

NIGHT SHIFT



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by

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Some things never happen.

Yet sometimes they do.

And when the things that never happen, do happen,

We would all have been better off had they not.



Chapter 1

“Mallory?” he snapped gruffly as his eyes flicked quickly over the report he was holding. He sniffed and, just for a moment, a look of disgust flashed across his face as he casually flung the papers down onto a well-used metal table between them. “Is this all correct?”

He was slumped back in his chair, and the tone of his voice would tell anyone who wanted to know that he didn’t much care for any of this. In any case, he made no secret of it.

Mallory nodded back, his eyes averted to the wall off to one side. His hands were clenched in front of his chest and his head hung wearily as if it were just too heavy to hold up any longer. His palms were damp with perspiration, which stunk such that every breath filled his nostrils with the musty scent of his own soaked-in sweat.

When this had all started, these rooms, these people, this whole horrible situation had terrified him. Now it was just another room, another pair of people, and another terrible moment. He sighed a little as he felt himself sinking down further into this yawning abyss. Inside him a gaping chasm had opened up that he had been slowly falling into for days, and he was beginning now to lose himself. Had it been days? In these anonymous not-quite-white rooms with only glaring artificial light, the seconds blended together, the minutes clumped into hours, and those in turn slipped into one big blur. He just didn’t know anymore.

“Odd name,” he said dismissively, perhaps intended as an insult, albeit one that very little effort had been put into.

Mallory huffed a deep lungful of air and said softly, “It’s French. I’m not French—the name is French. Everyone always asks me if I’m French when I tell them that, but I’m not. I’m from Chelmsford. I don’t know why they chose that name, my parents. They always just smiled and told me they liked the sound of it. It was a little bit different.”

A woman was sat opposite, next to the older man, her arms folded tightly across her chest. She glared at Mallory tight-lipped and her eyes narrowed defensively. “You’re *not* French?”

Mallory’s eyes darted up and caught hers, then instantly looked away. Were they trying to provoke him?

“No,” he assured her. “I’m not French. I’m from Essex: Essex isn’t in France.”

The man and woman looked at one another, their eyes catching for a tiny moment. They appeared to have the kind of familiarity that could only be built from spending a great deal of time working together. Something flashed between them that was unspoken, but communicated nonetheless.

Mallory peered up shyly and caught the look in their eyes. What were they were making of him? What did they know that he didn’t? Was all this normal? For all he knew it could be.

The man finally spoke. “That might actually be worse than being French.”

“Graham!” the woman snapped under her breath, the voice of a mother scolding a child. Mallory thought he caught a little smirk flickering on her lips. “That’s probably offensive, or something.”

The man, Graham, rolled his eyes before a fairly broad smile opened up on his old, dried out lips. “Offensive to who? Essexers or the French?”

She shrugged her shoulders as if she was taking it perfectly seriously, but Mallory suspected neither of them were. “Both, probably!” she grumbled.

He flashed her a smile, but when he looked back over to the timid young man, the smile was gone. “Mallory,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ve read your statement.”

“Twice!” she added severely, her folded arms tensing a little more so that her tightly balled fists began to show at the sides.

Graham nodded in agreement. "I'd like you to tell us once again what happened. I'd like you to take us through it moment to moment in your own words."

"I've told you," he said weakly, already knowing that protests would get him nowhere. "I told the others; I told everyone who asked. I've told you, I've told you and I've told you, and all you do is ask again. When is someone going to do something?"

"Tell us one more time, please," she insisted. She had a firm way of speaking that left the impression that your choices were limited to doing exactly what she told you to do.

Mallory sighed. Telling his story to the police meant seeing it all once again; it meant feeling the fear, smelling the pain and reliving every ugly, brutal moment.

"One more time," he told them with a shudder. It was the only resistance he could muster and still not much at that. "Just one more time. One last time."

He looked at them both, holding their gaze for a brief, brave moment.

The room was sterile and almost grey. Between them, a dented metal table was screwed to the floor. It smelled of strong, cheap cleaning fluids and was plain except for a metal box fixed to the side with a single emergency button. A black rubber strip ran around the wall at around waist height and there were no windows out to the real world that carried on outside, oblivious to what nightmares had been relived in places like these.

Flickering fluorescent light made the place resonate with a sickly, unnatural glow. With his nerves on edge, sleep deprivation, and the sheer surreal nature of everything that was happening to him, the whole experience was shrouded in a dreamlike quality. After days of sitting in rooms like these, having his story dissected, questioned, probed and poked, it all seemed like nothing at all would ever be real again.

If nightmares were real, is this what it would feel like?

“One more time, Mallory!”

It wasn’t like he really had any choice.

The man was younger than the woman but not by much, and she seemed to be in charge, but when he spoke he did so with authority. His voice was like a sword dragged along solid granite, and sent a wave of nerves jangling up the young man’s spine. His eyes lit up, angry and accusing, and Mallory found it hard to meet his gaze. He found it best not to try.

“You don’t believe me?” he said weakly. Even softer, he added, “I’m the victim here but you don’t believe me.”

His voice was barely more than a whimper.

The officers looked at one another and, once more, their eyes shared more than he could see.

“Mallory,” she began with an animated sigh. Her arms unfolded so she could gesture at him in exasperation. “It’s not that we don’t believe you. The problem is rather that we do. I’ve seen the recordings of your interviews, and I believe that you’re telling us what you believe to be the truth—which is all we can ever ask for. For now though, I need to hear it one more time, in your own words. We need to hear what exactly you think happened.”

“Why?” he pleaded. “You know I’m not lying. You have to know I’m not lying.”

“Mallory,” she began haltingly, pausing briefly to massage her temples. “I’ve been assigned your case, so please trust me that I do know what I’m doing. Myself and Detective Constable Roach have heard the recording of your statement, and we’ve read the reports, but nothing can compare with hearing it for ourselves.

“I have nothing but sympathy for what you’re going through, but I’m afraid I must insist that you tell us one more time what happened.

“Please, Mallory. In your own time.”

“One more time, Inspector,” he said, infinitely sadly while his hands shook in fear.

“One more time!” she agreed. She couldn’t have failed to notice the tremor running through him.

With a sigh, he began while they listened intently.

“They weren’t dead when I got home!” he said grimly as he thought of the place, as he thought of what he’d seen.

“Who?” Roach insisted.

The Inspector shot him an angry flash of her eyes and shook her head for him to stop. “Start at the beginning please, Mallory.”

“I went out for coffee,” he said with a frown. It had all started in such a mundane place in such a hopelessly mundane way. “I had to move back with my parents last year, you see. My student loans were too much, and the only job I could get was in a video game shop. I wasn’t making enough to get my own place—at first anyway—so I ended up back with my folks.

“They were good about it: they had a loft conversion done as a Christmas present to me, so I have plenty of room up there. I even have a pretty decent view, if the gasworks is your thing.” A flicker of a smile flashed on his lips, but it was a hollow one. His eyes remained cold and hollow.

“After work, I went for a coffee with a couple of coworkers, Jim and Pat. I think they’re seeing each other, but we don’t talk about that. We didn’t stay long. I caught the bus back home, and got back about six forty five, I think.

“I went up to the door and it was open, just a crack. I didn’t really think much of it at the time. My Mum never leaves the door open: we don’t live in the best of neighbourhoods, and I’ve heard of kids from the estate running in and grabbing things. When I reached out, the door was cold to the touch and it seemed to tingle under my hand, just a little. It’s

like the warm buzz you get from talking on your mobile phone too long. You know what I mean?"

The Inspector nodded her head once, very reservedly. "You're doing fine. Keep going, please."

"Inside it was dark: darker than I've ever seen it. At first I thought that there must have been a power cut. Then I noticed the smell. It was like sulphur, rotten eggs, burning rubbish. I couldn't quite tell, but it was overwhelmingly awful, just awful. I thought maybe we'd had a gas leak and had to cut the electricity for safety. I was worried.

"I called out, I think. I guess I must have. 'Mum,' I shouted, but there was no reply. I heard noises from somewhere, some dull thumping sound. Now, I'm scared: my heart leapt and my mouth went dry. I must have known something was wrong because all I wanted to do was run out of there screaming as fast as I possibly could. It was like something had curled itself around my brain and was whispering terrible things into my ears.

"But I couldn't run."

He hung his head as it all came back to him. He paused to take a few breaths and clear his head.

The two officers looked him over and then cast a troubled look at one another. "What happened next, Mallory?" she insisted, but a little more softly than before.

He looked up, and a vague, sad and slightly twisted smile began to play across his lips. "People always laugh at the horror movies, don't they? They always say, *He should have run out of there*, or *She shouldn't be going there alone*. But that's really what you do—you can't help it! Something takes over, something deep inside. You tell yourself you're just being silly and there's nothing to be afraid of. This is real life—there *are* no monsters here.

"So I carried on. I went through the house, my parent's house that was now cloaked in this unnatural blackness, like the shadows

themselves were taking it over. I took out my phone, I think. I must have, because the lamp was still on later. I may have called out again. I can't exactly remember anymore."

Detective Inspector Grace sniffed to herself and turned to her colleague. He never noticed her this time, and just continued to stare at the hapless young man as he told his story.

"I went to the kitchen. Everyone is always in the kitchen, aren't they? My Mum says the kitchen is the heart of a house, just like the stomach is the heart of a man." Mallory looked down and his shoulders slumped as a fresh wave of sadness washed over him.

"She always *said*..." he corrected himself, wiping a finger along the outer edge of his left eye.

After a lengthy pause where he got a little lost in his thoughts, Detective Roach, quite bluntly asked, "What did you find in the kitchen, Mallory?"

He looked up: his eyes had reddened, and he was shaking. "I found my parents," he told them. "Most of them."

"Most of them?" she asked and he nodded back to her.

"My father was laying on the floor behind the table. There was blood everywhere, but I could tell from his slippers it was him. I mean, I *knew* it was him, you can just tell somehow. The problem was that his face was gone. All that was left was a bloody red pulped mess spread thinly across his skull. His eye-sockets were empty, leaving just two dark holes where his eyes were meant to be. His teeth were jutting out, making him look like some sickening grinning monster.

"I think his hands were missing too but... it was hard to tell."

"Because of all the blood?" suggested the Detective helpfully, earning himself another angry glare.

"Because of all the blood, yes.

"All I did was just stand there, staring at it all. I didn't even see my Mum at first: I just stared at my father, with his wide, open eye

holes. I saw bubbles of blood coming from between his teeth, and then I heard a croaking sound. His whole body jolted once and then went limp.

“That was the worst. He’d been alive. He’d been alive right up to then, the whole time someone had torn off his face and plucked his eyeballs right out of his skull. He’d been alive, and had felt everything they’d done to him. Right there, in that moment, I knew it.

“My mother was just lying over the table, sitting in a chair but slumped forward helplessly. There was just so much blood.”

There was another protracted silence. The Inspector swallowed hard, and finally broke it by saying, “And did you see who did this?” Her voice cracked as she asked.

“I saw a black figure,” he told her, nodding. “That was when I ran. Something else took over then, I guess.”

“A dark-skinned man?” The Detective wrenched his eyes away, breaking whatever spell was holding him fixated on this story. He ran his eyes over the report.

“No!” said Mallory.

“A man dressed in black then?”

“No!” said Mallory again.

“A man silhouetted by a brightly lit window, perhaps?” suggested the Inspector.

“No!” said Mallory, yet again and more impatiently. “It was none of these things.”

The Detective shrugged. “Then what?”

“A black figure. A figure made of black. Something tangible formed of darkness, and then swallowed back up by it.” He shook his head, struggling for the words. “It was like a man was wearing a shadow, or maybe he *was* a shadow. A living shadow, darkness itself in the shape of a human.”

The officers looked at one another, not even blinking. Slowly, the Inspector turned to him and said, “It sounds like a nightmare.”

Mallory nodded sadly, sniffed hard and wiped a very conspicuous tear from his eye. He was close to breaking now, to emotionally caving in as it had all become more than he could handle.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But that was just the beginning, wasn’t it?”

Chapter 2

“What do you think?”

DI Grace stared fixedly at a cup of coffee served in a little waxed-cardboard cup that neither kept the coffee warm nor her fingers cool. The round glass jug it had originated from was covered in dirty fingerprints where nobody had taken the time to clean it, or at least try to do a proper job of it. The coffee had been left stewing on the plate for many hours at the back of a filthy little shared kitchen, and she knew it was going to taste like anger, if that were a thing you could pour into your mouth.

DC Roach ran his fingers through his thinning, slicked back grey hair. His eyes widened and he blew a lungful of air noisily out through his mouth, shaking his head slightly. The question was deceptively tricky to answer.

“It’s quite a story, I’ll give you that,” he told her. “Quite a story. It has the benefit of being one of the very few things I’ve heard in my life as a copper where I can honestly say, *That’s new to me.*”

She sighed loudly and leant back against the counter. The machine shifted behind her, spilling a little as the coffee sloshed about in the glass jug. She didn’t care enough to notice.

“He believes that this is what happened!” she said, frowning deeply. Normally she was a quite restrained person, but this time her hands joined in, making a forceful chopping motion as she spoke. “I’m sure that he believes that this is absolutely, exactly and completely what he saw. I’m convinced he’s telling us the truth!”

“I don’t know,” said Roach. “People are funny animals when it comes to the truth—I see it all the time! Yeti sightings, the Loch Ness Monster... When someone believes in some farfetched nonsense—*really* believes it, I mean—but they just can’t find a way to *prove* it, they have no qualms faking evidence or inventing anecdotes to support their belief.

After all, the thing is real, so what does it matter if this *one story* technically isn't?

"If he genuinely believes that shadow monsters are going around killing peoples' parents, unchecked, without due process, he'd happily make the story up, because to him the only lie would be a detail, an unimportant technicality. Sure, it didn't really happen to *him*, on *this occasion*, but it's totally real and happening all the time!"

"That's a bit of a stretch," replied Grace, shaking her head. "If he claimed he'd been abducted by aliens, had his kidneys stolen, or was the victim of a hate crime—you know, common urban legends, that sort of thing—then you'd probably be onto something. Not this though: it just doesn't fit the pattern.

"*It's new to me, too!*"

"Fair point..." Roach shrugged, and shook his head sadly. Suddenly, he remembered something—a detail. "Did you see his hands? The way he started shaking when he talked about his Dad... It was like he didn't even realise he was doing it." He nodded to himself thoughtfully for a moment before continuing, "I hate to say it, but yeah, I think you're right. I think he's telling the truth."

There was a silence between them for a moment. This stretched on uncomfortably for nearly a whole minute.

"Have you ever seen *anything* like this? Have you ever even *heard* of anything like this?"

Roach shook his head, then huffed a sigh. "I once heard this story from the Southeast. Some kid was hearing voices that told him how to get rich, how to make a success of his life. He kept a diary, planning all the while to kill his parents and get adopted by a wealthy family. He said someone was telling him to do it, and he even saw this person and spoke about them like he thought they were real.

"Eventually it happened. He turned up one night at a friend's house, drenched in blood. Said his family had been attacked. In reality,

he'd beaten his father to death with a shovel, I think, and slashed his mother with a kitchen knife. He'd set fire to the house to cover his tracks.

"Detectives caught up, and they quickly figured out what was going on. But at the same time, they didn't, you know?"

She frowned curiously. "No. I don't."

"I mean, it's one thing to retrace his steps: to find out what happened, what he did," he explained. "That's good enough for the prosecution, but it's not really solving the case. If you want a solution, you need to have an answer. Why would a kid do this? Why really? What kind of kid gets so screwed up that he murders his own family? That's the question we really need the answer to."

She flashed him a glance, finding herself nodding along in agreement with him. He was right of course.

"Did they ever find out?"

He shrugged. "His motive was to be adopted by a rich family. That was what they were looking for, so that was that—case closed!"

"But it makes no sense. Everyone believes they're one of the good guys, but he planned and executed a double murder! He had to have understood the complex set of consequences it would all entail, so how could he justify this to himself? Some crazy notion that he might end up living with rich people just doesn't ring true—I could never see it. I always felt like something big, something very important, was missing from the case."

"Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." She took a noisy sip of coffee. She was tired, and these snatched little moments of peace where the pressure momentarily abated let that exhaustion slip through: now she noticed it more sharply and pointedly than ever before.

He frowned at her curiously and his right shoulder slowly moved up as if he was about to shrug. "Cigar?"

“Sigmund Freud,” she told him. “He said that when you dream about a cigar, sometimes it represents a penis, but other times it doesn’t mean anything—it’s just a cigar! Sometimes things don’t mean anything: they’re just exactly what they appear to be, and nothing more besides.

“What I mean is, some people are just crazy. Some people’s logic is just bafflingly irrational to the rest of us. If we really understood what was going through the mind of someone like that, would we really want to?”

Roach let a tiny, dark, reserved smile begin to take shape on his lips. “Yes, I would!” he told her. “If it meant that one less person needed to suffer having their head smashed in with shovel, or their throat slashed with a kitchen knife, then I’d be willing to plumb the depths just a little bit more. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t do it too, because nobody does this job for the money. You’re just as warped as I am—don’t pretend you’re not.”

“I don’t know, Graham!” she said suggestively with a raised eyebrow. “*Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar!*”

The police station, located at the outskirts of Central London, was as clean and modern as such places could get, but still it had managed to wear before its time. The off-white painted walls already looked faded and dull. The posters and pictures had curled at the edges as the colours washed out. The grey tiles of carpet had discoloured and flattened out, the cheap nylon fibres having given up long ago as they began their descent into decay.

It had once been bright and cheerful, designed to give a more upbeat experience and keep the mood from becoming sombre. Now it was exactly what it had been designed to avoid, a stark reminder that it was what it was. It was a place people came with the kinds of problems that changed their lives. It was a place of dark memories and nightmares

that touched the soul with the icy fingers of the very worst things that could be imagined.

For the people who worked there, it was darker still because they truly understood what it was, and had seen it at its worst. Each person passing through had a life, a universe of their own that converged there at its lowest point.

They saw different people, but they always wore the same face. They saw victims and perpetrators so often that eventually, nobody could wear a mask that really disguised them. Their innocence had been lost and, in its place, their emotions had scarred over, building hard callouses for their own protection.

They stood now, outside the interview room. They were done with reports and recordings; there was nothing to be learned from further conversations. Now, choices had to be made and actions taken.

“You take the lead, Graham,” she told him, but her voice lacked its usual strength. She was unsure of herself now.

“You’re the lead officer, Sandra,” he said, not quite forcefully. “You should do this one. I don’t have a clue anyway...”

“No, I want you to do it,” she said finally. “I want to watch him; I want to see his reactions. I want to see if there’s any crack in his facade.”

Roach nodded. “You and me, both.”

He looked away thoughtfully. She knew when he was working something over in his mind, and when he was just watching his thoughts to see where they might go. He had no more idea about how to proceed with this than she did.

“We’re doing this then, right?”

“We are!”

“OK,” he said and nodded firmly. He seemed hesitant.

“Is there something you want to say to me?” she asked.

“Detective?”

“We’re throwing rocks at an egg,” he said softly.

She nodded very slightly. He wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t right either. “I want to break that egg. I want to see what’s inside.”

She took a deep breath and stood up straight, stretching her stiff and aching shoulders. She was resolved on this course of action. She hadn’t been sure before, but now it seemed the only way. “Take the lead, Detective Constable,” she told him, ushering him to the doorway behind which Mallory was sitting, waiting in his dark and broken little world.

“The trouble with eggs, is that once you find out what’s inside, you can’t put them back together again. And when you get right down to it, what’s inside is always pretty much the same. It’s just a mess that someone else has to clean up.”

Stretching the metaphor a little further, she added, “Some eggs are rotten.”

He glared at her for a moment. It had been a long day for them both.

“And some are just *cigars*.”

“Mallory,” he said, pulling out his seat. It dragged along the tiled floor of the interview room, scraping along with a screeching noise that set the Detective’s teeth on edge. He winced and tutted to himself. “I’d like you to come with us, please.”

The officers took their places across the table from him. Mallory began to fidget nervously, and then his hands wrung together as a look formed across his careworn face that went unsettlingly close to panic.

For a moment, she was sure his bottom lip had begun to shake, but either way, his breathing had certainly quickened.

“Where are we going?” he demanded with horrified, wide eyes, his fear temporarily lending him strength.

She watched in silence, casting an occasional glance to her colleague. She needed to get a feel for what might be going through his

mind, but the overwhelming bulk of her attention was on the victim, the suspect, the witness, whatever the hell it was she was meant to think of him as.

Whatever else he might be, there was no denying that he was scared. That was real and it would take a better liar than a boy who sold video games to get a trick past a seasoned professional like her. She continued to watch. He wasn't lying, but he couldn't be telling the truth either. What exactly was really going on here?

She'd seen it before many times. People not quite exactly lying, but believing something that was wrong, misled by their own mistakes. This wasn't that; this wasn't a delusion; this wasn't a lie. He was absolutely, certainly and unequivocally convincing, and yet he simply couldn't be correct.

This, she knew, was why the case had found its way to her desk, so far up the chain of command. Talking to him was troubling: it set your nerves jangling; it left a mark on your mind like a footprint in the snow. She had found herself believing him. He was pouring out the truth, a truth that never deviated, never changed. It was the truth, and her mind was happy to completely accept this without question, and yet... yet...

"You know where we're taking you." DC Roach cast a sideways glance at her, a little sliver of ice in his eye. It was a feeling they both shared, and if a senior officer had put her in the same position that she'd put Roach, she might have very likely railed against it just the same. But it *had* to happen.

This was for him, for Mallory. This was the best they could do for him, however it ended up. She hoped she had that much humanity left, but it was hope nonetheless and far shy of certainty.

He shook his head, slowly at first, and then more assuredly as his fear seemed to grip him. "No!" he said over and over, before suddenly

springing up from his chair with enough force to send it skittering backwards across the vinyl tiles, and clattering noisily into the wall.

Reflexively her hand went to the emergency button, but Roach was already standing, his right hand outstretched. On his face he wore as sympathetic a look as she had ever seen.

“Mallory...” he said, loud at first but then his voice softened as he continued. “We’re going to take you back, myself and the Inspector here. We’ll take two uniformed officers along with you. You will be protected the entire time. At no point will we leave your side.”

Their eyes locked together. Mallory’s shoulders rose and fell, his chest heaving as he breathed ragged, gasping breaths. His face was white and his eyes were sharp and clear, staring fixedly ahead.

“I have to do this, don’t I?” he said, his voice a weak, empty little apology that sounded like the voice of a man who had exercised hard in weather too cold to leave him breathing comfortably.

“We have to,” he assured him. “We’re all going together.”

“You’ll be with me?” Mallory looked away, hanging his head. His chest rose and fell as he gasped in lungfuls of air.

“Every step of the way!”

“You’ll be fine, Mallory,” the Inspector added, really much more sympathetically than she’d intended.

If this egg was going to break, then what on earth were they were going to find inside it?

Chapter 3

The car moved swiftly along the cluttered inner-city roads. Detective Roach drove with purpose and was aggressive in traffic, as he was in all aspects of his life: at least, that was Mallory's assessment of him so far.

The short journey had been undertaken with the three of them speaking only in short, economic sentences to one another, punctuated by the occasional growl from the driver and muttered accusations of incompetence, a lack of married parentage, and questions regarding the fitness of other motorists to tie their own shoes. Inspector Grace barely seemed to notice. Her mind was clearly somewhere quite else.

Mallory watched the grey and red buildings streaking by the side windows as he gazed out in silence. Nothing of great importance was going through his mind that he was aware of. He wasn't really thinking so much as feeling, and what he was feeling scared him to the very marrow in his bones.

The car shunted to an uneasy halt at the back of a row of stationary cars, lining up for their turn to pass through a set of traffic lights. It wasn't far back to the house he had lived in, but he would certainly never think of it as home again.

Out of his window, he saw a shop selling newspapers with a motorcycle parked up outside, the engine still idling. A bell above the door rang as two uniformed high-school girls left the shop chatting and laughing, carrying a magazine and a large bag of crisps. He took in the totally normal, mundane, everyday scene as people went about their day, buying cigarettes, sweets and news. They had no idea what lurked beneath the surface of their worlds. Their reality was a sham, a fine illusion stretched paper-thin over a world of nightmares.

At any moment they could step into their house and out of their world, just as he had done. One door could separate them from all of

their greatest fears. It didn't even matter if you knew what those greatest fears were: they would always know you.

Mallory sighed to himself and frowned. Where was he going to live now? He certainly wouldn't return to that house, not after everything he had seen. Where would he go? What kind of life was there left for him to live after everything that had happened? What kind of life could anyone have after they realised that reality, sanity, the foundations of civilisation were no more than skin deep?

"How are you doing, Mallory?" a voice asked. At first he wasn't even sure which one of them had asked it.

"I'm fine," he said quite automatically without thinking. He realised that he had been thinking about the future. Surely that was a good sign, he hoped.

Were people really this robust? Could the human psyche adapt to these kinds of experiences? Would he put it behind him like some forgotten piece of news splashed across the front of a newspaper one day, to be forgotten mere moments later? Did it even matter that much when you got right down to it?

Everyone dies, he thought to himself. Everyone treads lightly on the universe, leaving their shallow tiny footprints, a mark washed away by the first heavy downpour or obscured by the passing by of just a few other people. What might lie beyond all that? What mysteries were hiding behind the veil of death that we ignore every day?

Certainly the philosophers and the religious struggled with their answers, but the rest of us accepted the unconscious truth that we simply weren't built to know, that we wouldn't know, and perhaps we *couldn't* know. Against that tide of ignorance that we all, collectively, had been forced to accept, perhaps this one tiny, insignificant mystery was nothing in the grand scheme of things? It was no more than a footstep in the rain, and would be gone before the sun shone down on him once again.

"I'm alright," Mallory said bravely. This time it wasn't them he was trying to convince.

Inspector Grace told him firmly, "We'll be right with you. A uniformed unit is going to meet us at the house as well."

The fear returned as the car began to move towards the glowing green traffic signal. The car carried on, picking up speed as it passed through the junction and on up the road with a slight shudder.

"Mallory, I need to ask you a question!" The inspector shuffled around in her seat, struggling to slacken off the seatbelt so she could turn to the rear to face him. She fumbled for a moment and finally managed it, resting her elbow across the back of her chair. "Is there anything more you want to tell us?"

Mallory's eyes widened as he stared back at her with a look of confusion. "No," he stammered.

"OK. Well, do you want to *change* anything about your story?" she offered. "If there's anything you want to add, any extra detail you need to tell us, or perhaps something you might have said that now you're not sure about, then this is the time. This is your last chance."

"Change my story?" he frowned accusingly. "I've only told you the truth. I didn't add or keep out anything. I told you exactly what I saw, in exactly the way I remember it."

She cast a glance to her colleague. He hadn't been watching, but had been listening to the exchange with rapt interest. The pair of them looked at one another. He flashed his eyes over, and then quickly back to the road.

"Alright, then," she said, evidently not quite satisfied, but stopping just short of sounding like she was accusing him of anything. In fact, it sounded like she had heard precisely what she'd expected to hear.

"Do you think I made any of this up?" he asked, gazing out as the blurring buildings flashed past the window.

“We’re not saying that,” she told him firmly. “It’s just that, well, you understand what’s happening here?”

He closed his eyes, and very slowly, very slightly shook his head with a silly smile on his lips. He didn’t understand at all. How could he? This was madness through and through, and no sane mind could grasp it without screaming out in protest.

“All I know is what I saw. That’s all I know.”

The house was like any other in that part of town. It was the kind of house that was just a little bit inferior, so that when you saw it, you would hope that you’d never end up in something like it yourself. For that reason, it went unnoticed, for the most part. You could go past it a thousand times and notice something else each time before you eventually turned your eyes towards it.

It was the third along in a row of almost identical units. Each had a painted wooden door, and a window set into the wall beside it, off to the right, cut into the white, painted-over bricks. The grass out the front had no path and was clearly communal: the tenants were perhaps not fit to be trusted with the responsibility of keeping their own gardens looking tidy.

The car came to a rest with quite a notable bump as Roach laid his foot down on the brake with a little too much enthusiasm. Stopping was followed by a grinding ratcheting clicking sound of a handbrake being applied, while the engine noise melted away into nothing.

They sat in silence. For a moment, all Mallory could hear was the sound of his own breath. The door to the house loomed large before his eyes. It was just a few meters away now, a short walk across the grassy path he’d played on as a child.

It had little pots of flowers to decorate it once, but they had gone now, leaving no evidence that they’d ever existed. He couldn’t even remember them going. He’d become so used to it all that things just

continued without him even noticing anymore. Had it been the same way with his parents? How had they changed over the years without him even realising it? How had he changed along with them?

Softly and without impatience, the Inspector's voice told him, "We're here, Mallory. This is your house, isn't it?"

"Thank you," he said. He wasn't sure what exactly he had to thank anyone for.

"Listen," she began. "We are going to take you up to the front door of that house, and then we're going to take you inside."

He hung his head sadly and closed his eyes. He closed them so tightly that his brow pulled down, closing over the top of his eyelids. "I know."

"I'd like you to show me around inside," she said sympathetically but firmly, and the firmness in her voice was now the more compelling part.

"You want to see where it happened?" he asked. "You want me to show you where I found them?"

"Show us everything!" Roach told him.

"What if we see something?" he stammered fearfully.

The Inspector gave Roach a knowing look. "My colleague will video everything. There are two uniformed officers parked out here right along with us, and we've got batons and immobiliser sprays. We're ready for anything."

Mallory opened his eyes and a twisted smile widened across his lips. "You sound like a teenager," he quipped. "At that age, we all think that we know everything; we think we're as smart as we're ever going to get, and we know we're right about everything. Fast forward a few years, we look back and realise just how stupid we sounded, how naive we were to believe we knew anything at all."

“You think you’re ready for anything, but you’re not. None of us are. None of us have the first idea what we’re doing. We all think that we understand life, but we’re clueless!”

He just gazed at the door.

“That’s what happened to me, but it didn’t take years—it took less than a minute in that house. It happened in a mere matter of heartbeats, a moment that tore reality down around me.”

“Mallory…” she said, and then halted and looked away. What could anyone possibly have to say that could be added to that?

“Inspector, you don’t realise how unprepared, how naked, how vulnerable you are; you don’t realise how weak we all are. I do. I know.”

There was an uneasy silence.

“Anyway!” said Roach loudly, breaking through the awkward uneasiness that had settled on the interior of the car like a fog. “Let’s get on with it, then.”

The three of them walked gingerly towards the door. Despite what the Inspector had said, she was walking slowly, edging along towards the door, seemingly every bit as nervous as he was.

Mallory was certainly in no rush.

Roach went first. Not by much, but he marched ahead with all the confidence a man could muster. She stayed closer to Mallory, lending him the support he clearly needed.

Finally they had crossed the short distance and stood before the door. It was blue, and grey, and green, and red. His dad had painted it more times than he cared to remember, but for some reason the dark, ugly, satin green stood out sharpest in his memory, even though it was now painted over in thick white gloss with chips around the edges that showed off little hints of its previous colours.

“Are you going to ring the doorbell?” she suggested. It wasn’t a question, not really. Did he really have a choice? Did it really make much difference whose hand actually did it?

He took a deep breath and stepped forwards. His hand came down twice on the door, making a firm but slightly muted rapping noise.

Roach was facing back out to the road now. He pointed back to the door with his thumb. “Something wrong with the bell?”

“It hasn’t worked for years,” Mallory told him.

Roach shrugged and pressed it himself. Sure enough, the sound of an electronic doorbell echoed through the interior of the small house. He looked to the inspector and frowned. She raised an eyebrow curiously.

The unmistakable sound of someone approaching the door could be heard from inside. Mallory began to back away—he looked scared. His heart raced and the colour drained from his face. The Inspector grabbed his arm as he staggered back, almost losing his footing.

The door opened inwards. A woman peered out, her eyes looking over them. Then she frowned deeply to herself as her eyes fixed on Mallory. She looked sad, and seemed to slump quite noticeably. She looked a lot like him.

“Mallory...” she said softly.

“Mrs Gardener?” Roach confirmed. “Is this your son?”

“It is,” she told him with a warm little smile that she seemed to have to work a little too hard at.

Mallory was still backing away, but the Inspector held him in place, despite the effort taking all the strength she had.

“Mallory, is this your mother?” Inspector Grace asked softly.

“No,” he said. “She’s a good likeness, but my mother died. I found her dead in a pool of her own blood, together with the body of my father, with his face ripped off and his eyes gouged out.”

She sighed and huffed to herself. “Come on in,” she suggested wearily, stepping back to allow them through. “I’ll go and put the kettle on.”

Chapter 4

Detective Roach entered last, sweeping the way with his phone, recording everything from behind. Inspector Grace watched Mallory carefully as he edged gingerly forwards, slowly taking his time over every tiny step.

It was just a house—nothing special in any way. The carpet was a dull burnt-orange colour, wearing poorly just inside the door and fraying slightly at the edges where it had never really been fitted quite properly in the first place. The walls were painted white, in the hall at least, and it was a lacklustre job done by someone with no talent or interest in doing it.

Her professional eyes took in the details all around her. Nothing seemed out of place: the very few ornaments they had were dusty, and there were no pictures hanging that she could see. A large mirror with a cheap blue plastic frame hung on the wall, clearly meant for a bathroom. It stood above a shelf where the family dropped their keys next to a very old, yellowing phone that was hardwired into the wall. The wires were frayed. Perhaps they'd had a cat at some point.

It was a family home, exactly what you'd expect if you were to walk into it off the street, and nothing surprised her about it in the least. If anything violent had ever happened in this house, then she could see no motive for it. This was a house where ordinary, normal people lived. Low-income earners at a guess, taking home a little less money than it took to be really comfortable, but enough to make do. These weren't the usual targets of the kind of violence you might only find in the twisted nightmares of some horrific piece of contrived fiction.

"Mallory," she called softly, watching him carefully. "Is anything out of place? Do you see anything you don't recognise? Do you see anything wrong?"

Mallory turned to her. His face was ashen, a look of fear set onto it. "Yes, something is very wrong," he said sharply. "Somebody pretending to be my mother is walking around, making us a cup of tea after my real mother's brains were smashed in. The person pretending to be my dad also got a detail wrong, in that his face is still intact. Something is very, very wrong indeed!"

She sighed and cast a glance back at her colleague. "Look, Mallory. I have every sympathy with you. I believe that what you saw seemed very, very real to you. I have no doubt that what you're telling us is the absolute truth in the way you believe it to be. But, the fact is that there doesn't seem to be any evidence here of a murder. You tell us your parents died brutally, but all we see is a normal suburban family home, where your mother is making us a cup of tea.

"She's clearly quite worried about you, just as any mother would be."

His eyes narrowed angrily. "That's not my mother," he said darkly.

Roach added impatiently, "Then who is it, Mallory?"

"You tell me," he snapped. "You're the Detective!"

The Inspector shot Roach a glare and shook her head for him to stay out of it. "You're giving us very little to work with. I want to help you, but you need to help us to understand all this. What you're saying doesn't make sense."

He sighed. The fear seemed to melt away as a look of helplessness settled on his face. "I don't understand it myself. I wish I did."

She positioned herself directly in front of him, fixing him with a sharp stare. "Answer me this: is that your mother? Do you recognise her as the woman who raised you or not?"

He nodded. "It looks like her; it looks almost exactly like her in every way. It even acts like her, and sounds like her, but it isn't her. My

mother is dead.” He hung his head and sniffed, seemingly choking back tears. “I saw my parents dead. I watched my father cough his last breath right there in that kitchen.”

She looked over to Roach and raised an eyebrow.

“Why don’t you show us the kitchen?” suggested Roach. “Why don’t you show us where it happened?”

Inspector Grace nodded in approval. “Which way?”

She gestured forwards, intending to lead him to the scene rather than force him to take them there. Pushing him too hard would be a mistake: he was close to snapping altogether.

Perhaps Roach was right: maybe she was taking all this too quickly? Maybe she should have had him sectioned, investigated and assessed by more qualified experts in the field of mental illness? She was, after all, just a police officer. She wasn’t a councillor, a psychologist or a doctor. Maybe that was what he had needed all along? Maybe this steadfast belief in something that patently wasn’t real wasn’t as unusual as she imagined?

He gestured with a reserved nod towards a white door right at the end of the hall. “There!”

She led the way. Strangely, even though she knew that nothing like he’d described had happened in this house, that nothing had ever happened that came even close, she walked cautiously. She found herself dragging her heels, edging along slowly. She found a little voice in her head telling her she was giving Mallory enough time to keep up, but there was another, louder voice telling her she knew that was complete bullshit.

It was just something about Mallory. He was so believable, and his story had a way of crawling right up under your skin, as it had with her.

She should never have been there, investigating something as silly as this. He should have slipped through the cracks long ago, but

somehow, he had managed to be taken just seriously enough for his case to arrive in the CID office, to be investigated by professionals that dealt with serious crimes.

Was it the strength of his convictions that made him so compelling, or was it something else? What was it about his story that made people take him so seriously, even though they knew that nothing he was saying could possibly be true?

The wooden door had a brass-coloured handle, a round knob that you had to twist to open. She reached out for it. There was an electric tingle that sharply ran up her spine as a million butterflies began to dance in her stomach. She paused just for a moment and then turned to face him.

“This one?”

He nodded grimly.

She caught the look in Roach’s eyes. He looked just as nervous as she was, and wasn’t hiding it half as well. How had this young man’s delusion become so real to him, that it was being taken seriously by people who shouldn’t even be listening to him?

Her fingers tightened over the doorknob. It was cold to the touch, colder than she thought it should be, and looser too. It wobbled about as she unlatched the door. It made a tired groan as the hinges swung it open.

Mrs Gardener looked up from the kitchen counter, staring fixedly at them while flashing an awkward, apologetic smile. Everything seemed quite normal as the door opened on a fairly average scene. It was a kitchen, large enough to have a dining table with three mismatched chairs dotted around it. It was themed in green with plastic trim on top of melamine surfaced wood that was beginning to peel fairly badly.

“Won’t be long now...” she said, sounding a little nervous. “Just waiting for the kettle.”

The Inspector flashed her a measured smile and turned to gesture Mallory inside. "Could you join us in here, please?"

He stepped through the door, his eyes wide and fearful as he glanced around sharply, taking in every detail. He fixed on the table and the point on the floor he'd described so many times. "It was there," he said, pointing to the floor. He cast a glance over at the woman who appeared to be his mother. "That was where Dad was laying, face up in his own blood."

His mother grunted sadly, "Mallory..."

The Inspector held up a finger, gesturing for quiet. It was important to let him tell his story.

"He was face up, his head towards the hall door. He didn't move at first but then he shuddered." He winced as if remembering it was physically hurting him. "I saw a breath leave him; I heard him sigh. Little bubbles of blood came out the side of his teeth. They were clenched together, maybe in pain. I can't imagine how it must have felt to have his face torn off, ripped right off his head. It must have been agony, a feeling I can't even begin to..."

He stopped for a moment and took a deep breath while his mother grimaced at it all and shook her head sadly. He looked over and gave her an accusing glower. "She was sitting there, just where she always sits. She was slumped forward and just covered in blood."

She looked away, clearly distressed.

"I never saw her move: I didn't even know it was her at first," he explained weakly. "Her long brown hair was matted with blood, stuck to the side of her head. She was just red from the top of her scalp to the table. I couldn't see where her outline ended, there was just *so much* blood."

Mrs Gardener muttered something, dropped a metal tin of teabags to the counter with a noisy clatter and swiftly pushed past him to leave.

As she rushed out, she said, “Sorry...” quietly to the officers as tears began to roll down her face.

Mallory followed her with his gaze until she was gone. Footsteps noisily banged up the stairs and then, after a few long seconds, a door slammed shut angrily.

“I don’t see any evidence that anything happened here, do you?” she asked as she glanced about.

“No,” he said simply.

“So it didn’t happen!” she told him. “It couldn’t have, could it?”

He said sadly, softly, “No, it couldn’t have... But it did.”

It was Roach who spoke next. “What about the shadow? Where did that go?”

Mallory openly cringed and looked away. He reached out his slender arm and pointed to the side of the room where his mother had been standing. “It went there!”

The Inspector gave Roach a quizzical look. “There’s nothing there. That’s just a wall.”

“I know. It went right through it, right into it. The whole room was dark: as dark as it gets at night, but it was late afternoon. The whole side was in shadow and this man just melted into it.”

“I’m sure this must have been very real for you...” the Inspector began.

He cut her off, crying out suddenly, “It *was* real! I wish it wasn’t; I wish with every inch of my soul that it wasn’t, but it was! It was totally, completely and utterly real!”

There was a moment of silence. The Inspector began once more, “I’m sure it must have been very real to you but as you can see, there’s nothing here. There’s no sign of blood—and believe me, we checked. We’ve had officers in here already and we’ve found nothing. No trace of any of the things you’ve described.”

“There’s really nothing else we can do,” Roach added.

The Inspector was forced to agree. "There's just nothing left to investigate here. We've done our job as police, and we can't find any evidence of a crime, certainly nothing as horrific as you describe. If you have nothing else to add, if you can't help us to help you, then there really is nothing more we can do."

"My parents were killed!" he snapped, almost angrily but there was a deep well of sadness in his eyes, desperation in his voice.

"Your parents are right here!" she said, gesturing back the way his mother had gone. "At least, as far as we can see, they are. They're perfectly fine."

"Maybe this was just a dream?" Roach suggested.

"No!" Mallory pleaded. "I'm not crazy. I know you checked, so I know that you know I'm not crazy."

"We know you're not crazy," she agreed. "No history of mental illness anywhere in your family, in fact."

"We're boring," he told her with a desperate smile. "My Dad never even had a parking ticket. I don't go out much. I've never drunk more than four pints of beer in an evening. My Dad has an allotment and does gardening most weekends. My Mum makes cakes, and not even very good ones if I'm brutally honest."

"Mallory..." she began, but was at a loss of how to continue. What was there left to say? She'd been pushing her luck going this far. This entire case was going to be written off as either a prank that had gone too far, or burgeoning mental illness. Where else could it go?

"You're giving up, aren't you?" he said softly.

She stepped a little closer and put her hand on his shoulder. "You understand that we're police, not exorcists? We investigate crime and we catch criminals. There's no evidence that a crime even took place here; there are no tangible leads for us to investigate.

"There isn't a single thing we can do. We're out of options here."

Mallory closed his eyes tightly and stood there, a broken man.
“What happens now? What happens to me now?”

She shook her head. “I think I can arrange temporary accommodation for you, for a few nights. After that...”

“I can’t stay here, Inspector,” he pleaded, his eyes begging for help.

“Look, I’ll see what I can do,” she told him. “But long term, I think you need to prepare yourself for the fact that you’re going to have to just go home!”

Chapter 5

The hostel was a grim place. It looked like an old, disused office space that had been cleared out in a hurry, and even more hastily converted to living quarters on a budget of next to nothing. The place that had been assigned to him was a shared space. That meant that he only had a bunk to himself, screwed to a yellow plaster wall, in a room of four people, each having nothing more to themselves than a thin, worn-out blanket and a metal locker with a broken lock.

He sat down at a metal table, one of three in the dining area, and none of them matched. He had been warned to keep himself to himself but such a warning hardly needed to be made. It was plain to anyone that he was surrounded by people who were nothing like him. He was amidst the lowest of humanity in that part of the city: drug addicts, drunks and criminals on their way in and out of the prison system. These were people who had dark stories and tragic lives. They were people with nothing to lose, who had fallen through the cracks of society and were still on their way down.

The room stank of desperation, unwashed clothes and neglect. Sometimes it was nearly silent, and then that peace would suddenly be shattered by the sound of yelling or raised voices as someone decided it was their turn to be heard, and they weren't fussy who they were going to be heard by.

He sipped at a thin broth, some boiled down chicken bones turned into a soup. It was served with bread. The soup was surprisingly rather good. The bread was, shockingly, even better.

A voice punched through his thoughts, snapping him back to the here and now, even if there and then wasn't somewhere he would have ever chosen to be. "What are you in for?"

“In for?” he said and almost smiled. “This isn’t a prison, is it? Aren’t we all free to go?” He felt suddenly alarmed: it hadn’t occurred to him just how trapped he actually was. “Aren’t we?”

The man who had asked him was larger, older, and more confident than he was. He fitted into the place just a little too well. His head was shaved unevenly, his face was rugged with a cluster of scars below his right eye, and his old, worn clothing was purposefully tasteless. He wore a slightly ripped grey T-shirt that showed off tattoos on his arms, a mismatched tapestry of art that gave an impression of a man that just didn’t care, one who placed no great value in himself.

“Yeah!” he grunted. “Free to go where though?”

Mallory shook his head and returned his eyes to his food. “Not home, that’s for sure.”

“Well, new—boy, I’m Craig, and I drink too much,” he explained evenly. “Sometimes when I do, I hit people too hard. Because of that, I end up at Her Majesty’s pleasure fairly often.”

There was no pride in it. This wasn’t some idle brag: it was just the facts, the story of who he was laid bare.

“I got out last week. I can’t get a job with my record, so I drink too much and then the whole bloody merry-go-round begins turning once again.” He grinned, showing off an array of blacking teeth and several vacant slots around the sides.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Mallory with a knowing nod. This man, this violent alcoholic might be threatening him, or trying to make some kind of point, but it all meant so very little to him now. He even felt a bit sorry for him. It occurred to him that his emotions were so raw, so stretched, that he wasn’t sure what he was feeling anymore.

Craig snorted a sort of laugh, grinning to himself. “It’s just how it is, mate. Lots worse off than me in here. Lots of them older too. Just got to turn my luck around that’s all. Plenty of time—I ain’t dead yet!”

“I hope you do,” he told him evenly, even managing a little smile.

“You never said what you’re in for,” Craig said idly, pulling out a box from a pocket round the back of his jeans. He leant over and fumbled for a few seconds with yellow nicotine stained fingers.

“My parents were killed,” he said softly. “My father died right in front of me, he’d been cut to pieces. My mother, she was already gone by the time I got home and found them.”

Craig narrowed his eyes at him and just stared as he slung his box down on the table. He shook his head and said finally, “Bloody hell, mate. That fucking sucks.”

Mallory nodded in agreement. What else was there to be said?

Craig snapped open the lid of his green, metal tobacco box and began pulling out the parts of a cigarette to roll himself. He gestured to the box, “Do you smoke?”

Mallory shook his head and smiled. “I’m good, thanks.”

“My old man died about two years ago. Cancer got him. Started in his pancreas, I think, but he was riddled by the time they found out. It was too late to do anything much about it, not that he was worth saving. He refused chemo, just slowly went down the plughole, drinking himself away till there was nothing left but a skinny corpse in a lonely little chair in the corner of his council house.”

“Fuck cancer, eh!” Mallory sighed, tutting to himself. “It took all of my grandparents, one after the other!”

Craig shrugged. “I’m not saying it’s anything like what happened to you, but just... you know...”

Mallory wasn’t at all sure that he did know. He could smell the liquor on his breath, and as he spoke, Craig was wobbling gently from side to side, listing slightly.

“I understand—that’s all,” he explained. “I mean, if anyone can understand a thing like that.”

Mallory smiled thinly. “I appreciate that.”

“No problem!” Craig added with a wink as he rolled a thin cigarette, his eyes fixed on his handiwork. He looked up suddenly, peering about cautiously, and then said, “Look, do you have any cash? I need to borrow a few notes. I’ll get it back to you before you know it, OK? Whatever you’ve got will be fine. I’m not proud.”

Mallory shook his head and gave an apologetic little smile. Just for a moment there, he felt like this man actually cared, just a tiny bit. He silently rebuked himself for being so utterly naive. “I’ve got nothing, I’m afraid,” he said, stretching the truth just a little. “The police have everything of mine at the moment. I was lucky to get my clothes back!”

“Bastards!” Craig spat the word with venomous enthusiasm, a note of real hatred hung on his lips. “Oh well,” he shrugged, and began looking quickly around, scanning for someone else to try his luck with. “Good luck with the whole...” he paused and frowned thoughtfully, “... murdered parents thing, I guess. I hope it works out OK.”

“I’m sure it will work out just fine!” Mallory said with wry sarcasm.

“Yeah!” Craig said, already standing up as he poked his freshly rolled cigarette behind his ear, and the tobacco box back in its place. “The worst is already behind you, eh?”

Mallory watched as he wandered uneasily off, making his way through a few other lost souls that were dotted around, each keeping their heads down, avoiding one another’s gaze.

He took another sip of the surprisingly good soup as another, softer voice from behind him said, “Do you mind if I sit here?”

Mallory looked round. This time it was a young woman. She had to be somewhere in her mid-twenties, but in this place, around people who treated themselves with so little respect, it was hard to judge very accurately. She was slender with long, wavy brown hair that cascaded down from her head haphazardly. Her skin was pale and her eyes were pitch dark, staring, gazing forwards like they were seeing everything,

and not just what was there to be seen. They seemed to gaze on into infinity, plunging into whatever was behind whatever it was that was in front.

“You want to sit here?” Mallory was quite surprised. It wasn’t often a vaguely attractive girl was interested enough in him to come and sit close by. Rather the opposite, he was forced to admit to himself.

“Yes,” she said simply.

He smiled, trying his hardest to make it look like a warm, genuine one. Life goes on, after all, he thought. “Sure. There’s nobody else sitting here.” He gestured to the empty seats beside and opposite him.

“Well... there’s *you*!” she told him as if that was a problem.

Mallory frowned curiously. “Yes, but you’re welcome to sit *with* me.”

“I want to sit there,” she told him, looking a little less patient than she did before and pointing straight at him, or rather straight through him at the seat he was sitting on.

“There are lots of other seats.”

“Then why won’t you sit on one of them?” Was this making sense to her?

“Right!” he said. “You want to sit where I’m sitting? Sure! I can move, I suppose.” The path of least resistance is evidently called that for a reason. Who knew, maybe it was her favourite chair?

“Then why didn’t you move before? Why are people all so confusing?”

He pushed his food opposite and got up out of the chair to step to the other side and take over the seat that Craig had vacated. He muttered, just slightly under his breath, “Maybe everyone else in the entire world isn’t the problem?”

She sat down as soon as the chair was free, wrapping her arms around herself inside a fluffy, green woollen jumper that was way too

large for her and had sleeves that reached down to her fingertips.

“What’s the name?” she demanded.

“Mallory,” he told her. “Mallory Gardener”

“Yes,” she replied with a satisfied nod. “Good. Just checking.”

“Just checking?” he smirked. “Checking that I know my own name?”

“Yes!” she said, frowning a little as if she was the one who was struggling to keep up with a confusing development in a simple conversation. “Sometimes you don’t. You can never be too sure. I don’t know, do I, unless I ask?”

He sighed. This wasn’t likely to end in a date, with any luck.

“Well, I know my name!” he told her sarcastically. “Thanks for checking though. I appreciate the concern.”

She smiled back, her teeth bared as her face split into a wide grin that held back nothing. When this girl committed to an emotion, she clearly gave it her all. Mallory couldn’t help but to smile back at her.

“And you?” he asked.

“I’ll have to check!” she said with a shrug and began rummaging in a little fabric bag. “It’s almost always the same but it’s so hard to keep up sometimes.” She tutted to herself as she took various small personal items out and placed them on the table. “Shall we just say that the name is Lily and leave it at that? I think that’s probably easiest.”

Suddenly, and with a proud flourish she held up a little rectangular card with her name on it. “It is Lily!” she exclaimed proudly. “I knew it!”

Mallory stared for a moment. There really wasn’t anything that could be said. “Right!” he muttered.

“Go on, ask me if I’m on drugs!” she prompted with a sigh. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked off into the distance, or wherever it was that her mind was currently located.

“I wasn’t going to ask...” he stammered. He would have worded it more diplomatically, but it was definitely the thought that had been going through his mind. Was it such an unreasonable question under the circumstances?

She snorted an amused little noise from the back of her throat and then chuckled to herself. “You always ask.”

“I do?” He was more than a little confused now. “You mean people like me often ask you that?”

“If you like,” she said and grinned at him. “And they ask me *that* as well. Of course, it really all depends on what you mean when you’re talking about people like you. Do you mean exactly like you, or a little bit like you? Do you mean other people entirely, although I don’t really see much point in comparing yourself to them. I have enough trouble comparing myself to myself. I’m sure you do too.”

There really was nothing else for it. There was only one thought left on his mind. “Are you on drugs?”

She fixed him with a disarming stare and nodded very slowly. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m glad we cleared that up.”

Just as things were going so well, Craig reappeared, presumably after failing to get money from anyone else. “Hey, new-boy had got a girlfriend. That was quick, especially for someone with your face!”

