively and metaphorically. Bejewelled women, drunken partying, opulent digs. But Travis surprised her. He kept his head low. No one would have recognized him here. And though he said he was snorting, she’d never seen the evidence. And certainly there were no women hanging about.

“Today’s D-Day. I thought we should toast with champagne.”

“It’s too late for mimosas and too early for cocktails. Do you literary agents drink at any time of the day? It seems improper.”

“This bothers you?”

“No, I’m just wondering if you have flutes in your bag or if we’re going to have to drink out of the horrid plastic cups they leave by my sink.”

Avery reached into her backpack and pulled out a towel. She unrolled it to produce long stemmed glasses. “Tah dah!”

Travis smiled as he peeled the foil from the bottle. “Are you heading home soon?”

“Friday.”

“Are you glad?”

“No. Not really. What about you, Travis? Are you going back to the States?”

“I need to talk to you about that.”

The cork popped and the champagne, excited from the bumpy ride over to the hotel, erupted from the bottle. Travis caught some in his mouth then directed it towards the

glasses Avery held out. He didn't seem to care about the drips hitting the carpet. As they clinked glasses, the room phone jangled. "That will be Jerry," Travis said. "Why don't you talk to him for me?"

Avery lifted the receiver, taking a sip of champagne before she said, "Hello?"

"Avery. I wanted to talk to Travis."

Avery glanced over at Travis who gulped down his first glass and was pouring a second.

"He's indisposed. But I have wonderful news. Travis typed *THE END*."

"You have it there? You can get it to me now?"

"Sure. Hang on." Avery stretched the chord over to Travis's desk. She indicated the laptop, silently asking his permission. Travis nodded.

Avery sent the file to PMT, and she felt giddy with relief.

"It's sent," she said into the receiver.

"How many words?"

"A hundred and twenty-three thousand plus."

"Good. That's almost exactly the same as last time. I was afraid he'd try to hand us some piece of crap with seventy-five thousand or so. Yup, here it is. Will you hold for a moment?"

"Sure go ahead." Avery rested the phone on her shoulder as she sipped her champagne. Travis moved to lie down on his bed, ankles crossed, arm behind his head, looking the picture of relaxation – a far cry from the manic eyes and hyper fingers she'd observed during her time in London.

"Good. Good," Jerry said. "Yes. This is all very nicely done. I'll read it through immediately, but I can see it's a completed job. Thank you for your role in getting this done, Avery."

"You're welcome."

"And so you'll be headed back to D.C. We need to have a little talk about that. I wanted to let you know your position has been terminated."

"What?" Avery gasped.

"No need to worry. PMT will be handling your hotel expenses and flight, even though, as of this moment, you no longer work for us."

Avery sank down on Travis's bed. He shuffled over to give her room.

"I don't understand. Didn't I do what you asked me to do? You have the manuscript on time. Why would you do this to me? Are you displeased with my work?"

"No, Avery your work has been fine. I've even drafted a recommendation letter for you."

"I, I don't understand."

"My wife discovered we used to date each other. She is very displeased that you and I work in the same office in such an interactive way. She feels it would be best if you worked elsewhere. After speaking with her at length, I concur. I had security gather all of your personal things for you. They're being stored safely in the custodian's closet. You can pick them up at your convenience."

"My things? Security went through my drawers and put them. . . What?"

"I needed to make space for my new assistant. She starts on Monday."

"You've known you were going to let me go for a very long time then. Long enough that you had time to replace me? So you were waiting for me to hand you Travis's manuscript. I was just insurance you'd get the project done. And now you have what you want, and that's it?"

Travis reached over and took the receiver from Avery's hand and quietly hung it up.

Avery turned around, sitting cross-legged and looked at him. "Huh."

"It sounded from here like Jerry fired you."

"It sounded that way to me too. He has already hired my replacement."

Travis ran his tongue over his teeth. He reached over and patted Avery's knee. "Right then." Stretching past Avery he grabbed the phone and dragged it to him, lifted the receiver, and dialled.

"Jerry? Ah, Travis Bishop here. . . Thank you. Yes, it is good news. It feels great to have it done. Avery was very instrumental in all of this you know. And I understand you canned her."

Avery lay on her back, her knees posted, and stared at the ceiling. She was pretty numb. She wasn't sure what Travis had in mind by this phone call – it was nice of him to put in a good word for her. But truth be told, it was meaningless. This was personal.

Jerry's wife felt threatened, and Jerry needed to remove the threat so his wife would get off his back.

"Well, that's all well and good there Jer. Yes. . . Yes. . . You're a first class prick, but you know that already. Here's the thing. I'm quite pleased you've fired Avery."

Avery bounced up onto her elbows, eyes wide.

"You see, I think you're one of the worst human beings I know. This created quite the dilemma for me. You'll see when you read my book, there is a huge cliff hanger sewn into the ending. While Avery was here babysitting me, a whole plot line fell right into my head. I decided *Wilde Abyss* would be book two in a trilogy. But the impasse was that I only wanted to work on it with Avery, and I didn't want to line your pockets in any way at all. Now how was I to accomplish this? It's quite easy in the end, isn't it? Avery is my agent. I'm leaving PMT. You'll be getting my official termination notice in the next day or so from my lawyer. I'll sign with whichever bureau Avery decides is best for both of us." Travis turned his gaze towards her. "Avery, would you look on my desk? There are some papers I need you to sign. Then another glass of champagne please, so I can toast my new agent for Book Three – *Nosferatu's Armageddon*."

Avery could see there was nothing sitting on his desk. Travis picked up Avery's champagne flute and drained it. He held it out to her. She reached for the bottle to refill it. Jerry's blustering coming through the phone sounded comical. Travis held the receiver away from his ear while he drank his champagne.

When the yelling stopped, Travis said, "And what's more Jerry, I heard a bit about what you were saying – you know, the thing about your wife being the cause of this rumpus. That's quite illegal. I know an excellent corporate lawyer whom I believe will milk you and PMT dry for wrongful termination. Let's see if you get to keep *your* job after all this is done. There you go, you prat." Travis slammed the phone into place. He sent Avery a grin. "That was fun."

Teagan's memorial service was held at the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium, a two hundred acre site on Aldersbrook Road, in East London.

Clive, as Teagan's next of kin, had opted for cremation. The event took place in the modern North Chapel – the South Chapel being fully booked, and the Traditional Chapel closed for repairs. The thirty minute service cost nearly seven hundred pounds, and Sean had chipped in five hundred pounds of it.

Selecting appropriate music had been a trial. They could hardly have Lady Gaga blaring out over the digital music system, and Clive's preference for Heavy Metal didn't seem fitting either. In the end, the assigned member of the Cremations Team tactfully suggested Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, and his proposal was grudgingly accepted.

Much against his better judgement, Sean agreed to speak at the service. It was a moment of weakness he regretted. His apprehension increased when Clive handed him Teagan's notebook and suggested he read one of her poems. Sean forced himself to go through all the dead girl's scribbles, and he rapidly concluded there was not a single stanza he would feel comfortable reciting at a memorial. Instead, he dug out one of his own poems, written shortly after his breakdown. He would pass it off as hers, saying Teagan had emailed it to him some weeks before. That way, if Clive later tried to find it in the notebook, he would have an explanation for its absence.

The occasion was every bit as grim as Sean had anticipated.

Nine mourners braved the cold afternoon wind. Goose wanted to attend, but Sean had put his foot down and insisted he work his shift that day. There would have been something ghoulish in Goose's presence and, Sean was sure, he would say something inappropriate.

Sean looked around the red-themed chapel. Clive was in his wheelchair on Sean's right, and next to him were his close friends, Metalhead and Gort.