“Mallory,” she said to Craig, since it was clear to everyone that Mallory was too awkward to have introduced himself to anyone. She looked up at him with a sympathetic smile. “Nice to see you alive, by the way.”

Craig frowned at her and put his finger over his lips. “Shhhh,” he said, making an exaggerated gesture of pursing his lips. “Keep it down, Mallory! This poor boy had a nasty shock. His parents aren’t alive anymore, he doesn’t need to be reminded of that by your careless lip-flapping.”

“Actually I’m Mallory,” Mallory interjected weakly.

Craig clearly wasn’t bothered by such trivialities. He shrugged and turned his attention back to Lily. “Got any cash? I’m strapped but I get my giro on Thursday. I can pay you back then! I’ll take whatever you’ve got.”

“No!” she said with a smile. “I never seem to have any money. It seems to be a universal constant.”

Craig sat down and sighed, looking disappointed. He grimaced as if in not inconsiderable pain and huffed loudly. “Look, I’ll lay my cards on the table. I need a drink and I’ve exhausted my supply. Have either of you got anything? Beer, a few shots of something? I’ll take anything and give it all back double at the end of the week!”

“Sorry. I don’t really drink,” Mallory explained.

“All I’ve got is this bag,” said Lily. “And there’s nothing in there worth having. There never usually is, although I did once find half a hotdog, which is really weird because I normally hate hotdogs.”

Craig slapped Mallory on the back a little too hard to be considered really polite. He lurched forward and coughed a couple of times.

“Boy, you could use a drink after the shock you had!” Craig told him, as if delivering first hand news. He turned to her and told her, as if sharing a secret, “He came home and found his parents dead. Murdered, he thinks.”

Lily nodded and said simply, “Good. That’s great!”

“Poor bastard!” he exclaimed, and then cast a sad look over to Mallory.

“And now?” she said staring directly at him. She somehow knew exactly what question to ask, and was trying to find exactly the wrong thing to say.

“What do you mean?”

“What happened next? What happened after you found your parents murdered?”

“Nothing,” he snapped. He looked away and sighed. “I’m not crazy. I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Something weird happened!” she began to smile. “I like it when something weird happens. It breaks up the day nicely.”

Craig fixed him with a look, staring out from his grey, bloodshot eyes. “Something weird happened?”

“They were…” he stammered. Why was he telling them? What force was compelling him to do anything other than keep his mouth shut? He should drink his soup, smile politely and go to his bunk. What he shouldn’t do, under any circumstances was say, “They were fine afterwards. Everything just went back to normal. I don’t understand what happened.”

Unfortunately, this was exactly what he said.

Craig stared at him fixedly. He began to frown angrily at first, and then began to sneer. Finally he broke into a cruel grin and began shaking his head at him. He reached up and slapped Mallory, really quite hard on the back of the head. A loud clapping noise plunged the room into silence, a silence where everyone stopped and stared at him.

Mallory lurched forward and then froze, trapped in panic, not knowing what exactly he was meant to do.

Craig laughed. “You’re crazy. You’re here because you’re mental, one of those nutters who goes around seeing things that aren’t there. They should lock you people up!” He got up and slowly meandered away, muttering and chortling to himself rudely.

Mallory very slowly looked up to where Lily was still just staring straight into him. She hadn’t flinched in the slightest.

“You’re not crazy,” she said with a smile. “Take it from someone who really, really knows.”

Chapter 6

Detective Roach stared at his beer, brushing the glass gently with the tips of his fingers.

It was sat on a cardboard beer-mat so as not to mark the wooden table, even though it wasn't his table, and it already had more than enough marks to be getting on with. It had deep gouges along the wooden top, a crack running right through that was stained darkly, and a host of smaller chips and digs. It was a table with a story, each gouge representing an event indelibly marked on its surface, building up a history of a life it had lived.

It was like his face staring back at him from the mirror each morning. Every wrinkle, every line, every little scar and mark was a reminder of the hard life he'd lived: a hard life where he'd never seen anything quite like what the young man he'd dealt with today had told them about.

He watched silently as a single rivulet of condensation traced a path from the rim, down along the frosty, cold glass. He wasn't even watching it, not really—his attention was elsewhere. It was just happening, and for some reason, he had become aware of it, fixated for a moment.

"What's up, Graham?" asked Inspector Grace, before taking a very hearty swig from a pint of thin and hollow domestic lager.

He looked up at her, but it took an effort to drag his thoughts along to where his eyes were pointing. He sneered openly and began to shake his head like he was going to deliver a stern telling off. "That stuff's for girls," he told her dryly, tapping the side of his own, darker, fuller and richer tasting ale. "This is what real men drink, not that rubbish. I wouldn't clean my toilet with that."

"I am a girl, Graham," she told him with a smirk.

“Yeah, but if you act like a man, and drink pints like a man, then you should drink a man’s pint,” he told her with a little smirk of his own. “You’re so close to getting it right, why not just go that little extra inch?”

“Because I *am* a girl, and I’d like to point out that most of the men I’ve known could have done with an extra inch themselves.” She smiled wryly and took another sip, this time with a flourish as if to flaunt her small verbal victory in front of him.

“That’s good, Sandra,” he said, nodding in satisfaction. “You should write these comments down so you’ve got something to fall back on when your police career comes crashing down around you.”

“I think I’ll be alright: I’m sure they’d just demote me to ‘Detective Constable’ first,” she told him with an innocent smile. “Mind you, that is a long way to fall from the dizzy heights of Detective Inspector. From up here, you can scarcely imagine what it might be like to hold such a low rank.”

“Someone has to empty the dustbins, I suppose?” he said with a wry smile. “But good for you, Sandra. Not all of us are career minded. It’s all politics anyway: most of the Inspectors are only promoted because of their gender. None of them are any good at their jobs, I find.”

She chuckled at him and said, “Oh, that hurts, Graham.”

“Good!” he told her stiffly. “The truth often does. Let’s call it a draw, shall we?”

“Spoken like a loser!”

He laughed dryly and took a large gulp of beer from his now half-empty glass.

“You know,” she said. “That’s the most I’ve gotten out of you all night. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m only a Detective Constable! There’s not much room in my mind for anything beyond beer, really!”

“Well, something is going on in there!” she said. “I find it quite disturbing.”

“It’s just been a long day…” He made an effort to sit up straight and took a deep breath. Perhaps that would blow the cobwebs out of his mind, and get things inside his head clear, or *clearer* at least.

“Mallory?” she tutted. “It’s been bothering me too.”

“Yeah,” he sighed and shook his head. After a prolonged pause he continued, “I just can’t quite put my finger on it, but something really, really isn’t right there.”

“Well, the boy said he found his family horrifically murdered by a living embodiment of darkness. There’s a lot not right with this, when you get right down to it.”

He picked up his glass and hefted it twice, as if he intended to raise it to his lips. He stared fixedly and then put it back down roughly on the wooden bar table, missing the mat, and adding a little history himself.

“You know, I spoke with his mother. Nice woman. She has no clue what’s going on. She tells me he’s never been a problem before: never had a bad dream, never even wet the bed as a kid. She told me that they’re both mortified by all this. They just want to help their son.”

“OK!” she agreed with a shrug. “That doesn’t mean anything though, and you know it. We’ve both seen people from good backgrounds do terrible things, and people from the gutter going on to make a great success of their lives.”

“Something isn’t right though,” he told her firmly. “I asked her about her interests. She told me she hadn’t made cakes in over a decade. She seemed confused when I asked her about it.”

Sandra looked at him like he was a little crazy himself. “So?”

“So Mallory told us that was his mother’s interest. He told us his mother liked to bake cakes, and that she wasn’t very good at it.”

“Did he?” she shrugged. “I can’t say I remember him saying that.”

“I checked,” he told her, tapping the exterior of his shirt pocket where a small notebook sat snugly. “It’s all in here.”

“So what are you saying?” she asked. Her face softened as she sighed wearily. “Look... I have a teenage boy, and I doubt he could tell you what my job is, what colour my hair is, or even what day my birthday falls on. I’d be a lot more worried if Mallory knew everything about his parents. I think you’re clutching at straws here, Graham.”

He sighed and shook his head, grumbling to himself. “There were other things. But it’s not even that, there’s just something about this whole thing that doesn’t sit right with me.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, me too,” she agreed. “Mallory’s story never deviated. At no point did it change, and at no time did I ever get the impression he was telling anything other than the whole, absolute truth.”

“And it was too detailed to be a delusion,” Roach added. “But not so detailed he had to be making it up. There were questions he just couldn’t answer, points he didn’t remember. Everything was just right. It was a perfect victim report.”

She shook her head. “So, again, what are you saying?”

He sniggered a sad laugh. “I don’t know what I’m saying,” he admitted. “Is this a prank someone played on him? Is it a prank he’s playing on us? Did someone put him up to this? I don’t know, but something is going on here. There’s more to this than we’re seeing.”

Sandra Grace closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead wearily. “I don’t have the time or resources to mount an investigation into a boy who works at a video-game store who had a bad dream!” she told him with a note of weary resignation. “I’m sorry, Graham, there’s nothing more we can do about it. I think we need to face the fact that the kid had some kind of *psychotic episode* and just leave it at that.”

“Yes, but...” he stammered and looked away. She was right, and he really had no suggestion to offer in any case. But still, it bothered him and he wanted an answer. He couldn’t even explain why.

He flopped backwards into his chair with an animated sigh, defeated. For a moment he just looked around. The sound of the muffled conversations around the room washed over him, the stench of stale lager and cheap bar food, the flickering neon behind the bar, a lit-up sign picking out a word so badly that he struggled to read it. Life just carried on. Each person had their own little world to live in: sometimes they crossed over and left a mark on one another. Is that all this was?

Mallory’s story had crossed with his own, and now he had to leave it, to simply move on in his direction while the young man went off on his.

He snatched up his glass with a heavy heart and an angry scowl. He drained the rest of the beer in a single gulp, leaving himself gasping for air. This earned him a disapproving look.

“You’ve got work in the morning!” she reminded him coldly.

“That’s why bacon sandwiches and coffee exist.”

She shook her head, and scowled at him a little. “So how many of those are you planning on drinking tonight?”

“A bunch. Maybe more than a bunch.”

“Right,” she said, thin lipped. “Well, I’m not sitting here to watch it. Come out to the car. I’ve got something for you.”

“Oh yeah?” he sniffed and looked even more fed up than before.

He stood up and straightened his clothes over his increasingly tubby midriff, somehow making more of a mess than he was in when he started. He fluffed his hair with his hand and followed as she slid out from behind the round, dark oak table. He watched, running his eyes over her surprisingly fit, healthy and attractive body. She’d clearly spent more time in a gym than he had. Who hadn’t?

“Come on,” she told him, her eyes narrowing. She spoke, as often she did, with authority. At that moment, there was no question who was in charge.

She led the way, pushing the back door wide open forcefully and stepping out into the cold night air, huffing suddenly at the bracing temperature. They had been inside for nearly two hours and darkness had fallen while they had been talking.

The carpark was unlit, and her car had been parked down the back, tucked out of the way where she preferred to leave it. Roach followed as she clopped along, her low, sensible heels clipping noisily against the tarmac floor, echoing around the tired orange brickwork of the pub’s side.

She unlocked the car with her electronic fob and pulled open the driver’s door. It gave a very satisfying metallic clunk.

“What am I getting?” he said grumpily.

She smiled at him suggestively and threw her handbag into the car. She began to fumble under her skirt and took one last look around. “You already know the answer to that.”

“Ahhh, this again,” he said softly as he finally realised where this was going. He looked around furtively. “You know we really shouldn’t be doing this. I’m technically still a married man. This kind of thing isn’t going to end well for either of us.”

She stepped over her underwear and pulled herself free of it. She discarded a pair of delicate, white knickers casually into the car behind her. “I think that’s really more your problem than mine at this point,” she told him. She sat down and began scooting herself back across the seats, poking herself in the back with the manual gear-knob. This took some practice but she had a technique now.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his flabby middle. “In your car, Sandra? We’re not bloody teenagers anymore.”

She called out from inside, "I'm not taking you home to meet my kids, Roach. You're a bad influence! I'm not sure I'd even be comfortable with you meeting my cat."

He flashed another glance around the car park, but they had it completely to themselves for now. He unzipped his trousers and rummaged around inside. "So it's right to business then. I'm to be used like a piece of meat again, am I?"

He squeezed into the car, wriggling around on top of her and shuffled awkwardly into position.

"Unless you can think of anything else you're good for? I can't, and I wrote your last performance review. Think of it as power-harassment!"

"Well, at least I'm good for one thing," he muttered as she stuck her hand down through his open flies and into his underwear.

"Not much good," she sighed. "But you do go that extra inch. I will give you that."

He grinned rather proudly. "I bet you need every inch you can get after having a kid the old fashioned way, don't you?"

"I take what I can get!" she smirked at him as his hand went in through the side of her blouse and under her loosened bra. His fingers found her nipple and she jolted suddenly as a smile washed over her face. "I don't mind slumming it, once in a while," she said, increasingly breathlessly.

His hand went up under her skirt. The tips of his fingers made their way up between her legs. She was already moist and he gently pushed two fingers up inside. She gasped and pushed her head back and began to moan very softly.

"Yeah, it's fun to slum it," he told her. Their lips were now just an inch apart. He pushed forwards and kissed her softly. "You know," he began with a wicked smirk, "You're actually much tighter than anyone would guess from looking at you."

She reached up and kissed him, throwing an arm around the back of his head. “I don’t have all night, Roach. Get that thing inside me before you forget how to. It’s amazing a man in your condition can even get it up, so hurry yourself—we probably don’t have long.”

He kissed her one more time. “You’re the boss, Sandra!”

Chapter 7

Alcohol did, for some reason, seem like rather a good solution, since no other solutions had presented themselves. Mallory wasn't usually a huge fan of drinking, but something about the hollow self-abuse of reducing his brain capacity seemed very appealing.

Having just walked into a brightly lit off-license and buying whatever was on special offer, though, he felt the appeal waning somewhat.

With no restrictions on his movements, he had wandered out of the hostel, hoping that just walking around might bring some clarity to his mind. Certainly nothing inside the hostel was doing any of that.

Hostels sprung up in places that weren't the nicest parts of town, it seemed. This made perfect sense, but knowing it didn't really help to make him any more comfortable about being inside one. He wasn't that much more comfortable outside either.

He dug his hands into his jacket pockets. It was too thin for a night like this: it was cold and miserable and the pavements were gleaming from a fine misting of rain that had showered down about an hour earlier, leaving everything smelling wet and musty. The mustiness was tinged with the added aroma of burning fuel as poorly maintained cars passed by, chugging along the road beside him as he slunk along the pavement, going nowhere in particular.

Hanging down by his side was a little plastic bag with six cans of budget lager tucked inside. He'd been carrying them for half an hour and still couldn't bring himself to open one. He felt strangely like a criminal in even having them at all.

He looked in through the window of a kebab shop, light spewing out from behind the glass. He hadn't eaten any more of the soup and was still hungry: hungry enough to eat, in any case. He slowed down as he came to the door. It was wooden with glass panels, the kind with wire

mesh set right into the glass, and a further, thicker set of metal bars had been screwed over the top. It was anything but inviting.

He pushed it open and a little bell chimed over the top.

There was nobody else inside. An older, heavier man with thick, bushy eyebrows and thinning, greying dark hair stood up grumpily from behind the counter where he had been perched on a low stool. He took his eyes from a small, loud television that was mounted high up on the wall and said, not particularly politely, "What do you want?"

"Umm..." he said thoughtfully, tapping his chin as he ran his eyes quickly over a board behind the counter with the options and prices stuck to it. "Chicken doner, please."

"Salad? Chilli sauce?" he grunted, and turned his attention back to a foreign movie playing on the screen. He smiled briefly at something happening onscreen.

"Both please. No tomato though."

"Sure." He waved a hand at him and pulled out a long knife. "Sit down. Three minutes, please."

Mallory muttered a polite, "Thanks," and did exactly that.

He had been wandering about for hours, just walking around, not going anywhere, not even really sure where he actually was. He knew the town, but not well enough to recognise every street. It didn't matter though: he'd end up somewhere he knew eventually, and it wasn't like he had anywhere else to be.

He looked at his watch: it was earlier than he thought, and that brought a sad grumble. He wanted the day to just go away, to swallow itself up into the darkness and vanish forever. Sleep might reset him. He might wake up in the morning with some new insight into everything: come morning, it might somehow make some kind of sense. Perhaps it was all just some ugly dream that he would wake up from?

He looked up with a sigh as the door opened, softly chiming the same little bell. His heart sunk when he saw who it was.

“Lily, are you following me?” he grumbled to himself and looked away. He gave a dramatic sigh as she came over and sat herself down opposite.

“Do you want my chair?” he asked, not entirely sincerely.

“I sit in this chair,” she told him. “Usually, anyway. Mostly. I didn’t need to follow you—you’re really easy to find.”

“Look, I’m really sorry but I think I just need to be on my own right now,” he told her politely without looking up at her face. In that moment, being alone was probably the last thing in the world he actually needed, but the thought of struggling to make sense of her unique brand of social discourse was something he could do very well without.

“I know what you really need,” she told him. “Even if you don’t know it yourself, I know exactly what you need and I know how to arrange for you to get it.” She did some odd grasping motion with her hand and smiled a little slyly. “Balls are rolling.”

“How can you...?” he began, tutting at how ridiculous she sounded. Why could he never meet a nice girl? One without massive mental problems compounded by massive drug use? Why did he never meet *any* girls at all?

“Because you’re alone,” she told him, as if responding to exactly what he’d been thinking. “There’s only you and nobody else that this has happened to.” She cocked her head thoughtfully to one side and frowned like someone would if they were trying hard to recall a fleeting memory. “There’s so many of you, all over the place, everywhere, doing everything. But even though each of them is potentially different, most of them are all the same too. Most of them are *overwhelmingly* the same. It’s difficult to describe because most people don’t really see things the way I see them. Probably that’s worse for you because you are so very, very dull.”

“Perhaps it’s just because you’re crazy!” he told her, snapping almost angrily.

She looked back at him, her expression one of surprise. He was a little surprised himself.

“Well, you *are* crazy! You talk utter nonsense that doesn’t make any sense to anyone, except inside your own head,” he growled as the frustration bubbled away inside him, but really it was himself he was angry at now. Were these words really coming out of his own mouth? “I don’t need any more crazy, I need less of it. So please, I’m asking you nicely to just leave me alone before whatever is wrong with you starts to rub off on me.”

She began to smile, a sympathetic thing like she felt a little sad for him. “It is already a bit late for that!” she told him softly.

He hung his head and sagged down with a sigh, deflated. Just for a moment, he really had given up. “I know.”

“I hear you’re the one that’s crazy!” she said.

“I’m not crazy!” he frowned, but his certainty about such things was starting to slip.

“I know,” she said, nodding back. “I hear people say it to me all the time. They say, ‘*You’re crazy*,’ but they have no idea what it actually means. I don’t think anyone is crazy. Not really.”

“Except you!” he shot her a sad smile. “Perhaps a little bit...”

“Maybe I’m just crazy enough to know exactly what it is that you need.” She crossed her arms around herself again, just as she’d done back at the hostel.

“What do I need, lily?” he asked softly, not expecting a very insightful answer.

“You need help,” she told him. “You’ve got yourself into a situation that you can’t get out of alone. This isn’t going to get better—it’s going to get worse. You’re not the sort of person who can deal with things like this alone.”

He looked up and stared into her eyes. They were deep pits of darkness, but somewhere inside was a little spark of something. She held his gaze as if she was waiting for him to find it.

“Four pound fifty!” a gravelly, Turkish-accented voice called out loudly.

Mallory looked over. He had almost forgotten about his food, but seeing it wrapped up in thin white paper made him feel hungry all over again. He smiled and stood up, fumbling in his pockets for some change.

“I don’t like chicken,” she told him.

He frowned thoughtfully, her statement confusing him somewhat. “I didn’t get this for you! You weren’t even here.”

“I’ll throw the chicken out, it’s fine,” she continued as if the decision was made and he’d had some kind of say in it. “I like the salad and the bread. I guess you could eat the chicken, if you wanted to. Or we could find a cat? I like cats. Not in sandwiches though.”

“I don’t...” He tried to argue, but it was useless and he knew it. “Are you going to drink my beer too?”

She nodded.

On the side of a rolling green hill was a flattened spot, concreted over and walled with attractive, old fashioned red bricks. A set of wooden park-benches were fixed to the ground, making it a perfect observation area to look over the rooftop cityscape beyond the tree lined boundary of the green inner city park. It was a place to rest and take stock while out walking your dog, or just for taking a little time to yourself.

After dark, much of the effect was lost. Mallory looked out into the inky, still blackness of the night with the twinkling, blinking lights glowing away in the myriad windows of the buildings in the distance. Each represented a home or an office. People lived there, lives happened. Each one was home to a story yet to be told.

He was roused from his thoughts by the smell of grilled chicken being pushed in his face. He recoiled suddenly in surprise and snatched it up from her with a grunt after the greasy thing hit him squarely on the nose.

“Eat it before the cats do,” she told him, chewing on a mouthful of salad.

“How’s my dinner?” he asked innocently.

“Needs more martian-willies,” she replied earnestly. “Sorry, I never seem to have any money, but I still have to eat. You know how it is?”

He had no great desire to know how it was.

She paused momentarily to crack open a can of lager. The pull snapped loudly and the bubbling liquid inside hissed angrily at being released. She passed one to him and cracked another for herself. “Drink it,” she told him. “I don’t like drinking alone and you need a beer. You’ve had a bad day, you know, and you’re not the sort of person who does well on bad days.”

This much was true. “Thanks!” He took a swig. It tasted too sweet and wasn’t cold enough to be pleasant.

“In fact, you don’t do well at all,” she said thoughtfully. “Hold on...”

He opened his mouth to speak, but restrained himself, expecting her to get up or do something that required moving. Instead her eyes simply glazed over and she stared out into space. Moments ticked by. She didn’t blink and barely even seemed to move.

Suddenly she snapped back so sharply that Mallory jumped in surprise. She turned to him grinning haphazardly, and then sunk a little and gave him a sympathetic sigh and a supportive little smile. “You don’t do well at all. You’re just so irritatingly, biting, horribly average. You’re literally no fun at all. I’ve found more interesting things down the backs of chairs.”

“Thanks,” he told her. “You’re giving me all the help I could ever need.”

She frowned at him curiously. “I’m not helping you!” she told him. “How am I going to help you? I weigh 45 kilos in wet clothes.”

“Right...” he said, taking a swig of the pretty awful beer and swallowing the last of some pretty decent chicken. He opened his mouth to speak when another piece hit him on the forehead.

“You do need help though,” she told him.

“I know,” he admitted. She was finally right about something. “The problem is that there’s no help for me to get. The police can’t do anything and all they’ve done is refer me to a counsellor.”

“The police can’t do anything because nothing actually happened,” she explained, sounding suspiciously like she actually might know what she was talking about. “Counselling can’t help because what happened was real, not in your mind.”

“Well it can’t be both!” he said with a slight fluster. “It either happened or it didn’t; I either imagined it or it was real.”

She sighed and drank a little more beer. “I forget sometimes how limited some people’s thinking is,” she said sadly. She stared at him and spoke like she was explaining quantum physics to a dog. “Think a little bigger. You know better than that—you’ve seen it! What should I expect from someone so painfully average, from someone who buys a girl a salad sandwich for dinner and then adds chicken to it? I don’t even know where to *start*!”

“That’s funny because I was thinking this conversation was more or less ready to *finish*,” he said gruffly

“That actually is pretty funny.”

“Thanks.”

“I do know someone who can help you!” she told him, throwing quite a substantial part of his dinner on the floor, discarding it rudely.

“Who?”

“A detective.”

He shrugged and shook his head at her. He actually appreciated that she was trying to help, in her own twisted way. “I told you, the police aren’t interested. You told me the same thing a moment ago.”

“I mean a *private* detective.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know any, and I couldn’t afford one anyway. My worldly wealth might not even cover breakfast in the morning.”

“The one I’m thinking of doesn’t work for money.”

“I dread to think...” he sighed. “You know a private detective who will take my case for no money?”

“I do,” she told him. “I brought him here. He wants to meet you.”

“Here?” he said, surprised. “To this town?”

“Kind of... Yes!”

Chapter 8

He looked around furtively, checking up and down the quiet corridor to make sure he was all alone. Finding that he was spurred him on, filled him with fresh confidence, not a trait he was usually lacking in any case.

Craig Simmons edged along the corridor towards the first door, the entrance to a bunk room that wasn't his. He flashed a glance up at the security camera. It was pointed slightly away, but an angry glowing red light warned that it was recording everything he did.

He grinned to himself: this wasn't his first time. He knew that the camera either no longer worked, or more likely, was a fake to discourage people like him. Well, that didn't work. If you didn't want people like him to break into your room and steal everything you had, in order to buy alcohol, then you should have just given him the money when he asked for it.

Through the haze of half a bottle of Polish vodka, all this made absolutely perfect sense.

After all, he was the real victim here. He needed a drink: it was as simple as that, and he was going to get one no matter what it took to make that happen. Why were people so unreasonable? He always asked nicely; he was always polite about it. What was wrong with them? Why did they make him do things like this?

He edged along to the door. They were rarely locked since each room could be shared by four people who came and went frequently. He tried the handle gently and the door latched open. He smirked, showing off his blackened, ruined teeth to nobody in particular.

He rubbed his stubbled chin and looked around one last time. With no sign of anything, anywhere around, he let himself in, quietly closing the door behind him.

He took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dark. There was a window on the far side of the room. It had a thin brown curtain closed

over it, and it leaked enough light to make it fairly easy for him to make out the shapes. The room had only one person in it, already asleep on the top bed of a bunk off to the left hand side. He was curled up in his blanket, the thin grey sheet covering his head, and a faint growling snore sounding from beneath.

‘Old Michael’ had lived in places like this for so many years that he was used to it all by now. He could sleep comfortably through the comings and goings of other people. A stumbling alcoholic quietly rifling through the room wasn’t going to wake him up. On the other hand, he probably had nothing worth taking.

Craig kept his attention on the old man while he slipped forwards and began doing what he had to do. There was loose baggage on the floor so he began there, not caring whose it was, or what personal items might be inside. That simply wasn’t his problem.

He quickly found a pair of shoes which he stuck his hand inside, rummaging around with his fingers. A shoe was a common place to hide a small roll of money: he’d done so himself more than once. His face took on a scowl as he found nothing in either. He dropped them noisily to the floor and then cursed himself with a silent rebuke for his carelessness at making a little too much of a noise. He quickly shot Michael an angry, accusing glare, but he never moved. He just carried on snoring softly.

He huffed a sigh and returned to the baggage. He rifled through, running his hands against the coarse fabric of a bunch of rolled up T-shirts, and then against the softer towelling of a handful of socks.

Experienced thief that he was, Craig quickly searched through the side pockets, running his flat hand along the insides in the hope of scavenging enough money to buy a few cans of strong lager, or a bottle of rough cider.

He snarled angrily when he came up empty. There was nothing there he could even sell or trade for a drink. He was angry now, angry at Michael, and he snorted loudly as his temper rose.

A mixture of growing rage and desperation washed over him, and he stepped a little less lightly than he should towards a small desk just under the window. He pulled open the drawers, quickly searching the insides with the tips of his fingers.

Finding nothing, he growled to himself. With a low grumbling voice he snarled, "Fuck it."

"Hey!" came a sudden voice from behind him, causing him to jump in surprise.

Old Michael stood there, a mop of wild grey hair sprouting out in all directions, wide, wild eyes glaring forwards and a grizzled face with skin deeply wrinkled and leathery from a harsh and bitter life.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded angrily, waving his balled fist around impotently on the end of a bony arm that had no strength left in it.

Craig turned and grabbed him by the throat. He was the shorter of the two men but, by far, the stronger. He pushed him back until the old man crashed into the metal frame of the bunk with a loud clatter and a breathless gasp.

"What the..." Michael wheezed. His eyes were flashing with fear, but it seemed that to him, this was all too familiar.

Craig pushed his forearm up against his neck and pressed hard until Michael gasped, barely able to breathe. He struggled against him, but the wiry old man had little fight left in him after a life of having it kicked, quite efficiently, straight out.

"Shut your mouth, old man!" he snarled and his eyes lit up furiously. "Shut your fucking mouth right now, or God help me I'll..." The rest of his warning disappeared into an inaudible growl of angry threats.

Michael had gotten the point and the struggling stopped. They froze, the pair of them, their eyes locked together.

Michael just gazed forward, his eyes widened fearfully while Craig glared at him, barely holding back a ferocious temper. He took several deep breaths and seemed to calm slightly.

“I asked you nicely, old man” he told him. “I need money, just a loan. I’ll give it back to you next week but I need it now, right now, right this minute. You give me what you’ve got and I’ll forgive you—we’ll say no more about it.”

He let up the pressure on his neck and Michael gasped, his face flushed red and he coughed several hacking breaths. “Craig, if I could lend you money, I would,” he said with the lilt of a slight Irish accent. “I got nothing.”

The pressure came back as Craig’s eyes flared once more. “You’re holding out on me!” he hissed. “I need a loan. I need it now!”

Michael looked terrified, but at the same time, wearily resolved to it all. He shook his head never taking his eyes from Craig’s. “I don’t have a single penny. You *know* I don’t, Craig.”

Craig pulled back suddenly. He snapped off a curse at himself, damning his bad luck. “Fuck you, Michael,” he snarled at him. “I won’t forget this!”

He stalked out, noisily slamming the door shut behind him.

Craig leant back against the wall, breathing heavily. This just wasn’t fair. The world was conspiring against him, and Michael was definitely to blame for it all. He swore revenge. He promised himself that he would even this score, and Michael—all of them—would suffer for what they’d done to him.

He staggered along to the next door, his failure spurring him on even more on his self-righteous quest to satisfy his burning appetite.

He didn’t even check the camera; he didn’t even look behind him. His caution had left him. The confrontation had hardened his resolve and

set him on a path where nothing less than success would be tolerated. He needed a drink more than ever; he needed to curl up in the blazing, swirling haze of alcoholic oblivion.

This time, he would be more firm with anyone he found. He was finished being nice to people.

He opened the door and rudely let himself in.

The room was dark, much darker than the other one, even though it had curtains cut from the same ugly brown material: the kind of fabric you might find made into a dress on an ageing, yellowed photograph of a once young girl, way back when she looked youthful and happy, with her whole life laid out ahead of her.

“Fuck...” he snarled to himself, feeling his way around the wall. Slowly his eyes adapted and he began to make out shapes in the gloom. He squinted hard, but failed to make out anyone sleeping in any of the beds. He grinned to himself—that made it even easier. He went to the first bunk and began running his hand down along the verge of the mattress, searching with practised fingers for a sign of anything hidden beneath.

He shuddered as the cold bit at him and, for just a moment, it seemed to get darker, as if a shade had descended on the room. He shrugged it off and carried on his search, pushing harder and deeper, ramming his hand as far under as it would go, reaching in up to his elbow and searching around desperately.

A sudden, shocking force rammed him forwards. He grunted in surprise, but this time, the superior strength wasn't his. Something brutally strong was behind him, forcing his neck and head right down into the cushions of the plastic-covered mattress.

He grunted, tried to speak, but his effort only invited more force, more pressure thrust down upon him.

He couldn't move. He tried to shift himself, but instantly, a hand clamped down on his forearm, icy cold fingers gripping with such

strength that he gasped in pain and surprise. “Sorry!” he cried out, but his voice was barely audible through his crushed windpipe. “I’m sorry...”

Whatever was holding him came closer. Hot, foul breath blew first against his ear, but the source of it moved upwards, breathing into his nose. It smelled like the rotten breath of an animal, or perhaps a man with a mouthful of rotten teeth. It was decaying meat, a nest of rats found at the back of a wardrobe, or a house where an old couple had lived alone and died together.

Craig cringed and pulled again, uselessly struggling against whoever it was. He tried to roll his eyes to the side but it was so dark now that it was useless. There was nothing but darkness to see.

His ear burnt suddenly as pinpricks of white hot pain seared through his flesh. He began to panic as realisation hit him that teeth were clamping down on him, ripping his skin from the side of his face. He cried out in pain with everything, with all the power he had, but the sound that came out was nothing more than a muffled whimper.

His panic seemed to spur it on, empower it, fill it with refreshed enthusiasm. Sharp, rancid teeth snarled and bit down into his face, ripping and shredding his cheek. The pain was sudden and alarming, as if the source of it was inside the very core of his brain and was exploding outwards.

The hand holding his arm was like a vice and held on even tighter until blood started to pour from beneath a row of uncut, jagged fingernails.

There was a snarl as teeth further sunk into his face, shredding the soft flesh around his jawbone and causing a fresh, blooming explosion of pain to erupt in his head.

His panic intensified and he began to thrash around, gurgling in agonised terror, the copper-taste of blood filling his mouth.

Somehow his arm came free. It all happened in a blur: all human, rational thought had left him and his instinct for survival was all that was left. He was thrashing, fighting back with everything he had, forcing, pushing, wriggling, crying out for help and twisting his limbs for all he was worth.

He pulled open the door. He had no idea what had happened between being held down on the mattress and being upright, but he was somehow standing, somehow getting away. Horror had him now. It gripped him: it filled his muscles with renewed strength.

He ran through the door and into the corridor beyond and kept running. His T-shirt was drenched in blood, the side of his face had been reduced to tattered, shredded strips of skin flapping down over his exposed cheekbone. He was in shock and barely noticed the pain anymore: he just had to run; he just had to get away and to run and run and run.

Suddenly he stopped as a woman stood before him, skidding up and nearly toppling forwards over his own feet. She was dressed in a tight, black, stylish skirt and a tailored blouse with a gold name tag on the lapel. She froze in surprise and just stared for a silent moment, her mouth agape. Then she dropped a clipboard she had been holding, put her hand up to her face and screamed out in total, blinding, incoherent terror.

Craig's eyes were wide. He backed away, stumbled, and put out his hand to rest on the wall, catching himself before he fell to the ground entirely. He looked around, totally confused. The building was the same, but everything was different.

It wasn't a hostel. It wasn't the place where he'd entered the room. Now the building was an office, some place of business still open at night where people were catching up on work. All around, people had stood up and were staring in surprise.

Craig's mind just froze, he couldn't understand any of it. Nothing made sense.

Darkness washed over him and that smell, the rotten meat, foul breath stench was back and closer than ever. A fresh wave of adrenaline flooded him and the confusion was, once again, washed away by panic.

But it was too late. As everything went dark, teeth sunk into his throat. A wailing, gnashing sound echoed through his mind as he sunk into darkness, washed along with pain and fear until there was nothing but the darkness and the gurgling sound of his own breath.

Then there was nothing at all.

Chapter 9

“We couldn’t have met somewhere else?”

They were sat in a late night café, a glass-fronted corner of a city block that served food and drinks until far too late at night for the staff to really be happy about having to work there. It was quiet: they had the place largely to themselves, but certainly nobody was close enough to overhear them. It would be private, at least.

“What’s wrong with it?” Lily looked around as if something wasn’t right, and she was suddenly desperate to find out what that might be.

Mallory huffed to himself grumpily. What exactly he was doing here, following along after some girl with a flimsy grasp on reality, was quite beyond him. When he thought about it, really thought about it, it all seemed quite ridiculous. Maybe he *was* crazy after all?

Would he even know if he was?

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” he told her with a shrug. “It was just miles across town. Why didn’t we just meet somewhere closer? We could have met anywhere. I mean, doesn’t your detective have an office?”

She smiled. “Sometimes he does.”

“Does he have one now?” he asked. Why did she have to do this: answer every question in a way that only posed more questions? Why could she never simply say what she meant?

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “I didn’t have time to check, nor did he. It was just easier to meet somewhere we both know. This place is a nice constant. It varies sometimes: it was a bar once, sometimes it’s a coffee shop, but it’s always open late and the food is always pretty good. We always come here, no matter where we are.”

It was definitely her that was the problem, not him. “So who is this guy?”

“His name is Samuel, but you can call him ‘Sam.’” she told him. “You probably *should* call him Sam. In fact, *definitely* call him Sam.”

“OK,” he sighed. “But who is he? What can you tell me about him? Why will he take my case without getting paid for it?”

“Sam is usually a private detective,” she told him. “Or sometimes a policeman, a journalist, occasionally an investigator for an insurance company. Once or twice I even saw him professionally debunking psychics. He is a seeker of truth, a man driven to find something more important than money, or cars, or expensive clothes. He doesn’t care about anything else but his journey. It’s hard not to respect that.”

This was exactly what he didn’t want to hear. “But why would someone like that be interested in helping me? Isn’t he just going to get angry at me for wasting his time?”

She rolled her eyes upwards thoughtfully and began to rub her chin. “He probably will get a little bit angry. He’s always a *little bit* angry.”

Hearing that certainly didn’t make Mallory feel any better. “Did you eat his kebab too?”

“I’m not saying you won’t have to state your case!” she added. “But you need him. You won’t have to pay him money, but there will be a price to be paid. There’s always a price to be paid. Everything is about balance, you see, and you’re now unbalanced. You’ll have to give Samuel what he wants, whatever it is that he wants. And you will.”

“Lily, you’re scaring me!” he told her. “What have you gotten me into?”

She shook her head and looked a little sad. “These things happen, Mallory. The world is just like that sometimes.”

“These things?” he sighed. “Like finding my parents dead and then finding them alive and well a few hours later? Things like that happen, do they?”

“If you’re crazy!” she smirked. “If you’re crazy enough to allow yourself to see them.”

Mallory frowned and looked away, feeling a swell of annoyance. He *wasn’t* crazy.

“You’re right—you’re not!” she told him. “Which makes this even more fun, doesn’t it? That’s the price Samuel will want you to pay.”

“What’s he like?” Mallory asked finally, slightly dreading what the answer might be.

“He’s nice,” she said. “He’s nice to me, at least. He’s quite big, wide shoulders, very strong. He’s very focused and quick to temper. He doesn’t worry himself about the consequences of things. Why would he?”

“Great!” he muttered under his breath. “He sounds like the kind of man I’d want to date my sister, if I had one.”

Her eyes widened suddenly. “Oh no, you’d never want that,” she told him with some urgency. “In fact, it might be best if you never mention dating or sisters around him. In fact, it might be best if you never even speak unless he speaks first. Actually yes, just sit quietly and don’t say anything unless he asks you a question.”

She cocked her head thoughtfully to one side and stared at him for a moment, looking slightly disgusted. “And don’t smile. You have an annoying smile.”

His mouth lolled open in surprise. “What do you mean, I have an annoying smile?”

“It’s more of an annoying face,” she corrected herself. “Can you just not be you for a while?”

He scowled at her, growing increasingly annoyed about it all. “Sure, who would you like me to be instead?”

She shrugged and then peered at him very thoughtfully. “Someone less annoying. By the way, I hope you were joking about

having no money because I really fancy chips and you're buying them for me."

"I think I can manage chips," he grunted.

"You can have something yourself if you want."

"Thanks!" he muttered.

Their booth was halfway to the back wall from the door. Mallory had his back to it, but heard it open. Nobody had been in for some time and his heart quickened with anticipation. He turned around to get a good look at the man who had walked in.

He was certainly tall, but looked every inch a family man. He had a friendly face and emanated an approachable warmth, smiling as his eyes found each of the two members of staff. He didn't look at all bad, and Mallory started to smile as a little relief washed over him.

Then the door opened again.

This one was tall, broad and lean. He had fierce eyes that flashed around darkly. His hair was short, cropped and severe, and there was an air about him that he was not to be taken lightly. The relief was suddenly a thing of the past, replaced by an urgent, creeping sense of dread.

The man's eyes locked on Lily's. She waved, but he was already stalking over. He moved with short, measured movements, all the time his eyes flashed around, looking for something that might be hiding just beyond the scope of his vision.

Mallory looked away and stared at Lily. What had she gotten him into? "Is that him?" he asked softly.

She didn't even answer. She didn't need to.

"Samuel!" she grinned widely, standing up and looking quite excited. "Thanks for coming!"

"Lilith," he said, nodding back as his mouth curled into a very reserved smile. "Is that *him*?"

"Mallory," she said.

"Mallory," he repeated. "What's your name?"

He frowned and looked up at him. He wanted to say something sarcastic, but nothing came to mind, which was probably for the best. “Mallory!” he told him. “Mallory Gardener.”

The man never took his eyes from him as he moved to sit down at the booth, next to Lily. He seemed to be taking in every detail. Finally he turned, almost to face Lily and asked, “Is that right?”

“Mallory Gardener,” she nodded enthusiastically. “It’s right.”

He rubbed his chin. It was recently shaven, but a shadow was forming across his face as stubble started to assert itself. “Same name. Things can’t be all that different. That’s something...”

Mallory rolled his eyes at this cryptic and essentially meaningless comment.

“So, Mallory, why don’t you tell me what happened?” he suggested, raising his hand to the waitress.

“Has Lily told you much?” he asked with a shrug.

Lily scowled at him suddenly. “Answer questions, not ask!” she hissed.

He glared at her in surprise.

“She told me a bit of what happened. But why don’t you tell me what I don’t know. Tell me what you haven’t told anyone else so far.” His eyes seemed to bore into Mallory’s soul. He felt like he was being stripped bare.

“I don’t know what you mean!” he told him nervously. He was pretty sure he didn’t, at least.

Sam began to smile and flashed a knowing glance back to Lily. He turned his attention back and said, “Yes you do—you know exactly what I mean.”

He shrugged, a little lost by all this.

“Answer me this—are they your parents?” he asked, his voice low and dark. “Those people in your house: how do you know they’re not your parents? How do you know you didn’t just imagine it all?”

“I just do...” he stammered. “I saw them killed...”

“Anyone else might have just ignored seeing that. They might have assumed they’d imagined it. Maybe quit drinking so much caffeine, try to get more sleep in the future!”

As he finished his sentence, a waitress wearing a uniform of a red polo shirt and washed-out black jeans came over to take her order. She was pretty enough to make Mallory feel unusually awkward.

“Caffeine!” said Sam, like he didn’t care if she dropped dead on the spot.

“Chips!” Lily added. “On a separate, plate please.”

The waitress seemed a little confused but shook it off. Speaking to Sam, she said “Anything to eat?”

“I’ll have chips. With cheese.”

The waitress frowned, “That’s not on the menu...”

“You have chips?” Sam asked coldly and she nodded. “You have cheese?”

She nodded again, a little more awkwardly this time as she flushed red.

Sam shrugged and gave her a fairly aggressive rebuking glare before losing interest in her altogether.

“And you?” she said turning to Mallory.

He shrugged. “I guess a sandwich? Chicken? Salad?”

“Right...” she scowled at him, more bravely and with rather a different attitude than she’d shown to Sam. “I guess we have those things, I’ll see what we can do.”

She stomped away like she was angry at the world.

Sam looked over Mallory, as if searching for details, putting a story together in his head. “So, how did you know they weren’t your parents?”

“I know my parents!” he said, defensively. “And I saw them dead.”

“You saw a man with his face ripped off and the back of a woman’s head, covered in blood. You saw all that in a dark room, so dark in fact that your description to the police was that the assailant was ‘a shadow!’” None of this sounded remotely sympathetic. “And yet you are convinced—absolutely convinced—that it has to mean that your real parents are dead, and the ones walking around aren’t the real thing. Explain to me how that makes any sense to you.”

Mallory was getting angry, his face flushed and he tensed.

“They’re *not* my parents.”

“Indeed. How do you know?” he insisted.

“I just know!” he told him.

Sam continued to goad him, “You don’t know anything, do you?”

“It’s because everything’s off!” Mallory snapped, loudly, angrily.

“They’re just *not* my parents.”

Sam and Lily looked at one another. She smiled and he nodded back at her. Had he found what he was looking for?

Mallory sighed and hung his head.

“Everyone is hung up on the wrong part, getting it the wrong way round. I didn’t conclude those people were imposters because of what I’d seen: it was being confronted by the imposters that convinced me what I’d seen must have been real.

“For starters, they just got too many details wrong. My Dad never had a shirt like the one he was wearing. My Mum always wore a gold cross on a chain round her neck. She wasn’t religious, it was her grandmother’s: she left it for her when she died. She never takes it off, but now it’s gone. Their hair is different. Even my dad’s voice is different: he went to university in Glasgow, and he’s up in Edinburgh every other month on business. His voice always has traces of accent—he can never say ‘*about*’ properly—that’s gone too!”

He closed his eyes and shook his head sorrowfully. He took a deep breath before continuing, "It wasn't any of those details individually, though. Any one of those could easily be explained away.

"When I was a kid, I was best friends with identical twins from a few doors down. We were in the same class at school. To anybody that didn't know them well, they were indistinguishable, but I could never see it: there were similarities, sure, but to me they were far more different than they were alike.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I know what my parents look like, and that just wasn't them.

"When I saw the shadow-monster, I panicked and ran as fast as I could! I had nowhere to go though, so I waited, and I calmed down, and I started to think about things more rationally. I couldn't possibly have really seen what I thought I saw: I must have imagined it, maybe dozed off, had a nightmare. Cautiously, I wandered back to the house, and sure enough, everything was back to normal. I figured that was the end of that...

"But the moment I saw those two lookalikes pretending to be my parents, that's when I knew for certain that it had to have all been real."

"Right!" Sam said after a thoughtful pause. "That's quite a story. Now, listen to me, and listen carefully. I'm interested in your case. I'm going to look into this for you, but that kind of honesty you just had, that's what I need from you. Nothing less is going to work for me. I need absolute, complete, total and unequivocal truth."

Mallory looked up, hollowed out, broken and ashamed. Then realisation hit him, and a nagging, burning question filled his mind. He looked from Lily to Sam and back.

Finally, he said, "You already knew that things were different, didn't you? You were just waiting to hear it from me. How did you know that? I never told that to anyone, but you knew. How could you know?"

Sam seemed to have no interest in answering.

Instead, Lily said simply, “I told you he could help!”

Chapter 10

Breakfast was a waxed-paper cup filled just beneath the brim with thick, black coffee, the bitterer and stronger, the better. That was exactly how he liked his women too, he often joked. Other people found it less hilarious than he did. The Inspector, even less hilarious than most.

He handed Grace hers, after shuffling into the passenger seat of her car. Her choice was altogether too frothy, complicated and sweet for his taste. He held it at arm's length and gave it a disapproving scowl, like he was politely passing her a dead rat. She was flicking through mail on her phone, so engrossed in her work that she hadn't noticed until it was right in front of her.

"Thanks," she muttered and snatched it up, focusing rather more of her attention on her phone than anything else. She balanced it on the dash, even though there was a holder set into it further along that was far more convenient.

Roach said nothing. He discarded the cardboard tray on the floor of her car and pulled the plastic lid off the cup. He hated the lids with their horrible little spouts that forced you to drink in over-controlled little sips, measuring the experience out for you. He threw the lid down too and it landed haphazardly on top of the tray.

She glanced over, giving him a dirty look. "That had better find its way to a dustbin the next time you step out of my car."

He turned to flash an exaggerated nod of agreement. "It will be my number one priority, Sandra."

"Inspector!" she corrected him. "We're on the clock now."

"Sure," he smirked. "We're not in some pub car park, or a seedy hotel room on an overnight conference now. I get it!"

She put her phone down roughly on the dash. "Problem, Graham?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Nothing new," he shrugged.

“Good!” she told him. “Because we both know what would happen if word got out we were seeing each other.”

“*Fucking each other*,” he corrected. “If we were *seeing each other*, we could go out on dates, talk to one another, share a meal and do normal things that normal people do. We don’t do those things, Inspector — we just *fuck*.”

She narrowed her eyes, flashing him an icy little glare. “It’s not a perfect world,” she told him firmly. “If you can’t handle the arrangement then maybe we’ll have to stop *fucking each other* too. If you can be a big boy about it, then who knows what will happen next year at review time. If I get my promotion, then we won’t be working together anymore and I’ll be free to *see* whomever I like.”

“Which means me, right?” he asked suspiciously.

“Hopefully something better will come along in the mean time!” she told him with a wry smile.

He pointed at himself and said with a sneer, “Something better than this? What could be better than this?”

She gave him a thoughtful frown, scooping up her phone and returning to her messages. “A dog would be more loyal, a cat wouldn’t be as lazy, a hamster would be better endowed, a rabbit would last longer in bed, and I think a donkey might be smarter. Probably cuter too!”

“I thought you wanted a man, not a petting zoo!” He took a sip from his coffee, and winced as it turned out to be a lot hotter than he thought.

“I did, Roach, and luckily all the senior-level training I got recently has helped me manage the crushing disappointment at what I’ve ended up stuck with.”

Roach considered this one a net loss, deciding it was best to give up and at least try to be professional about it.

“So what’s on today?” he said, taking another more measured sip.

“We’re following up on two witnesses from a post office robbery,” she said, sounding distinctly disinterested. “You remember the one: it was recorded as an armed robbery, but the uniforms found two broken pool cues in supermarket bags round the corner.”

Roach nodded. “I always felt we should take that one more seriously—someone could have got a nasty splinter!”

“Yeah!” she sniggered. “Nasty business! We’re also scheduled to collect some CCTV footage from a couple of high street stores. Suspected gang of credit card fraudsters.

“Apparently, we’re closing in on them.”

“It’s the endless thrills and excitement that I love about this job!” Roach commented dryly. “It’s no wonder that some less professional officers end up having secret affairs with their assigned partners, grabbing at seedy, meaningless sexual encounters in pub car parks.”

She looked over and gave him her sternest, most angry stare.

He’d clawed a little victory back with that comment. “Which high street?” he asked.

She gestured ahead, along the rows of shops that led to a pedestrianised shopping precinct. “This one!”

“Let’s do that first,” he suggested. “Get it out of the way.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “Sure!” she agreed. “But if this is about taking me to a greasy café that serves nothing that wasn’t fried in week-old beef tallow, then I won’t be impressed.”

He huffed. “Nah, it’s not that. I’m cutting down: I want to lose a bit of weight, you see? I’ve been seeing this girl and it made me realise that maybe, just maybe, there’s a little room for improvement.”

She rolled her eyes. “What kind of idiot would date a man like you?” she joked. “What kind of grown up intelligent woman would allow herself to be referred to as *a girl*, come to that?”

He grinned at her. “One that’s not as grown up and intelligent as she thinks she is. I can get away with anything with *a girl* like that!”

She shook her head dolefully. "So what's it about, then?"

"If I tell you, you can't get angry!" he said.

"I'm not promising that!" she told him sternly. "You're worrying me now. What's on your tiny, pathetic little mind?"

"Promise, Sandra!" he told her.

She shook her head. "Inspector!"

"Promise?"

She sighed and put her phone down once more on the dash. "OK, go on! I'm intrigued enough to go along with it for now. I promise to not get mad if you tell me."

"I have your promise!" he reminded her. "I'm not afraid to withhold sexual favours if that promise isn't kept."

"I think I can live with that," she said sarcastically.

He paused and bit his lip. Finally, he said, "It's Mallory. He worked in a game shop right on this high street. Now I just happen to have a copy of his statement right here on my phone and I made some notes about it, just in case this very situation were to happen and I was to just find myself right here on this very spot. I thought I might just pop in and ask a few questions, just to see what happens."

"Mallory?" she sighed. "You need to let that go, Graham!"

"Just a few questions!" he said. "Ten minutes. We'll spend more time grumbling about it than we will doing it."

"Five minutes!" she told him firmly.

"Twenty at the outside," he told her with a grin.

"One of us is a really shitty negotiator."

"And one of us can get away with anything."

Inspector Grace might have had the authority, but she approached her job as a duty and was a polite civil servant through and through. She worked for the people, and behaved like she appreciated that they were the important ones.

Roach was not like that—he was not like that *at all*. He would enter a place like he owned it, and naturally took the lead: he commanded and controlled as he battled his way through life.

She thought to herself, in her private moments, that she was the modern face of policing, but he was what a good officer really needed to be. She joked about his Neanderthal approach to people, how he boldly barged his way into any situation, but secretly she had the deepest respect for him for precisely that reason. She was endlessly impressed by the confidence, the sheer power he wielded.

He wasn't even difficult, and never treated anyone badly: he simply demanded respect and people seemed to give it to him freely. When she watched him work, it became pointedly obvious that she belonged in an office, a managerial role somewhere, and the place for a man like him was on the front line, right where he was. He was right to have never sought promotion.

He walked into *Games Shaque*, a store displaying a dizzying array of software titles across a wide range of formats. Colours and styles were splashed across plastic boxes, cardboard characters stood at human height, representing things that he had absolutely no desire to understand.

Grace was content to observe as Roach naturally took the lead.