The acne-ridden Metalhead looked like his dark suit had been spray-painted onto him. His tie hung crookedly, greasy hair dangled down over his shoulders, and he

fidged the whole time. Geekiness personified. Gort, on the other hand, was not at all what Sean had expected. He was, Sean guessed, about four and a half feet tall, and had the short limbs characteristic of dwarfism. He also sported a long ginger beard that wouldn't look out of place in a Tolkein epic. His eyes were quick and angry. Sean thought he'd earned those from a lifetime of harassment.

An elderly great-aunt and uncle, Mrs. Patel, and two girls from Teagan's salon completed the funeral party.

Sean had gathered from Clive that, when questioned by the police, all of the girls denied arranging to meet Teagan for drinks the night she was killed. Her presence in that part of London on that fatal occasion seemed destined to remain a mystery, although her brother had his suspicions. Perhaps she had a date with a man who didn't like makeup and high heels? Although, Clive admitted, he had reservations as to whether such a male creature existed.

Sean had also been interviewed by two police detectives and had volunteered a DNA sample – which, he surmised, would likely be of limited use, given the Angel's MO. He had thought, as Teagan's ex-boyfriend, and someone who didn't have any witnesses to corroborate the story that he was at home that evening, he might have encountered some difficulties with the questioning. But the officers appeared simply to be going through the motions. Thanks to his father's intervention twelve years before, Sean had no criminal record. And the policemen seemed unaware of the other recent and unusual death in his apartment building. Either that, or they saw no cogent link between the two happenings. Sean concluded they already had a more fruitful line of enquiry.

In spite of his discussion with Avery at their first meeting, he did not raise the issue of the computer hacking. He did not want to set any hares running that might throw suspicion on him or involve Avery in the investigation. Moreover, it had crossed his mind that Teagan might in fact have been the hacker – and, if that were the case, it would definitely complicate matters. He felt bad about telling Avery afterwards that the police would be looking into it, and he resolved never to lie to her again. She trusted him. She must never have a reason not to trust him.

Clive nudged him. It was time for Sean to give the eulogy. *Too late to back out now.*

He stepped forward, unfolding the paper he carried in his jacket pocket. His palms were wet and his throat was dry: the exact reverse of how it should have been.

“We are all here to remember Teagan, and to say goodbye,” he began. “As her friends and her family, we all were shocked at the manner of her passing. She was so young, and so full of life, and she was taken from us so suddenly.

“We will all remember her bubbly personality, her wicked sense of humour, and her great, undiscovered talent as a poet and songwriter. I would like to read one of her poems to you now.” He cleared his throat. He felt self-conscious, but launched off regardless.

There are hours

There are nights

There are days

That cover us in shadow

There are times

In our lives

We feel lost

And alone and afraid

When the mantel clock

Ticks flat and slow

And branches scratch

At the window panes

When the dark things come

But not all is lost

For this is but

A transient dream. . .

Sean continued his oration, citing Teagan's virtues, real and imagined. The clichés limped out, shameless and florid, and then suddenly it was over. He shook hands with Teagan's relatives, and helped a tearful Mrs. Patel out into the blustery air.

"That was beautiful, Sean," an emotional Clive said. "She would have been so proud. And I had no idea my sister could write non-rhyming stuff. Most of what I'd heard from her before was more, like, *dum-diddly-diddly-diddly-dum-dum-do*."

"Obviously, you underestimated her."

"Want to come back with us to Metalhead's for a few beers?"

"Thanks, but I'm not really a beer man."

"I – uh – might have some Coke," Clive's taller friend muttered.

The shorter one said, "I definitely have some," and the three of them giggled at some private joke.

"I'll take a rain check, if you don't mind."

"I understand," Clive said. "Anyway, thanks again for everything. I'll see you, yeah?"

Sean nodded, fastened his coat, and thrust his hands into his pockets. Winter was here, and so was the next party of mourners. The conveyor belt continued to turn. Teagan's ashes would be placed in a woodland area of the grounds, and life would move on.

It always did.



"Am I late?" Sean asked, taking his seat at the restaurant table.

"No, I was early," Avery replied.

"You look beautiful."

"Thank you kindly." Her smile failed. "How did it go this afternoon?"

"It . . . went."

"Are you all right? Was it horrible?"