He marched up to the desk while she followed a few steps behind. He clearly didn't fit in, dressed as he was in a cheap, bland suit with a slightly untucked shirt. His regulation tie was missing, as it often was. She had given up reminding him about it.

"Morning!" he said and pulled out his ID and warrant card. He flashed his authority confidently before putting it away, clipped back on his belt even before anyone could have read the details. Perhaps he had made a point of also showing off his telescopic baton: a little bit of theatre never hurts.

Three workers dressed in dark blue uniforms stopped what they were doing and looked patently terrified. Roach made his way up to the counter and leant casually on it, completely at ease.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “Nobody is in any trouble so it’s alright to breathe.”

The three of them broke into awkward chuckles and the mood lightened just a little. “I’m just here to ask some followup questions about one of your colleagues.”

Grace did what she could to gauge their reactions. They all seemed confused, and nobody was panicking, yet... Just what was it that Roach was expecting to find?

He pulled out a note pad: more theatre. He was feeding the cliché, being exactly the officer they expected him to be.

“I’m asking questions about one Mallory Gardener.”

The three frowned and looked at one another. Finally, one stepped forward a little and sounding a little nervous, said, “Mallory?”

“Yes, do you know him?” Roach asked, standing up straighter now. Things had become more serious.

He nodded. “Well, yeah. I’m the manager here. He’s the assistant manager of the shop on Jackson Street.”

“Jackson Street?” Roach glanced at his notes. This time he really was checking them. “He doesn’t work here?”

The manager nodded and shrugged. “He used to, but that was five, maybe six months ago. It was just before I took over.”

“OK,” Roach muttered and nodded to himself thoughtfully.

Something was on his mind.

“Is this the head office? Is there any reason why someone might put this down as their work address, if they were actually based in another branch?”

The manager shook his head. “Nothing I can think of. Maybe he put it down out of habit?”

Roach narrowed his eyes. Not giving very much of anything away he said, "Sure, I can see that."

"Has he done anything wrong?" one of the others asked.

Roach looked over to a painfully thin young man: tall, mixed race, and wearing glasses that wouldn't look good on anyone. The uniform was at least two sizes too big. He smirked dismissively. "Not at all! This is just routine. I might actually die of boredom."

The young man nodded back, seemingly satisfied and chuckling to himself nervously.

Roach popped his note pad back into his pocket. As he was turning to leave, his eyes flashed up to the sign. Yellow lettering boldly picked out against a chequered metal backdrop.

"Is your sign spelled right?" he said with a little grin.

The manager looked up to it. "Yeah, that's how it's always spelt. Why?"

"So it's *Games* Shaque, plural, not *Game* Shaque, singular?"

"Yeah, *Games* Shaque, plural!" he said. "We sell more than one game."

"Indeed you do," he said, nodding his head. "I guess we really need to work on our record keeping. Thanks for your help guys. I appreciate it!"

Chapter 11

Breakfast was a waxed-paper cup filled just beneath the brim with thick, black coffee, the bitterer and stronger, the better. That was exactly how Lily often described him, as extreme in both ways, and to such a degree that the rest of his personality was something of a mystery, if he even had one. Nobody was entirely certain, least of all him.

He looked around his office with the eyes of a man who hadn't really bothered to take the time to really look before. While he didn't recognise the building, it did have an overall feel of being familiar. It had his personal touches all over it: a wastepaper basket filled with paper cups of coffee, stomped down with more piled endlessly on top, a wooden display board with a spattering of pictures and notes pinned to it, a collage that would grow while he worked on a job, often to the exclusion of all else.

Furniture was sparse, functional and not particularly comfortable. It was all just enough to get by with, and nothing beyond that. It was better than he usually had, so there was that.

Lily sat up sharply, rubbing her eyes and stretching. She let out a loud sigh, as if warning the world that she was coming for it.

"You slept on the floor?" he asked, staring out the window at the view beyond, trying to spot how many of the buildings he didn't know.

"No," she grimaced and narrowed her eyes, holding her hand above them to shield them from the morning sunlight. "I slept on a beautiful eiderdown mattress covered in silk sheets under a moonlit sky, in a wooden cabin next to the ocean in a tropical paradise. I just woke up here."

He gave her a stern little smile. "I slept in a chair."

She grinned widely and began to get up off the floor where she'd been laying on a makeshift bed constructed from a pile of old sheets they'd found in the storage cupboard. She had stripped off her clothes

and chosen to simply wrap herself in a sheet. It was draped around her, and there was in all likelihood nothing else underneath.

“For every winner, there must be a loser,” she said.

Sam nodded in agreement. “We’re all winners here, Lilith!” he told her with a wry smile. “I got you a coffee from a place on the corner, and there are some croissants for you and the boy in the box on the desk.

“I found a petty cash box in the drawer with quite a bit in it. I have nearly two hundred in my wallet and a bank card, but I obviously don’t know the number for that. Either way, we’re good for a few days.”

She stretched and made a loud, yawning noise. “You must have known you were coming!” she said.

Sam looked over to the young man, Mallory, apparently still sleeping on the floor beneath his jacket, all the sheets having been accounted for. “Stranger things have happened!”

She looked at Mallory, following Sam’s eyes. She cocked her head to one side curiously. “What do you think?”

Sam shrugged. “I think he’s telling the truth. Don’t you?”

Lily nodded and reached out her hand, grasping playfully with her fingers. Sam held out a cup of coffee towards her and she snatched it up enthusiastically. “My favourite kind of coffee!” she said excitedly.

“The kind someone else is paying for?”

She nodded and then looked a little sad. “You know me too well, Samuel. I sometimes worry that I don’t have any surprises left for you.”

“I doubt that,” he sighed. “The possibilities are literally endless, don’t forget. There are infinite opportunities for you to surprise, even shock me. Who knows what the future has in store?”

She looked unblinkingly forwards. “He’s telling the truth,” she said with an uncharacteristic note of resolute certainty. “But I didn’t mean that. I mean what do you think about the whole situation?”

Sam sniffed at her and gave a measured shrug. “We’ll find out. He doesn’t seem like anyone that would normally be in a situation like

this. I'm curious to know how he actually got involved, if it turns out that he *is* actually involved."

She pulled off the lid of her coffee and sniffed at it vigorously, taking a deep lungful of air in through her nose. She smiled in satisfaction. "Watered-down Espresso?" she said, almost a question, but not quite. "What do they call it here, a *Mexicano*? An *Ecuadoriano*?"

"Would you believe, it's an *Americano*!" he told her, sipping at his. He closed his eyes as it flowed over his tongue, stinging bitterly at his senses and clearing a little of the clouds from his busy mind. "It was bound to turn up somewhere. It's pretty good though!"

She smiled, much like a normal person might. "It isn't always. I had one once that tasted like the beans had passed through the digestive tract of a cat, and it had been stirred with the tail of an old dog. It tasted nutty!"

Sam looked her over, raising an eyebrow slightly. "Beans passed through the digestive tract of a cat? Was that some kind of metaphor?"

She nodded. "No, it was a viverrid. You see? There really isn't very much left that can surprise you about me."

"We'll see..."

"Are you going to the murder scene?" she asked. She perched herself on the edge of his desk, or at least the desk that was in Sam's office.

"I'll shift over there tonight," he told her with a nod. "The office is pretty much perfect for that. There's not much light coming in from street lights, and around midnight the moon shines straight in. The door to the office locks well, and I found a key. I can go straight through it, check out Mallory's house, find out what happened, and be back in time for breakfast if all goes well."

She looked back at the sleeping form of Mallory. He was snoring a little too evenly and had begun to move slightly, shifting around slowly on the floor. Sam looked at her and she began sniggered silently

to herself. He was obviously awake and trying to listen in to what they were saying.

“He’ll be safe here?”

Sam took another sip of coffee and turned back to the window, sighing to himself. “He has been so far. I can’t be in two places at once, and never fancied myself a bodyguard anyway, so he’ll have to take his chances. As far as I can tell, right here in this office is as safe a place as any. I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Sam took another, longer gulp. “Isn’t that right, Mallory?”

He rolled around, yawned and pretended, very poorly, to be waking up. “What?” he grumbled weakly. “Did someone call?”

“There are croissants in the box, coffee on the desk. You and me have a big day ahead, so get up off the floor and get yourself ready. I won’t tell you twice, so unless you want to be dragged into a fully upright position by your testicles, you’ll get up now and like it.”

He sluggishly pulled himself into a full upright position, but did it rather quickly. He began stretching his back and grimacing. “What are we doing?” he grunted.

“We’re going to see your parents, for a start!” Sam told him.

Mallory looked shocked, leaving Sam wondering just what he might have expected was going to happen. “That will help me understand the *how*. Then you’re going to show me around your life and we’re going to start to work out the *why*.”

“Are you going to explain to me what’s going on at any point?”

Mallory stood up, stretched once more and moved towards the desk. His first, reasonably confident step, was followed by a small shuffle and then he stopped, looking nervously over at Sam, hanging his head like a sheepish child.

Sam stared for a moment, then crossed his arms, glaring fixedly at the young man. He felt sorry for him. For a moment, a pang of sympathy flashed through his cold heart. How could he help him? What was going

to happen and what he'd find out along the way probably wasn't going to help him sleep at night. Ultimately, would it not be kinder to just kill him in some quick and painless way? He quickly put that idea out of his mind, for now, although he did consider that it wouldn't even seriously slow down the investigation if he did.

"Breakfast and coffee is over there," he told him again. "Help yourself. I have enough money to get us by for a few days: that should be long enough, I reckon."

Mallory pushed past his obvious apprehension and stepped towards the desk. "Thanks," he grumbled.

Lily bit off a small, almost delicate nibble of bread and flushed it down with a less delicate swig of coffee. "What are we doing for transport?"

"I've got a car!" Sam told her. "I was hoping for a motorcycle, but it's rare I ever get one—I don't even have a license. In any case, it's nothing special but it's got a full tank of fuel and isn't the kind of thing that will get any undue attention. The keys were in my pocket."

She grinned back, swallowing hard. "It's almost too easy sometimes."

Mallory took the smallest of the croissants and the last cup of coffee. He raised his eyebrow when he found that there didn't seem to be any milk or sugar to go with it. If it bothered him, he never said as much to anyone there.

"You two have known each other a long time?" he ventured.

Lily flashed a knowing smile over to Sam. With a little twinkle in her jet black eyes she said, "A long time in a lot of different places. In case you were asking, we know each other pretty well."

"Why do you ask?" Sam said, his voice low and accusing.

"You know..." he said flustered apologetically. Sam just carried on looking at him, waiting for him to continue as he knew he would.

“It’s just you have the same weird way of talking. You seem... out of place.”

Sam turned away, and for a moment he said nothing. He drained the last of his coffee and threw the cup on the floor, crunching it up into a ball first. “You seem just as strange to us.”

“Limited,” Lily added.

“I don’t understand!” he said with a confused frown. “Limited? You said that before.”

“Alright: imagine you live in a single room of a house!” Sam began. “You’ve got everything you need: water, a stove, a toilet, a bed, everything! You’ve got that? You’re imagining it for me? Oh—food too! Very important...”

“Now imagine you never left: you just spent your whole life in that one room, only ever meeting other people who lived in other parts of that same room, and they’d never left either. So, as far as anyone is concerned, that room is the entire world. What’s it like outside the room? It never occurs to you to ponder it—*there is no outside!*”

“Then, one day, you meet someone in the room who actually lived in another room. He too had thought his room was the entirety of everything, never once questioning it. That is, until he accidentally discovered... *a door!*”

“He’d always known it was there, but it never occurred to him to ask what it was for. Isn’t that strange? *Limited*, even... Cautiously he investigated it, and before he knew it, he found himself outside. He was free to wander about this whole gigantic mansion at will, endless corridors filled with little rooms with people living in them, just like his.

“Are you picturing this?”

“That man wouldn’t see the house the same way that everyone else did—he’d understand it as a whole. He would come to know all the other people in all the other rooms. He’d see how they’re really all the same, even though they all seem different on the surface: one might like

tea where another might prefer coffee; one might like rotisserie chicken, where another might prefer croissants or pain au chocolat; one might like fluffy rabbits where another might prefer heroine. You get the idea. Same people, minute differences on the surface.

“That man would understand things on a whole different level to the people who had only ever lived in one single room. Now do you see what I’m getting at here?”

Mallory stared wide-eyed as he listened intently, frozen to the spot almost.

Lily added, not quite as helpfully, “And there’s a person in every room with a video camera, and someone in charge can see any of the videos from any of the cameras at any time. That person could be everywhere, but also nowhere, all at the same time.

“That person would know loads of stuff, but people wouldn’t want to hear it because it would all be too much for them, so they’d just tell themselves she was crazy, and sometimes they’d throw rocks at her. Sometimes they’d burn people like her as a witch, and other times they wouldn’t go to watch movies with her because they thought she had funny hair.”

“Interesting,” Sam told her. “Did you just come up with that?”

“Sort of,” she said with an unnecessary scowl. “The thing about burning and not watching movies was real, but happened a bit differently, and not necessarily to the same person, or a different one.”

Chapter 12

Inspector Grace waited patiently. They had been waiting some time, and it seemed likely they'd be waiting for quite some time more.

"How long does it take to get a copy of CCTV footage?" Roach grumbled, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. He wasn't the most patient of people.

It was frustrating to be sure, but she stopped short of pacing up and down like a caged animal, the way he was doing. She managed her emotions better than he did, on the outside, at least.

"It will take a little longer than it already has," she told him. "You should have chosen your career with a little more care, if you couldn't handle the glamour and thrills of criminal investigations."

He gave her a weary smile and nodded. "You know who lives close by?" he said, as if the thought had just fluttered into his mind. "The Gardeners!"

"No!" she told him firmly. "There's nothing more we can learn from them. You don't even have anything you want to ask them: you just want to nose around, and rummage through their personal stuff!"

"Yeah, well, you didn't think there was anything I could learn from Mallory's workplace until we went there!"

She frowned thoughtfully. A little of his intrigue in this case was certainly rubbing off on her. The sad fact was that it was the most interesting thing that had passed through their department in months, and she would have loved to have had more time to spend working on it.

But it wasn't really a case. There were nothing but dead ends and empty claims. It wasn't the kind of work they did, as there were simply no results to be had. What was left that could be discovered, she wondered?

"A misspelt name and a wrong address isn't really evidence!" she told him finally. "There could be a really simple explanation."

“Go on then!” Roach challenged her.

“Go on what? What do you mean?”

“Explain it!” he told her. “Make it sound *plausible*. Convince me it was all just a mistake.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “OK,” she said.

She enjoyed a challenge and it would be a welcome distraction from standing around waiting for the staff to bring the recordings.

“Mallory is an idiot, or he doesn’t care about his job. Both, maybe. Either way, he never noticed the plural: probably distracted by the bizarre choice of Afrocentric spelling convention. He always wrote it that way and thought nothing of it. It’s the kind of job where nobody cares, nobody notices, and certainly nobody bothers to correct him. They hire losers! I don’t remember seeing anyone there and feeling like they might be wasting their brilliant minds.”

He huffed haughtily. “That’s actually pretty good.”

“And the address... maybe he just couldn’t remember the new one, so he put down the old one,” she said, feeling pretty smug about it. It certainly seemed rational. “Or maybe as was suggested, he worked there so long that it became habit. He wasn’t even thinking about the new address, just like how all the way through January, everybody writes down the wrong year. Or my uncle, who still thinks it’s 11th November 1994 any time he has to write down today’s date.”

“I bet you think you’re pretty clever?” he glared at her.

“Not really,” she admitted with a shrug. “Outsmarting you is no test of anyone’s intelligence. I’m sure there are salad-vegetables that could give you a run for your money.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. “Not the supermarket ones!” he told her sternly. “Maybe the organic ones, but that’s only to be expected.”

“I worry about you, if you genuinely expect to be outsmarted by an organic cucumber,” she sighed.

“If you really want to worry me, how about you let me go and do a followup interview with Mallory?”

“Why would I do that?” she asked, less opposed to the idea than she probably should be. She could actually justify such a thing, thanks to the minor discrepancies in his statement. If she was trying to make a case against him for maliciously wasting police time, she could certainly explain a short visit to her superiors, if she ever had to.

“Why? How about my winning personality?”

“I hope you can do better than that.”

“How about because there’s something more to all this, and you know I’m right about that? You know Mallory isn’t an idiot, which shoots a hole in your guess about the spelling. We also know he’s an assistant manager, so he’d be dealing with postings in and out of his store. There’s no way he wouldn’t know the address of the place he worked. He’s been there long enough to have broken the habit, if he ever had one.”

She looked at him and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “You just outsmarted a cucumber, Roach. Congratulations!”

He waved his hand dismissively. “All in a day’s work for a man who stands as the last line of defence between the innocent public and a gang of possible credit card fraudsters who may, or may not, have stolen three pink shirts and a bag of socks.”

“According to the manager, they were really very nice socks!” she reminded him.

“It’s exactly things like that that get me out of bed in the morning.”

“Alright,” she said finally. “I’ll agree to a followup on Mallory at the hostel. But I want a full work-up of the questions you intend to ask, and we need to do better than just a spelling mistake and a forgotten address.”

He grinned like a child that was getting its own way. “Can do, boss.”

“If I’m the boss, why do I never feel like I’m in charge?” she grumbled.

“It’s probably all my toxic masculinity and your passive-aggressive bullshit,” he said very matter-of-factly.

“*Probably...*”

Roach pressed a satin polished button on a stainless-steel weatherproof housing set at the doorway of the hostel. A low, reedy sound, something like an old mobile phone ringing started up as soon as he did.

“11th November 1994, eh?” said Roach. “What do you suppose happened that day that was so important it welded it into his mind as the ending of all times?”

“From what he told me, that was the day he quit his desk job. He went from writing down the date a thousand times a day, to practically never: a couple of times a year, if that. He must have retained the mental muscle-memory.”

Roach looked deflated. “When you explain it like that, it really detracts from the mystique. I thought it was going to be something with intrigue.”

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to be disappointed! You’re going to find in life that explanations are rarely as interesting as you hope they’ll be.”

Roach looked around briefly. The sky above them was a very disappointing pastel grey, no clouds and no sign of the sun, just a wash of dirty water smeared across a filthy canvas.

The neighbourhood was one where nobody would want to end up. It was threatening, cautious and tense. People walked around with their heads down, their hands in their pockets. Glances were furtive and nobody lurked around, waiting for bad things to happen to them. People

went on their way, moving as quickly as they could to wherever it was they were going.

“I wonder if the explanation of this story is going to be disappointing?” he said.

There was an electronic clicking sound and a voice followed it, asking, “Hello. Who’s there?”

Roach looked around for a camera but couldn’t seem to find one. “Detective Constable Roach!” he said, like the title carried significant weight. “Metropolitan CID. Do you need my warrant number?”

There was the sound of groaning, “No, it’s fine.” The door unlatched with a bleep, and Roach pushed his way inside.

“They just seem totally thrilled about our visit, don’t they?” he quipped.

Inspector Grace grunted to herself. “This place is a halfway-house. Some of the people here are on parole. It can’t be an easy job—there must be problems every day. I imagine they already know the odds are heavily stacked against a visit from the police making their day any better.”

“Sure!” Roach grunted. “Isn’t it funny how we’re the last thing anyone wants to see, until they need our help?”

Just inside the door was a fairly steep set of stairs leading up. Roach grabbed a painted-over wooden bannister and made his way up. From behind she called out, “I worry that this job really might be too glamorous for a man like you! A man who thinks too much, the way you do.”

“Luckily for everyone there aren’t many men like me left!” he grunted breathlessly as he paced his way up the staircase. Maybe he should add a more rigorous exercise routine to his diet, he thought to himself.

“Fried breakfast’s have killed them all off!” she joked, a little close to home.

“If mankind was meant to eat muesli, then it wouldn’t taste like muesli,” he snorted in annoyance, finally reaching the top. He gasped quietly, pacing his breath to seem less winded than he really was.

He tried to imagine himself running. It wasn’t a happy thought.

A very slender, very worried-looking man was standing at the top, waiting to meet them, edging his weight from one foot to the other. He reached out a hand in greeting, and strained to make eye contact. He wore a troubled smile.

“I’m Simon Trent!” he said with a noticeable Caribbean accent. “I’m the manager here. We’ve never met, but I remember your name was on the admission papers for one... Mallory Gardener? Is that who this is about?”

Roach and Grace exchanged eye contact. Something had happened, it was clear, and knowing it sent a smug little smirk across his lips. She raised an eyebrow and gave an appreciative nod back to him. Turning his attention back to the manager, he said, “What happened, Simon? What’s going on?”

“Nothing serious!” he told him as the two men shook hands. “I mean, nothing all *that* serious.”

The Inspector was losing her patience and said, “Mr Trent, why don’t you tell us what happened, and let *us* determine how serious it is.”

He gulped and looked shyly away. “There was a minor altercation last night in the dining room,” he explained. “It wasn’t even reported until later, but apparently there was an incident...”

He sighed, and shook his head, almost apologetically.

“One of our more familiar residents, Craig, is an alcoholic who was recently released after a small spell for a string of minor violent assaults. Nothing too excessive or premeditated, just bar brawls really. He has impulse control issues.”

“He sounds lovely,” Roach quipped, rolling his eyes.

“He’s a menace! I’d rather I didn’t have to house people like him, but unless they violate our rules we can turn them away. Anyway, Craig lightly clipped Mallory round the back of the head after he refused to lend him money to buy alcohol. After that, Mallory left and hasn’t returned.”

“I see,” Roach grumbled. “I think we’d like to talk to this Craig.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” he began, with a slight grimace. “Craig’s gone too. He was reported to have been going through other people’s belongings in a dorm room—he threatened one of our long term guests! After that, nobody knows where he went.

“We do know that he went into Mallory’s dorm at around 8pm. His mattress had been moved around, so we’re assuming he was looking under it for money.

“After that, nothing! We assumed he’d headed out to try his luck elsewhere. This morning, we thought to check the corridor CCTV footage to get an exit time, in case we needed to fill out some forms later. That’s where it got a bit strange: we see him go in, but he never comes out. The windows are barred shut and the door is the only entrance. Somehow he neither stayed nor left. He just vanished!”

“Vanished?” Roach said incredulously. “Like a magician’s rabbit?”

Simon Trent nodded scornfully. “Yes, Constable. Like a magician’s rabbit.”

“And this is your idea of providing a safe and secure environment for the vulnerable, is it?”

“Is that what you think we do here, Constable? We’re a simple bed and meal service for those with nowhere else to go. If a guest violates our rules, they either leave or we call the police. If it’s a parolee, we call the police, and they’re typically gone before they arrive. Other than that, they are free to do as they please and there’s nothing we can do to stop them, even if we wanted to: we’re understaffed and

underfunded as it is, and it was the police that advised us to never get involved.

“Mallory was a voluntary guest who left of his own accord, so until such time as he returns, he’s not our concern. Craig is a parolee, but he’s not here now, so that’s none of our business either. Frankly I’m glad to be rid of him, and if he does show up again, you’ll be the first to hear about it, believe me!

“So if you have some kind of complaint about the way this facility is run, I suggest you bring it up at the next council and committee meeting, or you could always write to Esther Rantzen.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Roach a little apologetically. “I’m sure you’re all doing the best you can.”

Grace stepped in. “You mentioned CCTV footage... Could we have a copy? It may contain evidence of a parole violation.”

“And I’d like to speak with the last person who saw Craig,” added Roach.

“Sure, whatever you need,” said Simon, shaking his head. Without another word, he made his way back to his office, humming to himself the whole way.

Roach grinned at the Inspector. “I told you there was more to this!” he said smugly.

She nodded wryly. “Who could have possibly imagined that a violent drunk would get drunk and behave violently? Your instincts are sharper than a needle in the eyeball.”

“Admit it, Sandra,” he said in a low whisper. “This is interesting. A man vanished from a sealed room with a camera pointing straight at him. We’re onto something interesting here.”

She looked unconvinced.

“We had better be for your sake.”

Chapter 13

Mallory's palms were sweaty. He felt light-headed as wave after wave of fear crashed through him. He winced openly, sucking air noisily in through his teeth as the car went through a gap that, to Mallory, didn't really look like it was actually a gap at all.

"Must you really drive so fast?" he grumbled, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Sam didn't even reply. He just pushed onwards, driving the small, and rather anonymous, family saloon way beyond its comfort zone. The engine howled out in front of them and the tread of the tyres made a rhythmic pulsing drone as it powered along.

"Are you going to tell me what all this is about?"

Sam gripped the steering wheel hard and his eyes probed only forwards. If he was even listening, he gave no sign of it. Mallory looked him over. He was dressed in a white shirt with an unimaginative tie topping it off. A grey suit, that had seen one too many visits to the dry cleaners, was worn beneath a long, black wax-cotton waterproof coat. He looked every inch the down-at-heel detective.

"What all what is about?" Sam grunted. "We're going to talk to your parents." He paused for just a moment and there was a subtle shift in his demeanour, like he knew something he wasn't going to share. "To Mr and Mrs Gardener."

"Are you going to tell me what you're looking for? What are you going to ask them?"

"That depends on what they tell me," he said.

The wheels of the car squealed slightly as he went a little too fast around a sharp corner. The car wobbled as it straightened up. Behind them, someone sounded their horn.

"I want to search your room too," he said matter-of-factly like it meant nothing. "You're going to help me with that."

“Why?” Mallory said defensively.

“Because I’m fairly certain that it’s not your room!” Sam told him firmly.

Mallory frowned and looked out of the window as buildings raced past. There was the soft thrumming sound of bollards echoing the sound of the car back at them as they hurtled along. He could hear it above the droning whine of the engine.

“I don’t understand!” Mallory sighed eventually.

Sam turned to him and asked, sounding almost sympathetic about it, “Why don’t you tell me what you think actually happened here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d like to hear from you what you think is going on!” Sam told him. “Just for fun, why don’t you explain to me what you think has happened?”

Mallory found the courage to scowl at him. “I have a few ideas, but I have a feeling that you already know much better than I do. I think you just want to laugh at me for being naive, for not knowing as many things as you.”

Sam appeared to silently mull this over. Finally he told him, his voice low, almost sad, “Nobody is laughing at you Mallory. I understand this is frustrating; I understand what you’re going through, and probably better than you might have guessed. It might shock you to hear this, but you’re not the first person in the world who woke up one day to find out everything they knew was totally, completely and irretrievably wrong.”

“It happened to Lily, didn’t it?” Mallory guessed. “Is that why she’s like that?”

Sam smiled, a reserved little flutter over his lips that went as quickly as it came. “Not Lily—she’s just like that. I think that, in her case, that’s all there is to it. She walks a path where her world and yours have intersected. Beyond that, I think it’s best not to think too much about what the world actually looks like to her.”

“Is she crazy?”

Sam shook his head. “She should be, but no. I don’t think she’s crazy.” He shrugged to himself and added, “I know she’s not.”

Mallory nodded. Somehow, hearing it from Sam made it seem real, even in a world that increasingly felt like nothing more than a dream. “I think my parents were replaced,” he said. “I don’t see any other explanation. I’m not saying they’re Russian spies, clones, aliens, or robots from the future. I don’t know who or what they are, but I know they’re not really them.”

“Your parents weren’t replaced.”

Something about the way Sam spoke with such cold authority made him very difficult to disagree with.

“So you know what happened?” Mallory ventured. *He* certainly didn’t.

Sam looked away, focusing on the road, even though there seemed to be nothing much to see. There were no cars ahead and they’d slowed right down. They were now driving at a fairly sedate, normal speed.

“First, I have a question for you,” began Sam. “Imagine for a moment you’re a cow. Better still, you’re a pig. You’re a *Berkshire* pig! You’re living a life of luxury in a modern farm that employs ethical methodology. You’re well fed, looked after, happy! Everything you need is provided for you, and more besides. This is the only world you’ve ever known, and it’s glorious! Are you picturing it? It’s important you use your imagination here.

“Now, one day, you discover the disturbing truth that the sole reason you’ve been getting all this free food is because the friendly farmer plans to kill you and sell your caucus to the highest bidder, so other people can eat you as some kind of delicacy. And that farmer will sleep soundly that night. How do you think that would feel? How do you

think you would feel about anything, ever again? Once your eyes are opened, they can't be closed again.

"The world is way more complicated than most people know. Most people don't even want to know. They go through their lives just believing that what they can see, hear and feel is all there is to it. It makes them feel safe, I suppose..."

"But the world isn't like that: it's bigger and less safe than you ever imagined! And once you see it for what it is, there is no going back.

"My question is, if there was something I could tell you that would radically change the way you saw the world, would you want to hear what that thing was? Would you *really* want to know?"

Mallory looked away, he reeled slightly as he thought about the enormity of it all. If someone could have told him the exact moment of his death, would he want to know? He had been asked this question once before and it had haunted him ever since. What would he have chosen to do if that information was available to him? What would he decide?

"I'd want to know!" he said finally, with little confidence.

"Once you know, there really is no going back," Sam told him, a last, final warning. "That genie isn't going back in the bottle. You'll have to find a way to live, to go forwards with that knowledge. Most people can't. Those crazy homeless people pointing umbrellas at passing cars didn't all just end up there by accident, you know?"

Mallory was nervous now. His heart was fluttering in his chest and he was beginning to feel lightheaded. With a confidence he found way down inside, that he never previously suspected might be there, and with a strength that surprised him, he said, "You found a way, didn't you?"

"Yes!" Sam told him. "I had to and I did. We do what we have to do."

"My parents weren't replaced?" he asked.

“No!” He huffed wearily. He hesitated one final time before explaining. “*You* were!”

Mallory smiled awkwardly. It had to be a joke. “Me?”

“This isn’t your home, Mallory,” he began. “I think that when you saw your parents murdered, it really happened. I think that you left your home after you saw it and came here. This is not the world you were born in. It’s a different one.”

Mallory frowned and deeply contemplated the fact that all this made no sense whatsoever. “How can I be in a different world?”

“Remember I told you about the rooms?” Sam explained. “About how you spend your whole life in one room of a building, believing it’s the whole world? Remember?”

“This is the same thing. Everything you know, this universe... it’s just one room in a much larger building. Every choice you make—that anyone makes—creates a fork in the road that your life is following. Those forks becomes fractures in the timeline. They become new universes, where all possibilities can, and do, exist.”

Mallory just listened.

“Imagine it—infinite universes! Most of them are largely the same as yours; there aren’t many real differences to be found. There might be a different shirt, a watch that got broken, or a TV show that you missed. That’s usually all there is to it. Most of the time we can go to most of the other universes without even really noticing much of a change.”

Mallory rubbed his temple in exasperation. “So you’re saying that I’m in a different universe? Am I understanding that right?”

Sam gave him a severe glare. “Yes!” he nodded. “That’s exactly what I’ve been saying, in more or less exactly those words.”

“Well, I don’t believe it,” he grunted angrily. “I mean, that’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.”

“Most people react that way,” Sam told him evenly. “But the fact is, that’s just how the universe works. Infinite universes, with infinite Mallorys occupying them.

“In fact, it’s not actually like that at all!”

Mallory frowned, but continued listening.

“All of the Mallorys in all of the universes are really just one big Mallory! Your consciousness is a bridge, spanning them all. You—the Mallory I’m talking to now—are only really awake and aware of the universe where you’ve led your path, but you are still conscious of the other universes. The closer a universe is to the one you’re awake in, the more aware you are of them—from the perspective of the Mallory *you* are, right here.”

“I don’t...” he stammered.

“You’re not aware of your heart beating in your chest, but you know that it is,” Sam continued. “You weren’t thinking of the smallest toe on the end of your left foot, but it was there, doing its job. You’re not aware of each of the countless billions of cells floating around your body, each one doing exactly what they’re meant to be doing. All of the Mallorys in all of the other universes are like that: it’s just that right now, you’re *this one*.”

Mallory looked out of the window, struggling hard to make sense of this. He didn’t want to believe, but the idea was hard to refute after everything he’d seen. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Sam nodded stoically. “It’s just how it is.”

“And you move, don’t you?” Mallory narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, as pieces of the puzzle began to come together. “You were telling me this morning that you found the door and you can go from room to room.”

“Something like that.” Sam gave a weak little smile. “Not physically, of course. You can’t just take your body out of one universe and drop it into another. That would be impossible. It can’t be done.

“It is possible to shift your awareness around, though. There’s only one Sam, you see, and I can take my memories, my experience and everything that makes me myself and I can bring all that to other universes to exist in other parts of the same Sam.”

“How?”

“Isn’t easy!” Sam snorted, getting really quite dangerously close to laughing. “Let’s just say it’s possible, but it’s quite hard. It does happen all by itself though, sometimes by accident. So actually it’s pretty simple when you come down to it.”

“And you think that’s what happened to me? You think I accidentally moved from my universe to this one.”

“*Shifted*,” Sam told him, a little too firmly. “We call it ‘*shifting*!’ It sounds cooler.”

“Shifting...” Mallory repeated to himself, as if examining the word carefully. He frowned thoughtfully, “What about Lily?”

Sam looked out to the side. “If you want to know about Lily, you’ll have to ask her. Hers isn’t my story to tell.”

Sam banged on the front door as if the fact that it wasn’t already open was an inconvenience that someone else should be blamed and punished for—perhaps to death. His right hand was dug deep into the pocket of his coat, the other hung down to the side as he impatiently waited.

“Is anything different?” he asked. “Is the door the same colour? Has anything moved? Look for details—even small changes matter.”

Mallory sighed nervously. He didn’t at all want to be there.

“The doorbell,” he remembered. “It didn’t work before, but it rang when the police tried it.”

“OK,” Sam nodded and rung it, just to be sure. “Keep looking at all times.”

“What am I looking for?” Mallory shrugged.

“The passage of time!” he told him. “Think of it this way: each branch splits off, and then that branch splits off into other branches. If we find a difference and trace it back, we can see how long ago this universe split off from yours. The further back they split, the more different they are likely to be.”

Mallory was confused again. “Does that matter?”

“Well, you come across as a pretty boring, inoffensive young man, wouldn’t you say? But evidently in some universe, somewhere, your parents are worth slaughtering right in front of you.” Sam shrugged at this rather significant difference. “I want to know why that happened, don’t you?”

He didn’t have time to answer. The door latched open and the face of his mother peered shyly out from behind it as it opened slowly, just a crack at first and then a little more. It didn’t open all the way.

“Mallory!” his mother said with a smile, but her eyes looked bewildered as she stared at him.

“The name’s Abbadon, ma’am,” said Sam, manoeuvring himself in front of him. He held up a business card he had found in his pocket for inspection. “I’m a private detective, and I’m here to make some enquiries.”

She looked at the card, then up at his face, back over to her son’s, back to the card, and back to Sam’s face again. Evidently confused, she confirmed, “A private detective?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam told her. “I work for Heinz and Worcester, a legal firm investigating a prescription medication suspected of causing *psychotic episodes*.”

“What?” she gasped, and allowed the door to open a little wider.

“Madam,” he began with an air of credibility. “I can’t name the drug in question, but it’s a recently released headache pill. We believe your son took it, and had a violent reaction that made him suffer a brief

and thankfully harmless psychotropic delusion: in short, he saw things that weren't real.

"We're filing a class action law suit to prevent further sale of this medication and demand compensation for the victims. I hope you understand that if they are found negligent, your son might be able to claim quite a significant amount in damages."

She smiled with a huge bloom of relief. "Mallory, is that what this is all about?"

Mallory looked at Sam, a bit dumbfounded by it all. For a moment, he found Sam so convincing that even he wasn't sure what was really happening.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs Gardener," Sam said. "May we come inside?"

"Of course!" she said, a new sparkle in her tired eyes.

Sam turned to Mallory, lowered his voice and said, "Look out for anything that's different."

"Just to be clear," Mallory began. "You're telling me these really are my real parents, just a different version of them? Is that right?"

"They're as real as you are!" Sam told him. "But that's just the pretext. Right now, we have to work out just how real *real* is."

"Well, I know what *is* real?" Mallory grumbled. "*Heinz and Worcester!* We have condiments where I'm from too, you know."

"Condiments?" he said, nodding. "Interesting!"

Chapter 14

Detective Roach grumbled to himself as he stalked down the corridor towards the manager's office, his large, heavy footsteps echoing against the plaster walls. He unceremoniously let himself in, rattling the door handle to free a sticky lock. He pushed it open, rather more aggressively than he intended. "Bloody thing..." he growled at it.

Inspector Grace looked up at him. Her face portrayed the usual veneer of professionalism that she wore at her job, when anyone else might be watching. Roach knew that it was a facade, an act she hid her real self behind, but anyone else who didn't know her so well might think she was quite severe, and more than just a little intimidating.

He knew that she actually slept with a battered old pink teddybear named 'Gerald' on her bed that she'd been given as a child by her favourite uncle.

"I've seen the footage," she told him, all businesslike and with total, impatient efficiency. "Sure enough, Craig goes into the room at 20:17 and doesn't leave. I have a copy. We can get a tech guy to make a more thorough analysis."

"I interviewed Michael," Roach told her, gesturing back to where he'd come from with his thumb. He dragged a beaten-up office chair noisily across the floor and sat himself down in it. "He knows less than nothing. Craig went into his room demanding money, Michael didn't have any, Craig left. Michael is an old-hand, familiar with this kind of life: he knows to keep his head down and his mouth shut. We're not getting anything else out of him, but to be fair, there's probably nothing else to get."

She gave him a ridiculing but pointed little glare and said, "Keeping your mouth shut is a skill few people have these days."

He smiled at her, very slightly, and his eyes lit up. What more need be said—she'd made her point.

“Mallory was with a girl,” she began. “Some slim, hippie-looking chick who came in as a guest. Apparently she walked right up to Mallory and they started talking. Everyone assumed they were friends!”

“Mallory has a girlfriend?” he said, a mixture of sarcasm and surprise.

“She was quite pretty, apparently. People said she seemed a little off, a little *out there*—maybe a drug addict. Nobody thought to question her being here. It’s a unisex hostel and she seemed to fit right in. As long as they behave reasonably, guests are permitted until 9pm.”

“Inspector,” he began. “Mallory doesn’t strike me as the sort to have a girlfriend fitting that description. I’m only a mere DC, but I would more likely see him with a slightly overweight, anxious, underachieving failure he met at work: someone who would make his life just as miserable as he would make hers.”

She nodded. “On the other hand, I don’t think he has the confidence to just meet a new girl, and then leave together.”

Roach raised an eyebrow in surprise. “They left together? I’m developing a grudging respect for this young man. Maybe we wildly misjudged him?”

She looked around, craning her neck to check behind. Nobody else was in the office, and the manager was out flustering around trying to find out what had happened to Craig. This gave her an opportunity to speak more candidly.

“We’re looking at it from different angles, but I think we both agree something doesn’t add up here. Right now though, my greater concern is with finding him. He’s a nice kid, and he’s out of his depth: he has no idea how to live in a place like this! He could have gotten himself into a lot of trouble.”

“We really did him a favour, didn’t we!” he quipped with a deep sigh of exasperation.

“What would you have had me do?” she snapped defensively.
“It’s not like we had our pick of options!”

She was perfectly correct of course, and seemed to be struggling with a little bit of guilt about her decision—he knew her that well. It would get nobody anywhere to labour that point, for now.

Roach pulled out his phone and dialled the office. “This is going to sound a little unorthodox, but I’m going to put a trace on his mobile number. If I can track him down, I can bring him in.”

She smiled thinly, looking relieved. “Good idea,” she told him. “We can’t take him anywhere against his will though—he’s not a suspect.”

Roach held up his hand as the call connected. “DC Roach,” he said. “I’d like to start a trace on the following number, please...”

Inspector Grace’s attention returned to the CCTV footage where, troublingly, nobody was leaving the room that Craig had entered. She sighed loudly.

“No, no! Don’t disturb the judge! I’ll have the target sign a post factum when we catch up with him, that’ll square it all out... Yeah, really! He’ll be *that glad* to see us! ... OK, you do that. Thanks!”

Roach ended the call and returned his attention to his superior.

“Trace is on the way. Once we catch up with him, I can check his statement, and go over the discrepancies directly.” He chuckled to himself and added, “Don’t give me that look, Sandra. I’m the police, and Mallory is a scared little kid from the suburbs. If I told him that he was in trouble, he’d wet himself where he stood.”

“And what if he really is in trouble?” she asked, not unreasonably.

“Then we’ll get him out of it,” he told her. “Haven’t you been paying attention?!”

She checked her watch. “It will have to be later,” she sighed. “We have an interview assignment across town.”

Roach grinned. “Well, there are two of us!”

“You want to go alone?” She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, but he knew she had wanted him to say exactly that.

He nodded. It was a minor bending of the rules, but not so serious that anyone would notice, or care.

“I’m a big boy. I can handle tracking down a young man who’s most violent act in the world was accidentally stepping on a bug when he was seven years old.”

His phone beeped with the data he had requested.

“But what if he *is* in trouble?” She rubbed her forehead wearily, a thing she often did when she was struggling with a decision.

Roach tried to help her make it. “Sandra, you’re more than capable of interviewing a potential suspect, and I’m quite capable of following Mallory to whatever coffee shop he’s hiding out in. We’ll be fine. Let’s meet for lunch and you can buy me a cheeseburger.”

“You’re on a diet!” she frowned. “You can have salad, with an extra-troublesome organic cucumber!”

Detective Constable Roach stepped off the bus. One of the most annoying aspects of working with an officer of higher rank was that she got to drive, and she got to drive her own car. When they split off, that meant he had to travel by *alternative means*, which invariably meant public transport.

He checked his phone. The office had sent him a map with the location of Mallory’s phone. Luckily, it hadn’t moved the entire time he’d been tracking it. It seemed his earlier comment about him hiding out in a coffee shop might not be too far from the truth and he certainly hoped it would be that easy.

The street was relatively quiet, lost in the background of some appalling suburban maze of twisting roads, filled beyond capacity with lost souls. Little clusters of shops had sprung up along busier stretches, or on corners that led off in no particular direction, but essentially it was little more than endless blocks of concrete houses, too compact and close together to be really comfortable for people to live out their lives in.

Roach looked up, trying to get his bearings according to the map on his phone. The world didn't very well match the digital representation in his hand, at least not inside his head. He paced along meaningfully like he was brimming with confidence, even though he wasn't at all sure where he was. Still, it told him he was getting there.

Checking the map, he knew he was close to Mallory's house, close enough to walk to if you had a little time, but not so close that there would be any confusion. He hadn't gone home, that was one thing he was certain about.

As he made his way along, he zoomed in closer to the twisted maze of streets.

A gang of young men, really little more than boys, started eyeing him, nudging one another and looking over furtively. Roach knew he stood out: he couldn't look any more like a policeman if he was wearing a uniform with a bright blue flashing light on the top of his head.

But, he wasn't concerned. They were just a gang of young kids, filled with bluff and bravado and with less substance to them than an internal promotion. He ignored them and went on his way. Someone shouted 'pig' behind his back, but he ignored it. It would take more than words to offend a man like him.

The path led him out to a stretch of waste ground.

For a moment, Roach just stared, confused and a little worried. It was a large, triangular stretch of land. Grass was overgrown in random, uneven tufts, and all around the edges, rubbish was strewn about. Above

him was a bridge, a road leading up and going nowhere special in either direction. It had left a gap, and the gap had been filled with what nobody else wanted.

If Mallory's phone was indeed here, then he might very well be in actual trouble. Roach stepped forwards gingerly, looking around carefully for any sign of a phone left discarded on the ground.

There was a wire fence all around with a gate blocking the way. It was locked with a fairly substantial padlock, the kind made from strips of heavy steel sandwiched together: it looked like it meant business. He pulled at it, grunting in annoyance. The hinges of the gate squealed dryly and started to moan under the force. He pulled harder and the rusty metal sheered off with a loud sigh. He pulled at the gate and it came away, leaving a gap large enough for him to squeeze himself through.

He edged forwards through thick bushels of heavy green weeds, mixed with polythene shopping bags and broken bits of rubble. He saw a small pile of discarded beer cans and a smattering of cigarette-ends piled up behind an overturned refrigerator.

What there absolutely wasn't was a coffee shop with a Mallory in it anywhere to be seen. As he made his way in, he became increasingly concerned at what had become of the helpless and naive young man he was looking for. He noticed his right hand beginning to hover just over the end of his telescopic baton.

He considered shouting out his name, but held the urge in check. If Mallory was indeed in there, brooding and alone, then hearing his name called out could make things worse. He might bolt, run for his life, and with a hint of self-reproach, Roach knew he'd never be able to catch him.

He checked one last time. According to his phone, he was almost on top of him—he must be close now!

Roach put the phone in his pocket and moved onwards. He stepped under the overhead road and it cast a dark shadow over the

grass. Where he stood had fewer weeds and more shattered concrete: it was darker and felt instantly colder. The larger pieces of junk had been discarded there, where the chain link fence was lowest.

An old stove was lying along the verge with several washing machines nearby, and an old television with the screen smashed out of it.

He looked carefully, sweeping the area with a seasoned pair of professional eyes.

Then he saw something that made his heart sink.

A shoe was sticking up through the weeds. A blue sports shoe, made from what looked like the same denim material as a pair of rugged jeans. The sole was white with a thin red pinstripe and it caught his eye like a beacon. To his horror, Roach saw that it was one of a pair, both facing out to the sides, flared out from a body that was lying face down in the dirt.

He ran over breathlessly, gasping as he abandoned caution and made a dash for the body. He hoped against reason that it was Mallory and that it wasn't as bad as it looked. Perhaps he had just given up on the hostel? Maybe he had walked close to home, to some little patch of land he used to play on as a child. In desperation he'd just chosen to sleep there, safely anonymous and far away from the drunken Craigs of this world, with their easy, casual violence and bubbling rage?

He cried out now, "Mallory!"

There was no response to his shout, except along the opposite verge. Three birds launched themselves in panic from a thin, dead tree.

"Mallory?" he said weakly, falling to his knees next to the motionless body.

Roach was a detective of some experience, and he knew the smell of death only too well. The bittersweet odour of decay filled his nostrils. He scrambled around, digging around the face to reveal what he feared the most. His professionalism slipped as he wilfully disturbed a crime scene. His heart was pounding, his hands were shaking.

He gasped, falling backwards from the corpse as he saw the face. It was decayed, the skin had begun to putrefy and turn a darker shade, and the cold, whitened, dead eyes stared out sightlessly into nothingness.

But there was no mistaking who it was.

“Mallory?” he gasped.

It made no sense. He’d spoken to Mallory the afternoon before, but this body, these remains had been lying here dead for days, at least, maybe a week—certainly longer than a single evening.

“It can’t be...” he whispered to himself.

He stared, his mind reeling as he tried to make sense of it all. He knew he should call it in: he should be on the phone already, bringing down a team of experts to swarm around, collecting evidence and putting together the pieces of this horrendous, grotesque puzzle.

As the thought of all that crossed his mind, the one thought that wasn’t going away was to call Sandra. He had to speak to her; he had to tell her what he’d found. For some reason, that was more important to him than anything else in the whole of his world.

He stood up slowly, his eyes still fixed on that lifeless face, the face of a man he knew and had spoken to only a matter of hours before when he’d been alive, in spite of his clearly having been dead for much, much longer. He cringed openly at the thought, at what all this might actually mean.

It was cold suddenly, colder than ever. A chill crept up his spine like the icy, dead fingers of the young man were running along him, caressing his exposed skin. He shuddered and looked up at the dull grey sky. It grew darker. The shadow from the bridge became deeper, grimmer. Darkness seemed to flow from around the shadows until, after just a few moments, the whole place was bathed in almost pitch black emptiness.

It took a moment for Roach to even notice. Suddenly, it was unavoidable. It was as if night had fallen in an instant, and daylight had never stood a chance against it.

He looked around fearfully, not knowing what was happening as terror gripped him. His heart was pounding now, his mouth was dry. Reflexively, he pulled the telescopic ASP from his belt. With a jolt of his wrist, the three-part metal baton extended into place, locking the pieces of carbon-steel into a solid bar with an intimidating metallic clunk.

He looked around, wide-eyed as the darkness now stretched out all around. There was nothing else.

He heard a footstep, a clumsy, large boot crunching down onto the loose rubble somewhere nearby.

Roach turned, flinging his right arm above his head, his fingers gripping down onto the weapon with all the strength he had, adrenaline sharpening his senses, filling him with strength.

Through gritted teeth he angrily snarled, "Come on!" He looked around, scanning the darkness. "I'll take on any man!"

In that moment it was no idle threat: fear had washed away reason, and replaced it with aggression, aggression that he would readily turn on anyone who deemed to threaten him. He would fight anyone, right there in that dark, hopeless moment. He was ready.

Suddenly the darkness tore open, as if the shadows were wrapped around a single man and he had plunged powerfully through a thin sheet of shadow.

A snarling, gnashing, viscous beast flung itself towards him. It roared with the venom of a man on fire, filled with burning fury, pure hatred and anger without end.

Roach was trapped, staring at this black shape as it melted out of pure darkness and was launched at him, flying directly at him, its fingers twisted into claws, its mouth open, its arms wide.

He reacted in the only way he could. He yelled in fear and swung his baton at it. He brought all the power he had to bear down on the thing. He swung, plunging the weapon outwards, hoping to connect with the head.

Arms were around him and he was tumbling down into the darkness beneath him. He felt as if it were swallowing him, devouring him. Suddenly, after what seemed like a much longer time than it must have been, his whole body jolted painfully as he impacted the ground with the weight of this thing forcing the breath from his lungs and making him cry out in pain.

He gasped, winded from the impact. He could feel the thing's hot, heavy breath as it growled mercilessly.

"Fuck you!" he growled and tried to bring his knee up to kick it. He roared in sudden pain as teeth sunk into his cheek, ripping at his flesh and grating painfully along the edge of the bone around his eye socket.

He thrust around in blind panic, swinging his arms underneath his attacker. Again, another stab of pain exploded into his arm as teeth sunk down into the soft flesh of his wrist. All the while this thing snarled and growled like a frenzied animal, filled with hatred as it unleashed its fury upon him.

Roach fought back, punching, kicking, twisting and fighting for all he was worth. Thoughts lazily took their time to come and go from his head. Where once his mind was careful, slow and methodical, as he had been trained to be, he was now instead filled only with survival—he was fighting for his very life!

Teeth snatched at him. Fingers pressed down into his throat, bringing with them a fresh wave of blinding panic. The last of his strength was found and he fought the hardest he ever had. Every last ounce of power left inside him was brought to a punch he slammed hard into the thing, somewhere around where a human kept the side of their ribs.

It howled in pain. Whatever it was, it was enough like a man to be made even more angry, and it attacked with renewed vigour.

The fingers around his throat tightened and he gasped breathlessly as his eyes bulged. It gripped with unnatural strength. It fought without reservation. It was driven, empowered by a complete and total lack of humanity.

With a final, bloodcurdling wail, it flung itself down with all of its considerable power. Roach managed to scream, “No!” pleading through ragged gasps as the thing bit into the side of his neck.

It didn't really hurt: he could barely feel the pain now as the teeth ripped into him. It gasped with jagged breaths, snarling with rage as it took bite after bite from the side of his throat, shredding deeper into his muscles, his windpipe, his arteries and veins, tearing huge, bloody, wet chunks of him out.

He fought back with all the strength he had, but he was sliding away now. The icy cold was gripping him and he was sinking into the freezing, inky blackness of eternity. His limbs felt distant and remote, like his muscles were filled with sand, useless and soft, weak and pathetic.

Darkness was everywhere, but it was no longer terrifying. He no longer fought against it. It was the way out of this now, as it had always been. It was the way out of the fight, as if he'd suddenly realised what he should have known all along.

He let himself drift into it, silently, effortlessly sinking into the darkness.

Chapter 15

Sam made himself comfortable in the chair that Mallory's father had always claimed as his own, right at the heart of the room, overlooking everything. He had removed his raincoat, but declined to remove his suit jacket. He sat down, crossed his legs with his ankle resting on his right knee and sighed to himself. His eyes flashed quickly over his notes, but occasionally looked up, sucking in every detail, noticing everything there might be to find.

"Mrs Gardener, where's your husband, if you don't mind me asking?" he said brusquely.

Mallory hovered nervously, keeping his worried eyes fixedly on his mother, or not his mother, or whatever it might be that she might *not* be.

Everything was so confusing, so difficult to accept, that his head was spinning. But throughout it all, one thought kept going through his head, one escapable thing that he could get past. If Sam was right, if he was telling the truth, if he wasn't certifiably crazy, and if he could be trusted, then this *was* his mother. In every sense that might make *any* sense, his parents really were his parents, even if they couldn't be and weren't. If all this was true, then they were somehow, in some way, exactly what he needed them to be: but also they weren't.

"My husband..." she turned to look directly at Mallory. Her sad old eyes that had cried a little too often over the last couple of days lit up brightly for a moment. "Your father... is away at his allotment. This has all been rather a lot for him to deal with, and he's not very good at dealing with things on a good day. He's really thrown himself into his gardening.

"At least we'll have lots of fresh organic cucumbers next year, if no other good comes out of all of this."

Mallory smiled and nodded back at her. It felt good to form a connection, even something as simple as sharing an opinion about someone they both knew well. She, this woman sitting in his mother's usual chair, had her sharp, slightly acerbic sense of humour. She had always been the brains of the family, the driving force behind everything good that came from living there.

As she'd often told him, loudly enough for everyone to hear, her one big mistake in life was marrying his father, but a young girl with low expectations and a ferocious libido was easily swayed by a man with a nice arse.

She'd follow up this appalling story with a wink, and tell him that while he might be more like his Dad than she would have liked, that would probably mean he'd grow up to have a spectacular butt, and he had better learn how to use it if he wanted to find a girl worth having.

It had never been a story Mallory enjoyed, but he found himself wanting to hear it now: he would welcome those very familiar words if they came pouring out of her mouth.

"Is he alright?" Mallory ventured quietly, looking suddenly away to avoid eye contact.

She nodded. "He'll get over it. His brain doesn't stray much beyond beer, and the need for even more beer. He'll be fine."

"Mrs Gardener," Sam said, dragging things back to the point. "What was your first name, please?"

"Patricia," she told him.

Sam cast a curious little look at Mallory, who stared back at him incredulously. He blinked absently, and then it occurred to him that he was meant to confirm this. He nodded: his mother's name was Patricia, indeed.

"Patricia," Sam repeated. "Do you own a gold cross that you inherited?"

She frowned in surprise and sat up a little, wriggling uneasily in her chair. "No!"

"Grandma's cross?" Mallory said.

"Your Aunt Lauren got it," she said, looking increasingly confused. "Mum left it to her when she died. I never wanted the bloody thing: it had pointy ends and she was always moaning about it jabbing into her tits."

"And this was thirteen years ago, correct?" Sam said, checking it by his notes, and apparently choosing to ignore the comments about uncomfortable jewellery and its effect on the sensitive parts of old people.

She nodded. "What's this all about? What's this got to do with..."

Sam held up a hand to cut her off. He explained, much more politely than he usually did, "We're confirming Mallory's memory of events. We need to know the full extent of the confusion. Don't worry: most cases have passed within a few weeks, which is why we need to get the details quickly, before he remembers everything properly. I'm sure you understand that this is all necessary, otherwise I wouldn't be asking."

She looked over at Mallory with that disapproving look only mothers can give to their children when they've let them down in public. She sighed and nodded once again. "It's fine."

"Can I ask if your husband ever spends any time in Scotland?" Sam asked, glancing again at his notes.

She nodded. "It was before we met, he was there a couple of years for university. He says it's where he developed his taste for strong, cheap whisky, and cheap, but even stronger, women. Of course, he's only brave enough to say it to me, and even then only after several doses of something brutally alcoholic."

Sam gave a knowing look to Mallory. "And he's never been back there?"

“Not that I know of,” she said with a dismissive shrug. “He did talk about a job opening once—this was back when Mallory was at infant school—some kind of supervisory position up in Edinburgh, but nothing ever came of it.”

“How about Mallory? Is anything different about him?”

“Apart from crazy delusions about shadow monsters eating his father’s face?” she said matter-of-factly, as if discussing the weather. She looked over to him with a smile, and then her face softened as she appeared to give it serious thought. Her face hardened suddenly and she glared, almost accusingly. “Well, he never wears black shoes. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in black at all. He likes colours: his favourite is blue. He was told not to wear coloured shoes at work, but he did so anyway until the manager gave up mentioning it.”

Sam glanced over at Mallory. “Explain your shoes!”

Mallory looked down at his very formal, business-like shoes.

“They made me wear them at work.”

She smiled as if giving up on the point. “Got through to you at last, did they? I hadn’t noticed before.”

Sam made a note and said, “Let’s have a look around your room now. You can tell me what’s familiar.” He smiled at Mrs Gardener like this wasn’t an expression that was particularly familiar to him. “With your permission, of course?”

She shrugged. “It’s Mallory’s room. He can take anyone up there he likes.”

The loft conversion was quite nicely done, but had a notable makeshift tone, that of being tacked together and never being properly completed. Beams of woodwork made up the structure, soft pine stained a darker red, then lacquered and polished.

Plasterboard had been fitted around forming provisional walls, which were painted white and adorned with posters of fast cars he’d

never own. It was the home of a child who had grown into a man, but nobody had sent the message to the larger part of his brain which was stubbornly refusing to catch up.

Sam looked around. "Who did your interior decorating?"

"I like it!" he grumbled back defensively. "It's my bachelor pad!"

"So it's the same?" he asked, shaking his head like he was judging him in some way.

Mallory nodded, but was looking around carefully, swivelling his head around to take in every detail. He pointed at a poster of a fast car with an even faster girl draped across it. "She was blue, now she's green!" he said, not terribly sure of himself.

"The girl?" Sam frowned.

"The car!" Mallory grunted. "She's a classic Lamborghini Diabolo with metallic paint."

"She?"

Mallory shrugged.

"I wonder if there's a parallel universe where you have an actual girlfriend?" Sam mused. He looked past the bed, which was unmade and unkempt and had a pile of clothes scattered across the side and draped down onto the wooden-effect tiled floor.

"I've had girlfriends!" Mallory huffed.

Sam said nothing in reply, but Mallory sensed he wasn't convinced. "I've had lots of girlfriends," he went on. "I had a serious one about three months ago but..."

"Shut up and focus!" Sam told him, plunging him into a surprised silence. Sam crouched down next to his bed and grimaced at something he'd found on a cheap, pine, self-assembly bedside cabinet. "Is this yours?"

Mallory went closer, craning forwards to see whatever it was he was looking at. Sam poked at it with a pen, like he was dubious about touching it.

“That’s not mine!” he said defensively.

The offending object was a brightly polished stone hoop attached to a black cord, formed as a necklace. The stone was like marble, but much brighter and with a wider, deeper range of colours. It flashed brilliantly under the crisp white fluorescent lighting of his loft.

“It’s opal!” Sam told him.

“So?” Mallory shrugged, having no real idea what that was meant to mean, or if it was even meant to mean anything at all.

“Some people believe that crystals have power,” Sam explained, taking it all very seriously. “Quartz, for instance, releases energy when squeezed. That’s a measurable, quantifiable effect that isn’t in any scientific question. You probably know that from basic physics classes.

“Some people think that other stones, other crystals, have other energies, energies that are much harder to measure and see with ordinary senses that aren’t open and attuned to such things.”

Mallory frowned. “What is opal meant to do?”

Sam looked at the thing. “Opal opens your mind to possibilities, it allows you to better see things that might be. When it’s carved into a circle with a hole in it, it represents a doorway to the infinite. This necklace represents a path that leads you to anywhere.”

“It lets you travel between universes?” he gasped.

Sam shook his head as though he’d just heard a very stupid question. “If it was as simple as that, people would be vanishing backwards and forwards every day. No, Mallory, you’re very firmly rooted to your place in this universe: it’s almost impossible for you to shift, and certainly a piece of stone isn’t going to be powerful enough to let you do it.”

Mallory grumbled and crossed his arms over his chest defiantly.

“Then what’s the point of even bringing it up?”

Sam stood up and fixed him firmly with a strange expression that Mallory couldn't quite read—it shook him a little. He uncrossed his arms and waited for whatever grand revelation might be coming.

Sam unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled out from inside a very similar stone, around a very similar black cord.

“My wife gave me one,” Sam explained. “It’s a universal constant. In almost every place I’ve been, in every version of myself I’ve shifted into, I’ve been wearing one of these opal necklaces, just like the one lying right there on your bedside table.”

Mallory stared for a moment, his eyes widening. He looked from the necklace Sam was wearing to the one on the side. They did, indeed look very, very similar.

“You were married?” he said.

“Mallory,” Sam grunted at him. “You might be focusing on the wrong detail here.”

Chapter 16

Inspector Grace sat working on her laptop, writing a very detailed, and incredibly dull report to explain that really, very little had happened. She flicked her eyes down to the bottom right corner of the screen and noted the time. It was quite a while past twelve: Roach was rarely late, especially when food was involved.

She gave an indignant little huff of annoyance and looked around, staring accusingly at the door as if it was to blame for him not managing to be exactly where he was meant to be.

“Roach...” she grumbled to herself as she went back to her forms.

“Can I take your order?” the waitress asked standing off by the side, an annoyingly pretty young girl who also seemed to be incredibly pleasant, friendly and helpful to everyone. The white plastic badge that jutted suggestively from her ample chest told the world that she also shared the Inspector’s first name. She had hated her instantly from the first time she’d met her, and that not only continued to be true, but threatened to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Inspector Grace sighed as if being asked what she’d like to order in a café was an imposition, and then glanced one last time over the plastic laminated menu. She knew everything on it since they ate at the same café most days.

“What are your specials today?” she asked, rather too abruptly to be considered polite.

The waitress screwed her face up, struggling to remember, and gave her an apologetic little smile. “We have spinach and feta quiche with salad, lentil soup with home baked bread, and chicken pasta bake!”

Grace thought about it briefly. The waitress interrupted her train of thought by quietly saying, as if sharing a little secret, “The pasta bake is really good. The quiche I could take or leave.”

The Inspector smiled back at her, impressed at her blunt honesty, and maybe warming to her a little. "The pasta sounds great: I'll take two of those, please. Also a tea and a coffee."

"Of course!" She smiled, and made a quick note on a paper pad. "I'll go and ring that up..." she said very sweetly and made her way off back to the counter. Grace noticed a table of businessmen from one of the many local offices. Their conversation paused as she walked past, and they all turned to eye her with careful interest while grinning to themselves.

"Men!" she said, rolling her eyes and smirking to herself. They were such simple creatures, so straightforward, so easy to understand and manipulate. Even Roach was fairly basic, when you got right down to it. Feed him often, give him beer daily, satisfy him in bed once in a while and he would be as loyal as a puppy. There wasn't much more to him than that, she thought.

The door opened, startling her. She frowned to herself slightly as he walked in, looking even more dishevelled than usual. His jacket and shirt was gone, and he wore only a heavily ruffled black T-shirt. His trousers were threadbare at the knee and had slight but noticeable grass stains. He looked around, staring out behind dazed, glassy eyes as if he'd been drinking and hadn't remembered when to stop. His hair was a mess. His face looked pale and unusually haggard.

"You're late!" she said, pointing to her watch. "What the hell happened to you?"

"What?" he shrugged, and looked at her like he wasn't really sure he recognised her.

"We agreed to meet at lunchtime! You know that means 11:30!"

He shrugged again and said, "I'm always late though, aren't I!" He sat down opposite and rested his elbows on the table, hanging his head in his upturned hands. "Aren't I?" he mumbled.

“You’re always drunk, and you’d better not be now,” she told him sternly. “You are usually on time though.”

“Funny!” he huffed. “Have you ordered?”

“I ordered for both of us,” she told him. “The chicken pasta, I hope that’s alright?”

He nodded, and took a very deep breath. He glanced around cautiously, before returning his attention to the Inspector. “Listen, I don’t know how to say this. I have just had the weirdest day. It was like... something out of a dream.”

“A dream?” she glowered at him. “It’s the middle of the day! Tell me what’s going on—you’re not making any sense!”

His head was hoisted up with some effort. He peered out at her fixedly with hint of confusion. Suddenly, it looked like he’d realised she was right.

“Yeah, I know,” was all he managed to say.

She was steadily growing really quite worried about him now. She did her best to look tight lipped and angry, but she couldn’t quite get the look right. “Are you alright?” she asked, and it occurred to her that she sounded more scared now than anything else.

That was when she noticed dried blood on the side of his head, causing her to suddenly sit up straight. Alarm gripped her as she saw a deep, ugly cut running along his temple. “Roach, have you been in a fight? What’s going on?” Her voice was laced with concern and came out much louder, and at a higher pitch than she’d intended. People had turned to look.

“I... think... I must have hit my head!” he told her, rubbing his temple and straining to remember. “I don’t know. It’s all a bit blurry. I can’t quite remember.”

She reached out and put her hand on top of his supportively and leant in. She didn’t give a damn at that moment if anyone were to see them, that there was more going on between them than the strictly

professional, paper-thin veneer she struggled so hard to maintain. She felt stronger for him than she wanted to admit to herself, and she was worried. Nothing else seemed to matter—all that just washed away.

“Tell me what you remember!” she said softly. “Start at the beginning.”

He looked down at her hand, like it was a surprise to him to find it resting warmly on top of his own.

“I was following a lead...” he began, his brow furrowed as he struggled to remember. “It was an anonymous lead from an informant. It lead me to some plot of wasteland. It was all locked up—I had to break my way in. I went inside, but I couldn’t find anything. At least I don’t think I found anything there.”

“Listen,” she said with a frown. “You were following a map to locate Mallory’s phone.”

He looked at her and blinked incredulously. “Who?”

“The young man!” she told him. “The case you talked me into getting more involved in. You’re convinced there’s more to it, Remember?”

“I don’t know...” he said, shaking his head, frustrated. “I was walking around under an overpass. I could hear the sounds of cars driving past overhead, and then something happened.”

“Go on.”

“Everything went dark,” he said. “Everything was black. I felt like I was floating down a river at the dead of night, being washed away by the current, swept along in something that was too strong for me, too powerful. I wasn’t scared though, it all seemed fine. I just remember feeling like I had to go along with it. I just didn’t care anymore.”

She listened intently, her eyes locked on his.

“Then I woke up. I must have staggered around for a while. There was a pain in my head, a sharp, stabbing pain that was cutting right

through my brain, right behind my eyeballs. It was like nothing I've ever felt before."

"Graham," she said very softly, "Where are your clothes? Where's your shirt?"

"My shirt?" He looked down quizzically, somewhat confused as though he were forcing his memories back into being through a foggy haze. "My shirt?"

She nodded.

He leant in, looking very secretive all of a sudden. "I need to tell you something, Sandra. But when I tell you, it has to stay between us! I don't want any fuss."

"Go on..." she told him, not making any promises on that score.

"I think I staggered some way up the road. My head was in pain, I couldn't think straight: I don't think I remember very much. I'm not even sure if I remember this or if I'm just imagining it. I didn't get far before I came across a roadside stall selling burgers and hotdogs. When I got there, the woman took one look at me and started screaming."

She bit her lip and felt the pit of her stomach sinking. She could only listen for now. She forced herself to stay calm and silent. It didn't come easily.

"I was covered in blood, and I hadn't even noticed," he said. "I flashed my warrant card, told her I was a copper—that calmed her down a bit. She had a tap out back, so I washed myself off and threw away my shirt—there was no saving that.

"I gave my face a wash and found a nasty dent in my skull: someone had hit me, I think, or I'd gone down hard onto my head. I honestly don't know which, but it obviously wasn't good either way. Blood had got everywhere: in my hair, my mouth, all round my collar.

"The cold water woke me up a bit. The woman gave me some coffee and I had a sit down. I needed it. After a while I felt better: I remember drinking a bottle of water, and I think ate a burger."

“What you need is a hospital,” she fumed. “Someone may have attacked you. We need to retrace your steps and see what we can find. It sounds like you might have come across this Craig person. Maybe he stole Mallory’s phone or something.”

She cursed her short-sightedness at letting him go alone. This was why the rules were there—she’d ignored them, and now Roach had paid the price.

“Craig?” Roach shrugged and screwed up his face as if struggling to recover some long-forgotten memory. “I don’t remember the name. I was following a lead from a snitch, I think. I had an informant feeding me information.” He rubbed his temple wearily and looked away. “I don’t remember, I guess. It’s all a bit of a fog.”

“At the very least you have a concussion,” she told him. “I’m taking you to the emergency ward and we’re going to call this in.”

“No!” he shook his head and pulled back his hand. “I can’t have any fuss!”

“Roach!” she snapped at him forcefully. “I’m taking you to the hospital and that’s the end of it. You can barely remember your own name and have clearly been attacked. You’re going!”

He hung his head in his hands and very slowly began nodding. “You’re the boss!” he grimaced. “I know how much you like to think so.”

Chapter 17

Sam sat on the edge of the bed, thoughtfully contemplating it all.

Why would Mallory have the symbol of the infinity-gate, the representation of the ability to shift between the endless multiple universes?

The necklace and the stone itself had little real power. The ability to shift was something that all humans carried within them. He had been taught that their consciousness bridged the infinite span of universes and could occasionally slide around, viewing fragments of things beyond their world. It was common. It was where strange, unexplained dreams came from. It was the reason why a sudden fleshed-out idea of an alternative path you never walked became rooted in your mind as a concept took hold in what we thought was our imagination. It was knowing with absolute certainty that something we know is perfectly right, is really absolutely and completely undeniably wrong.

To shift from one to another took only an understanding of how things worked, and an acceptance of the truth of these things. The stone represented the gateway, and to wear one meant you accepted that the world was the way it was. The opal circle represented a knowledge that this was possible and a sign of your intention to try.

It had symbolic value, but little besides.

The action of crossing a locked barrier was another of the symbols. It put the mind into a specific way of thinking: it created a desire to cross from one place to another by overcoming an obstacle, or pushing open the way before you.

But none of this explained how Mallory had done so obviously, and by accident.

“I need to know how you got this necklace!” Sam told him finally, gazing into the spiralling colours that swirled naturally in the structure of the crystal.

Mallory looked on with an apologetic smile. "I don't know—I've never seen it before. The Mallory who lived in this universe must have got it from somewhere. I don't know what he knows."

Sam knew this was right, of course, at least from Mallory's limited perspective.

"Who would know?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If someone gave this to you, back in your own universe, who would know about it?" he asked. "Who are you close to? Who would you be talking about it to? Things aren't that different here: there's a good chance that whoever you would tell there, the you that wasn't you here would tell too."

Mallory frowned. "That might be the most confusing sentence I've ever heard!"

"This is serious, Mallory!" he told him sternly.

"I'm taking it seriously," he protested, not quite brave enough to sound as though this was frustrating him.

"Let me explain it in terms a layman can understand!" Sam began. "Your mother downstairs really is your mother, you're just looking at her from a slightly different angle. I want you to imagine a coin—really picture it in your mind! The imagination is a powerful tool! The mum you knew was heads, and this one is tails, the opposite side of the same coin.

"Actually, she's more like a machined crystal. Imagine a crystal: many, many polished reflective surfaces, and depending on the angle you look at it, the light reflects off of it to form completely different patterns. And while she may appear different, some superficial details telling a slightly different story, you're still looking at the same coin... crystal... and it's the only crystal in a big bowl of bananas.

"In the wider picture, nothing has really changed. Do you understand me so far?"

Mallory nodded, scowling like a boy that was putting up with being spoken down to by an irritated adult.

“Now your original parents were murdered—somewhat brutally, I’ll add! Someone killed the hell out of them, and you were somehow displaced here. This matters, Mallory—this is important!”

“They were my parents!” Mallory told him darkly. “I think I have a pretty good idea how much it matters!”

“When...” Sam continued, holding a finger up for Mallory’s silence, “... someone shifts their consciousness into another version of themselves, the original disappears. The Sam that lives in this universe is gone: I have no idea where, he’s just not here anymore. He won’t be able to come back until I leave and take over another version of myself. He is nowhere. Do you understand what that means?”

Mallory sighed and shut his eyes, shaking his head.

“It means that whoever shifted you here displaced the version of you that lived in the skin you’re currently occupying. You’re stuck here now, and that means that another version of you has been wiped out. Someone, somewhere is acting remorselessly: they don’t care who gets hurt along the way. If that person is wandering around among infinite universes then there’s no telling how much damage they might be able to do. They have to be stopped before they hurt a lot of people.”

“And that’s what you do?” Mallory seemed to deflate, to give in to it all. Perhaps it was just too big for a little man like him.

“Not quite!” he said with a frown. “I wish I could tell you there’s a dashing hero, sliding around the infinite multiple universes trying to save the world, but there isn’t. Well, there may be, but it isn’t me. I have my own reasons for doing what I do.

“For now though, in this corner of a universe that’s infinitely larger than you ever imagined it was, I’m the best hope you’ve got,” Sam told him in no uncertain terms. “Focus on that!”

Mallory opened his mouth but nothing came out: the question just seemed to hang silently on his lips.

“So who?” Sam said finally. “Who might know? Who would you tell?”

“My parents, maybe?” Mallory shrugged. “Perhaps my friends? My best mate is Thomas. We go out most Fridays and Saturdays.”

Sam nodded to himself. With a deep intake of breath, he rolled the necklace down into his hand and slipped it into his pocket.

“Right, let’s start here and see where it takes us.”

His mother had busied herself making them all a cup of tea, whether they wanted one or not. She turned to flash her son a smile. “Tea, milk, two sugars,” she said, pointing to a white mug with a chip gouged out of the handle and a faded squared-off picture of a fast car on the front.

Mallory smiled at what must have been a familiar scene.

“Mrs Gardener...” Sam began from the doorway where he could overlook the whole thing. Perhaps a more personal approach was in order. “Patricia, may I ask if Mallory has a girlfriend, that you know of?”

“A girlfriend?” she looked confused. She turned to her son, looking rather concerned. “Yes, there’s a girl he’s been seeing: Barbi. They met a couple of months ago.” She flashed him a supportive little smile. “She’s all he talks about. Pretty little thing, she is. I never would have thought she was his type, but then I never thought he would be anyone’s type so...” She chuckled at her own joke, and then her face dropped a little, perhaps regretting it.

“Mum!” he grumbled. His eyes widened suddenly, and their eyes met for a moment. And for that moment, everything seemed like it was perfectly all right, and everything that had happened had been forgotten. They had found a connection.

Sam almost envied them. It was a shame it wasn't always that easy, at least not for everyone.

He rudely butted into their connection, shattering the moment quite completely. "Did Barbi ever give him anything? A necklace, perhaps?"

"I think she gave him a little stone thing on a shoelace," she shrugged. "Mostly it's about him giving her things—that's how it seems!"

"Mum!" Mallory shot her an acid glance.

"No!" she laughed, holding up her hands. "I don't mean in the bedroom. I mean, she never seemed like she had any money. Mostly you pay for everything. You take her out to dinner a couple of times a week, and drive her around all the time in your dad's car. You owe him half a tank of petrol, by the way."

Sam glanced at Mallory, and then back at his mother. "Tell me, do you have any pictures of her? I'd like to talk to her."

"Me? No, of course not. I'm sure Mallory has loads on his phone. I'm sure in a couple she's actually got some clothes on."

"Mum!" Mallory shot her an even more acid glance.

"Well, Mallory?" Sam held out his hand.

Mallory shrugged weakly. "It doesn't work. It hasn't worked since all this happened. I even tried my SIM in another phone, still couldn't connect to the network."

Sam narrowed his eyes. Something was wrong, possibly very, very wrong. But it couldn't be what he thought it was. It couldn't be.

"Mallory..." Sam said firmly. Suddenly, the cover story was of much less importance—this was all that mattered. "Do you have any cuts or bruises on your body that happened just before the incident? Do you have any long-term scars?"

Mallory rolled his eyes thoughtfully. "It's only a minor thing, but I stubbed my toe at work last week. The nail went a bit black."

“Perfect!” Sam said, looking really quite worried. “Show me!”

Mrs Gardener put her hands on her hips and looked on at it all in dismay. It couldn’t be every day that a private detective turned up at her house and asked her son to show off his toes. However, she seemed for the most part mostly unfazed. Perhaps not knowing how to react in such a situation was a major part of it.

With an indignant grumble, Mallory pulled off his black shoe and, in no particular hurry, pulled off a grey sock that smelled rather bad, since he hadn’t changed it recently. “There!” he pointed at it proudly, as if this vindicated him in some way.

Sam said coldly, his voice almost a whisper, “Did you have any trouble walking?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but just for a day or so. It bled a little when I did it. I had to put a plaster on it to stop it bleeding into my sock.”

“Where did you get the plaster?” Sam asked impatiently.

Mallory pointed to Mrs Gardener. She shrugged and shook her head.

Sam looked away, his head reeling. “OK,” he said finally. “It seems you’re still quite confused, although your memory is improving.”

“I’m not confused!” he insisted.

If he wasn’t, then his mother certainly was. She looked upon it all with deep fascination, slightly tinged with confusion. “Is Mallory going to be alright?” she asked.

Sam looked at her straight on. He began to nod and gave her an unconvincing smile.

“I’m sure he’ll probably be fine.”

Chapter 18

It was a dark, grey and cloudy day. It was the kind of day where people woke up in the morning, looked up at the sky, cursed, and just hoped it would quietly get itself over and done with quickly so we could all try again tomorrow. The sun wasn't a point in the sky, it was more of a region where the grey wasn't quite as grey, and the darkness was, perhaps, not quite as dark.

He looked up at the sky and sighed, grumbling under his breath. His little allotment, his personal little midtown garden was his haven, away from the viciously brisk pace of the modern world, a pace he had no interest in keeping up with. It was just one more part of a modern world he didn't fit into: a world he didn't want to find a place in, even if he had one waiting for him.

Like many people of his generation, Gerald Gardener was a man out of time. Smartphones, digital media and a host of other technological mysteries had encroached on his quiet little world and left him feeling like a stranger with no place to fit into it.

He'd been forced to get rid of his car, a well-worn Ford Granada. It had been a simple machine, and while he wasn't a mechanic, he had been able to quite happily work on it himself, regularly service it and keep it running nicely. It was designed to be easy.

But time had eventually caught them up, both him and his beloved old machine. Parts had become almost impossible to source, emissions and other regulations kept pressing down on him, and it all just became a little too much. Dealerships hawking new cars made it just too easy, made their products just a little too appealing.

And while it didn't appeal to him, it certainly appealed to his wife and son.

He'd been talked, argued, cajoled and dragged into it. He found himself sitting behind the wheel of a small, family hatchback wondering

what exactly had happened, and more importantly, how it had? The dash was a cheap, ugly slab of grey plastic. Gone were the hints and cues from the golden era of automotive styling, replaced with a bland sea of tasteless banality.

Opening the bonnet had sent a daunted jolt up his spine. He had gasped in surprise as the engine stared back at him. What had used to be a block, wired to the bay, with a simple, circular air filter mounted proudly on top was now a low, sleek, spotlessly clean mess of engineering that throbbed away almost silently, boringly, and soullessly at the front of his ugly little vehicle.

He had riled against it at first, but gradually had come to accept that this was how the world was and fighting it was nothing more than an interesting precursor to losing.

At first he'd objected to owning a mobile phone at all, but eventually capitulated. Later he refused to have a smartphone, until one was foisted upon him. And then, as he tried against all odds to figure out the simplest of functions, he'd seen his own son using one, sprawled out on the sofa effortlessly using this confusing gadget like it was the most natural thing in all the world.

It was then, right at that point, that he knew his useful days were over. He was past the pinnacle now and he was heading downwards. His new car felt awkward and unfamiliar, a piece of a new world that moved at a jarring pace, where it all happened without style, and with no good grace about it.

This car lacked a simple connection to him; it lacked heart. It was just a product, and it would never be loved.

He'd been forced to accept that this was now all he was. He was doomed to watch the world burn in the growing flames of misery as people flashed past on the road to nowhere, desperate to move ever faster as they had increasingly less things of value to actually do.

Compared to all that, his allotment was a last, lost bastion of sanity. It was a place unlike any other in that city: it was the one place things made sense, where he truly belonged.

He put his feet up on a little camping table and leant back in his deckchair. Truth be told, Mr Gardener had neither talent nor interest in growing anything. Behind him was a shed, stuffed with an array of tools that would always remain absolutely spotlessly clean, if he had anything to do with it.

Far more importantly, it had a reasonable power supply hooked up to a working television and a family-sized fridge that was always filled with as much beer as he could squeeze in it, topped up by the occasional shopping trip to Calais. He also had a portable gas stove, a hot sandwich maker, and a percolator for coffee.

Nearby was a supermarket that sold organic vegetables. Dropping by there on his way home helped to upkeep the ruse.

His choice had been between that, or buying a dog. He quickly decided that he wasn't a walker, and that the allotment gave him much more quality time in front of old 70s movies as the world passed him by on its insane dash to get where nothing was there waiting for it.

He might have lost his Ford Granada, but his heart would always reside in the beating heart of an underpowered 2 litre straight-four engine that gave really crappy fuel economy and smelled pretty awful from inside the cab.

A fizzing, popping sound accompanied the spluttering hiss of a fresh can of beer as he pulled the tab open. He looked around, seeing if any of the others were around. He wasn't the only man escaping his life to come out and enjoy a few hours of peaceful sanity.

Donald, three pitches over, had a chess set. Gerald might not be a fan of the game, but Donald's company was always accompanied by fresh Napoli-style pizza from a collapsable charcoal oven he kept in his shed. He often brought other snacks and handed them out freely in

exchange for a couple of hours of humiliating other people with his game of choice.

Trevor, right out towards the gate, had an impressive DVD collection and always managed to find something that was oddly familiar, even though you were sure you'd never seen it before.

Ranjit, the Cockney of the bunch, often brought authentic Indian curries and sides at his wife's insistence—he said he hated the stuff, so everyone should just help themselves. Mike had built a smoker he'd use to flavour cheeses, boiled eggs and assorted cold cuts. Paella was Steven's thing, though he often dabbled in albondigas with limited success. Simon had put together a functioning sausage factory in his shed, producing plump gristly frankfurters that were perfect when barbecued as hot dogs. Recently he'd installed an industrial air filtration unit he'd picked up second hand for a reasonable price, which he was evidently quite proud of. Ian's shed was decked out with an elaborate train set network, but he also had a record player and several boxes of classic rock LPs.

At the weekend, it was a veritable community of likeminded souls, adrift in the present, trying to reconnect to a past that would forever elude them. On weekdays though, life went on for most of them.

Today he was alone and that suited him perfectly well too.

He sat back and took a long, deep sip from a can of smooth, frothy English ale. He closed his eyes and just appreciated the moment, the serenity of it, the simple pleasure of escaping the world and finding a little something all of your own.

A chill slowly crept up his spine and down his arms until it eventually settled into his fingertips. He opened his eyes and gave the sky a really angry little scowl. He grunted once and tutted openly at it. He rubbed his left hand against his right arm and sighed.

It was no use, he needed another jumper—the day was getting grimmer. It would likely rain later, and if it didn't, then it would at night.

A storm was coming, there could be no doubt about that. He was lucky he hadn't chosen to get a dog. The dog he hadn't chosen had been luckier still.

Gerald stood himself up, huffing as he dragged his tired bones out of the low chair and breathing a heavy lungful of air out noisily through his lips as he stretched himself upright.

He stepped back towards his shed and began fiddling with the lock: it was an old padlock, a very meaningful piece of kit, but it had dried out and needed oiling. It had needed oiling for a very long while, and there was no sign of it happening any time soon. He twisted the key and rattled it around as only he knew how, and finally, it popped open.

He stepped in, closing the little wooden door behind him. It was colder inside than out, it seemed. As he breathed out, a white trail of vapour escaped his lips.

There was only one naked lightbulb, suspended from the ceiling by a trailing wire. It seemed unusually dim and was growing dimmer as the seconds dragged slowly by.

He reached up and tapped the heavy plastic surround. In response, the light flickered and the bulb swung around, sending a myriad shadows dancing around the tools. The blades glinted viciously about him like gnashing teeth as the light shifted.

He felt a strange tendril of dread rising in him as the darkness began to take hold. Cold, sharp fingers seemed to drag along his skin. He felt himself shuddering, and not just from the cold. Something seemed to be wrapping itself tighter around him.

It was so dark now that he had to strain to make out the details of the tiny space. The bulb, still swinging above him from the wooden roof, seemed to be glowing as brightly as ever, but the light was somehow being swallowed up, and was doing almost nothing to help him see.

He found himself sweating. His skin had begun to crawl, tingling with cold, dark dread as fear began to choke reason from his mind. In

desperation, he leant forward across his wooden workbench and took a firm grip of a pair of dark, heavy curtains. He jolted them apart forcefully, grunting to himself as he flung them to the sides.

Darkness seemed to spill inside through the glass, choking out what little light there had been. The room grew darker: the bright white light of the bulb seemed wrapped in shadows as endless blackness rolled into the shed through the glass.

Alarm gripped him. He opened his mouth to yell out, to scream for help, but the sound was choked out as fingers, cold and hard, suddenly wrapped around his head, dragging angrily at his face and snapping him round to the side.

Reflexively he cried out in shock and flapped his arms helplessly.

The fingers of darkness gripped him tighter, curling viciously around his throat and clamping down hard.

He waved his hand back, punching behind him impotently like a toddler thrusting a blow against a balloon.

It, whatever it was, began to snarl. Then it roared. A hot rush of breath lit up the skin along his face, terrifying him as the sound blasted suddenly into his left ear.

Coldness filled him then as he heard the sound of metal crashing against skin, dragging against bone. A flashing, flailing, slashing blade pulled back and plunged into him again, again and again. A flurry of attacks rained down on him as a weapon was plunged over and over into his chest and abdomen, ripping at his flesh and shredding the organs inside him. He just stared widely as a tiny, faint flicker of light caught the edge of a brand new, shiny metal blade. He very calmly thought to himself that his new shearing knife was much better than he thought: it was actually quite a lot sharper than it looked too.

It had been well worth the money he'd paid!

He heard his breath, ragged and raw, and felt his chest heaving in and out. He heard a weak gurgling spluttering noise, a cough, a splutter and then a gasp which trailed away into silence.

Light began to very quickly return as he fell back, resting on his workbench, exhausted and light-headed, his world spinning around him. He was shaken, his breath was ragged: he felt like he'd run for the bus, or desperately run up the drive chasing a delivery driver who had a parcel he needed. He was winded, breathless, empty.

He spluttered, "What the..." as he looked around. He was in his shed, his happy little shed out on the allotment.

That all seemed perfectly right. He had gone there that day to watch a movie, drink a few beers, and pretend to be turning over the soil ready for planting, which might, or might not actually be the right thing to do if he really was a gardener. It was a good enough story anyway to convince his wife, who was probably very happy to be rid of him, in her turn.

But his mind was fogged and distant and thoughts only came with an effort. He looked around, trying to make sense of the darkness. It had been all around him, surrounding him, enveloping him. Then it had been inside, wrapping around his mind, filling his thoughts until he had none of his own.

"Gerald..." he huffed, gasping to himself. "What was all that about?" he grunted, turning to reach for a beer. "I hope I didn't just have a stroke."

Light was almost returning to normal. His vision was clearing, his mind was almost working, even though his memory was fragmented, broken and twisted. He edged forwards, catching his foot on something soft and large laying on the floor.

He looked down to the grizzly, blood-soaked remains of a man roughly his size, roughly his shape and dressed in roughly the same clothes.

He gasped, sharply swallowing a lungful of air as he stepped reflexively back, knocking over something behind him that clattered noisily to the floor.

He realised something as he looked closer, his eyes peering into the last, faint tendrils of darkness as they curled around it. As it turned out, it wasn't something *roughly his size, roughly his shape and dressed in roughly the same clothes* at all.

It was a man lying in a growing pool of his own blood who was *exactly* his size, *precisely* his shape and dressed in *literally* the same clothes. As if there was any doubt left in his mind, the face staring up at him with bulging, horrified, lifeless, glassy eyes was his own. It was him. It was him that was lying dead in a slimy, red puddle of oozing blood, gazing up lifelessly right as he was looking down on himself in return.

He stood just staring in horrified silence, his mouth hanging open wordlessly as he stared at the grizzly mess beneath him, the chest shredded and torn open from a series of vicious blows with a long, sharp and serrated blade. His eyes swivelled to his own right hand where exactly that kind of blade was held, facing down in his own tight grip.

“Actually, I hope I did just have a stroke,” he muttered to himself, before reflexively reaching for another beer.

Chapter 19

Sam gazed out of the windscreen of his car. He stared fixedly forwards, not at anything in particular, just out into the world as he gripped the wheel hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

Mallory looked on in silence, growing increasingly nervous, worried as the seconds ticked silently by.

Sam said nothing. He hadn't spoken a word since they'd left his house. He had politely made his excuses, and instructed Mallory quite forcefully to leave. He then followed him out, his hand firmly pressed on his back, pushing him along to hasten their exit.

"Sam?" he said softly, his mind buzzing with a hundred questions and nothing close to an answer anywhere to be found.

He slowly, peeled his left hand from the wheel, raised it and held up the index finger for silence. He then returned to glaring into nothing, his hand going back to the important work of pointlessly gripping the wheel as his eyes peered out with frightening intensity.

To Mallory, this only raised more questions, and did precious little to answer any of the previous ones.

Sam looked over, a worried, angry, stern frown fixed on his face and he glared accusingly at him for several long, awkward moments.

Finally he said, "This isn't possible. None of this is possible."

"What isn't?" Mallory shrugged, really quite worried now. Then he said, as realisation struck him, "Hang on! You're right! None of this is possible! For all I know you might have been telling the truth about me taking a prescription drug. I might really have just had a bad chemical reaction and now I'm confused and struggling to remember things. For all I know you're just a figment of my imagination, some twisted manifestation from my subconscious."

"Stop talking now. I want you to know that I can hit really hard. I can hit you in such a way that your bottom jaw will snap right off your

head, and leave your tongue lolling about while the bones in your face droop down like your grandmas breasts.

“If you want me to prove that to you, then just carry right on saying stupid things and we’ll see where this path leads us, shall we?”

Mallory looked away, and hung his head dolefully. “That was a bit uncalled for!” he grumbled.

“I’m trying to talk to you like you’re *not* an idiot, even though I have strong reservations about doing so. You’re making that a lot harder by trying to prove my fears correct.”

He grunted and snorted to himself. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“We’ve established, due to the missing necklace your mother never owned, and your father never taking that job in Scotland, that your home world and this one diverged from one another quite a long time ago—probably while you were still in nappies.”

“Right?” Mallory shrugged, struggling to keep up. To his surprise he realised that this was starting to make sense. The whole irrational idea was sounding increasingly rational.

“Your toenail is still black!” Sam explained, without seeming to offer any kind of an actual explanation.

Mallory just listened, hoping that he’d end up saying something that would make sense at some point. This was all rather like an anchor dredging along the bottom of the seabed until it eventually catches a rock and is finally able to do its job, only without any rocks.

“You have a minor injury, right here in the universe you’re currently in, even though you—the *other* you that’s from this universe—never had that injury in this universe!”

At least that made sense, sort of. “Yeah!” he agreed.

“Do you see the issue here? There’s only one way that such a thing can happen, but it *can’t happen*. It can’t happen in any of the universes I’ve been to, and as far as I know, it never has.” Sam began to

sound really very concerned, and Mallory was growing increasingly worried right along with him. He wasn't even really sure why.

"When I shift, I do so by moving my consciousness around from one version of myself to the next, exploiting the fact that all my selves in all the universes are really just one me.

"I do it that way because it's how the universe is designed to be. We naturally move around all the time, we just don't realise we're doing it." Sam grew increasingly irate as he spoke. "It's like a cell in your body replicating, and then changing into another type of cell. It's not impossible: we just trick the universe into letting it happen the way we want it to.

"But what's not possible is physically moving from one universe to another. It can't be done. Your body is frequency-locked to the one it was created in. It can't move."

Mallory was getting the idea. "So...?"

"So?! You seem to have done *exactly that!*" Sam told him, with a sense of urgency, an insistence that carried such force that it would have terrified even the most steadfast of souls. "Your phone doesn't work because the bloody thing is tuned to a different bloody universe. You brought your damned stubbed toe with you!

"Don't you see? You've shifted from one universe to another wearing the same clothes, carrying the same injuries, the same phone, the same everything. *This is not possible. It simply can't happen!*"

Mallory sat there in silence, just contemplating it all for a moment. "OK," he said after a lengthy pause where his brain just screamed in confusion. "So what does all this mean?"

Sam shook his head, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. "No idea," he admitted with a shrug. "I've never seen anything like it before. I know people have talked about it, tried to find ways to do it, but I don't know of any instances of it ever actually happening.

“Why?” he continued. “Because it’s not possible! It’s like trying to invent a perpetual motion generator. There are some really convincing ideas how it could work on paper, but they never survive the maths. You add up the actual numbers and it always returns zero. Equilibrium always wins out!

“You however have done the impossible. You’ve somehow survived the maths.”

“So...” said Mallory, really unsure what to say. “How did I manage that then?”

Sam shook his head slightly and grunted under his breath. “I’ve met many travellers that do what I do and, so far, the consensus seems to be that, hypothetically, if somebody was able to do what you apparently have done, it could only mean one thing. The only way to beat the maths, is for maths itself to be broken. We all know that if you take a number—say five—and multiply it by itself, then the square root of the result takes you back to five again. What if there existed a number where the square root of its square was a different number? We assume maths is infallible, that this isn’t possible—*oh, you must have just added it up wrong*—but isn’t that just based on faith? What if somebody broke maths, and you’re that number?”

Sam’s meandering monologuing was leaving Mallory listening intently to things that quite possibly were even crazier than he might turn out to be himself. Disturbingly, it was all starting to sound pretty reasonable.

“Are you saying that someone’s broken the universe?”

Sam nodded sadly. “Now you’re getting it.”

“How?” he cried out.

“I have no idea. But I do know of someone who might.”

“Who?”

Sam huffed, shaking his head sadly. “That’s a long story!”

Suddenly, a piercing scream cried out from the house. Sam looked over sharply. Mallory looked at him, back to the door and back to Sam once more. "That's my mum!" he squealed in a very unmanly way.

Sam was already moving. He flung the door of the car open and ran to the house, covering the distance with impressively wide steps, his long black coat, flaring up behind him dramatically.

Mallory was barely out of the car as Sam was at the door. He brought his right leg up and kicked the door clean off of its hinges. It collapsed with a crash, the lock snapping and the door swinging back, buckling itself against the wall as it slammed open.

Sam was gone. He dashed inside as Mallory ran up behind him.

He stopped dead, his shoes skidding on the paved pathway as he saw inside. Sam was swallowed up by the darkness inside, fearlessly braving whatever he might find, running into it without a second thought.

Mallory swallowed his apprehension. He stood for a moment, his heart pounding in his chest so he could feel his pulse pounding in his ears.

He was running again, before he even knew it. He was running headlong into the darkness, dashing forwards against his fear, against all doubt to make his way inside.

After all, this was his mother. One way or another, this woman was his mum!

Sam ran towards the screaming, coming from the wider, open-plan living room where only minutes before, they had all been sitting, having a fairly civilised cup of tea.

Mallory crashed into the room, stumbling over his feet in the strange, grey shadows of twilight that had swallowed the whole house. Mrs Gardener was cowering on the sofa, struggling against some black,

fearsome and twisted thing. It was snarling and gnashing and swiping at her with bony fingers, roaring in a fearsome, twisted rage.

Mallory stared in horror but Sam threw himself into it, never hesitating as he leapt into action. He watched as the detective thrust his arm around the thing's neck and pulled it back. It snapped and snarled as he wrenched its head back, away from the stricken woman.

She gasped in relief as Mallory flung himself down, sheltering her from a further attack if the black, demonic creature could manage to wrest itself loose.

Sam flung it round, spinning it away from its victim and releasing it so it slammed noisily into the wall behind. It wailed a fearsome noise and turned, snarling back towards him. Mallory could only watch in wide-eyed horror as Sam punched hard, his fist rolling into the inky, filthy blackness that this creature seemed to be made of. He punched again, and then a third time.

He put in everything he had and the beast let out a sickening roar and collapsed, sinking to its knees. It contorted in rage but he lashed out with his foot and must have connected with its head.

It reeled back, slamming once more into the wall and it slithered to the floor, still gnashing and growling as it smashed heavily into the ground with an animal-like yelp of pain.

The darkness began to clear. Mallory was locked in silence, his eyes fixed on the huddled black monstrosity as the light through the windows again seemed to touch the room. The gloom melted away leaving a strange, rotten smell in its wake. The thing lay huddled and twitching, making horrible, twisted and ugly gasping, growling and snarling noises, as if it was consumed inside rage itself.

Mallory's mother stood up. She pulled her son close, shielding him from whatever it was. "Are you alright?" she gasped loudly through ragged breaths.

"Me?" Mallory cried out in surprise. "Are you alright?"

It lay on the floor with darkness curling all around it like smoke on the water one dull, cold morning next to a wide river. Slowly the blackness melted all the way back.

It shook with a violent spasm, throwing its limbs around in a brutal flailing motion, gyrating on the floor until it contorted into a ball, wrapping itself into a foetal position.

Sam stood gasping, heaving for breath as he backed away to the terrified pair, huddled together behind him.

The dark, twisted thing cried out, one last pained roar and dug its fingers into its face, ripping at itself furiously. The darkness ebbed away and now a thick puddle of deep crimson began to pour from it. Its fingers had plunged deep into the eye sockets and it was gouging, ripping deeper into its own skull.

Even Sam backed away, muttering something under his breath.

A horrible, deep croaking sound came as the thing stretched out suddenly, its limbs locking momentarily, and then it sagged and went finally limp.

Sam pointed at the fallen, bloody thing as the last clouds of darkness melted away, and gasped, "What the fucking hell is that thing?"

Mallory cried out, "You're asking me?"

"Well it didn't come here with me!" he shouted angrily. "I've never seen anything like *that*."

Mrs Gardener offered a voice of reason and said softly, and surprisingly levelly after what they'd all been through, "Why is that thing wearing my clothes?"

Mallory looked at Sam. Sam looked back at Mallory. They turned to stare at the thing, now that the light was able to reach it. The horribly twisted attacker was lying in a growing pool of oozing crimson as its ruptured eyes had burst, covering most of its face in thick, heavy red

blood. But there was no mistaking the body of a middle aged female with her clothing, hair and exact build.

“What the...” Mallory managed to wheeze.

Sam just stood there. Finally he said, “There is a definitely a very large hole in the universe.”

Chapter 20

“A very large hole indeed!” the nurse muttered to herself as she added the final of six stitches.

Even though the anaesthetic had taken the sting out, the pulling on his skin was unpleasant. He was beginning to feel a burning sensation as the hooked-needle was pushed through his flesh.

“Something hit me!” Roach explained. “I can’t remember what though.”

“I’ve seen worse,” she told him conversationally, her focus clearly on the work at hand, where Roach felt it really belonged.

He winced as she pushed a little too hard, sending a jolt of pain coursing down through his face. The drugs were wearing off.

“An iron bar maybe?” she guessed. “A bat of some kind? You’re police, right? Some criminal did this to you?”

“Probably,” he shrugged, carefully so as not to move his head. “You instantly take on a whole host of enemies when you become a copper. Mostly just scumbags who are already at war with the world. You’re just another target for them. You learn not to take it personally.”

“We see them in here often enough,” she told him with a weary sigh. “I didn’t become a nurse to hold back the tide of natural selection, but that’s basically what we do. Every Friday night, it’s always the same. An endless parade of idiots looking for us to fix the stupid problems they caused themselves, or did *to* themselves.

“I can’t say it’s everything I dreamed of.”

Roach chuckled. “I didn’t become a policeman to get smashed in the head by a crazed alcoholic. That’s life, I guess?”

Roach heard the tiny metallic clatter of the needle being dropped into a metal tray. At last, the worst of it was over. He hoped so anyway.

“I always wanted to be a nurse,” she told him conversationally. “It was my dream as a little girl. I always wanted to help people, I guess.

I thought I could make a difference. It's funny how wrong you can be, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," he sighed. "I wanted to be a copper from a young age too—probably early teens. I started to realise that not much else meant anything at all. I'm not someone who can easily just stand by and watch while things go to shit. That's why I decided to give it a try.

"All my mates thought I was crazy, but I did it anyway. I never regretted it, but there are days when I have to admit that it all wears a bit thin."

She huffed, snorting back a little chuckle of her own. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Roach smelled the familiar aroma of rubbing alcohol as she cleaned the stitches over one last time.

"I'm not even a career copper!" he continued. "I made DC seven years ago, but my heart is on the street, working with the people who need me. I mean, that's the idea, anyway."

"And once in a while, we get a kid come through, some accident or other that was nobody's fault," she agreed. "It's little things like that that just about keep me going, just about make all this barely tolerable."

"Yeah, I get you!" he agreed. "My missus, she's in it for the career. I don't even know why she joined in the first place. It's not really her cup of tea at all. She dreams of promotion to some lofty management position where she gets to tell other people what to do.

"Not me of course, she's been telling me what to do since the day I met her."

"I think we're all done here," the nurse said finally. "I think it's safe to say you have a bit of a concussion. Take it easy for the rest of the day, and you should probably rest up tomorrow too. A doctor will talk to you about all that before you leave!"

"No drugs?" he asked.

“They don’t help,” she told him. “Just over the counter pain-killers if it gets too much, otherwise it’s best to just let nature run its course. You’ll live!”

“Thanks!” he finally turned his head and beamed a happy smile. “I feel fine now, to be honest.”

“You’re not!” she told him firmly. “Get some rest!”

He shook his head and quipped, “Yeah, I’ll read a nice romantic comedy, or watch some daytime TV until my brain really does start running out of my nose.”

She looked at him sternly, put her hands on her ample hips and frowned. “Do that. I don’t want to see you back here in the morning complaining that you’ve gone blind because you ignored what I told you.”

“Pretty sure that can’t happen!” he told her.

She sniffed at him, turning away like she was giving up on a conversation she’d lost all interest in. “I didn’t know you had a medical degree. Let me know how things work out with that.”

And with that, she vanished through a white curtain without sharing another word. He made a humming sound to himself and considered himself quite lucky to be romantically involved with someone he actually had a degree of respect for.

He stepped out from behind the curtain and found the very concerned face of Inspector Grace staring up at him from a bench in the corridor. She stood up sharply, staring at him without blinking and waiting expectantly for him to speak.

He told her with a little smile, “It’s been confirmed by a trained medical practitioner that I got hit on the head!”

“I know you got hit on the head!” she grumbled, stepping forwards and craning her neck for a better look at his bruised temple.

She reached out and gingerly her fingertips stretched towards his wound, but stopped just short of touching it. “What did she say?”

Roach looked at her and smiled. “She said I was perfectly fine and could return to active duty, as soon as I’ve had enough beer to kill a small bull–elephant!”

“She did not!” she scowled at him.

“How am I supposed to remember what she said?” he sniffed.

“I’ve got a concussion, I barely know what day it is!”

Inspector Grace ran her fingers very gingerly over the side of his forehead, close to the cut but not quite touching it.

“Things are back to normal!” she smiled. “How do you feel?”

“I feel like I need enough beer to kill a small bull–elephant!” he told her earnestly. “Otherwise, I feel alright. I feel pretty normal now, actually.”

She nodded to him. “Do you remember Mallory? Or Craig, the alcoholic who attacked you?”

He winced at himself and shook his head slowly. “I really don’t. I can’t remember the names at all.”

“Mallory was the young man who found his parents dead, his father with his face torn off,” she told him.

Roach frowned and stepped away, a confused look set on his face. “Bloody hell, Sandra. That’s the sort of thing that should stick in your mind!”

“I know!” she told him. “That’s kind of my point.”

Roach rubbed his temples as if doing so might charge up his brain. “And this Craig?”

“I think he’s the man who attacked you!” she said. She gave him a thoughtful look. “Give me your phone. I want to check your GPS, and find out where you were when you were attacked.”

Roach nodded, slipped his hand into his back pocket and handed her his phone.

“This isn’t working!”

“No!” he agreed. “I think it’s broken.”

She glared at him, but it’s wasn’t a glare with any real anger behind it. “I think it might be *you* that’s broken!”

He bit his lip thoughtfully and considered how strongly it appeared that she might be right about that. “I don’t know what happened. I think it must have got broken when I was attacked: it hasn’t worked since.”

She looked at him in annoyance. “No problem!” she said after a slight pause. “I’ll phone ahead and get the GPS data you were following. We’ll go down and check the area out, see if it triggers your memory.” She paused thoughtfully. “You’re alright to do that, are you?”

“Peachy!” Roach said enthusiastically, nodding in agreement.

She called the office to get the GPS information Roach had received sent to her own phone.

“Yes... that’s right,” she said to the operative. “As quickly as possible.”

Roach sighed as she very quietly, very efficiently went about her business. He would have made a bit more of a conversation, crack a few bad jokes with the officer on the end while they waited. But really, they weren’t that different, not in any of the ways that really mattered.

She cared. She cared about people, and she cared about him. It was what drove her, what got her out of bed in the morning. They might do it in different ways, but they were, when you got right down to it, doing the same thing.