“I’m fine. Clive was in a bit of a state, as I’d expected, but he managed to hold things together. It’s over now. Let’s talk about your day. Did you speak to Jerry? Was he happy you’d sent him the manuscript?”

Avery wrinkled her nose. “Yes. He was so happy he fired me.”

Sean’s mouth dropped open. “He did *what*? That fucking piece of shit.” He took her hand. “Avery, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to use that sort of language. What I meant to say was, ‘That fucking asshole.’”

Avery threw her head back and laughed. Sean could sense a release of tension, but she still wore a slightly dazed look. And no wonder. She needed a job. In spite of her brave exterior, Sean knew she must be worried sick. Just as his life was coming together, it seemed hers was about to fly apart.

As one door closes, another one slams shut in your face too.

“I’m sorry, Avery,” he said. “What reason did he give?”

“His wife doesn’t like him having an attractive blonde around the office.” She looked away.

“That’s outrageous. You need to sue PMT’s pants off. That’s unfair dismissal. And he did this over the phone? The coward.”

“That wasn’t the weirdest thing about my day, though.”

“No? It gets worse?”

“When Travis heard what had happened, he called Jerry on the phone and told him he was severing his contract with PMT. Said he was moving to another agency, and he was taking me with him.”

“Bloody hell.” Sean was having trouble keeping up with the series of revelations. “You have had a day-and-a-half. And I thought mine was weird.”

“I’m having trouble processing it myself.”

“Is Travis serious?”

“As far as I can tell.”

“Good for Travis. He’s gone way up in my estimation. I’d better buy his new book.”

The ghost of a smile crossed Avery’s face.

“He must be fond of you,” Sean said, a gleam in his eye. “And no wonder.”

“I think it’s more that he hates Jerry.”

“I doubt it. How do you feel about the idea of taking care of Travis at a new place? I know this sacrilegious thread of his causes you distress and soul-searching. It must feel a little bit like making a deal with the Devil, but it’s no worse than working for Jerry? Or is it?”

Over the last few minutes, ideas and scenarios had begun jumping frenetically into Sean’s mind, but he had to know how Avery was feeling before he voiced any of them. He didn’t want to add to her distress.

A waiter arrived and hovered around the table.

“Can you give us a few minutes?” Sean asked.

“Certainly, sir.”

Avery gazed at their entwined fingers. A few moments went by. “I don’t know what to do,” she said eventually. “All this is coming at me very fast.”

“Are you talking about your employment situation?” His voice was soft. “Or us?”

Avery tipped her chin down. “Both, I guess.”

“Okay, let’s deal with the job first.” He sat up straight. “Listen, Avery, you are a very capable woman, more so than you realise. You got Travis sorted out. That’s some achievement in itself. Without you, his whole project would be dead in the water, and what is more, you’ve had to work against every instinct to get him over the line. You have contacts, and I’m damn sure you’re better thought of in your profession than you think. You’re too modest by half.” It sounded like a prepared speech, but now he had started, Sean had to continue.

“Keep talking,” she said, her eyes glinting. “I like it.”

“Stop trying to put me off. I’m serious. Tomorrow you should get on the phone to the literary agencies you know in London. Tell them you’re representing Travis Bishop. They’ll be all over you like a rash.”

“In London? I can’t work in London.” Her voice had a panic-stricken squeak.

“Why not? Why can’t you?”

“Because of my mother. Look, Sean, we’ve talked about this already –”

He cut her off. “No, we haven’t.” It was the moment of truth. Sean had to throw the dice. He took a deep breath. “You’ve talked about it, and I’ve nodded and made sympathetic noises. But I haven’t told you what *I* think.”

Avery saw the sincerity lighting up his eyes. “Boy, when you get assertive, you *really* get assertive, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, withdrawing his hands. “It’s because I care.”

“Then don’t let go.” Her voice was a whisper.

Sean took her hands again and leaned towards her, encouraged. “All your life you’ve been a care giver.” He began slowly. “You told me about the promise you made to your father. But you’ve done everything you can for your mother. And more. All feelings of guilt aside, you must *know* that in your heart. Your mother needs professional care. Full-time professional care. You can’t do that, sweetheart. It’s not just about you. It’s about her too. You have to let go.”

Avery studied his face. “You called me ‘sweetheart’,” she said.

“Yes, I did.”

“But – London? Where would I live?”

“That’s simple. You can stay in one of the apartments in my building. We have two empty ones. You can stay rent-free for six months, and if my father doesn’t like it he can go and screw himself.”

Avery balked. “Rent-free? I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can.”

“And what happens after six months?”

He looked into her eyes. “No matter what, you’re welcome there for the six months. If during that time you find you’re no longer in love with me, I’ll help you find somewhere to live. But if you are still in love with me, you’ll share my flat.”

Avery could hardly breathe. “What makes you think I’m in love with you?”

Sean tilted his head. “Aren’t you?” he asked. “I’m in love with you.”

Sean adjusted the angel on top of his small Christmas tree, and thought of Goose.

The trainee had toned down a little since his encounter with death. Sean suspected Mrs. Belka had given her son a stiff talking-to and Goose's patrols on the streets of London came to an abrupt end. Though his behaviour remained eccentric, when consulted, he could still be relied upon to voice a conspiracy/destiny/mathematical explanation for any puzzle. But in general, these days he was keeping his esoteric musings to himself. Janice had bought Goose a battery-powered Japanese Waving Lucky Cat. It was cheap, gold-coloured, and hideous, but it occupied pride of place behind the Tower Bridge Beans counter; and whenever Goose was anxious, the rhythmic, predictable movement of the cat's paw seemed to calm him.

Goose remained, in Sean's opinion, a chronic nut-case. However, his obsession with detail did result in consistent, perfectly-made coffees. So long as he didn't foist his wacky theories on the customers, Goose appeared destined to remain a long-term fixture in the shop.

Sean picked up his cell phone and called his father. Of late, their conversations had taken on a more positive and conciliatory tone. Sean felt more assured when talking to the old man. Whether it was Sean's new-found confidence since he had met Avery, or his father's reflection on his own mortality, or a combination of the two, didn't matter. Sean would be spending Christmas in Edinburgh, and both of them were happy about it.

"Hello, Sean."

"Hi, Dad. How are things?"

"Good. And they'll be even better if you bring that bottle of malt you promised next week."

"It's already bought and wrapped. But you're not opening it until the twenty-fifth."

"I thought you'd say that. Charles and Hannah will be joining us for Christmas dinner, by the way. Too bad your friend Avery had to leave before the holiday. Have you spoken with her since she left?"

“We Skype every day. She’ll be flying back in a few weeks to meet with a couple of literary houses that are interested in signing her and representing Bishop’s next book.”

Kenny Senior clicked his tongue. “So she’s still keen on moving to London? I thought she might change her mind once she was home and had, you know, her friends and family about her.”

“She seems to be happy about returning.”

“Sean?” There was a thoughtful silence at the other end of the phone, and Sean knew his father was choosing his words carefully. “Have you told Avery about your situation?”

“You know, you can use the word ‘schizophrenia’, Dad. It’s not a swear word. I’ve said I suffer from anxiety problems from time to time, but no, I’ve not gone into details.”

Don’t you think. . .?”

“I think there’ll be a right time to tell her, but it’s not now. Besides,” he added, “everything is under control, and it’s been that way for a long time. We forget it all happened over twelve years ago. For most people, that’s ancient history. Of course I’ll tell her. But not yet.”

His father sighed. “I suppose you’re right. And it’s your decision, after all.” He sounded relieved. “Hannah bought Bishop’s first book and read it.”

“So what did she think of *Nosferatu*, *the Lost Gospel*?”

Kenny Senior chuckled. “She said it was a bit pornographic in places. I think *Fifty Shades of Pray* was the term she used. Is Bishop still in London?”

“I gather from Avery he’s flown back to the States to be with his family for the holidays.”