She looked over to him, as she waited patiently for the information, her mobile pressed to her ear. She cocked her head very slightly to one side and her eyes rolled up and down his body. What was she thinking? He began edging closer, a curious frown on his face.

She held the phone a little way from her ear and spoke softly. "Roach..." she said haltingly, in some confusion about what to say. "Have you lost weight?"

"Yeah!" he shrugged. "I cut down on the drinking, remember? I've been watching what I eat, and hitting the gym."

She frowned a little deeper and said, "I mean, have you lost weight *today*? I mean, what I mean to say is, *how* have you lost weight today, because you really do look like you've lost quite a bit of weight!"

He smiled at her, wrongly presuming she was joking. "I don't know. Maybe it's the first time you've seen me in a T-shirt at work? I can't have actually lost weight in a single day. Getting hit over the head isn't a miracle diet, you know!"

She held up a hand as the person on the other end of the phone came back. She turned away and said to them, "How long?" She nodded and agreed, "Fine. Thanks!"

She hung up and put her phone in her bag. She looked over at him as if contemplating something she found difficult. "You look a little different."

He raised an eyebrow. She was serious. "What do you mean? More handsome? Could I look any more handsome? Would that even be possible?"

"Well, you certainly couldn't look *less* handsome," she said, jokingly. "I hadn't noticed before, frankly I was really worried about you, but now I stop to look, and the more I think about it, you look different. You look really *quite* different."

He shrugged and flashed her a look of curious amusement. "How?"

"Well, you *have* lost weight," she told him firmly. "You've shaved, you look fitter, slimmer in the face, and your beer-belly is gone."

He looked at her fixedly, trying to work all this out. "This isn't news, Sandra. We talked about this six months ago. I told you I was going to make more of an effort. I put on a bit of weight after my wife left me. When we got together, I started getting my life together. You know all this as well as I do."

She shook her head. "Six months ago?"

"Yeah!" he nodded. "You know, when we first got together."

Now she looked very, very confused. "When we first got together?" she said in surprise. She looked around, checking if anyone was close enough to hear them. Seemingly satisfied she moved closer and lowered her voice.

Roach just looked on in confusion.

"What do you mean when we *first* got together? Are you talking about the night when we went back to mine and worked through the burglary reports and a bottle of wine?"

He shrugged and nodded. "Yeah!" he huffed. "Pretty sure it was muggings on the high street, but yeah, that sounds about right!"

She looked around again. "That was the first night we slept together? Right?"

He was sure something was wrong, but wasn't at all sure what it was. He nodded.

"That was less than two months ago," she told him, her voice barely a whisper.

He stared at her, even more confused than she looked.

"At least six months..." he said, much less sure of himself. His fingers traced along the edge of his head wound.

"No. It was two months ago!" she told him assuredly. "I know. I remember it very well."

He shook his head, for a moment he doubted himself, but then decided he wasn't crazy at all. He *did* remember it properly. "I remember it too. I'm sure of it."

“Look!” she said, strongly but with a hint of sympathy. “I remember it perfectly. We had a bottle of red wine and I invited you round to share it with me. I’d already had too much to drink at the pub with you. I was lonely, and a little fed up.”

“It was six months ago,” he told her, rubbing his temples, certain he was correct.

She looked away, a little sadly. Sounding like she took no pleasure in telling him, she said, “I remember it because it was my birthday.”

He shook his head and sighed loudly. “No, Sandra,” he said firmly. “For your birthday, I took out to dinner. I bought you that silver watch that you’d always wanted. It was a man’s chronometer which I had engraved to read ‘For my boyfriend,’ but had the last word crossed out and ‘girlfriend’ engraved on it instead, you know, as a joke.”

For a moment she just stared at him, her lips parted as if she was about to speak. She held up her arm, showing off a cheap black plastic watch.

“No!” he said firmly. “I remember.”

Chapter 21

Mallory felt an uncomfortable, gnawing fear growing inside him, eating away at him, ripping at his very essence. Part of him, the part that was used to the world following certain rules, was screaming in confused frustration, roaring at him that none of this could actually be happening.

It couldn't be happening, could it? In a sane and normal world, shadows wrapped in swirling masses of darkness didn't attack his family in their home, ripping off the face of his father, attacking his mother with her own body, and then killing themselves by plunging their own fingers into their eye sockets and digging away into their own brains.

It had to be a mistake: some bad medication, as the detective had told him, or perhaps he was asleep right now? Whatever it was, it had to end soon, surely?

But the other part of himself was currently in a room with his own mother. She was near frantic, working hard to control her breathing as the panic rose up within her. All that seemed fair enough really, since another version of herself had accidentally fallen through a crack in the universe and attacked her in the living room of her own home, quite possibly, and not even unlikely, hoping to eat her face.

"What is...?" she pointed to herself, her other self, the blood-soaked and lifelessly still body lying dead on her very slightly beige carpet. "What is that... that *thing*?"

Sam shrugged at her. He had his hands in his pockets now and was staring at it with a bemused frown on his face while he chewed his bottom lip and made soft little clicking noises with his tongue thoughtfully.

"I can't claim to be an expert in such matters," he said after a lengthy pause where he seemed to consider the matter in great depth. "But it rather seems to be you, Mrs Gardener. You—the *other* you—appear to have killed yourself after I punched you several times in the

face. It hurt a lot more than I thought it would—you're surprisingly robust."

"He's a detective!" Mallory told her, gasping through ragged breaths as he struggled to moderate his own rising terror.

She looked at him with an angry, puzzled and frustrated scowl. She snarled angrily, fearfully at him and then turned to someone who it must have seemed more appropriate to be angry at. "Do you know what the hell is going on here, Mr Detective?"

Sam seemed surprisingly calm, as if beating a middle aged woman to the ground had helped him find some welcome peace and equilibrium. It seemed almost like it was an everyday event to him, or at the very least, a new challenge to be relished.

"I've heard stories of people trying to remote bio-relocate across worlds, but until today, I'd never once heard of it actually happening to a real, actual person that I'd actually met. My running theory is that there's a bit of a hole in reality."

She looked back to Mallory. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Mrs Gardener," Sam said, his forceful voice and boundless confidence plunging the pair into rapt silence. "I want you to imagine something for me. I want you to imagine a coin. Heads one side, tails the other. Now every time you toss this coin, it creates a new universe: one where it lands heads, and one where it lands tails. Each possibility creates a new world of its own. Now multiply that by every choice anybody ever makes, and you end up with an awful lot of parallel universes. Can you imagine that for me?"

Mrs Gardener seemed to give it some thought. "Let's pretend for the moment that this makes any sense," she said. "Why don't we cut the baby steps and get to the point. What's going on here?"

"As you wish. One of the benefits of infinite parallel universes is that, with a little skill, it's possible to shift from one to another, by

displacing your consciousness into a parallel you. It's not easy, but it's very possible.

"However, one thing we know for certain is absolutely not possible, is to physically relocate your entire body from one universe to another. That simply can't be done.

"With that said though, it now appears we need to reevaluate what is and isn't possible, in light of how what I just claimed could not be done, seems in fact to be happening on your living room floor.

"To put it bluntly, there is a hole in the universe, and a parallel you has fallen through and ended up here, evidently with the intent of killing you in some brutally horrible way!"

Mrs Gardener took a deep breath. "I see," she said resignedly. "I mean, it sounds like the crazed rantings of a lunatic, but it's as good an explanation as any, given the material facts." She gestured to the recently deceased copy of herself that was busy leaving a stain on her very expensive carpet.

"Your son came to me for help after seeing you and his father murdered in the kitchen of his home!" Sam continued. "At first, I assumed that his consciousness had shifted from his home universe to this one—where obviously, the murders had never taken place.

"I think it's now plainly obvious that Mallory moved *physically* to this universe, much like this other dead version of you did. This is not possible, except evidently it is."

She looked over to Mallory suspiciously. He returned a weak shrug.

"So this *hole*," said Mrs Gardener. "It seems like we have a problem."

Sam looked back down to the body. "It's a big problem," he told her, sounding not quite convinced of his abilities. "I'll fix it if I can, but I have to first figure out where it is, what it is, and what exactly it is I'm supposed to do with it, before it gets any worse."

“Worse than this?” she squealed angrily, gesturing again to the body laying on her floor. “Worse than a murderous version of yourself dropping by to kill you?”

Sam shrugged as if that question was actually not a well-considered one. “It could be a lot worse. What if you were standing next to hole that led to a universe where everyone was an armed psychopath?”

Mallory, clearly still struggling to understand it all, suggested, “You mean like America?”

Sam huffed a weary sigh and frowned at him. “Mallory, go next door and apologise. Tell them your mother found a mouse running around in the house. Tell them it was a really big mouse: very scary. It came in from the garden with fire in its eyes and murder in its heart, but you stopped its reign of terror with a chair.

“There was a lot of screaming, and it would be less than ideal if somebody decided to contact the police.”

Mallory looked at his mother. That all seemed perfectly reasonable, and he had completely forgotten that there might be wider consequences of there being a loud domestic incident followed by someone pushing their own eyeballs into their brain. He quickly got up, gave her a weak, apologetic little smile, and headed slowly towards the door.

Sam said to her, “Do you have a chest-freezer, one that’s big enough to hold that body? Also we’re going to need bin liners, or other plastic sheets? Failing that, bed sheets, blankets, anything we can wrap it up in?”

Mallory stopped in his tracks and turned to watch.

Sam sneered at him. “Now, Mallory!” he snapped. “Unless you want the police turning up, and you’re sure that you can find a persuasive way to explain why your mother is alive and dead at the same

time in the same room, then I strongly suggest that you get your arse moving right now!"

"Alright!" he grumbled, and made his way out.

Sam certainly knew how people worked, Mallory thought to himself.

The first of his neighbours, Mr Silverman, had heard the screams and turned his television up to block them out. He answered his door, giving the distinct impression he wasn't happy about having to do so, listened briefly to the explanation, grunted something about missing his dramas and slammed the door behind him. He had no more interest than if a leaflet had been pushed through his letterbox, and had appeared to be wearing a dressing gown with nothing much underneath. There had been a fairly pungent smell of cigarettes and loneliness, as if the smell of being alone clung to him in some way.

The other neighbour, on the other side had been a little more concerned about the whole thing.

She was an older woman, Mrs Cotteringham, who Mallory had never met but who seemed to know him very well indeed. That didn't really surprise, or even bother him anymore, as he found he was getting increasingly used to all the oddness of being in a universe in which he didn't really belong. She explained how she had been really very worried indeed, and hadn't known at all what to make of it all.

She seemed genuinely relieved to have a perfectly reasonable explanation handed to her, and she huffed continually, wiping mock sweat from her brow and laughing over and over again like all this was somehow hilarious.

In both cases, the matter was now happily resolved. Sam's suggestion had satisfied everyone: clearly there was at least a little more to him than just a very grumpy man who enjoyed punching middle aged women half to death.

As Mallory made his way to the front door, it swung open suddenly and Sam crashed out into the world as if nothing around him really mattered very much at all. In his world, perhaps it didn't, wherever and whatever that world might actually be.

"With me!" he told him, marching with distinct purpose towards his car and not even bothering to throw a glance his way.

Mallory looked back to the house, and then over to the detective. He wanted to go and check on his mother, but it was hard to argue with the only person in the universe who seemed to have any idea what might be going on.

"What's happening?" he cried out, dutifully following him over to the car.

"Your Mum's got things covered in there," Sam told him, pulling open the door and stepping inside like Mallory was of so little concern to him that explanations were largely unnecessary. "She's surprisingly well-versed in the art of disposal."

He scuttled hurriedly over to the car and ran across in front as Sam fired the engine and snapped off the handbrake. He quickly fumbled with the handle and let himself inside.

The car shuddered and then moved off, fairly violently, almost as soon as the door had slammed shut.

Mallory remained in silence as the car gained speed, hurtling along as the engine noisily whined in front of them. For just a moment, he thought about everything that was happening. He didn't do it for very long though, as thinking had started to scare him, given that what was happening had already gone way beyond the worst things he had ever imagined and was still spinning violently off at a wildly unpredictable vector.

"Where are we going?" he eventually asked, since the silence was beginning to bother him even more than the answer to that question might. He began to think that he probably really didn't want to know.

“I need to find this hole,” he told him. “I need to find out where it originated.”

“And then?” Mallory asked.

Sam looked really quite troubled for a moment. He said, “There must be a way to close it.”

Mallory looked at him. His face was one of grim determination, and at that moment, he had not the tiniest shred of doubt that if any man in any universe could do it, then Sam was that man.

“I don’t know how though!” he added with a sigh. “I’ve never seen anything like this! I’ll probably need to destroy it.”

That wrecked most of the confidence Mallory had dared to build up. “How do you destroy a hole? I mean, it’s a hole. By definition it’s already a sign that something has already been destroyed.”

“A *hole* is just the metaphor I’m working with until I know more about it!” Sam snapped angrily. “It’s a circumstance, an opening, a doorway. It’s a thing. Things stop existing when you destroy them. I need to find out what and where it is, and then destroy it. It’s not that hard to understand, is it?”

That did all seem reasonable enough, or reasonable enough, at least in a world where dead parents were popping out of shadows, and he’d woken up to find himself in a parallel universe that was falling apart at the seams.

“Where do we start?”

Sam looked at him. “At the beginning!” he said.

“The beginning?”

“I need to know what happened immediately after you arrived in this universe? After you saw your parents killed, you said you took off and ran.

“Where did you go?”

Mallory thought as hard as he could, but came up blank.

“Honestly, I don’t remember.”

Chapter 22

Inspector Grace looked straight ahead as she drove along the busy main road. Grey, concrete buildings blurred past her window, but she barely noticed: her thoughts were busy somewhere else.

Roach was a good man, a solid man. He was dependable, reliable, and he was wherever you needed him to be, whenever you needed him to be there. Not once in the whole time she'd known him had he seemed flaky, crazy, or anything less than a singular voice of reason in a chorus of chaos.

She had requested him as a partner, not because she had any romantic interest in him, and not because she even liked him particularly, but because she knew he was a person she could trust, and trust the most when it really, really mattered.

Now, the man sat next to her in her car was worrying her for the first time since she'd known him. Now she was concerned.

"What else do you remember?" she asked, hoping to find something that would make sense of it all. It wouldn't be a joke at her expense, but that didn't rule out a mistake? Was this just some ridiculous misunderstanding?

He laughed. "I remember lots of things," he told her.

"How many times have we slept together?" she said, rather sternly. Driving made it easier: she didn't have to make eye contact with him. She could lose herself in the moment.

"I don't know!" he admitted. "Lots of times. You spend most weekends over at mine now."

That had never happened. "We've had sex seven times!" she told him, almost angrily. "We've never spent the entire night together."

Roach now sounded almost angry, frustrated at the very least. "Sandra, what are you talking about? We had sex seven times last week.

Eight, if you include what we did on Wednesday afternoon. I certainly count it.”

She looked away sadly. Was this all some fantasy, cooked up inside his damaged brain? Should she take it as a compliment? Many men might freely fantasise about heroic deeds, sexual adventures, wealth, power or status. The man she had connected most with in all the world, since her husband had walked out on her, just fantasised about spending a bit more time with her.

Really, it was actually quite sweet when you thought about it.

“Have you met my daughter?” As soon as the words had left her mouth, she regretted saying them. Should she be pushing this? Wouldn’t he just create an even more twisted fantasy to support the delusions his sanity was already lurking inside of? Surely it would be better to give him space, let him come back to normality in his own time. Why did she always have to push so hard at everything?

“Sure!” he told her. “Theresa was a little dubious of me at first, but she came round. You know how well we get along now. She actually asked me last week for advice about her boyfriend, I was quite moved.

“I told her that as long as she had better taste than her mother, she’d be fine!”

Inspector Grace heard the words and snapped up suddenly. She’d never told him her daughter’s name, much less let him actually meet her.

On the very few occasions he’d been inside her home, she had been staying with friends. At first, it was simply because she was a firm believer in keeping her home and work life separate, but later it had been more personal. She was sure that Roach would leave her eventually and she wanted to protect her daughter from having to deal with that.

She had decided it was best to keep it casual, hold him at a distance, not get attached. He was a mistake that she wasn’t going to make again.

“Look, what’s going on?” he asked. “I think I can see where things are going here. I might not be the world’s best detective, but I’m not so stupid that I can’t see what’s happening right under my own nose.”

“What’s going on, indeed?” she asked flatly.

“You’re having second thoughts about us being together, aren’t you?” he said, his voice tinged with sadness.

“No!” she told him sharply, and so forcefully that she actually rather surprised herself. “Quite the opposite. I’m actually starting to really quite like you, despite your many horrible personality failures.”

“Horrible failures largely define my personality!” he told her. “So, what is this all about? Have you gone crazy or something?”

“Me?” she growled at him, snapping her head to the side in surprise to peer raptly at him. He was grinning back at her. She looked back to the road, struggling to peel her eyes off the earnest look on his face. “It wasn’t me that was hit over the head with something.”

“Are we absolutely sure?” he quipped. “You seem to have forgotten the last few months of our relationship. Frankly, I’m a little insulted.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything!” she said defensively, annoyed that this fantasy of his wasn’t her reality too. It seemed really much better than she had hoped for when she grudgingly let go of herself and let things get started. It was her that made the first move: he had seemed startled, he even pulled back at first—but only at first. “You just seem to have remembered things that haven’t happened.”

“Sandra...” he said, sounding really very serious. “Are you on drugs?”

“I’m not on...” she growled through clenched teeth. A little more calmly she said, “Tell me something that I might only have told you when we became closer—something intimate!”

“Like your favourite sex position is missionary because you like the weight of a man pressing down on you, and that you secretly like the feeling of being dominated?” he suggested coolly. “Or that you don’t find relationships easy because your father left your mother when you were very young? You saw him hit her twice, and after he left, your mother was distant and eventually turned to drinking.

“Did you mean something like that?”

She gasped, her jaw hanging down as she stared at him fixedly. She shook her head and turned back to the road. She pulled over, slamming the car to a halt along the edge of a pavement with such enthusiasm that the tyres squealed in protest.

“How could you know that?” she cried out. “I never told you that! I never told anyone that!”

“You told me months ago. We had a bottle of that red wine you like, the one I can’t pronounce, and we talked about our previous relationships. You explained why you have issues with trust and I explained that I have trouble getting into relationships because I’m a bit fat, and a little bit ugly.”

“You’re not ugly...” she chuckled at him. And then her eyes widened and she slapped him hard on the belly. “You’re not fat either! You were this morning, but now you’re not!”

“I don’t know what to say!” he told her. “I think the stress of seeing me hurt has driven you completely, barking mad. Clearly it was a short drive. Most women are a little bit crazy to begin with, and I only began thinking that since I started dating you!”

“Roach...” she said softly. “Why do we remember the last six months completely differently? Why do you now have memories that include my daughter? How do you know about my sexual preferences and my relationship with my mother?”

“More importantly, how did you lose weight since this morning?”

“More importantly still, where’s the watch I bought you for your birthday?” he asked pointedly.

“And that’s another thing!” she grumbled, “How did you know I always wanted a watch like the one you described? What is *happening* here?”

“Well, I don’t know what you think is going on here, Sandra...” he began thoughtfully.

She held up a finger for him to stop.

“Don’t call me Sandra!” she told him. “We agreed that while we’re at work, you address me by my rank.”

“Fine!” he muttered dolefully. “And I would similarly ask that, while we’re at work, you could avoid calling me ‘Mr Snuggles.’”

“Mr Snuggles?” she gasped, looking at him with a look of surprise that was bordering on shock. Her face turned white. “Mr Snuggles was a giant teddybear my Mum bought me after my father left. I still have him hidden away at the back of my wardrobe.”

“My god, Sandra. That’s creepy as hell, why would you call me that then?” he frowned at her.

“I didn’t!” she squealed. “I don’t. I wouldn’t. I won’t.”

“You do,” he told her. “Especially... you know... afterwards!”

“I do?” she slapped her hands over her face, cringed, and turned slightly pink with embarrassment.

“Yes!” he assured her with a knowing grin. “You call me that all the time. I actually hate it, by the way.”

She looked over to him for a moment, confusion washed through her mind like a tidal wave. He was describing her perfectly, almost too perfectly. How could he know her so intimately?

She suddenly realised she was beginning to take all this seriously, all this talk of how they had become close after many months of dating, but then how could she not? He knew things and said them with such confidence, such total self-assuredness that it was hard to question it.

She looked at him, her eyes taking in every detail of his face. The rugged cheeks and the rosy redness of his nose were gone. His posture had improved; he seemed more confident, especially around her. He was a man that was comfortable in a relationship that was making him a better person. He had put his problems behind him and seemed more positive and stronger for it.

But how? How had that happened in one single morning?

“What’s going on here?” she whispered to him, a little afraid of the something that she actually now had to lose.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know if anything has happened. Maybe I just took a nasty blow to the head, maybe you’re having a nervous breakdown. Who knows?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Roach...” she said softly, her words hanging on the air.

“Whatever is is, we still have each other—how bad can it be?” he said, smiling supportively so that his eyes lit up happily.

She couldn’t help but to smile back, and her heart skipped a beat, making her feel like a teenager again.

How often does your fuck-buddy, a dirty secret from work who you occasionally have quick, naughty sex with in the back of your car, get knocked into unconsciousness and wake up as the perfect boyfriend? Probably not very often, she thought.

Was she lucky that all this was happening?

She sighed to herself. That wasn’t at all fair on him. Roach had always cared for her, and they had never just been screwing. It had always meant something to both of them. She kept him at arm’s length because of her work, never because he’d given her a reason to.

She reached over, just resting her hand on his arm. For a brief moment, she just needed to touch him. His hand was on top of hers, resting warmly on her fingers and it felt reassuring. It all felt normal.

“Everything’s fine,” he told her. “We’re fine. I actually feel OK now.”

Their eyes met and she found herself smiling up at him. Maybe this was just a little induced craziness from an unfortunate blow to the head? Perhaps she’d let things slip in conversations, and maybe he’d picked up details about her that he’d put together in his head as he tried to make sense of his memory problems?

It could easily be that she’d simply not noticed him losing weight, instead being too busy, too focused on things that now seemed really rather unimportant. Now she was starting to realise, for the first time in a very long time, what it was that was really important.

Whatever had got them here, did it really matter now?

“Are you really alright?” she asked softly.

He nodded back, and a warm, happy smile fluttered across his lips. “I’m fine.”

She pointed to her phone, clipped to the dash, and plugged into the lighter socket. It was lit up with a map that pointed to the last known signal detected from Mallory’s phone. “Shall we go and see what’s there?” she asked.

“Sure!”

Chapter 23

“Got it!”

Mallory held up a mobile phone proudly and pointed at the screen. “How do you know to do things like this anyway?”

Sam grunted and looked at him with condescension he intended for him to pick up on. “I’m a detective, Mallory!” he said. “I professionally find things—it’s my job. Finding the location of a phone number is about as challenging as falling through a hole in the universe.” He glared at the young man. “Any idiot can do it!”

“Is it legal to track a police officer?” he asked.

Sam shrugged. “If Detective Grace didn’t want you to track her phone, she wouldn’t have given you her number. It’s virtually an invitation!

“Laws change from universe to universe: it’s probably not strictly legal, but in most places, nobody really cares.”

Mallory looked at him, blinking to himself. It didn’t look like all of this was quite making sense inside his head.

“How come your phone works here, and mine doesn’t?” he asked.

“You came through physically!” he reminded him, although this was hardly breaking news anymore. “The phone you brought with you is frequency locked to a whole different universe: of course it doesn’t work. Frankly I’m amazed *you* work.

“My phone isn’t really my phone,” he continued. “It’s the phone that belongs to the Sam who comes from this universe—I’m just borrowing it. Luckily I’m a detective here, so we have access to all my resources, including the software to track a phone number.”

Mallory nodded like he understood. Sam knew he didn’t.

“She’s moving,” he said absently. “She’s pretty close by now.”

Sam frowned to himself. “Is she heading towards your house?” he asked urgently.

“I don’t think so, no. I’m not really sure where she’s heading.”

“Go on?” Sam demanded.

Mallory looked hard at the phone as if the answer to that question might just pop out of it. “Nowhere,” he said finally. “They’re just driving down a road. There’s nothing round there but houses, a few pubs, nothing much.”

Sam put his foot down and the car began to pick up speed. “How far ahead?”

“Not far, we’re catching them up.” He bit his lip thoughtfully.

“Why do you want to talk to the police?”

“Because they’re investigating the murder of your parents!” he told him. “I know you gave them a full report at the time, so maybe you told them where you went after the horror show. They’ll also know if anything else has happened, any similar incidents. I need to know how widespread this is. I need to know where this hole is, what it is, and how big it is.”

“And they’ll just share all that information with you?”

“They will. Police aren’t generally the sharpest tools in the box. It’s not difficult to get information from them if you ask the right questions.

“Anyway, I know Detective Grace.”

He looked at him, slightly startled. “You do?”

Sam nodded. “I’m a PI, I know lots of people.

“You understand that when I shift universes into other versions of myself, I’m in the same geographical place. Sadly, I’ve never arrived in a world to find myself on a cruise ship in the middle of a tropical ocean with a cocktail in my hand, surrounded by beautiful, bored, half-naked, women.”

Mallory nodded. “I guess you’d stay, right?”

“I can’t!” Sam said coldly. “I was warned when all this began that I can only stay a maximum of three weeks: no more than twenty one days in any one place.”

“Why?”

“If I stay any longer, I would start to melt. My mind would merge with the mind of the version of me that I’m occupying. I’d lose myself and be stuck forever in that universe, not ever knowing anything different again. This version of me, this Sam Abbdon, that understands how the universe works, would never exist again.”

“Oh!” Mallory said, sounding like he understood. His face dropped. “That must be very lonely. I mean, you can’t get to know anyone, right?”

Sam snapped, “I don’t want to get to know anyone.” He glared angrily ahead. “I’m not here to make friends. I’m here for my own reasons. Just consider yourself lucky that you’re getting my help along the way.”

Mallory kept quiet, probably wisely, given the circumstances. The car hurtled on, smoothly passing along a dark grey, tarmac road that seemed to be going nowhere, perpetually. Along the side was the odd industrial estate. At one point they had passed a large DIY store. Aside from that, it was just houses and fields, in stark contrast to the urban environment that it felt like it should have been.

“They’ve stopped!” Mallory said nervously. “They’re really close now!”

Sam pushed the car even harder. “How far?” he growled.

Mallory pointed ahead, checked the phone once more and said, “Just up ahead, we’re almost on top of them!”

Sam’s bland grey car pulled up behind Inspector Grace’s equally bland dark blue one, slamming on the brakes rather late and demanding the most unwanted kind of attention.

The two officers looked over in some surprise.

Sam was first out of the car, with Mallory close behind.

“Mallory!” she cried out in surprise, tempered with a little relief.

“Where have you been?”

She looked back to Roach who just glanced over, a slightly confused look on his face.

Sam stepped in front, and walked over purposefully towards the two police officers as if he were completely in charge.

As he came close, she cringed openly and turned away in disgust. “Sam Abodo,” she groaned.

“Abbdon,” he corrected, suspecting that getting his name wrong was a deliberate sleight. It usually was, but he didn’t know the specifics of the behaviour of this particular one, in this particular universe.

“Sandra Grace!” he said with a polite but insincere smile as he held out his hand in greeting. “*Detective Sergeant* wasn’t it?”

“*Detective Inspector!*” she told him, looking down at his outstretched hand as if he had handed her a rotting fish.

A large, and very serious man stepped forward defensively. “And you are?”

Grace explained, “This man is a private detective. He’s widely considered to be nothing more or less than an annoying, minor pain in the arse.”

Sam stretched out his hand in greeting to Roach. He smiled, not entirely warmly. “Sam Abbdon, annoying, minor pain in the arse!”

“Detective Constable Roach,” he told him, taking his hand and shaking it. He had a dry, firm grip, the kind of hand that would cause significant damage to a person if it connected with their head with any degree of anger behind it. “Widely considered by annoying, minor pains in the arse to be a bit of a major problem!”

Sam wasn’t threatened in the slightest. “You’re not going to be a problem,” he told him earnestly.

“What are you doing here, Abbdon?” she grumbled. “We’re on police business. I can arrest you for interfering in a police investigation.”

“No you can’t!” he told her, digging his hands in his coat pocket. Or could she? He had no idea what police powers she might have on this world. “I’ve just got a few questions, then we’ll be right out of your hair.”

“That’s not how this works, Abbdon,” she told him. “We’re the police, we ask *you* the questions.”

“My client, Mallory here, has hired me to investigate something for him,” he said. “I can’t go into details, obviously, and I’m sure you’d be bored by it all in any case. I’m sure that two fine police officers such as yourselves have better things to be doing than worrying about all that.”

“Mallory...” she called over.

He responded instantly, stepping up and beginning to walk over.

Sam held up a hand. “He’s my client now. Your questions have to go through me, I’m afraid.”

She scowled at him a little confused. “That’s not really how this works.”

“Mallory?” Roach ignored Sam, stepping forward to the young man with a slightly vacant expression, that of a man who had very clearly never met this person before.

Mallory looked a little confused himself and nodded back. He glanced over to the Inspector with a curiously raised eyebrow.

She suddenly said sharply, “While DC Roach was trying to track you down today, he was attacked and received a serious head injury. He’s suffering a significant concussion.”

Sam was suddenly quite interested. “Why were you trying to track down my client?”

She ignored him and said to Mallory, “Where have you been?”

Before he could speak, Sam stepped between them again. He glared directly at her and his near black eyes burnt with a sudden intensity, lit up with a ferocious fire. He said, as if his words were the only thing in the world that mattered, the only thing in the whole universe that meant anything at all, “Mallory is my client and you will address your questions to me. I have questions of my own.” He paused, calming himself with a deep breath. Moments later he continued, almost angrily, “We can do this officially, but let’s be honest, neither of us has the time for that and we’ve all got better things to do. I suggest that we help each other out, as we probably want the same things here?”

She looked at him fixedly. Roach stepped forward to lend his not inconsiderable muscle, if Sam were to overstep the mark. Sam wouldn’t — he wasn’t looking for enemies.

“You’ve developed a certain intensity, Sam!” she said, sounding actually a little impressed.

“I’ve been upgraded!” he told her. “I’m now a potentially huge pain in the arse! It’s best if we all keep that in mind from now on.”

“What do you want, Sam?” she rolled her eyes at herself.

“Why are you looking for Mallory?” he said, his posture relaxing slightly. “What’s happened?”

She looked at the young man who was watching all this with a worried look, his eyes nervously darting from one face to the next.

“He was at a hostel last night,” she began. “He left with a girl after suffering a minor assault from another guest. Nobody heard from either him or the guest again.”

“Mallory has been with me,” he told her. “He left with a mutual friend, Lilith. He did nothing, just slept in my office on the floor. He’s done nothing that should warrant attention from you.”

“We’re not accusing him of doing anything, we were just concerned.”

Sam nodded, happy to hear that. “What about the guest? What happened to him?”

“We don’t know!” she admitted. “He just vanished from the shelter. We don’t know where he went.”

Sam perked up, hearing something of interest. “Vanished?” he asked. “What do you mean vanished?”

She gave him a rather curious look.

“Grace, Roach, why are you here?”

“What do you mean?” she frowned.

“Why here?” he asked, gesturing around. There was nothing but an empty lot, a road passing overhead. It was a place that wasn’t a place, a little area where nobody went. “Why did you come here looking for Mallory?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I never said we were here looking for Mallory!”

Sam looked around. “And why aren’t you dressed formally?” he said to Roach. “What’s going on here?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions,” she told him, snippily.

“You’re here tracking Mallory!” he smiled, just a little, to himself and then he began to step forwards. “You came here earlier looking for him and were attacked on this spot?” Roach and Grace looked at one another and exchanged a slightly concerned look.

Sam turned around suddenly. “The big guy came alone, or else you wouldn’t have come back here now with him. He pulled off the gate, and broke his way in: it’s still twisted and bent now, and paint has flaked off where it’s twisted, and it hasn’t rusted yet. You were looking for Mallory here, in this place.

“You were tracking his phone!”

The Inspector looked impressed but did her best to hide it. “That’s none of your business!”

Sam looked worried. He could tell from the puzzled, worried looks on their faces that he was right. But if he was right, that made the whole thing even worse.

He said sharply to Mallory, "Hold up your phone, Mallory."

Mallory fumbled in his pocket and then duly complied. The officers looked over to one another once again.

"His phone doesn't work!" Sam told them. "And it's been in his pocket the whole time. Mallory was on the other side of town, sleeping on the floor of my office. Whatever you're tracking, it isn't his phone!"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, getting increasingly concerned.

"Mallory, is that your only phone?" she snapped. Mallory simply nodded. She grunted to herself, looking over to Roach. Finally she said, "What are you getting at, Abbdon?"

He pointed in through the gate. "Something is in there," he told her earnestly. "Something is in there that we're all looking for!"

"I'm going in!" Roach snarled, pushing himself forwards bravely.

Sam stood in front of him, putting out his hand and pressing it against his chest. "How did that work out for you last time, eh?"

Roach rubbed his temple and shot a glance back to his commanding officer.

"I propose that Roach and I go in together," he suggested. "The Inspector stays here to keep Mallory safe. If there's anything in there, we can be there to help each other!"

It was Inspector Grace who broke a rather lengthy, contemplative silence. "Why should we trust you?"

He smiled, and it was genuine for once, if not particularly happy. "Because if what's in there is even slightly close to what I think it might be, then I'm the last thing in the world you need to be afraid of!"

"And what do you think is in there?" Roach growled at him.

"Answers. Isn't that what we're all looking for?"

Inspector Grace nodded, just slightly, but enough to communicate her intentions to Roach.

“Come on then, *detective!*” he told him, lumbering ahead.

They picked their way through the dense weeds, tall grass, and smattering of rubbish rudely strewn about.

“Be completely straight with me!” Roach told him. “What do you expect to find?”

“I have honestly no idea!” Sam told him. “But something isn’t right here. I’ve had a weird day and I’m still struggling to catch up.”

“It’s been a day for weird days!” he said softly. The two made their way ahead, stalking along slowly, carefully as they looked around, scanning for the slightest detail.

“There!” Sam cried out, catching the sight of a shoe, hidden behind a pile of discarded, dented and beaten white goods. They looked at one another and then ran, sprinting over to the object, both desperate to see just exactly what they’d found.

The two of them stopped, dead in their tracks. They stood staring, gaping in horrified silence. Slowly, very slowly, they turned to look at one another, their eyes wide.

“That’s...” Roach stammered, pointing at the body, not seeming to know quite how to end his own sentence.

Before him lay the decomposing remains of Mallory Gardener, frozen to the spot by the touch of death. His glassy eyes gazed out into nothingness, seeing the emptiness of the universe stretch out infinitely before him.

“Mallory...” Sam said, not sounding terribly surprised. He had been partly expecting to find another version of him at some point, the version that belonged in this universe. Roach meanwhile seemed far more interested in the other body, its neck crushed and with dried, blackened blood caked onto the face and soaked through the white shirt.

“I’m no expert, but that other dead guy...” Sam looked up to Roach who was staring in dumbfounded horror.

“It’s me...” Roach croaked, barely finding his voice. “How can that be...?”

Sam slapped him supportively on the back. “It looks like you were killed,” he said earnestly. “You look better now though. Did you lose weight?”

“I don’t...” Roach stammered. “What...?”

“There’s a hole in the universe,” Sam muttered to himself. “And it’s a lot bigger than I thought.”

Chapter 24

There is more than one kind of silence.

One kind in particular goes a very long way beyond a lack of words. Sometimes the silence is so huge, so all-engulfing, that it's like an impenetrable fog that permeates solid matter, curling itself around everyone's brain, strangling thoughts and ideas straight out of them. A silence that is almost deafening.

This was one such silence.

The four of them stood there, just staring at the two lifeless bodies, their limbs twisted and contorted, their faces screwed up from their agonising deaths. Mallory's face had softened, darkened, and the skin had begun to pull over his bones. Roach's end was more recent: his lips were curled back over his teeth, and his eyes stared forward glassily. He looked like he had met a most painful and terrifying fate.

The remains of two otherwise healthy young men would have been disturbing enough, but the fact that two of those men were staring fixedly down at themselves ripped all other thoughts from their mind, plunging them into a numb kind of horror.

It was Inspector Grace who spoke, snapping everyone back to the unreal reality of it all. "Sam?" she asked simply, hoping he could fill in some of the details for them all.

He turned to face her, wrenching his eyes from the grizzly scene. "If I tell you, you have to listen. And I mean *really listen!* This is important, bigger than you ever dared to imagine."

Even Roach looked up, a confused look in his eyes, an angry frown on his face.

Sam explained, gesturing to the dead bodies, "I can explain all this, and I will, but you have to understand that you're not going to like what I tell you."

"I think we're well beyond what we'd like," Roach huffed.

Grace and Mallory began nodding in agreement for their own particular reasons.

Sam looked back, his interest divided between the two corpses. He seemed to be silently contemplating it all. She wondered what might be going through his mind, right then at that moment. The frustration stabbed at her. She wanted to run over, shake him and scream at him until he made all this make sense for her.

A gentle wind blew across the tall yellowing grass, and the muffled sound of a car whizzing by broke the otherwise peaceful scene. It was strangely serene. It was a place where humans touched lightly, and was seldom walked by man. It seemed so odd, so unreasonable for this place to have suffered the indignity of having unwanted things unceremoniously dumped on it and then to have to witness such violence.

There was no justice to it.

He said softly, but with the weight of a man speaking words that would change the world, “There’s a hole in the universe.”

“What?” Roach snapped angrily. His face flushed. “There are two dead bodies lying there and you want to talk about science—bloody—fiction?”

Sam looked at him, staring coldly into his eyes. “One of those bodies is yours, Roach. If you have a *rational* explanation that challenges no established norms, I’m all ears.”

Grace shook her head at him, warning him to just calm down. She said, as forcefully as she could muster, “Let’s hear what he has to say!”

Roach gave him a resentful glare, crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

“Imagine it like this... You reach into your pocket with your left hand and you take out a lime. Then, you reach into another pocket with your other hand, and you take out a lemon. So you’ve got a lemon, and you’ve got a lime, two different fruits—a different fruit in each hand.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it, but is it really? The word 'lime' comes from a foreign language, and translates to 'lemon.' What's more, lemons in some parts of the world where that language is spoken are slightly different from ours, in that they are exactly what we would think of as limes. So what we have is the exact same word describing the exact same fruit, and yet here they both are together, exactly the same, but completely different.

"Now, imagine that you're at a hotel bar, and you order a gin and tonic. The recipe is pretty simple: sloe gin, tonic water, and a wedge of lime; and if you're feeling adventurous, some milled juniper berries sprinkled on the top for a little pizzazz. So the barman fetches you the drink, compliments of the house, and everything seems fine, but you suddenly feel queasy—something is off. Something about this gin and tonic is just wrong, but you can't quite put your finger on what it is. You give it a closer inspection, only to find that there, right in front of your face is a wedge of lemon. *What fresh hell is this?* Where's the lime?

"Now you see, it's the same word, describing the same fruit, but who in their right mind puts a wedge of lemon in a gin and tonic?

"Is this making sense to you?"

Roach and Grace exchanged confused glances, before returning their attention to Sam.

"Not really, no," said the Inspector.

"This is just a suggestion," said Roach. "But rather than telling us what it's *like*, why not try telling us directly what it *is*?"

"Very well, Mr Roach. Tell me, did you have tea or coffee with your breakfast this morning?"

"Tea. I always have tea. Why?"

Sam pointed at the body of his dead counterpart where it lay. "He didn't," he began. "It didn't start today: it could have been years ago, and probably was. But at some point, this Roach here woke up and thought to himself *'You know, I think I'll have coffee with my breakfast*

today.' So he had coffee, and you had tea. Ever since then, your lives have followed very different paths, in different realities, parallel worlds, neither aware of the other's existence, and never the twain shall meet."

Roach remained less than convinced. "That's all very well, but how does that explain what's happened here?"

"Exactly!" said Sam, with alarming enthusiasm. "It doesn't! What's happened here is not possible!"

"Mr Roach, you wanted me to tell you directly how it *is*. Well it's this. There are infinite universes, and an aspect of ourselves resides in all of them. Well, most of them. A lot of them... Every aspect of us is slightly different from all the others, and each stays in its own respective universe, unaware of the others.

"Now I don't know how, but there are '*holes*' forming between the universes. Not literal holes—that's a metaphor—but what it means is that people from parallel worlds are accidentally coming through to this one."

He pointed to Mallory. "That young man witnessed the gruesome death of his parents, and I believe that what he saw was real. Afterwards, he somehow ended up here, in your world."

He pointed to Mallory's decaying likeness on the ground. "*That* is the Mallory that was living here, the one that belonged here. Something killed him, just like it killed *this* one's parents. Something killed you, Roach, and another version of you came through from another universe.

"I'm sure you've noticed changes," he suggested. "You've seen things that aren't quite right?"

Grace looked over at Roach. Her heart was pounding in her chest and sweat was prickling beneath her hair. What he was saying all made sense, and rather a lot more sense than she would have admitted out loud.

Roach unfolded his arms and protested, "Parallel worlds... holes in the universe... I'm not buying it."

Grace shuffled closer to him and rested her hand on his arm. She looked up sadly and asked, “How else do you explain it?” She smiled a hollow smile, shaking her head and feeling angry at herself that she was even considering this. “You’re alive and standing right here, and you’re laying there dead on the floor at the same time. How can that make any kind of sense whatsoever?”

“If I’m from another universe,” he frowned deeply. “Are you saying this isn’t my Sandra? You’re saying she’s in another world?”

“Do you know,” Sam suddenly interjected, “how an ATM works?”

Roach cocked his head to one side. “You put your card in and it gives you money?” he suggested, as if the answer were obvious.

“Not what I meant,” said Sam, shaking his head. “I mean the machine itself. Each bank has ATMs up and down the country, some overseas, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of them even. They’re all independent, have no knowledge of each other’s existence. They’re all alone in the universe. But the reality is, they’re all the same machine. A single computer sits in the basement of some bank building somewhere, but instead of having just the one screen and input device, it has tens of thousands of them all over the world. Every ATM that bank operates is just a single representation of a single facet of that one machine.

“There is only one Roach!” Sam continued. “But you are not it. You are just a single representation of a single facet of that whole, a whole that spans infinite universes. There’s only one Grace, and there’s only one you, it’s just another piece of a bigger you than you ever imagined there was.

“I know it’s almost impossible to accept, but you are still the people you always were. You just made slightly different choices, or had slightly different experiences, somewhere along the way.”

She smiled at hearing that—it helped.

"I can't believe this!" Roach said angrily, growling through his tightly gritted teeth. "I can't accept that I've gone from one universe to another. How am I meant to take this?"

Sam put his hands in his pockets and looked away wistfully. He said, "I shift universes all the time.

"I don't do it like you did: I just shift my mind from one me to another. I've seen how different the universes are; I've seen firsthand how getting out of bed late on a morning can change everything, how not buying that car you liked makes the world a different place.

"I've seen how strange a universe can be when your favourite coffee shop is suddenly selling shoes, or a man you know well suddenly only dresses in black and has long hair.

"But I've also seen how it's still really all the same, how the differences that seem to be huge don't really matter at all."

Roach frowned but his veneer had softened somewhat.

Sam said finally, "I understand what you're feeling, Roach. I understand better than anyone in the world, but if you want my advice, then let me tell you this one thing.

"This is your home now; this is your world. The two people you find yourselves as, are who you are now. This is how it is for you, and there is nothing you can do about it. It's best for you if you just learn to accept it."

The silence was back, but perhaps not as deep, and not as dark as before.

Mallory asked the first really good question that any of them had managed to muster in quite some time. "So what do we do now?"

Sam pointed to the bodies. "I don't see any freezers about, so we're going to have to destroy them! It's the only way."

"What?" Roach gasped.

Grace laid her hand on his chest, holding him back and said, “We’re police officers and this is a murder scene. We can’t just destroy the evidence.”

Sam looked at her and said darkly, “The evidence leads back to Roach and Mallory. I don’t know who killed them, or even if they’re still here for your system to punish. If you want to write a murder report about a trans-dimensional creature shifting from a parallel universe, then by all means, be my guest.”

She absolutely did not. “But what about whoever...whatever did this?”

“I’ll find it!” he told her confidently. “But you can’t. All you can do now is help me to pick up the pieces so you can get on with your lives.

“There’s a hole in the universe, in whatever way that might mean, and if I don’t find out where it is and close it, then this is going to get worse.”

Roach finally grumbled and sighed. “What are you proposing?”

Sam took a deep breath, and wearily rubbed his forehead. “We need to make sure these bodies never get identified as yours. We need to remove the teeth, the fingerprints and the DNA.”

“Jesus!” he grimaced. “Are you serious?”

Grace frowned angrily, instinctively riling against such a thing. “Are you suggesting we smash in their faces with a hammer and then burn them? Am I getting this right?”

Sam shrugged. “They won’t mind!”

“I mind!” she snapped at him, almost choking on her words.

Sam crossed his arms, glared at her fixedly. “I’m sorry, let’s hear your better suggestion?”

She glared back angrily since she had none to give. She had no ideas at all: her mind was still busy trying to make sense of it all. She found herself in the unenviable position of actually wanting to trust him,

since he was offering the only explanation of something that simply couldn't be explained in any other way. Her mind was grabbing at it, desperate to accept it like a drowning woman clutching at an inflatable raft for dear life, in an endlessly impersonal ocean.

Mallory chimed in, "I can't smash in my own teeth with a hammer. I just can't. I sell video games. I'm not an evil mastermind: I'm just an average guy who lives in his parents' attic."

Inspector Grace shook her head, winced as her mind struggled with the enormity of it all. "I need more!" she said finally. "I need more than just your word before we even consider doing what you're asking."

Sam looked at her thoughtfully. He nodded and said, "Alright! But I think we can all agree that we can't leave those two here, just lying there right on the surface for anyone to find."

She looked at the bodies and shuddered. "Agreed."

"We could bury them?" Roach suggested.

Sam huffed and said, "We run the risk of someone finding them. It's still better than leaving them out in the open though."

"We'll bury them. I can live with that, for now." She could scarcely believe the words leaving her own mouth.

Sam nodded, he seemed dubious but agreed nonetheless. "Fine, but at some point, they will need to be destroyed. Fire or quick-lime. Either way, all traces of DNA will need to be removed."

"Let's just focus on burying them for now!" Roach suggested.

"Fine!" Sam agreed. "I have a shovel in my car, and some plastic sheets."

Grace frowned at him and shouted sarcastically, "Do you have rope too?"

"Of course."

Roach crossed his arms and blew out a heavy, weary sigh. "Of course..." he grumbled.

Grace surprised herself by leaning in and hugging him. She felt an involuntary smile cross her lips as his arms tightened around her.

“Sandra?” he said, and she looked up at him. He was staring fixedly over to the body, the remains of the other version of himself and he was shaking. “Look at that thing!”

“Don’t think about it!” she told him. “We’ll just deal with it. Don’t worry.”

“But Sandra, look!” he told her.

She just held on tighter, she didn’t want to see it, and she certainly didn’t want to have to look at whatever it was that seemed to have sent a chill through his soul. “Leave it, Roach.”

“The me that isn’t!” he said. “He’s holding his police issued baton.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“But my head...” he said softly.

“Forget it...”

Chapter 25

With makeshift graves dug, and unfortunate, incriminating corpses hidden, Sam was free to head off to more interesting things. It was now the middle of the afternoon, some time before the sun would set, so for now he was stuck there.

“Hungry?” he asked Mallory, as if the day had been spent relaxing in the garden with a good book.

“Hungry?” Mallory echoed, somewhat quizzically. “No!”

“Not hungry?” Sam tried again. “Are you sure? We haven’t eaten anything all day since those croissants.”

Mallory just glared at him, his expression blank and empty. Finally he said, “We just buried a corpse; we just dug a great big hole and put my own, decomposing body in it. We then covered it over with dirt, rocks, and discarded kitchen appliances. Bits of it leaked out onto me so I now smell like my own dead self. I don’t know if I’ll ever be hungry again after all this.”

Sam shrugged and just drove a little faster. “Please yourself, but I’m hungry,” he told him. “There’s nothing like desecrating corpses to really build up an appetite, I always find.”

“Are you joking?” Mallory gasped. “Are you joking right now?”

Sam looked at him and a cruel little smile flashed on his thin lips. “It happened Mallory. It happened and we dealt with it, and now we’ve got more things that are happening that also need to be dealt with.

“In-between all that, people get hungry.”

“Well, I’m not eating!” he said grumpily, crossing his arms defiantly over his chest and pouting for all he was worth.

Sam smiled to himself. “You eating or not eating has absolutely no bearing on my current need to.”

“Don’t you care about any of this?” Mallory snapped suddenly. “Doesn’t this bother you?”

Sam shrugged to himself. Did it? He wasn't really sure anymore. "It doesn't bother me unduly, no," he said firmly. "Not in the wider sense of the universe! You're just one tiny part of an infinite self. Having a version of you die here is nothing of any real consequence in the wider scheme of things.

"You continue to exist in infinite other universes, endless realities where you carry on living in your parent's roof, selling video games, not having a girlfriend, and doing nothing of any great value."

Mallory stared out of the window moodily. "My life means more than that!" he sneered.

"Your life, and everyone else's, is what you make it. Take a look in a mirror and tell me with a straight face that you're seeing someone whose life is of consequence. Tell me you're worth something in the whole, wide, grand scheme of things! Tell me you're special!"

Mallory scowled and his crossed arms tightened over his chest. As he did, his hand caught in the seatbelt: he fumbled around with it, before finally struggling free. He flashed a quick glance over, just to see if Sam had noticed: he had, and was chuckling to himself.

"Where are we going?" he grumbled.

"The café: the universal constant. We're going to meet Lilith there."

Mallory looked confused. "When did you call her? I didn't see you call her."

"She'll know," Sam explained. "I don't have to call her. She always knows when we have to meet."

"Who is she?" Mallory asked, interested. "How does she fit into all this? Who is she *really*? Who are you, for that matter? How did you get involved in all this craziness in the first place?

"Let me summarise all that: What the hell is actually going on?"

"You'd have to ask her about her. It's not my business to decide who knows what about her. As for me, it's a long story and I don't have

time to figure out how to explain it all to you in simple enough words that you'll actually understand any of it. I'd have to understand it myself first."

Mallory looked a little smug, like he'd worked something out that was of great importance. "But you just said I didn't matter. Who cares if you tell me or not?"

Sam just gave him an almost sympathetic smirk. "You're not of consequence, but she is, and so am I."

Mallory grumbled and sat back in the chair. He sat in silence for a while, until finally, he moodily managed to say, "I could probably manage a sandwich."

The café was relatively quiet, the lunchtime rush mostly over, gone and forgotten, leaving nothing much in its wake but a few people dotted around the place, sipping on coffees, using laptops or phones, and avoiding whatever the outside world meant to them.

Sam began looking around for Lilith as he walked in, throwing the door open rather more forcefully than it required.

This place had always amused him since he'd never found an answer to it being there, and he was a man who liked answers. How did this place become a universal constant? It was a slightly dingy, rundown place that made just barely passable food. It wasn't well located, and seemed to not make any real money. But somehow, despite all that, there was an almost identical version of it in every universe he'd ever been to.

Lilith, by her nature, had seen many more, and she had always told him, with absolute confidence, that this place was there in all of them, in every single possible permutation of the universe that they were familiar with.

It might be missing in the more radical departures where dinosaurs roamed the jungles of London, or killer robots had taken over, but in their neck of the woods, it was always there. There were,

theoretically, universes where apes ruled the world, where everyone was Batman, or where every single building had to be painted pink for tax reasons.

Sam had never seen anything like that, and had no great desire to do so. But on quiet, dull days, or in times of desperation, it was interesting to wonder about such things and to know that literally all things were possible, and were happening somewhere. His whole life might be lived in a parallel reality by an effeminate gorilla, or in another, he might simply be a character in a book.

A hand raised up, on top of a long, slender, painfully white arm. It waved three times and then went back down. It was sitting in a booth some way off—their usual booth, in fact—and it didn't go unnoticed that she was facing away from them and hadn't bothered to turn round and look to see who they were.

Mallory mumbled, "How did..."

Sam shook his head at him and grinned. "Inside Lilith's head isn't somewhere you want to go!" he warned. "It might be a nice place to visit, but it isn't recommended for long-term habitation."

Mallory just looked at him and opened his mouth to speak.

"She's not girlfriend material either, in case you were wondering," Sam said, heading over briskly, Mallory trailing behind.

"Are you trying to tell me who I can and can't date now?" he grumbled.