His father made a snorting noise. “That’s a bit ironic, isn’t it? His celebrating the birth of Christ, I mean. Maybe he’s just raising a glass to his goose that lays the golden eggs. Let’s hope they’re not sacrificing goats. Or children.”

“Unlikely.”

“What’s Francis doing for Christmas? Have you seen him lately?”

“I don’t know what he’s doing. We haven’t spoken for a while. I’m not even sure he’s still in London. I must ring him. Anyway, listen, I’ve got some news.”

“Oh?” There was a short pause on the other end of the line. “Avery’s not pregnant, is she?”

“*Dad!*” Sean exclaimed in frustration. “It’s nothing like *that*. No, the manager at the coffee shop is leaving, and they’ve offered me the job. It’ll mean more responsibility, but more money.”

He could imagine his father trying to find the right words to respond. After a moment, he said, “Are you sure you want the added stress, Sean?”

“I know what you’re worried about, Dad, but it’s fine. Good grief, if I can handle a tenant dying on me and my ex-girlfriend getting murdered by the Angel of Death, I think I can run a coffee shop.”

“Point taken. At least there haven’t been any other Angel killings since. I suppose we should be grateful for small mercies. How’s the girl’s brother holding up?”

“He’s managing. I’m still checking on him every few days.”

“Good. Anyway, ring me tomorrow. I have to go now. It’s bridge night.”

“Will do. Have a good one.”

“You too, Sean.”

Sean looked at his watch. It had just turned seven. He felt too restless to watch television. There were three hours before his Skype call with Avery. He had time to kill. He went to the bathroom, washed his hands, and looked at his reflection in the mirror.

“Maybe I’ll go out for a long run. Get the adrenaline going.”

That’s a good idea, said the voice. A nice long run. Where will you go?

“Well, not to Islington, for a start,” he told his reflection. “So don’t even think about suggesting it.”

Of course not. The voice chuckled. *That would be too obvious.*

“Maybe I’ll try the South Bank. Maybe even as far as Westminster.”

Yes, that’s the spirit. We need to try new places. Somewhere farther afield.

Sean tore himself away from the mirror, changed into his running gear, and pulled on his hoodie.

He ran down the three flights of stairs, then out into the freezing night, to where the darkness of the city awaited him.

About the Authors

John Dolan



"Makes a living by travelling, talking a lot and sometimes writing stuff down. Galericulate author, polymath and occasional smarty-pants."

John Dolan hails from a small town in the North-East of England. After completing a degree in Law, he headed for London in search of attractive women and indoor toilets. Despairing of both, he trained as a Chartered Accountant, later holding Chief Operating Officer positions in the international power industry – thus allowing free rein to his chronic wanderlust. John has run businesses in Europe, South and Central America, Africa and Asia. He is currently based in Thailand.

John is the author of the 'Time, Blood and Karma' and 'Karma's Children' mystery series, among other things.

If you are so minded, you can contact him via Twitter [@JohnDolanAuthor](https://twitter.com/JohnDolanAuthor) or see his website johndolanauthor.com

Fiona Quinn



Fiona Quinn has made a life out of throwing caution to the wind. World traveled, Fiona has ridden camels across Egypt, an elephant in Prague, and eaten horse in Moscow (she sincerely wishes Google Translate existed back then). She has degrees out the yin-yang including B.A.s in History, Foreign Language, Psychology, (almost Art History), and an M.S. in Counseling. Along the way, Fiona has picked up other competencies that she sews into her writing. She's a Reiki Master, a Tae Kwon Do Black Belt, a certified archery instructor, and she shoots her Springfield 9mm in a very Zen fashion with much deep breathing and bulls-eye accuracy.

Canadian born, Fiona is now rooted in the Old Dominion outside of D.C. with her husband and four children. When not out seeking her next adventure, she unschools her kids, pops chocolates, devours books, and taps continuously on her laptop.

Fiona runs ThrillWriting.blogspot.com where writers learn to write it right.

For her other publications stop by FionaQuinnBooks.com