"Sure! Why not? I told your Mum to hide a dead version of herself in a chest freezer in the garage, and a pair of seasoned police officers and yourself to bury your mouldering corpses in shallow graves, and you all did exactly what you were told.

"I think I have pretty good control over the people in this situation right now! Don't you?"

Mallory glared at the back of his head, seething angrily. Sam could clearly feel it and did nothing more than smile a little to himself, rather enjoying it all.

Sam was a man with a finer, deeper understanding of how the universe worked than most people might ever begin to foster. He knew at a depth most people would never plumb that people, ordinary humans, would never have the slightest control over things: their individual lives had no more meaning than a twig bobbing along on a swollen river.

With that in mind, pushing people around was a nice little outlet for him.

Sam slid onto a bench seat opposite her. She was cradling half a cup of coffee and staring out of the window, seemingly distracted by nothing much that was worth looking at.

"There's a hole in the universe," she said softly. She smiled to herself a little sadly, then turned to Sam and gave him a happier, more genuine seeming smile, flashing her teeth.

"Yeah, I know," Sam agreed. "Are we in trouble?"

She nodded simply. She looked at him, her face contorted into a look of deep, troubling concern. Then she suddenly broke into a smile, like she'd just been told an amusing, but not brilliant joke. "Aren't we always?"

Sam grumbled and conceded with a nod.

"Samuel!" she said haltingly. She flashed a glance over towards Mallory, a dirty little scowl like he wasn't welcome at all. "We have to stop it, but you understand what this could mean? You know what this might mean *for you*?"

"I know!" he told her. "Is it possible?"

She shrugged. "It depends where the hole goes, which universes it punches through and where it originated.

"It's difficult to track. It's not like it's a big, black physical thing I can see, it's only there when something falls through it. So far, I'm only

aware of about three or four place that are affected by it, but there might be thousands more. I have no way to tell.”

Mallory stared at her, and then nervously ventured a question.

“But how can you know that?”

She looked at him a little sadly and explained, “I am Lily. I float on the water.”

Sam smiled to himself and said to Mallory, “I hope that helped. Now you understand everything, right?”

Mallory shook his head, grumbling and mumbling to himself.

“You people...” he muttered.

Lilith’s eyes suddenly widened. “Sam, I can’t see into your universe. It could go there, but just as likely if you fell through it you could end up in a world ruled by apes, where everyone was Batman, or every building had to be painted pink in compliance with tax regulations!”

Sam huffed to himself. He hated it when she did that, spoke out loud something he had only thought to himself, like she had plucked it directly out of his mind.

“There are universes like that?” Mallory gasped.

She nodded. “Oh yes!”

“What...?” he said, shocked as his jaw gaped open. “Have you actually seen them?”

“Oh no!” she said simply.

Mallory started to smile, an awkward little grin as if he thought he’d been let in on a joke. He seemed to deflate and his face dropped as he noticed that nobody else was taking this any less than totally seriously. “But then how do you know?” he almost pleaded. “How *can* you know that?”

Sam explained, “There are infinite universes, Mallory. Everything that’s possible is out there somewhere.”

Mallory glared at them, crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.

“Lilith, I need to shift,” he told her. “I need to shift back to the universe that Mallory came from, now more than ever.”

She nodded. “That shouldn’t be a problem,” she told him. “Everything is set up for that to happen in four hours, once it gets dark. You have three hours before you’ll have to shift back here.”

“Right!” he agreed. “I might need to go to a few other places tonight.”

“Are you going to fix the hole?” she asked. “Or are you trying to find the origin so you can go through it?”

He frowned. “Fix it!”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded that he was, but sure was the one thing he was not. This was the closest he’d come to finding a way to physically cross from one universe to another in the whole time he’d been shifting. Even he didn’t know what he was really going to do.

“I’m going to close the hole before something really bad happens.”

They both looked at Mallory and waited.

Right on cue he said, “Aren’t bad things already happening?”

Chapter 26

Detective Roach reached out across the small, round, wooden table. His index finger just brushed against the outside of his glass.

“I had pretty much given up drinking,” he said, just thoughtfully looking at the double shot of single malt whisky. It was a deep, dark brown with a single cube of ice bobbing around on the surface, very gently tapping at the side with an almost indiscernible clink.

Inspector Grace sighed deeply to herself. She said to him softly, “I think, under the circumstances, we both deserve a stiff drink.”

“Maybe two!” he agreed. He looked back to the glass and his mind wandered back to that face, his own face. It had stared back with a pair of empty, hazelnut eyes, gazing blankly into the void, with lips pulled back off of his teeth in agonised terror. “Maybe three!” he added.

“Roach...” she said but her sympathetic intentions just couldn’t seem to find the proper words. What proper words could there be for something like this? She swallowed hard and tried again. “What do you think is really going on here?”

He snorted a laugh, shaking his head in dismay at it all. “There was another me...” he said. “There was another me lying there dead. Another Mallory too. I know I don’t have a twin, so what other explanation could there be?”

“A different universe?” She thoughtfully began chewing her lip. “I don’t know if I can believe this. I just don’t know what to think! What is there to think?”

Roach looked back to her with saddened eyes. “And what does that mean for us?” he asked softly. Suddenly, he grabbed the glass and shot back the entire contents in one, single drag. He swallowed, hissed and shook his head.

Grace looked at him fixedly and huffed sadly to herself. That thought had been preoccupying her thoughts too. “What do you think it means?”

Roach looked down, staring at his empty glass. “Listen, I don’t remember things quite the way you do. I’m clearly not the man you knew: I think it’s safe to say we buried him this afternoon.”

“But you are *you*!” she said, not entirely convinced. “Sam told us so. He said that we’re just one person who lives in all the universes: it’s still you, the very same actual you.

“It’s still me too. I’m still the woman you know from your universe, I’m just a different piece of her. Right?”

Roach began to smile. A little grin flickered on his lips and his eyes narrowed slightly. It was that cheeky little look that had made her abandon all good sense and sleep with her work colleague that first time, and he was looking right back at her with it now.

“Right!” he said. “So nothing between you and me has actually changed then?”

She smiled back, breathing a little sigh of relief. “Right!” she agreed. Then more enthusiastically, “Right! We just have a bit of catching up to do—that’s all.”

Roach nodded approvingly. Suddenly, his smile vanished and his face darkened. “You know, I hate to say it, but Sam was right about something else as well.”

She picked up her glass and sipped at the whisky, frowning curiously. “What’s that?”

“We need to destroy the bodies,” he said. “We can’t let anyone discover the remains. We really do need to go back and destroy them.”

She took another deeper, longer sip. “I know!” she sighed. “But not tonight.”

“No...” he agreed. “Not tonight. I think I’ve had enough weirdness for one day without taking a claw hammer to my own dead corpse to smash out its teeth.”

“Quite!” she agreed.

She drained the last of her drink while Roach watched on in a moment of thoughtful contemplation.

“Go on...” she said. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Nothing...,” he said, smiling to himself. “I was just trying to see the obvious, rational explanation that must be staring us both in the face. Could I have had a twin I never knew about? Could it have just been two people who really, really looked like us?”

“It’s hard to accept,” she agreed. “And even if we did try to find a rational explanation, there’s no way to explain away the fact that you and I have very different memories, or that you changed, lost weight, look healthier and had a haircut today.”

She smiled thinly and looked away. He looked like his mind was full of things it didn’t know how to deal with. And if he wasn’t thinking it, she surely was.

“So what now?” he said wearily.

“We wait for Sam,” she told him. “And we carry on as normal.”

He frowned at her suggestion. She wondered which part.

“Do you trust him?” he growled accusingly.

She shrugged and smiled an empty smile. “Do we have a choice?”

“He said he’s going to go to a bunch of other universes; he’s going to track down a hole. I mean, that sounds insane.”

She nodded. It did: it sounded perfectly, absolutely and undeniably insane. “If he’d said that to us this morning, I would have arrested him for his own good and got him psychiatric help. But after I watched two grown men burying their own corpses, it rather put things in a different perspective.”

He could only nod along in agreement.

“Sandra...” he began, a little nervously. “Are you staying at mine tonight? I mean, you usually do, but I understand if you’re not ready.” He flushed a little and added, “No pressure.”

She smiled to herself. “How do you even know you live in the same house? How do you know your key will work in the lock?”

“That’s a good point!” he grumbled. “The place is probably a terrible state too.”

She looked at her empty glass, wishing it was full. Haltingly she opened her mouth to speak. She hesitated a moment and then said, “Why don’t you stay at mine?”

He looked up and a grin formed. “Really? Are you sure?”

“No pressure!”

Chapter 27

Sam and Lily occupied all of his thoughts for now, as he stared at them intently.

It was all too much to deal with, almost too much to bear, but there was really nothing else to be done and he had no choice but to bear it. The things he was dealing with were weighing heavy on his mind. They were new things: things he'd never contemplated, concepts he'd never even considered before. They certainly never covered anything like this in school, but he'd heard little snippets of it in TV shows, the odd documentary, perhaps?

And beyond it all, maybe worse than anything, was the nagging, unpleasant thought that there was something he was missing in all of this. It was like a splinter in his mind, pricking at his thoughts and slowly infecting every idea. There was something he hadn't quite yet admitted to himself, some *thing* he'd overlooked.

But how could anyone know what they were missing when their nice, small, comfortable universe was suddenly smashed open? His reality had been torn down around him and replaced with something infinitely bigger, and far more terrifying.

A row of strip-lights flickered as they hummed softly. They glowed dimly at first, and then almost imperceptibly slowly, they glowed brighter. Sam sat in an office chair, leaning back in it until it began to creak from his weight. He had thrown his coat roughly and it had landed in a crumpled heap over a small pile of cardboard box, files piled unevenly at the side.

Lily sat opposite him over his desk in another office chair, less plush than the one he had taken, but nothing there was creeping up towards the lower end of high-quality. Under the dull fluorescent lighting, her pale white skin almost glowed. She looked quite strikingly

attractive with her long, straight dark hair cascading softly around her face and tumbling gently over her slender, almost bony, shoulders.

For a moment, the whole thing looked oddly surreal. He was the very embodiment of a haggard, hardened detective who had lost interest in the world, until his contempt had sent a shard of ice through his very soul. She was a pretty young girl coming to him for help in his dark, grim, dingy office, the last place in the world where desperation might be turned into hope.

It could have been the opening scene of an old movie, Mallory thought, and the stark, clichéd reality of it all made it seem even more unreal.

Adding still more weight to the Detective-Noir fantasy playing out in front of him, Sam reached under the desk into a drawer. It clattered open on tired old metal runners, shuddering the whole desk as he pulled it out. He grinned at Lily and brought out a bottle of malt whisky, a third already missing. It slammed down firmly on the desk and he reached in again for a brace of glasses.

“I found this earlier!” he said with a grin.

Lily smiled back at him, nodding happily.

He laid three glasses down in front of him, looked up and said, “Mallory, are you joining us? We’re having a quick tippie before I leave.”

Mallory shrugged. Where was the harm? “You’re leaving?”

Sam looked at him as he poured out three small glasses of liquor. He handed Lily the first.

“I am!” he told him. “I’ll be back before it’s light.”

He handed a drink to Mallory. He took it with a nod and waited as Sam poured the last one for himself. Sam gestured to another chair, inviting him to join them. He duly complied.

“I know this is all very confusing for you,” he began. “I know it’s hard, but there are some things in the world that you just have to get

used to. You know there's more to your reality than you ever dreamed, and I can't take that away from you now.

"You just have to find a way to live with what you know. It's not easy, but the thing about humans is that we adapt. We can cope with anything. While this all might seem the most awful, huge, incredible thing now, it will be easier tomorrow. In a week it will feel normal. Before you know it, you won't even be worrying about it anymore."

"Is that what happened to you?" he asked. "You just accepted it?"

Sam shook his head. "I'm not you, Mallory."

Mallory sniffed to himself, wondering if anyone was actually going to even tell him anything about what was actually going on. Sam reached forward with his drink and Lily held up hers to clink glasses with him. Mallory followed suit.

"To the journey!" Sam said.

"You're shifting?" Mallory said. "You're shifting to another universe, right?"

Lily and Sam looked at one another. Sam sighed and took a sip of his drink. "I am."

"Will it be like..." he began, and then the weight of it all choked the words out of him.

Lily broke into a wide, slightly condescending smile and Sam chuckled to himself, covering his smile with his other hand.

"No!" he told him firmly. "It won't be anything like what you saw in your kitchen. Or living room... From your perspective, nothing will happen. I'll just suddenly seem to forget everything. That's all you'll see."

Mallory frowned and sipped at his drink. It was smoother than he thought it would be. Perhaps there was a universe somewhere in the infinite spread of possibilities where a Sam resided that actually had some taste?

"So how does it work?"

Sam and Lily looked at one another. Their eyes shifted subtly as they silently discussed it. Eventually he nodded and took a longer, deeper drag on his drink.

“It isn’t easy,” Sam explained. “There are rules that have to be followed. It takes two of us—Lily and me—to get it to work properly.

“First, it has to be dark. The world has to be lit by the light of the moon. I don’t know the dynamics of why, but the difference in the light makes a subtle change that allows this to be possible.

“Secondly, I’m only shifting from one version of me to another. Both versions have to be in the same physical location. I can’t cross to another country, or even another building. We both have to be standing in the same place at the same time to allow a shift to happen.

“Thirdly, I have to overcome a barrier: typically a locked door.”

Mallory frowned. It all seemed so difficult to believe. He began to wonder if this was the nonsensical ranting of a lunatic, and that he was buying into a dangerous psychotic fantasy.

Sam continued, perhaps reading what he was thinking, “Opening a locked door changes the way a person thinks. It means you’ve crossed a barrier, a barrier that’s not open to everyone. When you approach the world knowing that the barrier between universes exists and that it can be overcome, then your mind can cross.

“It’s that simple.”

“Simple?” Mallory scoffed. He looked over to where Lily was nodding back at him. “But then how do you get the two Sam’s lined up? How do you both get in the same place?”

Lily told him softly, “That’s my part. I have to help with that.”

Mallory frowned.

“My mind isn’t like other people’s minds. I live across the whole spread of universes, just like you, but I can’t see the barriers.”

Mallory looked at Sam who was, slightly alarmingly, just nodding back in agreement.

“It’s not like there’s just one of me, controlling infinite people, endless versions of myself. It’s just that all those versions are communicating. I can hear their voices, one voice in my head. I can see everything any part of me sees. I can go to any universe and be there, or in all of them at once.

“It can be confusing at times...”

“How is that possible?” Mallory said, his voice barely a whisper.

Sam snapped back a reply, “We don’t know. There’s rather a lot we don’t know. What we do know is that Lilith and me are friends across the multiple universes. She can get me into position for shifting relatively easily.”

Mallory just shook his head. “I don’t understand any of this...”

“Yes you do,” said Sam. “You’re just fighting it. We’re all the same way at first, but you instinctively understand it. You know that where you are matters, you know that opening a door is letting yourself into a place, you know it feels different to walk the same place without sunlight.”

Mallory said thoughtfully, “How many people know about all of this?”

Sam snorted a laugh and shook his head. “Lots of people. It’s not some grand secret. Most people can’t handle what they find; most people can’t deal with the shock. A lot of them go crazy, some end up homeless, drunk or locked up.

“Some just quietly get on with their lives, understanding that this is just the way the world is and they have no power to change it.”

Mallory glared at him, almost accusingly. “And you? Where do you fit in with all this?”

“Right in the middle!” Sam glared back. “I’m not crazy enough to be useless, and I can’t accept that this is just my reality now. That’s why I ended up rolling around between worlds, never staying in one place

long enough to have my mind absorbed. I manage to hold on to my identity, but it comes at a price.”

“A price?” Mallory didn’t like the sound of that.

Sam drained the last of his drink. “Everything comes at a price, Mallory. Everything!”

He got up forcefully, his black office chair skipping back over the tiled floor to bump into the wall behind.

“You’re in place!” Lily told him, pointing over to her chair.

Mallory could only watch, wondering what was happening.

Sam stepped over to the door, fumbling around in his pocket for the keys. He turned to Mallory and said, “If you think I’m crazy, this is going to prove it.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Your home universe!” he told him flatly. “I’m going to find out what’s going on where you come from.” Sam turned his attention to Lily. “I’m going to have to talk to *him*, you know!”

“*Him?!?*” she looked away, contorting her face in disgust. “I don’t talk to *him*.”

“We need him!” Sam said softly, as softly as Mallory had ever heard him speak.

Without looking back she said, “I can’t see him. You know I can’t see him.”

“But you can send a message,” Sam said, pulling a rattling bunch of keys out. “You can let him know that I need to talk to him.”

“He won’t want to see you either,” she told him. “He won’t come.”

“Please!” Sam told her. “There’s a hole in the universe. This changes everything. He’ll want to know.”

She gave him an angry, accusing glare. “I can go and sit in every café in the universe. I can leave a note for him to go there tonight. He’ll get the message.”

“Thanks!”

“I won’t be there!” she told him sternly.

“I know.”

Mallory found the courage to ask, “Who?”

Lily turned sharply, her strange little eyes lit up with dark little flames. “My father. That’s who!”

“Your father?” Mallory said in surprise, reeling back from the sudden and unexpected ferociousness of her answer.

“We don’t talk!” she snarled. “He’s a bad man. He created the universe.”

Mallory’s surprise deepened. “He’s what?” he gasped. “Are you telling me your father is a god?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” said Sam.

Mallory shrugged, really quite grateful to have shifted the conversation away from the now quite terrifying facts of Lily’s existence. “Then what...?”

“He’s a certifiable genius. He investigated the universe, and came to understand its nature. Everything we know about it, everything we’ve told you comes from him.

“He experimented, and we believe he found a way to create a new branch of the universe. We think that all branches that came from it, all the multiple universes that spread out through reality all stemmed from this one branch he created. Everything is based on his understanding, on his plan.”

Mallory wasn’t sure if this was a joke at his expense. “So he almost *is* a god?”

“He’s a bad man!” she told him again, spitting the words out venomously.

Sam separated one key out from the others, staring at it momentarily. He inserted it slowly into the lock of the main office door

and turned it, very deliberately until the lock snapped open with a metallic click.

“He’s not god!” Sam told him firmly. “He just created the universe.”

“He’s a very bad man!” Lily added. “And it’s a very *bad* universe.”

Mallory wasn’t sure how much of all this he was meant to take literally. “How old is he?”

Sam told him, as he pushed the door open, just a crack “He’s 57, which is how old the universe actually is. But the planet you’re standing on is billions of years old. That’s part of the reason so many people lose their minds when they find out about all this.”

Mallory was determined not to be among them. “I’ll stay sane!” he said.

Sam looked at Mallory and smirked knowingly.

“Good luck with that!”

Chapter 28

Sam stood in the doorway and pushed the door open, staring out into the corridor beyond. He always liked to get a feel for the place one last time before he left. He was going to the same place, but it would look different. The more different it was, the more he liked it.

There was something compelling about seeing something that had become familiar take on a different feel after changing into something completely else. It was exciting, invigorating, refreshing. He had come to enjoy it, to almost live for it. Each universe was a whole new world of opportunities, a whole new chance to find his way back.

He turned to look back into the room and gazed at the pair of expectant faces staring back at him. He had learned to get used to Lilith, she was always with him when he shifted, but it was rare he moved in front of someone else. It was even more unusual that it was a someone else that he expected to see again. But he would be back—he had to. Wherever this hole began, it seemed to be emptying out there, right there in that insignificant little facet of the universe on an insignificant branch of an indifferent fragment of infinity.

For that moment, and for whatever reason, that universe was suddenly the most important place in all of reality.

Lilith pointed to the chair, not for him to sit in, but for him stand in front of. Her eyes took on a glassy quality as they stared out coldly from somewhere inside her own head. She was crossing back and forth which stretched her, and she always had an empty, open look when she did it. Sam knew she was watching him now, the other one of him that lived where he was going.

He stepped up to the chair and stood in front. He took a deep breath as Lilith gave him a little confirmatory nod.

He could only wait now. His chest tightened as his nerves edged along impatiently. Any second now...

Suddenly a bright white light exploded behind his eyes, blotting out the world around him. He opened his mouth to scream, but if any sound came out, it was lost to his ears. He felt like he was being sucked into pain, as if the idea of being hurt was a gaping hole that was swallowing him up. The light grew brighter, from an all-encompassing glow to a brilliance that burnt the very fabric of his mind.

Then it was gone. He was shaking, sweating, and his knees were weak. He was confused for a moment, lost in the light, in a spinning dizziness that felt like he was floating forwards, tumbling into a spiralling decline that seemed to lead down into infinity. But even that began to pass as his head cleared and the room swam back into view.

It was the same room, dark and austere with the same desk, the same chair, the same everything. The only thing missing was Mallory.

Lilith stared back at him and smiled. “OK?” she asked.

He shook his head, rubbing his hand over his face, checking for a beard. “I’m fine. It’s a lot easier the way you do it.”

She frowned darkly. “No, Sam. It really isn’t.”

Chapter 29

Sam stood for a moment and then pushed the door open, staring out into the corridor beyond. Mallory wondered just what exactly he was thinking at that very moment. What would it feel like to shift from one universe to another, to alter your perception in the most radical way imaginable?

He turned around to face back into the room, looking at the pair of expectant faces staring back at him. He must have been used to doing this around Lily, she was always with him when he shifted—he had said as much earlier. But there was a little something in his eye, something in the way he looked at Mallory, or perhaps in the way avoided looking at him, that made him feel like he wasn't welcome.

He sat in silence, looking on at it all as it happened around him but was forever beyond him, always and perpetually out of his reach.

Lilith pointed to the chair, not for him to sit on, but for him stand in front of. She had a glassy look in her eyes as they stared out coldly from inside her own head. He had seen her looking like this before and had always wondered what she was looking at. Certainly her eyes didn't seem focused on whatever was up ahead, right there in what Mallory knew as the real and only, and only-real world. Now, that curiosity itched at him and he longed to know, *needed to know*, what was happening inside her.

Sam stepped up to the chair and stood in front. He took a deep breath as Lilith gave him a confirmatory nod.

He stood, just waiting, but Mallory could never know what it was he was waiting for. Mallory's heart fluttered: he felt nervous, almost scared by it all. This man that he had come to know was shifting from one universe to another right in front of him. He was going to travel into an alternative dimension, a parallel world.

Sam's eyes began to roll up, his body sagged and he visibly slumped, seeming in that moment like he might fall to the ground, but he managed to remain standing by some miracle. He looked like he was falling away. His eyes fluttered and he gasped loudly for breath, his lips moving like he was trying to silently mutter something.

Then his eyelids snapped open suddenly. He straightened, his breathing ragged as he gasped for air. He felt behind him with his arm and then slumped down heavily into his chair, almost missing the seat and crashing to the floor.

It was the same face, but different eyes looked out from behind it. Some unique spark was missing, replaced by something quite noticeably *other*. Mallory was surprised that he could see it, but how could he not? Something was fundamentally different in the way he looked, the way he moved.

"Who are you?" he grunted weakly at Mallory, frowning curiously. Even the voice sounded different: not as dark; not as driven. Someone else was wearing this body now.

"Mallory!" he said weakly.

Lily stepped over and put her hand on this Sam's shoulder.

"He's gone now."

Chapter 30

Sam reached back behind him for the chair. It was, fortunately, in virtually the same spot he'd left it in the last universe. He crumpled down into it heavily. The gas-loaded piston that supported it bobbed up and down under his weight. He looked around, scanning for the tiny differences that separated this place from where he'd just been.

It wasn't impossible that he'd ever been there before, but the fact that every passing moment created infinite new possibilities to fall in and out of existence made the likelihood of that extremely slim. He knew his journey was one that went almost perpetually forward, and always would. Each step would take him further and further from where he'd started. He found that a depressing thought.

Lilith said, snapping into his thoughts as his mind reeled around in a haze of confusion, "The sign on your door just says 'Detective' now. But I think that someone just scraped off the rest of it. Also the newspaper in your wastepaper basket has a headline that says that the next US President is likely to be an elephant named 'Cuddles.' Otherwise, things are pretty much the same."

Sam looked at her wryly. "Sure, it's just another taste of home. Another taste of *another* home."

"There's still whisky in the bottom drawer of your desk!" she told him pointedly—clearly that fact mattered to her. "But your socks don't match, and your underwear is a funny colour."

"One of the strangest thing about shifting is the sudden change in underwear," he said absently, reaching for the bottle. He pulled up sharply as his mental faculties came back to him and he realised exactly what it was that she had said. "Wait, what do you mean my underwear is a funny colour? How do you even know what my socks look like?"

"It's my job to know!" she replied haughtily as he put the bottle down between them. He pulled out two glasses from a set of five, all of

them mismatched and none of them very clean. He unscrewed the cap while flashing her a slightly suspicious look.

“What are you doing first?” she asked.

“I’m going to find out what exactly happened at Mallory’s house,” he said firmly. “Then I need to meet your father.”

“I can’t help you with that.” She crossed her arms defiantly, and looked away.

“You said you’d help!”

“I’ll help you meet my father, but I can’t help you with Mallory,” she explained. “I can’t be everywhere at once.” She looked away thoughtfully and frowned at the sheer enormity of what she must have been contemplating. “That is to say that I can’t help you with Mallory *while* I am everywhere else at once.”

“I know what you meant!” he said. He pushed a short glass towards her over the desk. “Lilith, there’s a hole in the universe and we have to fix it. This is important.”

She sneered and snatched up the glass, downing the whisky in a single shot and slamming it back down hard onto the table. Even Sam was surprised. “I know it’s important to you,” she told him with a petulant little scowl. “I know you’ve been looking for a hole in the universe ever since *the incident*.”

Sam sipped at his whisky, looking her over evenly. He said, very calmly, “That’s not what this is about. This hole is a problem and needs to be fixed. This is bigger than me getting what I want.”

She grinned but it was an ugly thing, dripping with malice. “But something made the hole!” she sneered. “Maybe it can make another hole? Maybe it can make a hole for you that will take you back home?”

Sam drained his glass and smacked it down onto the desk. It hammered home loudly, plunging the room into silence.

Lilith jumped in surprise, facing him with wide, frightened eyes.

Sam kept his voice low, but nevertheless, he growled, “Would that be such a terrible thing?”

She stared at him fixedly, her face difficult to read. “Your car is downstairs, Samuel. You have three hours and the clock is ticking.”

Sam grabbed a handful of keys and stood up, smoothing down his shirt and jacket. He checked inside the pockets, finding a wallet with enough money to get through the night. He looked at her and said, “I’d better get moving then, hadn’t I?”

He slipped around the desk and headed for the door.

“Samuel!” she called after him. “He’s not going to tell you what you want to hear.”

Sam said nothing, and carried on out the door.

The clock *was* ticking.

Having been to Mallory’s house before, he knew both where it was, and what the layout was like inside. According to the young man’s own words, almost nothing was different. The doorbell didn’t work, but very little, other from that, showed any real change.

Maybe the two universes were very similar, and perhaps that was why the hole connected them? It could just as easily be that Mallory—his whole family—was so insignificant that he shouldn’t expect any great changes to happen around their lives.

Mallory clearly wasn’t a man to take hold of opportunities, to follow dreams, to blaze a path through the world to who-knew-where. People who were driven and motivated, who could live life fully, often diverged greatly from one universe to the next: people like Mallory very much less so.

Sam sat in his car, the engine purring away in front of him. He had parked up opposite, and now he just stared at the building. It was draped in darkness with yellow police tape blocking the doors. A white tent had been pitched outside where forensic officers worked during the

day. The frenzy of activity following a violent crime had died down, but still, two uniformed officer were stationed at the door, looking bored, cold and a little bit fed up with themselves.

Breaking in was probably out of the question, but he was confident that he didn't need to.

Instead he turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. He slammed the door behind him and marched confidently to the house, strutting over like he owned the place.

One of the officers looked up, and shuffled forwards slightly towards him. Policemen, especially young, uniformed officers, had plenty of confidence of their own: they were conditioned to behave like they were in charge. But it was usually plastered on, and easily overwhelmed by someone with even more strength of character than they thought they had.

"Evening, gentlemen!" Sam called out, not even deigning to look them in the eyes. They needed to know they weren't important to him. They stiffened, responding as they'd been conditioned by authority to do.

Sam pulled out his wallet, flicked it open and showed his ID, a detective's registration card. They looked, but it was a cursory inspection at best. His voice would be the better tool for painting an impression in their minds

"I'm Detective Abbdon from Central Regulatory!" he explained. He flashed them a smile, a shared joke of sorts. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble, and I'll be out of your way soon. I just need to follow up on a few details."

He ran his hand over his short, dark hair as his face became stony and severe. "There's been a complaint, I'm afraid—a bad one!" he sighed, his voice low and serious. He frowned, and rubbed his forehead wearily as if just thinking of it was enough to cause a problem.

The two officers looked at one another uneasily, just as he had hoped they would. Now he had them under control: he was leading the situation.

“It’s not about a uniformed officer—it’s the investigation team!” he assured them, his posture opening apologetically. “Have you been inside?”

One began to shake his head, while the other nodded. “I was in there today,” he said in a low, gruff voice.

“And you are?” Sam demanded.

“Constable...” he began but Sam cut him off, holding up a hand.

“I’m Sam, by the way,” he said, holding out a hand to shake, while unfastening a button on his jacket with the other.

“Paul!” said the officer. He reached out and shook his hand, flashing him a nervous, measured smile.

“Paul,” Sam repeated, nodding back. “I want to get this all sorted out before the shit hits the fan and gets all over the rest of us. It’s a forensic investigation, so the details matter. You get me, right?”

Paul nodded, probably not getting him at all.

“The father was lying on the floor, right hand side of the kitchen as we go in through the front, with his face seriously lacerated, while the mother was slumped over the table, her hair soaked in blood.” Sam glanced around as if this was a secret that had to be protected at any cost. Certainly it wouldn’t have been public knowledge. “That’s a matter of record, am I correct?”

Paul nodded back.

“To the best of your recollection, what were the recorded causes of death for the victims?” Sam asked.

Paul looked to his colleague, and shrugged slightly. “I didn’t see the actual bodies,” he explained. “I heard them say the father was blood loss. His neck and face had been bitten by something. The mother had a fractured skull. She had been hit repeatedly round the back of the head.”

“Good!” Sam told him, looking relieved. “And the son?”

“No sign of him!” Paul said. “He ran—who bloody wouldn’t?!”

Sam glared at him accusingly and snapped, “A good man like you wouldn’t, I wouldn’t—an innocent man wouldn’t!”

“Yes, sir!” Paul said, like an admonished child.

Sam needed to keep him off-balance. He needed him feeling, not thinking. “Sorry, Paul!” he said and vigorously rubbed his temples some more. “This Mallory kid, that’s what this is all about. They’re assuming he can’t have been the killer, and some idiot wrote that into the press release. As far as I’m concerned, he’s a suspect until we exhaustively eliminate him. We can’t afford to make mistakes on something like this. It’s too big, and we’re all under the spotlight!

“I can’t tell you what stress that has put us all under. One mistake makes us all look like imbeciles. You know what the public thinks of us!”

“Yes, Sir!” he said with a nod of steadfast agreement.

“He’s still not been found then, this Mallory?” Sam asked. “My information is a few hours out of date. You’ve not heard anything new, have you?”

He shook his head and began to follow Sam’s lead, standing the same way he was standing, echoing his posture. “We heard nothing. A neighbour saw him enter the house, then run off down the road about a minute later. Nobody’s seen him since that we’re aware of.”

“And he was clean when he ran off?” Sam frowned. “Did the neighbour mention anything about his appearance?”

Paul shook his head. “He said he looked spooked, and ran so fast he didn’t even shut the front door properly, but otherwise nothing that stood out!”

Sam nodded to himself and rubbed his chin. He said to Paul, “So that’s why, then! That’s why his innocence is being assumed: if he had

just brutally murdered his parents, he would have been covered head to toe in blood.”

“Makes sense!”

“Yeah, well it’s not our job to make guesses,” Sam grumbled. “I hope this one is right, or we’re all going to end up looking like idiots! Sorry, mate! This isn’t really your problem...”

“Not at all. Happy to help, Sir.”

Sam started off towards his car, but then stopped and turned back to the officers. “Nobody else was found inside, were they?”

Paul looked over to his colleague, they frowned at one another and began shaking their heads.

“I mean, someone has gone on the record and stated that Mallory is innocent, I need to just make sure I’ve got all the facts here,” Sam explained. “There wasn’t anyone else found inside, that’s correct, right?”

“Right!” said Paul. “From what I saw, there was just nothing to see outside of the kitchen. No forced entry, no blood spatter, nothing the team was taking any interest in at all. Something just went mad in there, but it looks like whatever it was, they must have let it in first. The working theory is that the boy came home, found it, and ran off in panic. They’re also considering that whoever did it could have chased him out.”

“Ahhh!” Sam raised a finger. “That explains a lot,” he said as if it had all now fallen into place. Actually it just raised more questions. “I mean, it’s not like something just walked through a hole in the universe, appeared in the kitchen and tore everything to pieces, is it?”

The officers chuckled at what they would have had no choice but to assume was a joke.

Sam smiled at them. “Thanks guys, this helps a lot. How long are you out here for?”

The officer that had not been introduced said wearily, “Until 5am, Sir.”

“Nice!” Sam said sarcastically. “I remember my days in uniform. If I’m honest, I still miss it sometimes. Don’t you guys be too eager to get those promotions, it’s more of a headache than you could ever imagine.”

Paul chuckled and assured him, “I won’t, Sam.”

Sam reached out and shook his hand. “And don’t talk to the press!” he told them. “That can get you into a lot of trouble too.”

Chapter 31

Detective Inspector Grace sipped at a glass of gin and tonic and sighed to herself. She felt nothing now, she was just numb inside. Thoughts of the horrors of what she'd seen and what the victims must have gone through were now screaming in silence inside her mind. Her ears were now deaf to it, temporarily at least.

At one time when she'd begun down this path, she'd collapsed at home on occasions like this. She'd had days where she'd run to the bathroom, thrown up and fallen to the floor, sobbing quietly to herself as the images etched on her brain played through her mind, over and over again.

She had lived the lives of the victims, experienced for herself every stab through the stomach, every burn, every punch, kick and smash to the skull with a blunt instrument. She'd seen their pain, fear and anguish until it was as real to her as her own front door, her own bathroom floor, her own toilet full of her own vomit.

But she hadn't really hardened, not like she thought she would.

Once she'd seen officers like Roach as dinosaurs. They hid behind crude jokes, laughing off their feelings instead of facing the trauma head on. Suddenly one morning, she'd realised that she had become one of them, dealing with things in exactly the same way. The choice had been to change, or to be crushed by it all, and it was really no choice at all.

Her partner, the same Detective Constable Roach, sat opposite, sipping just as reservedly from a pint of dark, brown ale. Tinny, plastic sounds wafted from a nearby jukebox, and in the far corner, a pinging, chiming sound of a gaming machine swallowing someone's money broke up the irritating, saccharine-sweet jangling pop music.

The pub was nothing special, and at her core, she didn't like it at all. She was happier in a wine bar, surrounded by people who preferred the finer things in life. At least she had been once.

The pub sitting right opposite the station was where detectives would often head to after their shifts, especially after more difficult ones. With her now a part of the team, and a key one at that, she had little choice but to follow along.

The wine bars just seemed fake now, an affectation plastered over nothing of any substance. Only these people, who had given their lives and risked their souls to make a difference, truly mattered to her now. She saw these *dinosaurs* for what they really were: people fighting back a growing tide and struggling their way forwards any way they could. There was no doubt in her mind that she was one of them.

"Well, that was all a pile of shit!" Roach grumbled.

She scowled up at him under her lowered brow. "What were you expecting?" she asked pointedly. "Yesterday we attended a *minor incident* where an unfortunate man had his face ripped off, while his wife had her face repeatedly smashed into a table by the blunt force of a food processor.

"Did you think we'd spend today rescuing cats from trees?"

Roach huffed at her and raised an eyebrow.

She sighed and put her drink down. She huffed loudly and said, "Sorry—that wasn't fair... We're all stressed out, and it doesn't help me adding to it."

"No problem!" he said. All was forgiven—it always was.

"I just need to unwind: a couple of glasses of wine, a long bath." She smiled at him thinly, apologetically.

"I was thinking exactly the same thing!" he said. Suddenly he flustered, his face flushed red. "Not about *you* in the bath! I hadn't meant that at all."

She laughed, this time finding a enough warmth somewhere inside to make it seem a bit more genuine.

“I was actually thinking more of going home, skipping the shower, shovelling a microwaved lasagne into my neck, watching a crap 80s movie on DVD, and polishing off a six-pack of supermarket lager right there in my own filth.” he told her. “I mean that’s basically the same thing...”

“Well, I’m going to languish in my bath, drink wine, resent my ex-husband and avoid my daughter,” she said with a smile. “We’re really living the dream, aren’t we, Detective?”

Roach smiled back and nodded. “Life’s shit!” he said simply. “But at least nobody ate my face and beat my ex-wife to death with a kitchen appliance.” He rolled his eyes thoughtfully and added, “That second part I’d rather have the pleasure of myself.”

“By continuing to hate her, you’re only giving her power over you!” she advised.

“All the while she has access to my bank account, the hatred is going to just keep on flowing!” he assured her. He held up his beer. “Technically she owns a third of this! I’m going to drink all of it though—that will really show her! I might even have another.”

“It’s the small victories,” she said, laughing in good humour.

She liked Roach: he was simple and delightfully uncomplicated. There were no difficult corners to navigate around as you worked out who he was. He was a man who commanded respect and engendered trust, simply because if you lent those things to him, he wouldn’t give them back broken.

“Excuse me gentlemen, I’m Detective Sam Abbdon!” came a voice, breaking into their conversation, piercing her meandering thoughts that had started to wander dangerously towards the romantic. She suddenly realised herself and was actually glad to have the distraction to drag her back to cold, hard reality.

Sam gestured to a third stool at their table and pulled it out so that he could join them at their table.

“Who are you?” grumbled Roach, no nonsense about him.

“I’m Detective Sam Abbdon!” he repeated. “Is there an echo?” he asked quizzically, peering around the room. He shook his head with a shrug and continued, “I was told I could find you here. I’d like to speak with you both briefly, if you have the time.”

“What agency are you with?” she asked, narrowing her eyes, struggling to remember his face. There was certainly something familiar about him, although she couldn’t quite place him.

“Private detective,” he said, without apology. “I represent the Gardener estate.”

She sighed and glanced back over to her colleague. “Mr Abbdon, don’t you think this is something that could be done during office hours? We’re off duty now, and I’m sure you can understand that we’ve had a long and difficult day.”

“I do apologise!” he said. “But I’m sure you can imagine how long and difficult the day has been for the families of the victims.”

Roach grumbled to himself. “Hurry up and get to the point, please.”

Sam looked at him with a bemused expression. He said, somewhat hesitantly, “I wasn’t expecting to find you here. How very interesting... DC Roach, isn’t it?”

Roach huffed and nodded.

“I represent what’s left of the family!” Sam explained. “Our biggest concern is Mallory. Is he a suspect? Is he a victim? The family is struggling to make sense of all this, and they’ve hired me to liaise with you.”

Softening his voice somewhat, he continued, “Look, I used to be on the force myself. I was injured at work, hit by a car while pursuing a

bag-snatcher, if you can believe that shit. Hardly saving the world, and it put me off of active duty.

“My point is, I know what you can and can’t say, but these people are hurting. They want to know what Mallory is to them. Is he a vicious killer who took the lives of their loved ones, or is he in trouble?”

Grace sighed, feeling a deep pang of sympathy pricking at her conscience. “You know I can’t tell you that!” she said, wishing there was something more she could do than give him the same old answers he must heard a dozen times.

“Inspector...” Sam began, and took a deep breath. “I’ve heard that the family might have been attacked by an animal, perhaps a large dog?”

Grace and Roach both shook their heads sadly. “We wish!” said Roach.

Grace held up a finger of warning and told him, her voice held low, “This goes no further, but it wasn’t an animal. We’re certain of that, unfortunately.”

Roach added. “We got enough clear dental imprints. It *wasn’t* an animal. At least not a four-legged one.”

Sam looked shocked, shook his head and muttered to himself. “Bloody hell!”

“Yeah!” Roach agreed and took a sip of his beer. He glanced over, flustered for a moment and said, “Sorry mate, did you want a drink?”

Sam held up a hand, and said, “No, but I appreciate the offer.” He gave Roach a strange look, and for just a fleeting moment, she wondered what exactly was going through his mind. “Another time, in another place, perhaps?”

The Inspector leant in and said, “We can’t tell you much, you know that already...”

“Anything you can give me, on or off the record will help.”

She paused momentarily as her humanity and professionalism fought for control of her mouth. “We only have a single witness who even saw him there. A neighbour from across the road—hardly close friends, but knows well enough who the family are—he claimed to have seen him come home early evening, and then go charging straight back out again moments after.”

“In panic?” he asked.

“Blind panic!” Roach added. “Poor kid. For what it’s worth, my gut tells me he walked in and found that mess. We’ve seen nothing connecting him to the actual murders.”

Inspector Grace shot him a withering glare. “That is off the record, and he doesn’t speak for the department. At this point, he *is* being treated as a suspect. At the very least, we need to find him to help us answer some of these questions.”

Sam held up a hand. “I won’t pass any of this along until you’re ready,” he told her. “I don’t want to make this worse for them. I don’t want them getting any false hope either! These people are a mess: I’ve never seen anyone more fragile right now.”

Grace nodded in agreement. “Right,” she grumbled. “To be honest, I don’t know if there is any hope for them to find. That kid has been missing for days now—nobody has found any trace of him! In a situation like this, that’s...”

“Unusual?” Sam suggested. “Damning even! But it’s not evidence that he was involved, is it?”

Roach shook his head.

Sam said darkly, as if this bothered him, “But of course, if he *didn’t* do it...”

Grace nodded very slowly. “Exactly.”

Sam checked his watch. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Thanks for speaking with me. It’s time I left, before I wear out my welcome.”

Grace nodded her head at him. "Just be careful what you tell the family!" she told him. "We don't want to make this worse."

Sam nodded. "Sure!" he agreed, standing up and doing up the buttons of his jacket. "Thanks again for your time."

Roach huffed to himself, as if annoyed at what was about to come out of his mouth. "Do you want to leave a card?" he muttered. "If we can help later, I could call?"

Sam slapped his pocket and said, apologetically, "I'm all out. Can I take one of yours?"

Roach sighed and handed over a small white business card with his contact details on it. "Next time, it's your turn to tell us something interesting."

Sam smiled at him, took the card and tapped it with the index finger of his opposite hand. "That sounds fair. Next time I see you, I'm sure I'll have quite the story to tell."

He left, mingling back into the crowd and then vanishing through a side entrance doorway.

Roach shook his head, and tapped his half drained glass with his finger, probably unaware he was even doing it. "I'm not sure which of us has the worse job," he said thoughtfully.

"He doesn't have to deal with a man whose face has been chewed off by a human being!" she said with a scowl.

"No, he has try to find a way to tell the people he left behind what happened, without destroying them in the process. I think I remember commenting previously on my opinions about life."

She watched him, and then looked at her own drink. He had always seemed very different to her, but lately, she had started to wonder just how different they really were.

"Drink your beer and stop thinking about it," she told him, stepping up from the table. "My round. You're having another I take it?"

"I've got no reason not to!"

Chapter 32

It was a cold night in the city. Above him, the sky was black and it stretched on into forever, dark and endless without a star to be seen. A crescent moon was the only thing that broke the inky blackness, a little crack in the endless emptiness that hung above him, gazing down, always threatening to swallow him whole.

He sometimes smoked, but it seemed he didn't here in this little corner of reality. Sometimes he'd arrived in himself and felt the burning need for a cigarette, his body crying out for a fix of nicotine. It didn't bother him unduly: his consciousness didn't have to carry on very long inside a body dying of lung cancer, so why should it?

It was of little consequence to him, so he usually just indulged the need.

More often he drank. It was rare that he found himself in a place where he didn't drink alcohol in some form. Usually it was spirits: the lower end of high quality whisky was his personal preference, but that varied too. He was a man who liked to try new things and he took pleasure in difference, so it was hardly a surprise to find minor variations in his tastes.

Tonight, in the ferocious, biting cold of that lonely, grim universe, while standing there in the back of a pub car park, a cigarette seemed like an oddly good idea. To take the opportunity to breath in something that made your lungs feel warm, just for a moment, was seductive. To have something in his hand that might occupy his mind, that would take the edge off his racing, churning thoughts and provide something real and solid to occupy his mind on would help more than anything.

He often did his best thinking behind the wheel of a car. It helped to have an alternative focus, his mind just worked best that way.

But now, without all that, the hole was occupying his every waking thought. Somewhere, an opening had been torn open in the

universe and Sam couldn't bring himself to think of anything else. It was crushing him, beating him down with the sheer enormity of it all. He was, after all, just a little piece of a man, who was a tiny part of a universe, that was a fragment of a wider reality. He was nothing of consequence—no human was—and he knew it only too well. But now he had to deal with something he could scarcely wrap his tiny, human mind around, because there was simply nobody else who would.

Somehow this problem, that was every fragment of everyone's, had become his alone to deal with.

He could hear his own footsteps and realised he was walking towards his car. Maybe some little part of him wanted to park himself behind the wheel so he could let all this wash over him just for a moment? Maybe it was because it was warmer with the heater blowing? Maybe he just didn't want to stand around in a pub car park, where who-knew-what kind of people did who-knew-what kinds of things?

Beyond the hole, he was preoccupied with the upcoming meeting. It was looming, and it was the biggest, most important discussion he might ever have.

He heard footsteps coming his way: large, solid steps from big, heavy people, walking on thick rubber soles. The noise caught his interest. There were two of them and they were getting closer. His mind quickly flashed to thoughts of defending himself, in case he had to. In the overwhelming majority of places, guns and other weapons were banned, or at least heavily restricted. He'd not even taken the time to check, neither in the office nor the car, to find if anything was secured inside that might help him.

It was just him, his mind, his reflexes, and his attitude against the world. It felt like it always was.

Sam reached his car and then turned, flashing a look as the footsteps reached him.

Two men were standing there: big men, men who looked like they had the moral fortitude of a sewer-dwelling rodent. One, who was standing closer, stared down at him aggressively. He had a shaved head, cold, piercing eyes and glared at him with a look of abject hatred. He crossed his arms and glared forwards, his legs spread widely apart in a fighting stance.

The other was slimmer but there was a coldness in his eyes that sent a chill up Sam's spine. He would kill without remorse, he had no doubt. If his work left him a corpse to deal with, then a man like that wouldn't view it as a thing that might weigh on his conscience for the rest of his days, but more a minor nuisance. Neither of them were to be taken lightly.

"Gentlemen!" Sam nodded, weighing them up, working out if he could fight them, and what chance he might have if he did. Probably not much, he thought to himself.

"You're coming with us!" the smaller man said, his voice surprisingly high in pitch, and his accent soft and polished from a well rounded education.

Sam shook his head. "I have a meeting," he told them. "It's not something I can reschedule, I'm afraid." For a moment Sam wondered how one might go about rescheduling an appointment with the man who created the universe.

"We don't want any trouble!" the larger one grunted, his voice a low gravelly gasp. It was clear that he might not *want* trouble but was secretly hoping for it.

Sam sighed. "Who sent you?"

The larger man uncrossed his arms suddenly and stepped forward, lunging intimidatingly like he was leading into an attack. "We're not here to answer your..."

The smaller man slapped a hand into his chest, restraining his barely contained, and unwarranted fury. He straightened up, but his eyes

burnt in his skull angrily while he ground his teeth, holding himself back impatiently.

The smaller man told him, "It's best you shut your mouth and do as you're told." He glared at Sam, nodding to himself as if contemplating his own words carefully. "My friend here... his patience has limits!"

Sam stood, forcing himself not to show any fear, not to back away, not to give them what they wanted.

He could fight, if he had to. He could lose an eye, get his ribs broken, his fingers snapped. It wouldn't matter: soon he'd be shifting on to another universe, another body, and all this would be left behind. He wasn't a man who had to stick around and deal with the consequences of his actions. That made him different, he could fight without holding anything in reserve, without a single thought for the future. He had no use for fear and it had abandoned him long ago.

"I'm not looking for trouble either!" he told them, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. His heart was beating normally and his breathing was regular. He just didn't have time for this. "But I've got places to be. Tell me what this is about and I'll sort it as soon as I'm free."

The smaller man edged forwards. He was confident, a man who walked without a care in the world, used to having the respect of the people he dealt with, or at least inspiring their fear. He said to Sam, "You don't understand. This isn't a choice. You're coming with us. You're coming with us easily, or we can make it hard on you. Either way, this is happening."

Sam huffed to himself, wondering what the Sam in this universe had got himself into. In any case, the man was correct about one thing, this was happening alright.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I just can't fit you in right now!"

“Fit us in?” the larger man cried out, his anger apparently reaching the upper limits of his patience and then carrying right on going. He leapt forwards, his huge, bulky weightlifter’s body with the barrel chest and powerful arms launched itself at him.

Sam wasn’t as strong, but he was quick. He knew how to annoy someone just enough to get them angry, to get them not to think. He knew how to make the most of every one of his advantages.

He stepped to one side, shifting his weight down and kicking out with his leg. The large man tripped, rolled over and crashed to the floor as his considerable bulk carried him onwards.

The smaller man was startled and Sam capitalised on it: it bought him a little time to finish what he’d started. He balled his hands together and brought them smashing down into the back of his gigantic assailant’s neck, directly at the base of his skull. The big man grunted and fell limply to the floor.

The second man reeled backwards, not frightened enough for Sam’s preference, but certainly taking him more seriously than he had before.

He adopted a fighting stance, and a good one at that. His legs were spread with the weight and balance in just the right place, his fists up and ready. Sam began to walk towards him, clenching and unclenching his fists aggressively.

The man was clearly a boxer, trained in a gym, sparring, learning how to take a punch. He wasn’t scared of Sam. He was certainly wary, but he knew that he wasn’t going to back off; he wasn’t going to back down.

He didn’t have time for this. “I need to go!” Sam said. “Just tell whoever you work for that you never found me!”

The man grinned, showing a set of slightly broken teeth. He leered at him like he was anticipating something he was going to enjoy.

There was no other way to get past him. Sam kept his left hand high to defend himself and reached out with the first punch.

The man snarled, his eyes wide, taking everything in. Sam's punch was blocked by a pair of wiry, powerful arms that snapped up quickly, cutting off his jab. Sam edged forwards for another and was gratified that at least he backed up slightly.

Suddenly Sam saw a white flash and a sickening dizziness surged through his head, making him reel backwards, slightly dazed, the world spinning for a moment. He knew, from all too bitter experience that a punch had connected with his head, but how that had happened he didn't know. He hadn't even seen his arm move, and yet a fist had caught him and nearly knocked him clean off his feet.

He was a boxer alright!

Sam decided that he needed to return the favour, and quickly, before any more of those found their mark. He shook his head, clearing the haze out of his brain and taking a few breaths while he tried to recover, to build up the energy to take another go.

The man was holding his arms up too high, he noticed. He was trained, used to fighting in the ring, used to protecting his head like a sportsman.

Sam wasn't a sportsman. He swung back his arm, making an exaggerated show of looking like he was going for the face. As his opponent's arms reflexively went up, he quickly shifted, swinging his foot up to kick him squarely where no boxer's foot might ever normally venture.

He grunted sharply and sagged, his shoulders dropping as soon as Sam's boot found its way into the crevice between his legs. With the jarring pain surging through him, Sam rained a series of blows down from his fists. He felt the solid, concrete-heavy feel of a human skull beneath his fingers. He felt it again, and again.

The man wilted under the punches, crumbling to his knees. Sam stepped back, kicking as hard as he could into the side of his head, landing a blow that sent him smashing into the tarmac, a sickening thud as his head went down, bouncing back up lightly before melting down to the floor in a gurgling heap.

Sam backed up, smiling to himself. He shook his head again, trying to clear out the dizzy feeling that fogged his brain.

Suddenly the world flashed white again as a rain of sparks drifted lazily behind his eyes, exploding into a flaming arc of pain that shot through his brain. He was laying on the floor, the black, ugly sky reaching into infinity above him. Another surge of pain shot through him, this time in his ribs, a pointed, stabbing pain. He gasped, his lungs struggling to find enough air to breath. He felt his whole body doubling in pain and heard the sound of his own voice, crying out.

The bigger man looked down on him, towering over his fallen body. He'd screwed up, he'd misjudged.

The larger man recovered quicker than he's anticipated, and he'd assumed the smaller one wouldn't know how to fight, or wouldn't have been as good as he was. He'd been so caught up with what was happening in front, he'd forgotten to guard his back.

He'd missed it as the huge, lumbering monster of a man had come up behind him, knocking him to the ground and then keeping him there with a kick to the ribs.

He groaned to himself as the second man limped up, standing next to him, resting on his shoulders and cupping his aching groin.

"Bastard!" he muttered, and the last thing Sam saw was him stepping back to take a kick that was aimed directly at his head.

Chapter 33

Sam heard muffled voices as consciousness began to punch through the murky darkness fogging his brain. He was confused, and his thoughts came to him only when he struggled to find them. He realised he didn't know where he was. It took a few seconds to even remember *who* he was, but it slowly started to drift back.

He was moving, the ground was shaking and light was streaking by. Then he realised he was in pain as well. Slowly, through the haze that clouded his every thought, he realised he'd been put in the back of a moving car. The two men who had come to get him must have beaten him into unconsciousness, which wasn't ideal.

He groaned at the various painful reminders of the brief but poignant encounter. His ribs had taken quite a kicking: if one of them wasn't cracked, at the very least, he'd be quite surprised. They ached dully and breathing deeply sent a shock of pain cutting through his chest. His head was on a whole different level of discomfort: it felt like he'd been drinking heavily the night before, standing too close to a concert speaker, trying to learn Mandarin, and opening doors with his face. There was no part of any of that that was remotely pleasant and the sum of other parts was so much more than just the sum of those parts.

He heard voices, and saw flashes of light as the car drifted along. It was an expensive machine, gliding along over the bumps and holes in the road effortlessly.

Sam put his hand over his rib, checking as he breathed to see if the bone had done any damage inside. He hefted a smooth inward breath into his lungs. They didn't seem punctured: the damage was probably no more serious than some bruising, his body warning him to stop whatever he was doing before worse damage occurred. The swift kick to the face had been enough to make that very thing happen, but probably wasn't what his body had intended at all.

His head was beginning to clear. The damage wasn't as bad as he had feared. He would live, at least, and long enough to shift out.

The car swung about roughly, turning off to the right before shuddering to a halt, snapping to a stop as someone leaned too heavily on the brakes. The engine cut off, the soft vibration melting away and the sounds dying off into nothing.

He heard the two getting out of the car, chattering to one another softly.

Should he make a run for it? Should he fight his way out? That certainly hadn't gone very well the last time, and now he was at the disadvantage of being in a cramped place with some physical damage to add to his problems. Running was even less likely. His chest was sore, and he was struggling somewhat for breath. He knew he couldn't keep up an extended pace.

His options were limited, but he couldn't miss his appointment. He had to get to the café; he had to meet the man who created the universe at any cost. That same whole universe could be at stake if he didn't.

He sat up, heaving his body upright. He took a deep breath, running his hand over his aching jaw, clicking it from side to side, checking it wasn't broken. The pain behind his temples had calmed down to a dull roar, but it was gratifying to know that the man who had done this was no better off than he was. Both of the men sent to deliver him must have been in just as much pain as they'd left him in.

The back door opened. A gruff voice told him, "Get out!"

He duly complied, sliding out across a black, leather chair that stretched right across the rear. The big man was standing in front, glaring angrily, and the smaller was behind the door, holding it halfway open.

Against his better judgement, Sam got out, hanging his head, hunching his shoulders. He staggered forwards unevenly, uneasy on his own feet. This was a terrible idea, his brain screamed at him.

The big man seemed to enjoy it: he seemed gratified that Sam was suffering. The smaller man off to the side wasn't grinning: he was staring at him carefully: he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

Sam allowed himself to shuffle closer, balancing himself along the edge of the car door, groaning loudly in pain.

He ran his hand along the top metal edge, feeling along the rubber door seal until he found the fingers of the smaller man. He grunted, sounding surprised and grimaced. He saw the big man shaking his head and laughing quietly, chuckling to himself. The slimmer, smaller man might not underestimate him twice, but the large, angrier gentleman was far less of a threat, in that respect.

Sam snapped up suddenly, snatched up two of the man's fingers and wrenched them back as hard as he could. They snapped with a sickening crack. His face froze in an expression of terrified shock as the pain caught him in, what could only have been, an agonising wave.

Sam didn't have time to enjoy it. He had moved himself closer to the big man, the man who hadn't taken him seriously. He cupped his palm and pushed upwards, the heel of his hand slamming up under his chin, catching him just slightly off to the side, swivelling his head nicely. He grunted softly and his knees buckled. He collapsed to the ground in a crumpled heap, gasping in surprise.

Sam turned his attention back to the boxer. He was in shock, the sudden snapping of the horribly sensitive bones in his fingers would have sent sheets of pain crashing into him. He knew he had to move quickly before the surprise gave way to the kind of anger that goes looking for revenge, especially as he seemed to be the kind of man who had plenty of just that sort of thing in reserve.

Sam lunged at him, ignoring the grating pain that was shooting through his chest. He landed a punch to his face, catching him right at the side of his jaw. He was clutching his crippled fingers and although his eyes widened in surprise, he wasn't fast enough to respond this time.

He sagged to his knees, crashing heavily to the pavement in a crumpled heap. Sam had guessed that no single punch from anyone would be enough to put that man down and out. He seemed to be right about that.

The man fell forwards, reflexively putting out his hands as he fell. His broken fingers hit the pavement and he yelped in torturous pain.

Sam felt a pang of regret, even sympathy, but he didn't have long enough to wallow in it. These weren't street-corner thugs, who thought that dressing the part and talking like the television had taught them to, made them into something they weren't. These were seasoned men. They had seen more than a few fights and they wouldn't be down for long.

Sam knew he had to get to the meeting, and in that moment, it was all he knew. He had to get back to the café that served as a universal constant; he had to get there and hope that the man who had created the universe would be there to meet him.

He looked over the car. The bigger man had been driving: he had to have the keys on him somewhere.

The decision was made.

He was starting to fight his way back to consciousness, muttering to himself, his eyelids fluttering. He hefted himself up, his head and shoulders rising from the pavement. Sam kicked his head back down, stomping the recovery right back out of him. He didn't have time or any particular inclination to go another round with either of them. He wanted the keys, and he wanted to get back on his way, as far away from these two as possible.

He patted down over his pockets until he found the telltale sound of a bunch of keys rattling unevenly beneath his fingers. He rummaged inside and snatched them out, a large black electronic key fob with the maker's brand emblazoned on it, and a jangling bunch of assorted others off to the sides on a shiny metal hoop.

Sam quickly looked around, trying desperately to get his bearings.

What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

Sam straightened, stiffened. His hands fell limply to the sides and he groaned, sighing deeply to himself.

Right before him on the far edge of the pavement was the café. Light spilled out through the windows, a blue neon sign glowing brightly into the night lit up with the word 'Coffee,' which shone out like a welcoming beacon.

The smaller of the men was upright, cradling his fingers with the opposite hand. He was hunched forward and glaring with furious eyes.

Sam looked back, shaking his head in dismay at him. He pointed over to the café, gesturing with an open hand. "You were bringing me here?" he called out angrily. "Why didn't you bloody tell me that? This is where I've been trying to get!"

"Fuck you!" he snapped, spitting the words through gritted teeth, spluttering between ragged breaths. "You fucking broke my fucking fingers, you piece of shit."

Sam shook his head, sighing at him. "You should have just told me! All you had to do was tell me you were bringing me here: I would have offered to bloody drive!"

"Get in there!" he growled, snatching back a little piece of control.

Sam shrugged, and flung the keys back down on the pavement next to him.

"I was gonna!"

Chapter 34

It occurred to Sam that he actually had no idea what the man who created the universe even looked like. Beyond referring to him as a ‘bad man,’ Lilith had never mentioned his name, so he didn’t have much of an idea what to call him either. Was there a formal mode of address for the creator of a cluster of universes in which infinite aspects of himself resided? Would he offend him with some errant gesture, and would his wrath be swift and brutal?

He presumed that he wouldn’t be too hard to find. He was a man of importance, someone who held sway over the universe: he wasn’t likely to go unnoticed in a crowd.

As the door swung shut behind him, he swept his eyes over the coffee shop, looking for someone who might fit the bill. He looked for someone who might also hire large, angry men to bring him to the meeting, for someone who had everything the world had to offer, right at his fingertips. Nobody looked to be in that kind of position. It was all just so ordinary.

An elderly gentleman with a kind face was standing by the counter, paying his bill. He waved him over, beckoning him with an outstretched hand. Sam frowned curiously and approached him, looking around first to make sure he was reading the situation correctly.

Could this be him? The man was dressed like a person does when they don’t have an abundance of money. He was hunched slightly over, his back twisted from years of the pressures of the world, and was at least in the latter part of his sixties. He was fumbling around, struggling to get his wallet back in his trouser pocket, his old hands trembling and his pale fingers hooked over with arthritis.

He looked up, a little smile on his face and said, pointing to a booth over to the side, “I’m sitting there. Please take a seat—I’ll join you as soon as I can!”

Sam found this a little difficult to accept. He hesitated, wondering if this was simply a case of mistaken identity. “Sir, do you know who I am?”

“Of course, Samuel,” he said, grinning wryly. “I know who everybody is.”

Suddenly his eyes changed: the muscles around them seemed to let go and the expression on his face vanished.

The young girl behind the counter then said, “After all, I *am* everybody.”

Sam looked at her, confused and a little startled. “What?” he muttered.

“Sit down, Sam—I’ll be right over!” she said, that same wry grin on her face that he had seen before.

Sam made his way over to the booth, casting a glance back, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. He sat himself down, settling into one of the grey vinyl benches that sat opposite a slightly battered wooden table.

He glanced again over to the counter as the elderly gentleman began moving away, heading out to the door, carrying a takeaway bag of some baked goods like nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened.

The girl behind the counter, wearing light blue jeans, a white polo shirt and a deep crimson apron wandered off to begin filling the gaps in the counter display. She never looked up at him, never seemed to show any interest.

Sam was confused.

“I’m sorry you’re confused,” a voice said. Sam turned, startled, as a middle-aged Mediterranean man slipped into the chair opposite. He was heavily built, had thinning hair, and was casually dressed.

“Are you...?” Sam didn’t really know how to finish that sentence. He tried again, “How did you know what I was thinking?”

“It wasn’t magic!” he told him, that same knowing smile fluttering across his lips. “Everyone is confused when I do this. It’s not something you see every day, is it? But yes, I’m him.” He looked down at his own body and shrugged, “Well, you’re speaking to *me*, anyway. I like to think I looked after my actual body a little better than this person did.”

“So you can take over people’s bodies?” Sam said, really quite impressed. But then, this man had created the universe, he remembered. He probably *should* be impressed.

“I’m not an alien fungus from some badly-written science-fiction horror novel, Samuel!” he told him, sounding a little offended. “I am now just an idea. Ideas can evolve, adapt, grow and change. Your body is a trap, Sam. It doesn’t give you the freedom to move around, rather, it’s a set of bars that limits you.

“I have worked hard to go beyond *my* limitations. There’s really little difference between what I’m doing right now and what you do. You shift from one version of yourself to another, because ultimately there’s only one you. You’re merely looking out from a different perspective while still inside your own mind.

“Myself, I came to understand that there is really only one person, and that one person is all of us. When you understand that, then my perspective, the eyes I look out from behind, can be any pair of eyes at all.

“I don’t take over anyone: I’m just a passenger, a consciousness along for the ride. Just like everyone else, when you get right down to it.”

Sam nodded along, mostly following what he was saying. “Then why didn’t you just hop into my mind?”

He smiled like a man that had just been asked a ridiculous question. “Your mind is a mess, Sam. It’s already crowded enough, don’t you think?”

Sam couldn't argue with that.

"And isn't it nicer to meet face to face? Isn't it nice to share a moment with someone over a drink and a piece of cake? I hope you like cake, by the way. I took the liberty of ordering for us."

Sam shrugged. Who didn't like cake? "Why did you send those men to bring me here? I was coming anyway, you had to have known that!"

"Samual, my dear boy. I tried to help you by sending a car and escorts," he told him. "The situation spiralled out of control, rather due to your own poor judgement in the matter."

Sam couldn't argue with that either.

"In addition, it made a point," he added, gazing forwards with a bright sparkle in his eyes. "There are matters in life not to be taken lightly. You requested a meeting with me—that's no small thing. I'm a busy man, as you can well imagine."

"There's a hole!" Sam told him bluntly, rather blurting it out in a manner quite unlike him. He realised that for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was nervous. "There's a hole in the universe!"

He laughed. At first it was a chuckle, but it grew until he laughed heartily, rudely, at him.

He slammed his hand down on the table and said, as if sharing a joke with him, "Samual, there is always a hole in the universe. The whole of reality is riddled with them. It doesn't matter—nothing matters! Nobody cares!"

"I care."

"Well, I don't!" he rebutted firmly, leaving no doubt in Sam's mind that he meant it. "I don't think you really care either. I know how long you've been looking for just this kind of hole in the universe. I think you're hoping that this one can be made to lead you back where you came from."

Sam looked away and sighed to himself. "Can it?" he said softly.

“Can it?” he smirked. “Can this tear in the fabric of all of creation be used to send one man back home to his own, personal universe and to the wife and son he left behind there?”

Sam waited. After a lengthy pause, he said again, but more strongly, “Well?”

He shrugged. “It’s a very large universe...” he said.

The waitress came over with a tray. She smiled at them, very professionally, and handed over two mugs of coffee and two plates of identical chocolate cake. She looked directly at Sam and said, “Anything is possible!” before turning and walking away.

Sam grumbled to himself and flashed him an angry glare.

“May I ask why you’re so obsessed with going back to that one, single universe?” he looked curious. “You know better than anyone that you can go to any universe where your wife and son are, and they’ll be the same people. Why not just find a universe you like, one with a flourishing economy, no religion, no squabbling over resources, where the rich haven’t turned half the world into their personal garbage container or committed crimes against humanity in the name of population-control? Why not just settle down and let your memories melt away. You could just go back to being Samuel again. All of this shifting around in different universes could just end, and you could be happy once more?”

“Because it wouldn’t be *my family*—not really,” he told him softly. “And there would be a universe somewhere where my real family would never see me again.”

“You know you can never go back to that universe!” he said, looking a little confused. “You know why, right? You understand what happened?”

“I know!” Sam nodded.

“You’re dead, Sam!” he said. “You died. You shifted your mind out to another universe, and someone killed you. You can’t shift back, because there’s no Sam there for you to shift back to.”

“I know!” Sam snapped impatiently.

He grinned. “Oh, right. You know?” He leant back in the chair and gazed at him, leering like he had all the answers and wasn’t going to share any of them. “You know because Lilith told you! You know all about it because my daughter explained it to you?”

He nodded.

“Why on Earth... why on *any* version of *any* Earth... would you trust that girl?” he asked evenly.

Sam glared, increasingly frustrated at the spite of it. “She says pretty much the same about you!” he said flatly.

“She doesn’t like me!” he grinned widely, and the statement clearly didn’t bother him in the slightest.

“No!” Sam agreed.

“None of my children do!” he told him conversationally. “I had three, you know. The twins, a daughter and a son.

“If I’m brutally honest, I’ve probably contributed to the creation of many more. One of the nice things about being able to just pop into people’s minds and ride along with them is that it opens up an entire world of possibilities. The human body can be a very fun thing to play with if you know what you’re doing.”

“So, you’re a serial rapist?” Sam said coldly.

He smiled and then the smile vanished off his face. He shook his head a little sadly. “You’ve popped into various bodies, Sam. You’ve done things you’re not proud of. Much worse things than experiencing the world from the perspective of other people.”

He looked him over.

“You got this version of Samuel pretty badly beaten up tonight,” he began. “And all the damage you do is justified by your quest to find a

hole that will take you back to your quiet, unimportant little corner of the universe. You didn't care what would happen to this Sam after you left, did you?

"And what happens if you find your gateway back? The only way you can get through it is with a Sam's body that you'll have to borrow. You can't give it back, can you? You'd be ripping another version of yourself out of the lives of another version of your own family, and you know his mind would melt away into nothing.

"And I know you've thought about finding a version of yourself with no family, a hopeless version with nothing important to lose, but I suspect that if the door opened here and could take you home, you'd go through it, and you'd do so without a second thought."

Sam glared at him angrily. He said darkly, "You really *haven't* been inside my mind, have you?"

"No!" he grinned. "But there's nothing very sophisticated about you. You're certainly not as interesting as I had hoped."

Sam told him sternly, "I'm a simple man. All I want is to go home to my family."

"And you're willing to kill to do it?" he told him. It wasn't really a question, more like an accusation.

"You created the universe," Sam said angrily. "You could send me home. Then nobody has to die."

He began to chuckle. "I didn't create the universe!" he told him earnestly. "This is what I mean about trusting Lilith. She's got a very, very cluttered mind."

"She told me..." he frowned, confused.

"Look, I am a very clever man, but I am *just* a man. I experimented with my consciousness. I dreamed the universe until my ideas became solid enough for me to touch. I live in a world I imagined.

“I am Lilith’s father, I created her universe. You have to be careful to see things from your own perspective and not accept hers without question.”

Sam deflated, slumping back heavily into the seat.

“You were hoping that you could bring me the story of this hole, offer to help close it in exchange for some favour? You thought that you might negotiate passage back to your universe, me helping you out of gratitude for your service?”

Sam looked away.

“I don’t have that kind of power,” he told him with a note of sincere authority. “I’m a ghost. All I’ve done is find myself a little freedom from the shackles of my humanity.

“What’s really sad is that you’re bordering on having the same kind of freedom, and all you want is to crawl back into your cage.”

“People are dying!” Sam growled. “There’s a hole in the universe and it’s killing people.”

He nodded back. “I know! But ideas don’t get sucked into holes, so I don’t see how it affects me, or you, come to that.”

Sam scowled and looked down to the table, too angry to make eye contact for the moment. “Lilith says that you’re a bad person.”

He shook his head and smiled thinly. “I’m not a bad person, Sam: I’m just not a good one. I’m not really a person anymore at all.”

Sam opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t find the words.

“This must be a huge disappointment to you.”

Sam nodded.

“I will tell you something, though...” he began. “You weren’t killed in your universe by accident, some random convergence of consequences. You were murdered quite specifically, and for a very good reason. Somebody wanted you dead and gone, so that it wouldn’t be possible for you to go back.”

It seemed pointless to ask how he knew that. “Who did it?” Sam asked.

He nodded at him, and flashed him a wicked smile.

“Well, let’s not take all the fun out of it, shall we?”

Chapter 35

With the ‘man who built the universe’ turning out to be probably nothing of the sort, and utterly unwilling to help, Sam was left with few options. There was a hole in the very fabric of reality, and if it couldn’t take a physical version of him home, then at the very least it had to be closed.

People were getting hurt. That was something he couldn’t sit back and allow to happen.

On the one hand he knew, with a strong sense of certainty, that it didn’t matter that much if someone was hurt, as they just continued to exist in all the other universes they were in. The loss of just one version of them was insignificant, even to the person losing it.

But then on the other, a person would be dying horribly.

Sam was only human, a creature that couldn’t help but think in terms of a single universe, and to him, it mattered. Seeing a fellow human suffer and die left an emotional imprint, an unavoidable mark. That mark would become a scar if he did nothing about it. What would it mean if he really didn’t care? What would he become then?

He closed the door behind him, stalked over and then slumped heavily into his office chair. Lilith had her arms crossed defiantly across her chest, looking out through the window with a petulant look etched onto her face. She made no attempt to acknowledge him as she stood motionless.

“Lilith!” Sam said.

She moved slightly so that her whole body faced the window. “Did you see him?” she growled angrily, her voice low and filled with anger. “Did he meet you? Did he actually turn up?”

Sam sighed to himself. “He turned up... well, somebody turned up. Several somebodies actually. It was all pretty confusing. I don’t think I was really prepared for it.”

“Sometimes he rides other people,” she said more softly. “He knows lots of tricks. He took all of his consciousness and moved it all into one body. He’s living in one universe and I don’t know how to get to it. I don’t even know which one it is. From there he can know anything, so he’s always a step ahead of me. If he ever leaves, he just does it by riding other people.”

Sam nodded and took a deep breath. He reached down for his desk drawer, pulled it out on a pair of rusty metal runners that shuddered noisily, and grabbed up the bottle of whisky that some version of him had tucked away.

“He keeps his own body safe and just goes travelling in his mind? That makes sense: I’d have done that too if I knew how.

“He wouldn’t help us.”

Lilith turned back and uncrossed her arms. There was a tiny hint of sympathy in her eyes. “I told you he wouldn’t!” she insisted. “How wouldn’t he help you?”

Sam poured them each a drink, sighing deeply as he did. “He wouldn’t help with the hole!”

“He wouldn’t help you to stop it?” she asked as she slid her slender, frail-looking body into the chair opposite his across the desk. For such a small, light person she crashed into the chair surprisingly hard. “Or he wouldn’t help you to use it to shift home through?”

“He didn’t care!” he said. “He didn’t care about either.”

“I care!” she told him, nodding to herself. “It’s a big hole and it’s dangerous. It could do some real damage.

“We have to close it. No matter what else happens, we have to close the hole.”

Sam nodded in agreement. With some hesitation, some reservations, he said solemnly, “I’ll close it.”

The hole wasn’t predictable enough to take him home, he knew that much. All that was left was fixing the problem before it got any

worse. He huffed a weary sigh of resignation. "I'll close it!" he said again, this time with a little more conviction.

He slid a glass across the desk and held out his own—an olive branch.

She glared at him for what seemed a very long time, and then burst into a very happy smile. She swiped up the glass and said cheerily, "We'll close it together."

Sam was used to her shifting moods: it didn't faze him any longer, but watching her dancing between emotional extremes still brought a wry smile to his face. He couldn't help but smile back at her.

"You know, he told me some things that I hadn't heard before!" Sam began thoughtfully. He rubbed his chin, wondering if these were even things he should be talking to her about. Lilith nodded along but he noticed her eyes flashed off to one side, away from him. "He told me you have a twin. Is that true?"

Lilith sipped at her drink thoughtfully. He watched intently as she frowned, smiled, frowned again and looked like she was considering something very deeply. Finally, she put down her glass and stared directly at him, as though she was about to reveal something of incredible importance.

"Yes!" she said.

"Yes?" Sam laughed. "You have a twin sister?"

She nodded. "We aren't identical. We don't even look alike, at least I don't think so. We're nothing alike at all really, except in our face and bodies, they're pretty much the same." She frowned suddenly and then smiled again.

Sam couldn't even hazard a guess what might be going through her mind.

"And your brother?"

She looked a little sad. "He's an idiot."

Sam laughed: that had been the last thing in the world he had expected to hear.

“He can’t do anything,” she explained. “My father tried to make us all special, to teach us special tricks from the very first day we were born. My brother just got stupid, like it was all too much for him. He used to just sit around all day doing nothing, playing video games, watching television and eating whatever food could fit in a toaster.

“My sister, she just wouldn’t learn. She fought back really hard because she always insisted that she just wanted a normal life.

“His training only really worked on me, I think.”

Sam listened intently and took a short sip of his drink. “And your mother?”

She shook her head and her face darkened. “Dead!” she told him. “She died after my brother was born.”

Sam bit his lip thoughtfully and looked away. Finally he said, “I’m sorry. He’s a bad man!”

Lilith nodded. “He’s a *very* bad man.”

“You know what else he told me?” he continued. “He told me that I was killed back in my own universe.”

Lilith shrugged. “You knew that already.”

Sam nodded, trying to work out how much she knew and how much of it she might not be telling him. “He told me that whoever killed me did it deliberately. I was murdered. Is that true?”

Lilith looked at him fixedly. Her head cocked slightly to one side thoughtfully. “Did he tell you who by, or why they did it?”

He shook his head. “Is it true?”

She sighed dramatically and told him, “I don’t know. Probably. I don’t see why he’d have any reason to lie. I can’t imagine why he’d have any reason to tell you either, so who knows?”

Sam drained his glass with one more, much longer sip. If she was lying, she was doing it expertly. He slammed it down, not too heavily on his desk.

"I'm sorry!" she told him sadly, her eyes dropping to the desk.

"That first time I helped you to shift, it really was just an accident. I didn't do it deliberately, it just happened all of a sudden. I was too late to do anything to stop it."

"I know," he told her. "I remember it well. I felt a white flash, and was then standing there, with a very bad headache, wondering what the hell was going on." He smiled to himself. "That all seems so long ago."

"If it helps, you wouldn't have felt anything," she told him. "That version of you didn't have a conscious mind anymore. He was just laying on the floor, silent and still where he collapsed. I hid him and went to talk to you instead."

"And by the time you'd got me to believe you..." he sighed.

"Right..."

"Look, we have a problem," he said, happy to change the subject to something that somehow didn't seem quite so important. "We have a problem right here and now. Mallory is gone, but Roach is still here. That means that the new Roach we've got in the other universe isn't from this one. The hole isn't just a gate between these two universes, it goes into at least one other. It's bigger than I feared, which means it's even more dangerous than I'd imagined."

She frowned and glared at him, almost angrily. "You want me to find a universe where Roach is missing?" She shrugged a highly animated, almost theatrical, shrug: it looked like she'd been practising it in a mirror and still hadn't quite managed to get it right. "You know I can't just see everything, everywhere!"

Sam smiled sympathetically. "I'd like to shift over and see where Roach vanished from. There might be something we can learn from that."

We've got plenty of time before it gets too light to shift back. I don't want to waste the time we've got."

Her eyes fluttered. She glared at him and told him with a stern voice, "The universes aren't lined up in alphabetical order. This might not be as easy as you think."

"I have faith in your abilities," he said with a wry smile.

She looked away again. Her mouth lolled open like she was about to say something. "I might know where it is," she told him. "I think I've found it, but you can't shift from here."

"Where?" Sam snapped up.

"I'm working on it," she growled at him impatiently. "Don't rush me! It will take some time to work it out. You have to give me some time. This isn't easy!"

Sam grunted and sat back hard in his chair. "Where am I?"

"In that universe?" she looked at him coldly. "I'm phoning you now to find out."

Sam snatched up the bottle and poured himself another small shot. He slid her glass over and poured one more for Lilith. She continued to stare out into space like her brain had turned itself off.

She raised her hand to the side of her face, nodded and then put down a phone on the desk, even though there was actually nothing in her hand. She just acted out the motions and then sighed deeply to herself.

"You're at home," she told him apologetically, like she regretted having to say it. "You're at home with your wife."

Sam nodded and swallowed hard. "Right!" he said, trying to sound like that was nothing.

"You won't leave!" she told him.

"Right!" he grumbled.

"That means you have to go there."

"I know what it means!" he snapped. He calmed himself down, reminding himself that all this was quite normal, routine stuff. In that

world, Sam was a married man. Why would he leave just because a girl he might barely know asked him to?

He had always known that he'd meet some version of his wife someday. He couldn't avoid it forever, no matter how much he might like to, and how much he might try.

"You want to do it?"

Sam drank the whisky in one, long, single shot. He huffed loudly and said, "We don't have a choice. That hole is somewhere and we have to find it before it starts killing people we care about.

"Some things are more important than my feelings."

"In this universe, you live in the same house. You can just go home," she said softly. "Actually that's perfect, you'll overcome the locked front door and it will still be dark. It won't be hard at all."

Sam glared at his empty glass. No matter what she said, it would be the hardest shift he'd ever taken.

Chapter 36

Lilith rode along as they slowly, unenthusiastically made their way to his home. It was, irritatingly, the exact same address as the one he'd lived at in his own universe. It was the same; everything was annoyingly exactly the same.

The sameness dug at his brain as the words Lilith's father had said to him went round and round, his mind picking them over relentlessly.

He could just stay there, he thought. It was almost totally, exactly the same. He'd seen no great differences, nothing that he might really have noticed if he wasn't trying so very hard to see them. If he stayed in this place then his mind would melt into the version of Sam he was occupying. He'd just live there with his family and everything would be normal. After a short while, he wouldn't even remember there was a difference.

It would still be him: just *this version* of him. It would still be his own mind looking out from behind his own two eyes.

But was *normal* really all that he needed, he found himself thinking? He wanted so desperately for it to be enough, but there was something else, that little splinter in his mind that pricked at him, that never let him rest. It blocked the way forward, cutting off every possible train of thought. Any idea about settling down in another universe was headed off at the pass by the simple, yet irrefutable fact that it simply *wasn't* his universe. To him there was only one *real* universe, and everything else was just a copy, a hollow facade pretending to be home.

What difference did it really make, he asked himself? Kelly, his wife, was just one person who lived across many, infinite universes. It was just her, just one person. Would it make any difference which version of him lived with which version of her?

And although he knew that in every practical, reasonable way, the answer was that it didn't. It still mattered to him. It mattered more than anything else in the universe. Maybe all this didn't make the slightest difference to the world, but it made a world of difference to him. Knowing the truth and accepting the truth were, apparently, entirely different things with virtually no relationship to one another.

And that was where the splinter in his mind always dug itself in a little deeper, pricked at his raw emotions just a little bit harder. He couldn't escape it and he knew that he would never have tried, because deep down, he never wanted to.

There was a universe out there where Kelly was alone, where his son was growing up without him, and they were the real ones, the *only* real ones, as far as he was concerned.

He sighed to himself, rather more deeply and loudly than he intended.

Lilith said to him sharply, snapping up suddenly from wherever her thoughts, mind and consciousness had been dwelling, "What are you thinking, Samuel?"

Sam's fingers tightened on the steering wheel of the car.

"Nothing," he told her, sounding less than entirely sincere about it. "Nothing important." As he heard the words, and the sound of his own voice saying them, he grimaced. At that moment he knew that it was the most important thing in the entire world. It was all that had ever really mattered.

"We'll fix the hole," she told him, sounding uncharacteristically resolved about it. "Don't worry."

He looked forwards, slowing down as he approached a red light. "I'm not worried about that," he said.

She went quiet again as the light changed to green, and he carried on, not having needed to come to a complete halt.

"We're nearly there," she said softly. "I should get out."

He nodded and then huffed, “Yeah!” He thought quickly about where he could drop her: the odd familiarity was suddenly a pointed nuisance. It just sent the little splinter on its constant downward journey, twisting its way towards his heart.

“Where?”

“Anywhere is fine!” she told him. Sam knew she meant it literally. She’d happily crawl into an alley and sleep behind a row of dustbins for all she cared. Her life, her individual bodies and identities in the universes they visited meant nothing to her. She had accepted the reality of their lives in a way he still hadn’t managed to come to terms with. Would that come with time? Would every subsequent shift drive him ever closer to becoming like her?

“No!” he said, shaking his head and smiling at his own little mistake. “I mean where am I? Where do I need to go to shift out? Where am I standing in my house?”

She looked at him, narrowing her eyes accusingly. “Bedroom,” she told him. “Or living room. Or toilet, maybe the kitchen.

“I keep telling you, Samuel, I don’t have superpowers. I’m in the other universe waiting for you, and it’s cold, by the way, and I only have a thin knitted jumper on. I can’t see through walls, I just know you’re in the house.

“Just walk about until you find him, you’ll know when you’re in the right place: your consciousness will be sucked into a different universe in a painfully blinding flash of white light.”

Sam smirked at her almost angry little sarcastic tirade. “Yeah,” he agreed. “That is tough to miss.”

They were nearly there. Sam noticed he was driving increasingly slower as they got closer.

“There’s a row of shops on the corner,” he told her. “There’s a café there. Meet me there, get a coffee and warm yourself up.”

“I don’t have any money!” she sneered at him.

“Here or there?” he shrugged.

“There!” she told him.

“Well I’ll pay for you when I get there,” he said grumpily. “Just get whatever you want. I’ll have money on me there, won’t I?”

She nodded in grudging agreement. “I am hungry,” she said thoughtfully. “Alright. I’m going to get a sandwich! I might even get chips.”

“Fine!” he smirked. “I’ll pay for you when I get there. Actually, get me a sandwich too, and a coffee. We’ll discuss things when I arrive. I won’t be long.”

“You had dinner!” she told him moodily.

“What?” he snapped in confusion. “What do you mean? The other Sam had dinner there? Is that what you mean?”

“Probably!” she said accusingly, like this was a problem somehow.

He had struggled to follow her line of reasoning for long enough, he decided. Luckily for him, he saw it looming ahead. “There’s the café —I’ll drop you there. Meet me in the same place on the other side.”

The car rolled up and stopped at the curb, just outside of it.

She looked at him with a frown. “I don’t have any money!”

“What?” he said. “Here, you mean?”

She nodded. “I never have any money,” she grumbled, scowling accusingly. “You should know that by now!”

He sighed and took out his wallet. He rummaged inside and found a note, the largest one in there. He snatched it out and handed it over.

“That’s too much for coffee,” she sniffed at him.

“Use it later,” he told her.

She made a low growling sound and snatched it from him. Then her face split into a bright smile and she said, “Don’t be long with her. Time is the same in both universes so I know how long you’re going to be.”

Sam looked back straight out of the front window of his car. Just ahead was the final turning that led to the driveway in front of his house. "I won't be long," he told her. Muttering, he added, "There's nothing to keep me there..."

She looked at him one last time and said, "Don't be." She opened the door and began stepping out. "I'll get you a sandwich and a coffee. Don't worry, I know what you like."

Sam shook his head very slightly at her as the door slammed shut. Although she made it hard to accept, that was the easiest part of all of this, and it was behind him. The worst of it was up ahead.

He put the car into gear, flashed a glance at the mirror and then pulled away.

He opened the door. The key was the same as the one in his own universe. He hadn't memorised every cut, every tooth along the edge, but it looked the same regardless. Small details like that rarely changed. For some reason, it wasn't the tiny, insignificant things that varied from world to world, so much as the bigger, more human things. The differences were in the people, how the tiny things affected them, and changed them sometimes into people he could barely recognise.

Perhaps people just didn't notice the ridges cut along the edge of a key. Perhaps such things really didn't matter in the whole, wide, grand scheme of things.

The door opened, and warm yellow light spilled out into the darkness. In every imaginable way, it felt like home, and in every possible way, he knew that it really wasn't. For a moment he hesitated. He went to step inside, but his leg didn't seem to want to move. It was like something was holding him back, some force outside, and beyond, his own body.

He swallowed his apprehension and, with a pure force of will, took that first step into his house. He heard the door clicking shut behind

him as he stared into the living room. It was horribly familiar: nothing seemed out of place. The family photos were right where they should be; Kelly and Marcus just as he remembered them. It was as if he'd left just a few minutes before and walked back into his life, passing seamlessly from one moment to the next.

For a while, his brain just took it all in. Thoughts of shifting around from one world to the next, life-threatening holes punched through the fabric of reality, grumpy trans-dimensional consciousnesses demanding money for sandwiches, and unhelpful creators of universes were lost. He was home, and he found that it brought an unexpected smile to his lips.

He heard her before he saw her.

She came in, drying her hands on a towel, not really paying much attention. Then she caught sight of him and gasped, "Sam!"

"Kelly," he whispered, trapped by the sight of her. He stared, finding that he couldn't drag his eyes away from her. She looked just as he remembered her those many long days when he'd struggled to hold her memory sacred in his mind.

She was almost as tall as him, with long, almost perfectly straight blonde hair tumbling down over her shoulders like a heavy golden curtain. Her rounded little face was staring at him, gasping in surprise.

She squealed accusingly, "Have you been fighting?"

"A little bit!" he told her apologetically, his hand reflexively touching the sore part of his face.

She ran over and began carefully dabbing his split lip with the edge of a towel. Sam recoiled suddenly from the warmth of her touch. Her fingers against his face sent a shockwave of electricity through his skin, refreshing too many happy old memories that now, in this place, were things to be cautiously avoided.

His mind screamed at him that this wasn't his wife. This wasn't *his* Kelly, even if the parts of his mind that weren't preoccupied with

screaming were desperate to believe it was. Could it be? Could it become real if he just wanted it badly enough?

She pulled back, perhaps startled by the odd severity and suddenness of his reaction. She stared in surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. He gently pushed her back, the palm of his hand against her shoulder. “It’s more painful than it looks. Just leave it.”

She glared, but the glare quickly melted, softening into a supportive look of concern. “What happened?”

It wasn’t her. He knew it wasn’t her. It was part of her, perhaps, but only a part.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just something silly. Bit of a misunderstanding. I’m fine, really.”

“Can I get you anything?” She looked worried, and because he knew her well enough to judge, a little hurt that he was pushing her away.

“I could use a drink!” he told her, trying not to smile.

She sighed and gave him a little, slightly disapproving, smirk. “Alright!”

He watched as she went to the cabinet—his cabinet. He stared intently, his eyes taking in every inch of her body, running over every curve of her form, remembering every part of her in suddenly graphic, vivid detail.

She turned back, a shot-glass in her hand. She frowned, and looking really quite worried about him, said, “Is everything alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“I’m fine,” he assured her, reaching out for the glass. “I just really need this.”

Then a blinding white light exploded behind his eyes and the world vanished as his mind was sucked into it.

Chapter 37

The piercing white light burnt into his brain, a flowering, effervescent and searing pain swallowing him up. Then, as suddenly as it started, it was over.

This time the fog that usually filled his mind with the cotton wool sensation of having a head stuffed with emptiness passed quite quickly. He gazed around, his eyes wide and bright, his mind clearing more and more with every second that passed.

It was the same: the same house, the same furniture. He knew that everything had changed, but nothing seemed different. He began to wonder just how much of any of this really mattered.

He was alone in the living room now and found that he was dressed differently. He looked down, noticing he was wearing only a white T-shirt and a pair of black boxer shorts. His cheap suit and the white shirt with a few drops of dark, dried out crimson blood dripped on the collar, were gone, as if he'd simply forgotten to still be wearing them.

"Sam!" Kelly's voice called out from upstairs. It was a familiar-sounding voice, a tone of speaking between two people who were completely comfortable around one another. It pushed the vicious little splinter a little further from his mind as he felt, even more than before, a little like he was just a tinier bit closer to being home.

This time his house felt more relaxed somehow, like a tension had been lifted. He couldn't say what it was that was different. But certainly, Kelly's voice had a more laid back, less urgent tone to it than it usually had.

"I'm down here!" he shouted up.

He needed clothes. He followed the train of thought that led him to getting out of that house, to meeting Lilith, to eating a sandwich and saving the universe from a tear that might threaten to swallow the whole

thing up in an ugly black cloud of swirling darkness that randomly spat out insane, slavering, face-shredding monsters.

"I know you're down there!" she shouted back down. He knew she was smiling. He heard her footsteps on the stairs.

He felt nervous: his head swam; his stomach tensed. He felt like a teenager on a first date, and found himself wanting to run to the door, to fling it open and escape into the biting cold darkness beyond. If he'd been properly dressed, he might have done exactly that.

She descended into the living room dressed only in a blue towel that wasn't really quite large enough to be wrapped around her. She was drying her hair with another pink one, not really paying attention to him. "Did you order dinner yet?" she said. "That bottle of wine had better be open as well, or else you won't like what you get. And, you would certainly have liked what it is that you won't be getting!"

"Wine?" he said with a shrug. He was surprised to find that it was in his left hand, opened exactly as it should have been.

She laughed and gestured towards it. "Pour me a glass, you idiot. I'm not stupid enough to sleep with you without a fair bit of alcohol inside me!"

"Right!" he grinned. It took considerable effort to drag his attention from her near-naked body.

"Get a move on!" she told him firmly. "It's not often we have the place to ourselves!"

Sam placed the bottle onto the marble-effect surface of a breakfast-bar that separated the living room from the kitchen. His eyes suddenly fixed on a framed family photo standing at the end. It showed the two of them with a young unknown child. He recognised his face: there was no question who he was in this universe. It was the first time he found something obviously different. It was a reminder that this wasn't home, and while it was a slap in the face that pulled him out of his fantasy, it was a welcome one.

Kelly may be a different aspect of the same person, but this was a completely different child. The divergence must have been before he was born. How many other children did he have in the infinite universes that he'd never get to meet?

He lingered a little longer than was cautious before snapping out of it and hunting for glasses. He rummaged around through the cupboards, and it was almost a relief to find them where the coffee mugs ought to have been.

"Where is he tonight?" Sam asked, pulling out two glasses.

"With Rita and Paul!" she said slowly, glaring at him like he had lost his mind. "You just dropped him off!"

Sam froze for a moment. It had all been a little too much. He had relaxed and let himself get swept up in the moment—he had slipped.

"Of course I did!" he said quickly with a self-reprimanding grimace, disguising his uneasiness that he'd never even heard of those people. At least he had their names though: that was more than he could say for his own boy. He shook his head with frustrated resignation. "Sorry... You know how it is. Do you think he's alright?"

"Alright?" she chuckled. "He's watching stupid movies on a ridiculously expensive home cinema system, stuffing pizza into his face-hole and hanging around with his mates. In his little fragment of the universe, he's doing better than we are."

Sam smiled back at her. There was a little light that lit up in her eye as her face broke into a smile. It was her, he thought, in every way it *was* her—in every way except one.

"He's making me jealous!" he joked, trying to cover his obvious flustering. He hadn't seen her since his first, accidental shift. He'd gone to pains to avoid her, and seeing her again now was just too much. He hadn't been ready.

"Are you alright?" she said. She stopped rubbing the towel over her hair and just looked at him. She blinked and gave him a very

thoughtful probe. “You look like a very hungry man gazing at a totally helpless cardboard container of delicious takeaway food!”

He looked back. For a moment, he didn’t know what to say. She looked so beautiful just standing there: it was so easy to forget where he was, or more specifically, where he wasn’t. He looked away, a little sadly, and forced himself to focus on what was important.

“Sam?” she said softly, edging closer.

“It was a dream I had,” he told her with a tiny, hopeless smile.

“It’s been on my mind a little more than it probably deserved.”

She cocked her head to the side a little curiously as he continued.

“You know those dreams where you keep waking up, only to find it’s all part of the same dream? It was like that, but each time I was waking up in a different world. Everything was the same, but everything was just very slightly different too, often imperceptibly so.

“I was always me, you were always you, but we were different parts of ourselves. And these versions of ourselves never felt as real as the ones in the world we thought we came from.

“What if that was really true?” he asked. “What if one of us woke up one morning in the wrong universe: a different version of me with a different version of you. Would it be the same? Would either of us know the difference?”

“I don’t know!” she said softly, giving it nothing more than a shallow little shrug as she held the towel in place with her free hand. “There is only one real version of you for me. I would never settle for anything less.”

She was right; he knew she was right. He would be selling her short if he did anything but go forwards and fight his way back to his own, real, version of her. He would never do that to her. She deserved the best of him and he would give her nothing less.

“I have to pop out,” he told her flatly, his voice empty and hollow.

“What for?”

What indeed? If he told her the truth—the rest of the truth—would she even believe him? What if she did? She deserved better than that, this much he knew for sure.

“Dinner,” he said finally. “You know how the drivers are this time of night... Quicker to just get it myself. I won’t be long!”

She frowned at him thoughtfully. “OK,” she agreed. “Are you sure everything is alright?”

He looked at her sadly. He reached up and placed his hand on her shoulder. He smiled as best as he was able and told her, “Everything will be fine.”

For her, at least, he knew that was true. In an hour, none of this would have happened. It would be like he had never been there.

Lilith looked up sharply, roused from her thoughts by the sound of the metallic little chime of a bell as the café door opened.

Sam smiled at her and gave her a little wave. He pushed all thoughts of Kelly away, forcing himself to focus on the job at hand. He instead let thoughts of his work overwhelm him, something important to occupy his mind, to force the face of his wife back away and to blot out everything else.

Maybe that was all he was? Maybe he was the one leftover piece of Sam whose job it was to protect all the other parts? Was he just a cell in the immune system of his own wider body-system? If all he was meant to do in life was to suffer through his loneliness and the pain of separation from the people he loved, then he had shoulders broad enough to carry the burden: so long as that burden served a wider good. If his sacrifice protected the lives of others, especially his family, then he would gladly carry that responsibility until he stepped into his grave.

He wondered, very briefly, if he’d even have the luxury of a death.

If only he could know any of this for sure.

Lilith stood up, her eyes wide and urgent. She leant towards him, looking as though she was about to reveal something of great importance. Sam felt a rising wave of alarm and began to move faster, covering the distance between them with broader, wider steps.

“Cheese and onion!” she revealed with a tone of immense importance. “I got you cheese and onion!”

Sam grumbled to himself and rolled his eyes at her. “Cheese and onion is fine!” he mumbled.

“And lettuce,” she added. “And baked beans.”

“Right...” he said suspiciously, hoping against all odds that this wasn’t a single sandwich she was telling him about.

“Toasted!”

Sam sat down opposite her and pondered some of the recent choices in his life. There must have been a significant wrong turn that he’d made somewhere down the road. “Toasted cheese, salad and beans is fine,” he assured her. “A real man would struggle to go through life without the experience of such things.”

She sat back down, nodding gravely. “I know,” she agreed. “I *knew* you’d think that.”

“I don’t always say and think the same things.”

“Yes, I know that too!”

Chapter 38

Inspector Sandra Grace emptied the last dregs from the fourth mug of coffee she'd had in the last two hours. She gasped loudly, rubbed her temples, and blew out a lungful of air slowly through her teeth.

DC Simon Ahmed had been her second choice as a partner, and he was not a pleasant man. That unfortunately made a rather pointed comment about the quality of possible candidates she had had to choose from. She had never required that he should be pleasant in order for them to work together, but she was grateful that he hadn't been her first choice. That became more pointed every time she had to speak with him. Sadly, just such a thing was now unavoidable.

"The stupid old bastard probably just got himself drunk and collapsed somewhere in a ditch!" the young detective slurred in a South London accent. He flopped down into a chair that was sat just in front of her desk, though she preferred to think of it as a 'workstation.' He grinned to himself, leaning in over her files, pushing her well ordered neatness around without the slightest consideration.

She gave him a stern look of disapproval. "I'm not interested in your unfounded *opinion*, Detective Constable," she snapped, suddenly and sharply enough to shock him into sitting upright in surprise. "I'm interested in finding out what really happened! That is the job of detectives, after all."

She glared at him angrily, her eyes reflecting all the hatred she felt for him at that moment. He was a fairly awful person: young, arrogant, cocksure of himself and full of spite and hatred aimed at everyone but himself. What his personal history might have been, she couldn't imagine, but the culmination of it was probably less than the sum of its parts.

He'd joined CID a little too young, a little lacking in seasoning, a little undereducated. He had been swept up in a drive to normalise

diversity statistics by streamlining the promotion of underrepresented group members into key senior positions, and in doing so managed to have waived several of the usual requirements.

Although it annoyed her that he should be moved forwards, in spite of any drawbacks he might have in terms of inadequate preparation for his difficult job, she had been keen to work with him. She felt that the program was worth the effort, that opportunities should be equally available to everyone, regardless of race, religion or gender, and that this should be reflected in the numbers.

She had taken him out on several assignments to find out a little more about him, to form a more rounded opinion. She had grudgingly arrived at the conclusion that a pairing between them just wasn't going to work. Some people, no matter their race, religion, gender, or statistical distribution, were just *arseholes* it seemed, and there was no excusing it.

"I'm just sayin'!" he told her, slightly angrily with an inappropriately aggressive scowl.

She snapped again, "Well don't *say*!" This time it was a shout, an angry bark that plunged the entire office into silence. "Find out properly! I have no interests in guesses—I want facts. We have a missing officer who might be in trouble. I want every officer here doing twice their absolute best."

"What?" he cried out as if offended at being noticed for his poor and thoughtless behaviour. He got up, gave her a tut, and muttered something about the stink of fish-fingers and Brussel-sprouts under his breath as he rested on the back of the chair.

Another female officer came up behind him and said, "Simon, isn't time for you to have some of that water cleared out from behind your ears?"

He looked at her as though he wanted to smash her in the face. “Whatever!” he sneered finally, with an aggressive sneer as he stalked off. “*Women!*”

She sat down in the chair that had suddenly become vacant and flashed the Inspector a supportive smile.

Inspector Grace huffed to herself, silently seething in anger—that anger stemming from a very deep well of fear. “Thanks, Carol,” she said, trying to sound calm. With all that caffeine floating around inside her, *trying* didn’t seem to be working very well.

“Sandra...” she began haltingly. She looked around, checking if anyone was in earshot. Seemingly satisfied she continued, softly, “I know what you’re going through! I mean, I can imagine...”

She stiffened. “My partner is missing in action!” she told her firmly, but there was a heavy note of concern lying just below the surface of her voice that she couldn’t quite manage to completely cover. It wouldn’t take a detective to notice it. “I’m going through the very professional process of wondering where he is and what happened to him.”

Carol looked around once more. “I didn’t mean that,” she said softly, leaning in, craning her neck to get as close as possible. “I mean, *I know!*”

Sandra blinked and leant in, mimicking her. “What do you *know?*”

Carol sighed to herself and bit her lip. She could almost see her thoughts, the question of whether she was really going to make her spell this out was painted all over her face. “I know about you and Roach,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Sandra tried to remain calm, to keep up the pretence that she had no idea whatever it could be that she was talking about. She shrugged, looked around herself, making sure nobody was listening in. “What about us?”

"I know that you're screwing him!" Carol said, shouting out quietly in an annoyed, loud whisper.

That certainly dealt very nicely with the illusion of pretence.

"What?" she said, trying to sound outraged, or offended even. Surprised perhaps? Thinking better of it, she tried to pretend she was stifling a laugh, that this was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard? "Graham and I?"

Carol was nodding, staring back at her dryly. "It's *Graham* now, is it? Go on, tell me you're *not* screwing him?"

She lied, quite unconvincingly, "I'm not... *screwing* him!"

Carol just waited, watching her knowingly.

"Alright..." she relented angrily. "This goes no further..."

Carol crossed her heart, despite the fact that she was clearly not in the least bit religious. "Of course!" she promised, just as unconvincingly as Sandra's attempt at disguising it.

"We're seeing each other," she explained with a weary sigh, regretting every word of it. "It's pretty serious actually. It's been going on a while, I really..." she cut herself off and looked away sadly. She continued with a sigh, "I really... *like* him, OK?"

"Roach?" Carol grimaced as though she was hearing a joke, or something hard to believe, at least. "You *really* like him? You *really*, *really* like him?"

Sandra frowned defensively. "Why not?"

Carol held up her hand, palm outwards and sniggered to herself. "I'm not saying you two aren't a good fit together. It's just... It's just... he's *Roach*! You're *you*. I mean, how does something like that even happen?"

Sandra narrowed her eyes. "I know who he is!" she said haughtily. "I'm *screwing* *him*, remember!"

“OK!” Carol agreed with a furtive little grin. “It’s just, I’m trying to say that it’s pretty obvious. We’re detectives and you’re both horrible liars!”

She frowned at the suggestion and retorted proudly, “I’m an accomplished liar!”

“Maybe. Roach though is bluntly, blisteringly honest!” Carol shrugged. “The duty Sergeant asked him why he was late to work once and he replied that he had driven really slowly because he was still quite drunk from the night before. He’s that honest.”

Sandra smiled at what she hoped, for everyone’s sake, was just an inappropriate joke. “I like his honesty,” she said. “I like that for once I know where I stand with a man. He doesn’t hide who he is, he just is it. In a lot of ways you might look at us and think we’re nothing alike, but we came to realise that we believe in all the same things and share the same passions.

“I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to him.”

Carol’s face was more sympathetic. “I didn’t realise that things had gone that far between you,” she told her. “Why are you keeping it a secret? It’s not like it’s against the rules? Besides, everyone knows anyway...”

“It’s just better this way,” she told her. “Easier, anyway. When we started, I was going for a promotion and I didn’t want this cluttering up my chances. I didn’t want him to get in the way.”

“And now?” Carol asked.

Sandra smiled sadly to herself. “I was always going after promotions. I just defined myself by the title of my job. Now I don’t care so much about all that. I think I might actually have found what I was always looking for!”

Carol’s eyes widened in surprise, a silly smile fluttered on her lips. “Roach?” she gasped.

Sandra sighed, shrugged a little and said, “This place, this job... doing something every day that matters to people. Yes, Roach is a big part of that.

“All I know is that the fire that has always burned within me, urging me to always strive to be better... that’s pretty much gone out. I’ve found my rut, and I’m perfectly happy to stay right where I am.”

“OK!” Carol agreed. “So what I can I do to help?”

“You can start by not telling anyone!”

“Honey,” Carol said sympathetically. “There’s nobody left that hasn’t figured it out all by themselves. If it would help, I could promise not to tell Imanuela next time she comes in to clean the piss off the holding cell walls, but I think even she suspects something.”

Inspector Grace made a low rumbling, grumbling noise from the back of her throat. “Right!”

“I’ve got the GPS location from his phone. Do you want us to follow up on that?”

“Dead end...” said Sandra, frowning thoughtfully. “The last place his phone registered was a piece of wasteland. Nothing to see.”

“I don’t mean Roach’s phone!” Carol said cockily. “I mean the other guy: the one that gave him the anonymous tip. I don’t have the current location, but I can tell you where he was when he made the call.”

“Ahhh,” she nodded. “That’s something I hadn’t thought of. Good work. Follow it up and let me know what you find.”

“I’ll send the idiot!” she said, pointing her thumb over to Simon, who was wandering about the office holding a piece of paper, trying to look important, and fooling nobody.

Grace nodded. “Sure,” she agreed. “It’s not likely to be a good lead, but make sure he follows up on it properly. You never know.”

“Don’t worry: one of us knows how to do our job!” Carol told her, with reassuring confidence. “And on that subject, I know who it was

that assigned him to me as a partner. I need to find a way to thank you properly for that!”

Inspector Grace shrugged and gave an innocent little smile. “I can’t imagine what you mean.”

Chapter 39

Detective Simon Ahmed grumbled to himself. He clapped his hands together to warm himself up, although it wasn't really all that cold, even for someone who had grown up in a hot, Middle-Eastern country — which he hadn't. He was largely just being dramatic, riling in protest at having been sent out late on a job he thought was beneath him.

The night certainly wasn't warm, and it was getting dark, but the darkness still hadn't quite taken hold of the city, not yet at least. But to him, even at this relatively early hour, it felt quite cold enough: the air nipped at his skin and his lungs were burning with a horrible, tingling sensation as he breathed it.

"Bloody..." he muttered to himself, rubbing his aching fingers together.

The high street was still bustling, even at this late hour. It was around nine thirty, and the shopfronts glowed brightly: gaudy neon and backlit signs shone out, beckoning weary shoppers to their warm, comfortable interiors so they could be tempted to part with their money.

The detective looked at his phone. He grunted to himself and walked around, circling the area like an angry dog.

He dialled a number from his phone's memory and waited impatiently, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, looking around with a petulant scowl on his face.

Eventually, after too long a time, it connected. He snapped the phone up to his ear and huffed, "There's nothing here. This was a complete waste of my bloody time!"

He looked around and waved an arm about. "I'm standing right on the top corner of the high street!" he exclaimed, his voice rising in pitch as he yelled in protest. "I'm right on the spot where the call was made."

He listened, looking at the floor grumpily, paying only half the attention he should have been. “That’s what I’m telling you! It’s the top corner of the high street and there’s nothing here. There’s a couple of shops behind me, a library opposite. This is the pedestrianised end so there’s no cars up or down, just insanely boring people wandering about. At the time of day that call was made, there were probably thousands of people here: it could have been anyone! This is bloody pointless!”

He continued listening.

“CCTV?” he growled. “Are you joking?”

He shrugged and scowled, pouting with his lower lip as he looked away. He held the phone some distance from his ear as if someone down the other end was telling him off. He shook his head in dismay.

“Yeah, I get it!” he said, sounding sheepishly calmer. “I know a police officer is missing. I get how important that is. I totally understand. It’s just that I’m on the high street! It’s a busy spot right on the corner. None of the shops are going to have cameras pointing out onto the street! I mean, why would they?”

He listened again. He began to sigh to himself. “Yeah, that’s a good point...” he admitted in grudging agreement. “Might be worth asking around...”

“It’s not like I’ve got a bloody choice, is it?”

He nodded along as he was given further instructions. He screwed up his face, clearly not liking what he was hearing.

“Yes!” he shouted angrily down the phone. He winced at the sudden strength of his own reaction, regretting it. He began again, more calmly, “I understand. I know how important it is! *I get it!*”

He barely whispered, “Alright!” He hung up the phone and put it in his inside pocket. He drew air in noisily over his bottom lip and glared at the shops before him like they were somehow the problem, that his discomfort was their fault.

“Roach, you had best be dead, bruv!” he grumbled to himself. “You fat, old drunk... You better not show up tomorrow with a hangover and a funny story, ‘cos I will kick your damn vitamin D deficient arse for you!”

He looked once more down the row of shops.

There was a strip of grey concrete tiles with red brickwork along the edges made into a modern pedestrian walkway, but there was no disguising the tired, ageing feel of the street. The shops lining the way were made of crumbling bricks, signs were bent, chipped and rusting, and the glass in the windows was cracked.

There were three shops that might, potentially, have some kind of footage of the spot he was standing.

With a final grunt he muttered to himself, “Fuck it,” and began stalking off to the first of them. He buried his hands deeply in the pockets of a puffy, bright, electric-blue winter jacket with grey furry strips on the collar and cuffs. It warmed his hands to the point of barely tolerable.

He reached the door and pushed it open a little too forcefully. He made his way inside, sighing happily as the warm air wafted against his face. It was a mobile phone shop, painted in warm brown earthy colours, and the bright lights and the tang of electrical heat made life just about bearable once again.

He pushed past the only two customers, who were browsing the fake, hollow handsets stuck to the wall with wire alarm cables, and went straight to the counter, looking purposeful and businesslike.

Picking up on his direct and forceful approach, a girl in a green uniform looked up sharply, tucking her phone into her side pocket and smiling. It was an entirely fake expression, no more real than a plastic mask worn over her face might have been.

She looked a little concerned at the sight of him. He loved that look, that little glint in people’s eyes when he went straight up to them,

fired by his endless confidence and utter security in the fact that, as a police officer—as a detective—everyone knew that he was in charge. He could stand in the front room of someone else’s house, but it would be his world, and they knew it.

“Can I help you, Sir?” she said, casting a worried glance out through the back door to the staff area.

He fumbled for a moment in the inside pocket of his padded jacket. He pulled out a black leather holder and snapped it open, showing his police ID and warrant details.

“DC Ahmed—police!” he said proudly, but trying to make it seem understated, like it was nothing to him and he was beyond all that business.

She looked even more worried.

“I need to ask you a few questions,” he told her. “That’s all. Is there anyone else working here?”

She nodded and began waving out through the door. Two others stepped out, looking as concerned as she did.

“Listen up people!” he told them all. “There was an incident earlier today at around 11am. I need to ask you some questions about it.”

She nodded and a young man, painfully thin and socially awkward stepped forwards. His badge identified him as the manager. “Certainly!” he said, a confused look on his face. “What would you like to know?”

“Did any of you make a phone call outside at that time?” he said, pointing behind him to the street outside.

They all began shaking their heads. They certainly looked uneasy, but none of them appeared to be guilty, or were even close to panicking. They were just bewildered—that much was obvious.

“No problem!” he said, nodding to himself. “Can I get CCTV footage from that time, if you’ve got any cameras pointing out there?”

The manager shook his head apologetically. "We've only got two cameras, one on the door and one on the counter. Sorry!"

He tutted to himself angrily, even though this was exactly what he'd expected, and had argued this specific point with his supervisor mere moments earlier.

"Do any of you know of anyone that might have come in around that time?" he asked redundantly. "Was anyone acting strangely?"

The girl frowned and looked to the others. "How do you mean *strangely*?" she asked. "We had a guy in this morning who tried to eat one of the display phones. Last week a woman pissed on the floor."

"Again..." added one of the others.

He smirked and covered his mouth, trying not to laugh. "Clearly I *did* make the right career choices after all!" he said.

She smiled, flushed a little and looked away. He caught it, not with the eye of a Detective but with those of an experienced young man who knew when a woman was showing a little interest in him.

"Nah, I don't need to know about that. I'm looking for some seriously bad people. You know the type, I mean!" He took a small pack from his pocket and made a big show of pulling out a card with his name and number on it. "Don't worry about it!" he told them all and handed the girl his card, flashing her a toothy smile. "Just give me a call if something occurs to you, right?"

She nodded and flushed again.

"Call any time!" he told her and turned to leave. He flashed her a look back as he made his way towards the door. "Any time!" he mouthed and gave her a knowing little wink.

She stared after him as he went, a slightly embarrassed little smile on her lips.

Outside seemed colder than before, the wind more biting. He quickly sprinted to the next door and went to go inside, back into the heated interior of another shop.

He pushed the door, but it was locked. He took a step back, and grumbled angrily to himself. It was a shop he knew, where a group of socially-maladjusted young men sold video games to other socially-maladjusted young men, and sometimes to real men with proper jobs, like police detectives who were neither particularly maladjusted, nor very social.

He grumbled and banged on the glass angrily. At the far end of the store a man was working on the till, counting the takings for the day. He looked up, sighed and tapped his watch with an apathetic shrug.

He banged on the door even harder than before, hammering on the glass until it shook in the aluminium frame.

The man inside looked up and sighed wearily, since clearly, this kind of thing happened rather a lot.

The Detective slapped his warrant card and ID on the glass and yelled, "Police! Open up!"

The young man turned white, rooted to the spot in horrified surprise. After the near panic had let him go, he held up a finger for him to wait and began scrambling around under the counter. He snapped back up with a bunch of keys and began scuttling to the door.

"Sorry!" he kept repeating over and over as he fumbled with the keys, trying to fight his way past the lock.

Simon smiled to himself, letting his enjoyment of it all wash over him. He stood, leaning casually back against the glass, in an alcove leading into the shop, lined with cardboard cutouts, posters and displays of the latest merchandise.

After seemingly endless fumbling, the lock to the main entrance snapped open with a heavy clunk.

He pushed himself up from the glass wall and stepped inside, flashing his ID around, while the young man locked the door behind him.

Suddenly there was a flash, something dark that shot through his brain. It was like being smashed hard around the back of the skull. His thoughts were gone in an instant, clouded completely and blown away by a foul, black wind, leaving him reacting on instinct, nothing more than an animal.

Fear choked him as the light faded away into nothing, the darkness fogging him completely, on both sides of his senses. There was nothing but a swirling, coiling curtain of blackness draped over him and he was sinking, plunging, falling into it, dragged deeper and faster by a hook firmly entrenched into the soft grey matter of his brain

It carried on forever, soundless, without substance, as if time no longer had any meaning. It could have been seconds or years, both and neither passed in an instant.

For him there was only fear, fear that choked all reason from his mind, but something else was growing inside. There was a faint tendrill of something darker, deeper and more dangerous.

And then anger exploded inside him, a flower opening in the darkness and as it spread through his empty mind, it grew deeper and darker. Fear became rage, rage gave way to fury.

His hands reached out, not to find the edges of this infinite descent into emptiness, but to attack it. He needed to destroy, to kill, to escape.

He bared his teeth and threw himself forwards through the darkness, the substanceless vacuum that had no form. He reached for it, for the thing at the middle of nothing, that thing that it all seemed to be spilling out of.

He found it, and if he had any chance of escape, it had to be destroyed. He grabbed at it, not even consciously knowing what it was, just knowing that it had to be destroyed at all costs—it *had* to die!

He grabbed at it, snarling like an animal and plunged his teeth into it. Fuelled by the furious emptiness of fear, the terrifying all-

encompassing rage, he flailed at the thing, the vile, evil, dark monstrosity that had to be vanquished if anything else in the universe had the slightest chance to live.

The darkness began to melt away as light fell back into his eyes. He could see the spurting, raining showers of blood, feel the ragged breaths from his own mouth, hear the animal growling noises echoing through the inner sanctum of his tortured mind.

His fingers were twisted, contorted with rage, plunging deep inside a body, ripping, shredding into the flesh, powered by pure insanity, unreserved by any sense of human judgement.

He heard screaming; he heard gasping. He felt the fear in the room, the pain, the horror at what was happening.

He slowly found thoughts melting back into his mind. They must have seen this thing, this horrible, twisted creature, he heard himself thinking. He was a hero for slaughtering this terrible monstrosity; he had done a wonderful thing. These thoughts spurred him on and he gnashed his teeth still harder, biting and chewing until his jaws ached and the teeth in them were sore and bloody.

Light slowly filled his mind, washing away the clouds, clearing away the pure adrenaline, the animal instinct, the burning need to thrash against everything for the sake of his own survival.

He fell, exhausted to the ground, his heart pounding like a drum in his chest, his lungs heaving, his muscles heavy and strained.

He ached all over from the exertion and lay there for a moment. Bright white lights filled his eyes as he gazed upwards. Slowly he came to realise he was on the floor, looking up into the ceiling of a shop.

But he couldn't remember. It was like waking from a dream and watching the dream slowly ebbing away like a fluffy little column of smoke while he grabbed at it helplessly.

He hefted himself upwards, his hand sliding on the floor as he balanced himself. He looked down, confused as his mind desperately struggled to work it all out. Where was he, what had happened?

People were staring at him. He held out his hands which were coloured red with deep, thick crimson blood. The metallic, copper taste of it was in his mouth, the bitter tang ran down his neck and burnt inside his throat.

The people weren't just staring, they were awestruck, gazing fixedly in pure panic, pushing themselves up against the walls, eyes wide open in horrified fear.

He wasn't sure what was going on; he couldn't quite put it all together. His mind was furry, fussy, foggy and confused.

"What's..." he managed to breath, struggling to find the words. "What's... going... on? Where..."

He watched as a uniformed man looked around, unsure of himself, stepping forwards nervously. He seemed to be taking the lead, and he hoped he was coming to explain himself, to tell him what was happening.

Detective Ahmed saw something beside him. It was a bloody, shredded body, a man lying twitching and oozing his way to death. Blood, thick and heavy was pumping from jagged holes torn open in his flesh, flowing from gaping bite marks in his face, along his head and the pulped mess that had used to be his throat.

What was left of the face, the tattered remains of his identity made him gasp in shock. He felt waves of panic crash over him as he saw, what he knew without doubt was his own face.

"What?" he cried out.

The uniformed man edged forwards, drawing a pistol from a holster on his side.

A gun, Simon thought? What would a security guard be doing with a gun? People in shops in London never carried weapons. What in the hell was going on?

“No!” he cried out, and the last thing he heard was a series of roaring explosions as the gun fired over and over again.

Chapter 40

They sat in the police carpark, just taking a moment while Sam gathered his thoughts. He had rummaged through his pockets and the alcoves in the dash to find out who this version of him was, and what he had at his disposal. Sometimes there was very little he could use. At other times he was more fortunate.

Sam held his laminated ID in his hand and smiled. "I'm a civilian police consultant!" he said with a note of surprise. "This is going to make things so much easier. Usually the police hate me!"

Lilith nodded. "Most people hate you," she noted dryly as if commenting on some tiny, mundane detail.

He frowned at her, scowling a little, but nothing was going to make it any less true.

"Do you think it's really just because of your job, or is it something to do with your personality? Are you just a person that inspires hatred?"

Sam just looked at her evenly. Finally he said, "Probably a little of both, I would think."

She smiled, really quite uncharacteristically warmly and told him, "I don't hate you."

"I don't hate you either, even though you don't make that easy sometimes."

"You're all I have," she admitted in the same matter-of-fact way a person might reveal that they enjoyed breathing air.

He looked at her with a tinge of sadness. He knew she was right, of course, but had never really given it a great deal of thought from that particular perspective. He had always just taken her as a weak, desperate little thing with the power to destroy worlds locked up in the confines of her dangerous little mind. He felt the quite natural urge to protect her,

but really had very little power to do so. He was stuck in one universe at a time, while she crossed almost infinite ones, all the time.

He realised that, for the most part, that went both ways. “Well, it seems I’m not going anywhere, anytime soon,” he told her with a huff. “We’re stuck together for now.”

“But you will!” she told him accusingly, wrapping her arms around herself tightly and flashing him an angry frown. “You’ll find a way home eventually, and I’ll be all alone again.”

He looked at her sadly. “How do you know I’ll find a way back?”

“Because it’s what you do! You never quit! You do whatever needs to be done to put things right and you never back away from a challenge. It’s people like you that change the world, and people like me that watch you do it.

“I don’t much like being people like me.”

“Lilith...” he began to speak, but words escaped him.

“It’s alright!” she smiled. “I know you want to go back to your family, I understand that.”

“But you can’t go back to yours?” he said.

She shook her head and scowled. The scowl was soon replaced with a fake little smile. “No,” she said firmly. “My sister just wanted an ordinary life. She gave all this up and worked hard to forget it ever existed. My brother can’t walk this path into the world because his mind is just too small and it broke. My twin is too scary to think about, and my father...”

“He didn’t seem that bad when I met him?” Sam said.

“He’s a very bad man,” she told him firmly.

Sam nodded. He asked, “Do you think this will ever work out? Is there a way you can be happy?”

“You mean, if I could find a way back to my father?” she said with a scowl. “I would only want to go back so I could kill him, and my

brother and sister too. I just want to hurt them for what they did to me and for what they allowed to happen.”

She looked as dejected as he’d ever seen her. Under the low, artificial lights from outside and the dull blue glow from the car’s dashboard, this huddled, sad little thing looked like nothing more than a lost little girl, something broken and too damaged to put herself back together.

“I never asked to be made like this,” she said softly, her words barely more than a whisper. “I didn’t get a choice.”

Sam hadn’t heard her speak this way before and it worried him. There had always been a darkness inside her, some little black splinter of ice way down, piercing right through her soul. Sometimes when she spoke, the darkness would wash over her and she would become almost a different person. It worried him that someone with such power, who could be so dangerous, might wield that power unevenly.

“Well then it’s a good job that you *do* have me then!” he told her.

She smiled and her face lit up, flushing the sinister cloud that had cast a shadow over her away. “I have you!” she agreed happily.

“I’m going in to find out what I can find!” he told her finally, looking up to the front door.

“Can I come?” she asked.

He looked at her thoughtfully. Normally she was content to just sit around waiting for him, usually while she got something to eat. She certainly wasn’t dressed like an officer. Neither was he, come to that.

He was resourceful though: he was confident he’d come up with something. He nodded, and against his better judgement he said, “Sure. Just keep quiet, take your lead from me and do what I tell you to do.”

Sam headed into the CID offices with Lilith following along closely behind him, huddled inside her ill fitting clothes.

“Why are we here?” she said, looking around the tattered, peeling off-white plaster walls.

“Roach vanished from here,” he told her. “He must have left something behind, some clue. It doesn’t make any sense that the hole connects this universe to the one he ended up in. We have to find this hole: we have to find out how it works and where it is.”

Heads turned to look at them as he entered the office. He had dressed quickly, throwing on a black T-shirt and the first trousers he’d come across. Over that he was wearing a long, tan raincoat. Something was not quite right about his appearance and he well knew it.

Police officers in their own building, in their own offices felt secure, confident and safe. Walking into their territory gave him an air of respectability. They would never believe that a threat might make it this far into their inner sanctum.

Consequently, while he was gazed at with interest, there seemed little suspicion.

That’s when he saw her: Detective Inspector Grace. She was working away at a computer terminal, busying herself with whatever it was that was occupying her. She didn’t look up, she was too engrossed in her work, even at this late hour. She looked concerned; she looked like she was surviving on caffeine and fear.

Sam felt a pang of sympathy as he went over to her. Something about all this just seemed a little too familiar to him.

“Excuse me, I’m Detective Abbdon!” he told her, flashing his ID. He wasn’t sure what a civilian police consultant actually was in this particular universe, but he knew enough about how people worked to understand that they were all very much the same. She wouldn’t care as much about what he was as about what he had to say. “This is my assistant, Lilith.”

“Detective Inspector Grace!” she replied, gazing at his card and then up to his face, looking him over carefully, probably just out of habit.

“May we sit?” He gestured to a chair near her desk. Lilith, behind him, started dragging another one noisily across the tiled floor.

She nodded with a sigh. “I’m really very busy at the moment so whatever this is, can we keep it brief? If it could wait until the morning, that would really be much better.”

He nodded. “I’m looking into the disappearance of your partner, DC Roach!”

She looked up suddenly. He clearly now had the entirety of her interest.

“Roach?” she said sharply, almost accusingly. “What do you know about him?”

Sam sat down as Lilith finished dragging over her chair and throwing herself into it with reckless abandon behind him.

He shrugged. “I’m afraid I have more questions than answers at this point,” he told her. “I routinely investigate any concerning issues when an officer goes missing.”

“Concerning?” she said. It wasn’t really a question, and she openly shuddered at the sound of it.

“I know the circumstances,” Sam told her. “What can you tell me that I don’t already know?”

She looked at him accusingly, but suddenly, the look vanished as if it was never there. “Roach went to meet an informant...”

“An informant?” Sam said with interest. “To a piece of wasteland in the middle of nowhere? I’m having trouble with that part of it.”

“I know!” she said, rubbing her temples wearily. “And I let him go alone. He told me it was an informant he’d been working with for some short time. He had proven to be unusually reliable, but was very nervous about where to meet.”

“He didn’t seem unduly surprised or bothered about the odd choice of venue. He certainly never expressed any concerns to me.”

Sam had found something that interested him. Someone had led him to that spot, perhaps someone had done this to him deliberately?

“And you don’t know who this informant is?”

She shook her head.

“Isn’t that unusual for a partner?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you have known more about them?”

She shrugged and admitted, “It isn’t unheard of. We often cultivate our own sources. Those kinds of people can sometimes be very dubious about meeting officers they don’t know. Where possible, and if the leads are worthwhile, we usually indulge them.

“My feeling was that Roach was quite capable of making the determination of whether or not there was a potential risk and taking the appropriate action. He is a seasoned officer and quite capable of taking care of himself.”

Sam nodded in agreement. “Let’s hope you were right about that!” he said, staying in character and exuding the appearance of a concerned advisor. “You have a personal involvement? Is that correct?” he asked, pushing her out of her very polished, almost rehearsed routine. He wanted her reacting without thinking, not leading the conversation.

“What?” she blustered.

“Inspector,” Sam began. “If it has no bearing on the situation, then I have no interest in your personal matters. I do, however, know that you two are romantically entangled. Let’s not waste valuable time pretending otherwise.”

She glared at him angrily, peering out under a lowered brow. “It has no bearing!” she told him sternly.

He nodded, satisfied that she was now suitably off-kilter.

It seemed too much of a coincidence to him that Roach might have accidentally ended up being at the very same patch of off-the—

beaten-track land at the same time in two completely different universes that just happened to be connected by a completely random hole running between them. He continued, "What can you tell me about his informant?"

"He kept the details to himself," she sighed. "I know he thought he posed no threat. He approached Roach a month ago, leaving texts on his phone. He ended up agreeing to meet and said that it wasn't at all what he expected. He laughed about it and said that it was the oddest, least threatening informant he had ever seen."

"Male or female? Short or tall? Black? White? Asian? Do you know anything at all?"

"I presumed male, but now I think of it, he never actually said that it was," she told him earnestly, screwing up her face as she struggled to remember. "I know they met several times at a local café, and I know that every tip paid off."

"Right!" Sam nodded.

Although he couldn't tell her, he knew that something rather odd was going on. He knew that this version of Detective Roach had fallen into another universe and it was beginning to appear that someone had quite deliberately led him to that waste ground and had done so for a very good reason.

"Do we have any details of who made the call, asking for the meeting?"

She frowned and shook her head. "It was a burner phone: there was no name associated with the number."

"Right!" Sam grumbled. "And are you tracing the phone now? Have you tracked its current location?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Where was it positioned the last time it signalled the cell towers?" he asked.

“Wait!” she said suddenly, snatching out her mobile phone and dialling out. “I had an officer following up on that, Detective Mulligan. I don’t know if she thought to run the last known location. Wait there and I’ll find out!”

Chapter 41

Detective Carol Mulligan looked around the place, not that there was anything particularly interesting to see. It was dark, night had taken hold and the place was a different one to what it usually was. With daylight gone, a change had descended on the whole neighbourhood. A different kind of people occupied the streets, a different mood filled the air, and things looked subtly, but undeniably, not the same.

This person, this informant, had walked these streets several hours earlier, but now there was nothing much to be seen, certainly nothing that stood out.

She felt the buzzing, vibrating sensation of her phone ringing in her hand and she looked down to find an incoming call from Inspector Grace. She grunted moodily to herself and answered.

“Ma’am!” she said, slightly irritated at the intrusion. Frankly, she just wanted to fail, crawl into a nice warm pub with a nice cold gin & tonic and then go home to bed. “Of course I did!” she grumbled. “The phone is turned off now, but the last time it was turned on was about five hours ago, just down the bottom end of the same high street. No sign of anything now.”

“I’m just picking up Simon, and we’re clocking off for the night. There’s nothing else we can do tonight.”

She nodded, grimacing to herself about something she didn’t enjoy hearing and nodded along, rolling her eyes.

She secretly resented the Inspector. She was older and more qualified, and yet Grace had been promoted over her. It didn’t seem at all fair.

It wasn’t that she had even wanted the promotion—she had been prompted to apply for it by a senior officer, and had been surprised that she was even in the running for such a position. But after she had accepted that it might happen, she had found herself starting to want it to

happen. By the end she had realised that the only reason her name had made the list was for the sake of the list, and had never had any bearing on her interests.

“I sent him to check up on in-store CCTV while I tracked the phone,” she explained. “I know what I’m doing here. Nothing came of it, and frankly I didn’t think it would, but it was worth a try.”

She paced along the high street up to the shops she’d sent Simon to check on. It was cold, and seemed to be getting colder. The hour was late, the shops were closing up after a late-night shopping day, and the few people that were left were wandering round, drifting into cafés, low end restaurants and bars.

It was all very routine, as she had expected it might well be.

Whoever this resource was, they were nothing that stood out in a crowd. What did the average informant look like, she wondered?

She tried calling Simon, but her phone reported back that he was either out of range or his mobile was switched off. She silently cursed him, imagining he’d abandoned the search and headed off for a drink without her. Worse, he might simply have given up and gone home: it wouldn’t be the first time his arrogance had overwhelmed his better judgement.

She made her way up to the end of the row, breathing heavily as the biting cold air filled her lungs. She walked into the first of the last shops, a mobile phone store and flashed her ID.

“Police!” she said. “I’m looking for a colleague. He passed this way within the last hour.”

The young girl gave her a funny, almost embarrassed smile and pointed next door through the wall. “He went to the game shop!” she said, flushing red very slightly.

“Thanks!” Carol said reflexively, letting go of an angry huff that was barely audible as she turned and left, flinging the door open angrily.

She stalked to the next, already plotting out in her mind what she was going to say to him when she found him. It wasn't the first time—even that week—that he'd done something stupid, leaving the scene of an investigation without authority, tampering with evidence, failing to uphold the chain of command.

Why such things were winked at was beyond her understanding. He shouldn't be there, working among the more dedicated, professional officers. He didn't have what it took: he wasn't the right kind of person at all.

She pushed the door of the game shop but it was locked. With a grunt she hammered on the glass with the heel of her fist. She slapped her police ID firmly on the door so anyone inside could plainly see it.

A young man stopped and stared at her, seemingly stunned, and instead of reacting he just carried on looking blankly at her. She growled under her breath and banged on the door once more.

Another man, shorter and not as thin was standing behind him, looking equally bewildered. They looked at one another and the second of them suddenly dashed forwards, running to the door.

He twisted round the key that was already in the lock on the other side, and flung open the door. He gazed at her with a mixture of horror and relief, his face was bone-white, like all the blood had drained from his flesh. The other just stood there, gazing with an open mouth and a confused look on his face.

If she had to guess, she'd say he was in shock. She frowned at them in confusion: rarely did a police presence invoke such fear, and yet these two seemed close to panic.

"Police?" the young man behind the door gasped. "That was quick. We didn't even call you yet."

"Call us?" she said, not following along. She gestured for the man to take it easy. "Calm down! Tell me what's going on?"

“The other one...” he explained, without really explaining very much of anything. He closed his eyes, shook his head and tried again, “The other police officer. He was here. He just... *disappeared.*”

While she still didn’t understand the strength of their reaction or the depth of their concern, she was at least gratified that Simon had been there, doing his job. That was something.

“He disappeared?” she asked. “How long ago? Where did he go?”

The other man suddenly began moving, pushing past whatever the emotional blockage was that seemed to be so powerfully holding him in place. He was suddenly very animated, his arms flailing about in large, wide, theatrical gestures.

“That’s what he’s saying. He disappeared. He didn’t go anywhere. He just suddenly wasn’t here anymore.”

They weren’t making sense, or anything like it. She stepped inside and although she was starting to feel a little of their panic herself, she remained, on the surface, completely calm.

She spoke, softly, slowly to the man who had opened the door. “What’s your name?”

He swallowed hard and gazed up into her eyes, his own wide and fearful. “Mallory Gardener.”

“What happened here, Mallory?”

He looked around to his colleague. Turning back sharply he took a deep breath and explained, “He was stood here. One minute he was just standing here, right here in the shop. He told us he was police, which didn’t worry us or anything: we get a lot of shoplifters so police are always a welcome sight.

“He was talking, and then it went dark. At first I thought a lightbulb had broken. I looked up and they hadn’t: they were all working, but underneath everything was dark, and it was getting darker. It was like clouds of darkness were coming out of the officer. They were

coming *out of him*, like he was turning into a shadow, or being taken over by a hoard of them.

“He started growling and his eyes were just mad! I’ve never seen anyone look so deranged, so angry. It was like he was turning into an animal. He was growling, snarling and spitting.”

The other man stepped over, holding his head in his hands. “Then he was gone. Just *gone!* The dark black shadows were gone too, and he just wasn’t standing here anymore. Gone! There was nothing there.”

She was almost smiling, frowning curiously. None of this made any sense. “What do you mean *gone*?”

The first man, Mallory, nodded in agreement. “He just wasn’t here anymore. He wasn’t in the shop. He was just *gone*.”

She sighed and shook her head. “So he left?”

Mallory shook his head slowly. He raised his hand and pointed to the front with an outstretched index finger. “The door was locked behind him,” he said. “Nobody had touched it. Nobody touched it until you turned up. The door was locked: nobody went out, nobody came in.”

She looked worried herself now. She couldn’t help but feel a rising tide of panic growing within her. She looked at the horrified faces of the two men who were staring at her expectantly, desperately hoping for her to take the lead, to control the situation for them.

For now, she couldn’t even understand it. Whatever had happened, these two men absolutely and thoroughly believed what they were saying.

“He just disappeared?” she said, as if it was ridiculous, the craziest thing she’d ever heard. “Like a rabbit in a magician’s hat?”

They nodded in unison.

“Mallory!” she said firmly, fixing him with the most authoritative glare she could manage. “I think you’re telling me the truth, and I want to believe you, but obviously what you’re saying makes that very hard to do. So how about we check the CCTV footage together and see if we

can both build up a better understanding of what happened to my associate. Can you make that happen?"

"Absolutely!" he said, clapping his hands and nodding firmly. "It's..." he continued, gesturing out back with his thumb, before making a hasty retreat.

She turned to the other and began haltingly, "Tell me again exactly what you saw!"

He opened his mouth and froze. His eyes widened in alarm as he just stared at her. Slowly, his expression shifted, like it was melting off his face. He looked horrified, utterly terrified right down to the very core of his being.

She felt the cold, dead claws of fear tracing up her spine. His reaction was just too much, too extreme for him to just be imagining or remembering something. Fear turned to dread as she turned around. Behind her, two clouds, inky black shadows of darkness were opening up. In the corner of the shop, and somewhere off to the left, behind a display stand of the latest handheld console, a third patch of darkness was taking hold.

She gaped in horror as the shadows, with nothing casting them, darkened, swallowing up light and drowning the world in their presence.

"Not again... Not again..." he began muttering, backing away from them fearfully. His breath was ragged: he was beginning to whimper in terror.

She looked back over to him, to a deep area of darkness behind the counter, swallowing up everything in the depths of its emptiness. He looked behind, perhaps taking his cue from her look of abject horror that such things were possible. He collapsed to the ground in fear, huddled into a cowering, shuddering ball, his knees held up to his chest, his arms pulling in tightly over his head.

She wished that she had the good sense to join him. She would wish that again.

It felt like hours as the mere seconds dragged by painfully, threatening to rip the last lingering shreds of her sanity straight out of her. Fear washed away reason. Her police ID, useless and forgotten, hung limply in her hand and her telescopic baton and pepper spray remained unused in her bag. She just stared, gazing into the abyss as the three holes surrounding her opened up, darkened and swallowed up all the light in the room.

Then, dimly and distantly, she realised that they were *surrounding* her. The three holes were roughly equally distanced from her: they were spaced evenly and they were expanding. She was encompassed in whatever was happening. Whatever it was, there could be doubt that it was happening *to her!*

She screamed, a sudden, piercing squeal that shook her out of her panic. She was shocked at first, hearing her own voice crying out but then she dimly, distantly began to realise that this was a perfectly normal and rational response, perhaps the only response that a normal and rational person could offer?

She turned to run but the gaping maw of the three holes surrounded her and they seemed to almost be touching now, meeting up and surrounding her in shadows like they were made of a solid black mist that fed on all visible light.

Suddenly the darkness split open with a roar. Three black forms exploded out of them, one from each. Three twisted, enraged, vicious forms tumbled out, cloaked in nothingness.

She felt a powerful jolt and was tumbling backwards, her mind reeling, unable to keep up with the blur of pitch-dark movement.

Something heavy was on top of her.

Pain seared through her mind, as if something made of agony was crawling through her brain. She was so confused, so shocked by it all, the wailing, the snarling, the gnashing noises and the hands, twisted claws at their tips, that she couldn't make sense of it at all.

She felt ripping at her flesh as teeth and fingernails dug into her. She could feel someone chewing on her throat; she could hear her own heaving breaths, the last of her voice pleading for help in inaudible little ragged gasps.

She felt the pressure, incredibly blinding agony as something forced its way down. At first, she felt like it was crushing her. Something massive was slammed against her body, squeezing the very life out of her, but then, she slowly became aware of what it was that was really happening.

Fingers, long and slender, with sharp nails on the end were pressed down hard against her eyelids, forcing down with inhuman resolve. Her eyelids gave way all too soon and she felt a slurping, wet plop inside her skull as her eyes caved in. They exploded like a wave of pure violence had erupted inside her, washing away all thought and plunging her into an endless abyss of agonised panic.

She sunk into a pit of unspeakable, endless suffering as it swallowed her up, drowning her in pure pain. She felt the fingers pushing on, shredding into her. Movement, foreign and alien was inside her face, teeth were shredding her skin, chewing into her neck, ripping at her arms and even inside her stomach.

It was cold, she noticed. It felt almost like she was looking on now, although it was black where she was, and no light could reach her. Someone was hurting her, but it wasn't quite real anymore. All she knew was how cold it felt as she slowly, easily gave way to the ice running through her veins.

She couldn't fight it anymore, not when it was just so easy to give in, to just let herself go. She drifted on into the freezing darkness, not even aware that she was doing it.

Chapter 42

Sam watched, taking in everything, evaluating every detail. The Inspector gasped as someone gave her the news. He watched quietly from the chair beside her desk as she stood in the doorway listening, taking it all in. She looked horrified, confused and deflated.

He lent back and quietly whispered to Lilith, “What’s happening?”

She shrugged and he glared at her accusingly.

“You can see into all the other universes. Can’t you see anything interesting?”

“Like what?” she asked with a frown. “I’m not sitting here in a police station in all of the other universes. Not all of them, at least. I’m not omnipotent like my father.”

“Something’s going on!” he told her. He watched for a few moments more before deciding that it was time to get a little more involved. He was, after all, a police consultant: in this world he held some sway. He could push himself into their conversation with impunity here. He might do it in other places too, but here, he had a much higher chance of getting away with it.

He stepped up, gesturing at Lilith to stay in her seat for a moment. She didn’t. She stood up and began to follow him. He ignored her, relying heavily on his aura of authority and confidence that, so far, had ensured nobody had questioned her presence in this place.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, approaching the Inspector with a friendly smile but a look of concern. He tried to behave like a man who wanted to help, but one that she didn’t really have the power to refuse.

She turned to him, bit her lip and said haltingly, “There’s been an *incident!*”

“That sounded ominous!” he told her, his smile fading from his lips.

“We’ve had a report from a shop on the high street. Two officers are involved in a situation that we can’t quite make any good sense of. We’re still trying to gather the facts at this point.”

“Inspector Grace,” he began with a deep sigh. “I’m not a member of the press. Please be straight with me, as you’d like me to be with you!”

She shot him an annoyed and frustrated glare. It melted away almost instantly, and she huffed to herself, closing her eyes. “Sir,” she began. “Initial reports are that one of our officers has been killed in a violent altercation in a high street store. The second is missing.

“The details from the person reporting this are extremely confused: that man is reportedly in shock, utterly panicked. We have uniforms on the ground, securing the scene.”

Sam’s face never shifted. He said, very firmly, “I need the details.”

She shrugged. “Sir, our detective was attacked by three assailants and has apparently been ‘torn to pieces’ by them. The man is saying that she did it to herself, and there are four of them now.

“Our missing officer just vanished right in front of him.

“Sir, I should add that these reports are preliminary, and we don’t yet have an investigator on the scene.”

Sam looked away, frowning to himself. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully before turning back to her with a knowing expression. “The game store?”

The Inspector gasped and pulled her head back in surprise. “How did you...?”

He looked back to Lilith, frowning grimly and she looked back with her usual, slightly vacant expression. He wondered where she was,

right at that moment, what universe she was looking at, what exactly she might be experiencing.

He said to the Inspector. "We need to get there now!"

The scene outside the store was chaos. Everything was bathed in the eerie glow of pulsating blue lights as the flashing of a dozen different police vehicles blended into a flickering sheet of sickly illumination.

Officers stalked about, looking angry as they languished behind lines of yellow tape, and the hissing static chatter of radios filled the air.

Sam had expected nothing less. The death of an officer was something that would be taken very seriously. This time he left Lilith behind in his car: she simply raised too many questions that he didn't want to have to focus on finding answers for. He wanted his mind clear and focused on the task ahead.

It was a rare luxury to walk into a crime scene, fresh evidence laid out before him and people around, answering whatever question he might pose to them. Usually he scavenged for details, building a picture of what had really happened from the tattered shreds of evidence the police left behind.

It was a hard job but it made him harder along with it—it focused him. He was used to struggling, had become well versed in scratching at every detail until the truth reluctantly revealed itself to him. Having things come too easily might make him soft: it would take away the drive that made him strive to push himself further.

He stepped gingerly into the scene. Inspector Grace led the way, picking her way through every marked-out piece of evidence. Every spatter of blood, every tiny thing was taped off, under examination while officers in white overalls milled about diligently.

Sam followed, a respectful pace behind as he let her make her way into her own crime scene. Here, she had authority and he needed to respect it if he wanted her continued cooperation. His identification was

clipped to his belt, and the Inspector had vouched for him on the way in. He had made enough of an impression to have been accepted now.

“My god!” she said in exasperation.

The scene was one of carnage. Bodies lying under black plastic sheets were spread out across the floor. A large, almost black pool of thick blood was oozing out from under the first, the one in the middle.

To the sides were three more, each surrounded by wide splatterings of blood and little pink pieces of shredded flesh.

“What in hell happened here?” she gasped. She looked at Sam, her face begging him for an explanation, something to help her understand.

“Let me talk to the young man who made the call!” Sam told her softly, his voice low and even, calm and unemotional. He had put all of that out of his mind and the horror just helped to focus his thoughts, reminding him why all this was so important.

She bit her lip and rolled her eyes, struggling to remember.

“Mallory, I think his name is!”

Of course it was.

“We need to talk to him now. I want to know exactly what he thinks happened here. I want to hear his side of things.”

She gave him a needle sharp glare, and then asked aggressively, “What do *you* think happened here? I know you know more than you’re saying!”

Sam nodded. “I do!” he admitted. “We don’t want to corrupt the witness though. Let’s hear what he has to say first, and then I’ll explain what I know.”

“Oh you will, will you?” she asked. Then, more forcefully she asserted, “You’re damn right you will! I’m lead investigator on one of the most violent physical acts this city has seen in modern times. Me! I’ve got an officer down who has reportedly been torn to shreds by three assailants.

“My partner and another officer are missing as well. This has to be connected, and if there’s a chance that something like this has happened to them I need to know about it.”

Sam knew it wouldn’t take long until she made that connection. She had probably made it already, but hadn’t found the courage to test her convictions.

“Inspector Grace,” he began. “Time is a factor here. We both need to hear what Mallory has to say first.”

Mallory was in the staff office, a dingy little back room with posters torn from discarded gaming magazines adorning the peeling plasterboard walls. A table had been supplied, looking rather like it had been found in a skip and bodedged back into a vaguely serviceable condition. The three chairs in the room didn’t match one another, or the table.

He was shaking, quivering, struggling for every shallow breath he took. His pale skin was unnaturally white, his eyes were wide and gazed out fixedly.

Sam kicked his toe heavily into the wall outside as he stood lingering for a moment, just watching. Mallory jumped, his eyes suddenly wide, and he shifted his body back, twisting fearfully away from the sound.

Grace looked at Sam with a curious frown.

He said softly, too softly for anyone else to hear, “He’s in shock. Whatever happened here has made a powerful impact on that young man. I think we can clearly rule him out of involvement with the attacks.”

She nodded back in agreement. “I’m going to ask him some questions,” she said.

“Perhaps you should let me?” Sam suggested. “You were right, Inspector, I do know something that I’ve not been able to tell you yet. I was sent here for that reason, so please be assured that I am here to help.

“Perhaps it might be better if I took the lead, as I have an insight into this matter that you are not yet privy to?”

“You could just tell me what’s going on!” she sneered.

“Or we could do our jobs?” he said evenly. “Time is against me here. I’m asking you to please trust me!”

She sighed. “Take the lead!” she grumbled.

Sam nodded, without a flicker of a smile. This was no victory: this was just a step along the path that headed forwards and nothing more. He wasn’t the sort to dwell on such things.

He stepped inside, holding his hands out to the sides, showing his empty palms and smiled, as warmly as a man in his position was able. He took off his coat and made a point of discarding it casually on the back of the chair, opening himself, showing he was comfortable and ready to talk, hoping that the frightened young man would follow along, to some degree at least.

He helped himself to a seat, and gestured to the inspector to join him. “Inspector?” he said, offering her a place at the table.

Mallory watched them intently.

“Hello Mallory, My name is Sam Abbdon. This is Sandra Grace. We’re here to find out what happened, and make sure nothing like this ever happens again. But above all, we are here to help you.”

He realised that not a single part of what he’d said wasn’t true. Such was usually the case with the best lies.

“I’m Mallory Gardener!” he told them, his voice low, cracking as he spoke. He peered out defensively and crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

He was scared!

Sam followed along, crossing his arms over his own chest, mirroring the gesture as closely as possible.

“Something happened here, Mallory,” he began with a sigh. “The first thing that needs to happen so that we can deal with this, is to establish the facts. We can’t fix a problem if we don’t fully understand it.

“That’s where you come in! All we need from you is that you tell us what you saw. Don’t worry about telling us what we want to hear, just tell us what really happened, even if you think it might sound crazy.

“I live in a crazy world. Believe you me I’ve heard everything before!”

Telling Mallory something that he couldn’t refute, then adding entirely reasonable sounding instructions had helped him make a connection. He uncrossed his arms and sat back in the chair, flashing a warm, open smile. Mallory sighed and uncrossed his own, smiling back thinly.

The Inspector looked over to Sam. For a moment she looked impressed.

Mallory sighed deeply to himself. “It’s going to sound really crazy!” he warned.

“Not to me!” Sam assured him earnestly.

He looked up, bit his lower lip thoughtfully, and looked at the expectant faces of the two officers. “The first officer just vanished. He was standing there talking, and then there was a shadow: it came over him and he sort of disappeared into it. Right in front of our eyes, he was just swallowed up. Gone. It was just us stood there staring at the empty space.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, I can’t explain it.”

Inspector Grace leant forwards. “Perhaps a light went out and he walked away?”

Sam looked at her, frowned and turned his attention back to Mallory.

“No!” he insisted. “The door was locked, and there was nowhere for him to go. The lights were working—that was what was weird. There

was a fluorescent light-strip right above him and it was working, but right underneath it was a patch of darkness.”

The Inspector looked at Sam, confused.

Sam continued. “What about the officer that arrived after? What happened to her?”

Mallory shuddered openly. He began shaking his head. “She was standing there, almost in the same spot as the other man. It was different this time. Patches of black opened up all around her. Three that I could count. We could hear growling, snarling and animal noises.”

He looked up suddenly, as if remembering a detail. “The same noises were coming from the darkness that the first man went into!”

Sam nodded, “Go on, Mallory.”

“Three black shadows seemed to come out of the patches of black,” he said. “They all went for the woman, but not really the woman. If I had to say, it looked like they all went for each other. They just all started tearing into one another, and into the officer.

“I couldn’t tell at first what they were: people, animals, monsters. It was just a dark blur, and I was terrified. But it was her—it was all her! I could hear screaming and then I ran. I ran out into the back room right here. I locked the door and I phoned the police.

“I can’t even remember what I said. I know I was scared, really scared, but I went out to look. Once it was quiet I crept out. It was silent and I looked around the wall. There was blood everywhere, bodies lying in heaps. There was so much blood.”

“Alright, Mallory!” Sam told him. “That’s very good, you’re doing great.”

He smiled back thinly.

The Inspector looked at Sam with a confused look on her face.

“Tell me,” he said. “What’s your phone number?”

He looked at him, a little confused himself, but complied.

Sam looked at the Inspector. She realised what he was getting at and quickly checked her notes on her mobile phone. Could it be the number that had phoned Roach earlier that day.

She shook her head firmly. “No!” she said.

“Mallory, do you have the mobile phone numbers of the other people who work in this store?” Sam asked.

He shrugged and reached into his pocket. He took out his phone and began to check. “This is the Assistant Manager,” he said, showing them the screen.

She shook her head. “No,” she muttered.

Sam nodded to himself. He was beginning to form a theory now — this was coming together. He had a nasty, terrible feeling that he knew what had been happening.

“Mallory,” he began haltingly. “Why don’t you show us where you were when this all happened?”

“When the uniforms arrived, the door was open!” the Inspector said as they gingerly picked their way through the grizzly, blood spattered scene of human carnage. “We’ve found four bodies so far. The Assistant manager we know from his identity badge. We’ve got two middle aged women we haven’t yet identified, and our own officer, Carol.

“The reason we’re struggling with identifying them is that they’ve torn each other apart. Pieces of them are everywhere: they’ve chewed each other’s faces, necks and heads apart.”

“Our officer died after her eyes were pushed back into her sockets and her throat was bitten out. We’ve not found several pieces of her throat yet and they think that one of the suspects might have... *swallowed* them!”

“Nice!” Sam said sarcastically, his eyes darting here and there, taking in the scene. One thing was for sure, it was getting worse—far worse.

“You told me you’d have answers for me!”

Sam sighed to himself. He had indeed said that, but had never intended to actually follow through on it.

“Can we agree that something is going on here that’s quite a long way outside of your routine experience?” he said, surprising himself at this outpouring of honesty. There was something about her, something he didn’t find in a lot of people. She commanded respect, something he didn’t offer lightly. “You can’t understand what’s happening here if you only allow yourself to think in terms of what’s normal.”

She looked around at the blood-soaked bodies. “I think it’s very clear that something strange is happening here. I’m not afraid to admit that I am hopelessly out of my depth.”

Sam shuddered. “I’m not quite ready to admit that myself, but that might just be stubborn foolishness on my part.”

“Well, are you going to tell me or not?”

“You won’t believe me,” he said solemnly. “You’re not ready for it. Nobody ever is.”

“Try me!” she said.

Sam sighed to himself. After all, what did he have to lose? Soon he’d be shifting out, going to another universe, and would likely never see this aspect of her again. With a strong sense that he was going to bitterly regret this decision, he began.

“Do you seriously expect me to believe that?” she snapped at him.

“No, I don’t!” he told her simply. “I told you that you wouldn’t believe me just moments ago. But I can tell you something else that you’re not going to like.”

She nodded dubiously.

“Detective Roach is fine,” he said. “He arrived in another place—the world I just came from—perfectly unharmed. That’s why I’m here. But there is no way he can ever get back. You will never see him again.

“I can’t help you with that, all I can do is offer to give him a message for you.”

“What?” she said, covering her mouth with her hands. Her eyes reflected the emptiness his words must have brought to her.

“It’s a world just like this one: there’s another you, another everything. He can make a life there, and he will, because he has no other choice.”

“That’s crazy!” she said angrily, casting a worried look back to the office where she’d sat and listened to the story Mallory had told them. “You’re crazy.”

“Let’s assume for argument’s sake that I’m not. If there was no way for Roach to get back to you, but he could spend the rest of his life with another version of you, what would you say to him?”

Her face contorted into a growl, then softened slightly. Then it contorted again as she tried to hold back tears. “I’m not playing your games!” she said, her voice an angry snarl.

He took a look around and sighed. He had seen all he needed to see. He knew what he had to do, although he knew it wouldn’t be easy to do it.

“This is bullshit!” she added angrily.

“Check the DNA of each of those bodies,” he told her. “Keep the evidence to yourself until you’ve confirmed identities. Remember what I’ve told you, and then decide for yourself how to proceed. The answers are there and you’re going to find them. What you do with them is up to you.”

She scowled at him angrily. “I’ve got a dead officer lying here, someone I considered a friend, and you’re making up stories!”

Just then, her phone began to chime. She snatched it out of her pocket, checking the number as she did so—she cocked her head curiously. She answered the call, putting the phone on speaker. “Hello, DI Grace!”

“Sandra, it’s me!” the voice said. “Carol.”

Her look of anger softened, and then was gone altogether. She stared raptly at the body, her mouth beginning to hang open in surprise.

“Carol?!” she gasped, clearly recognising the voice. “But...”

“I’m not sure what’s happened,” the voice explained. “I’m in an alley, and I’m not sure how I got here. My phone doesn’t work, so I had to find a payphone. I’m covered in blood: it’s in my mouth, down my clothes, in my hair. It’s everywhere, and I have bite marks on my arms.

“I... *think* I’ve been attacked, but I can’t remember. I can’t remember anything...”

She looked up at Sam, horrified.

He nodded and whispered, “Check the DNA...”

“Sandra?” the phone persisted. “Are you still there? I need help!”

“Carol!” she frowned, seemingly lost in confusion.

“I have to go,” Sam told her. “Good luck, Inspector.”

“Wait!” she called out.

Sam turned, one last time.

“If this was true, I’d tell him to live his life. I’m a big girl—I’ll be alright without him!”

Sam nodded. “I’ve known you in many places, Inspector. I know that’s true.”

“Tell him I love him—I’ll always love him!”

Chapter 43

Sam stepped outside of the crime scene, passing through the front doors of the shop, leaving Inspector Grace and the horrendous scene of carnage behind him. It was a surreal place now: no longer did it have any any bearing on the real world. The place had been swallowed up by nightmares, where worlds had collided.

But it wasn't the collision of two universes, connected to one another by a tear in the fabric of reality, that had so massively impacted the place. It was the normality of a mundane high street store smashed into by the unreal world, and those who had to explain what had happened, but never could.

The place was surrounded by officers, a dark and sombre visage lit by flickering police lights and the bright white glare of tall metal hangers shining powerful glowing ranks of lights into the shop. The sounds of police radios made a cacophony of background noise as a dozen muted conversations were layered over one another, so it all became a jumbled blur of hissing, crackling noise.

He wasn't sorry to be leaving all this behind and heading out to a whole different universe. As a private detective, he often envied the powers of the police. They had the freedom to soak up the very best of the evidence, they had access to the best information, they cast the widest net. In his position, he had only his wits and his tenacity, seldom very much more. He had to be a man who wouldn't quit, one who would get the job done against the odds that life seemed determined to throw at him. If he hadn't been, then he wouldn't have lasted this long!

Now with the cold, bright lights on him, the chaotic blur of activity all around him, it all seemed far less easy. He often walked in their world, but he had never lost sight of where he came from. He wasn't a policeman, and never truly would be. He just hadn't been made that way.

He crossed past the yellow tape and out, passing the guarding officers who gave him no more than a disinterested glance before looking away. He carried on out, the flashing blue lights now behind him and the crowds ahead as he paced purposefully onwards. Huddled people stood watching, gawking at the scene, perhaps hoping to score a glimpse into whatever grizzly secrets might be kept inside.

Some might be press, he thought. He wondered if the true story might ever be told in this world. Would Inspector Grace allow the DNA records to be made public, revealing that the attackers were the same person as the victim, and that the victim was lying dead on a slab in the mortuary and had also been found alive, confused and bloodied in some urban alley that went nowhere?

What would people do if they knew that? What might happen to this world if people knew how flimsy reality really was and how far the cracks went?

He dug his hands into the deep, warm pockets of his raincoat.

She would probably write it off as contamination, erroneous test results. Mistaken identity on the parts of the witness would explain away the rest. She might blame drugs, some other motivation for the ferocity of the attack and leave it at that, covered up quietly and forgotten about.

As he pondered this, he found that he wanted to know what would happen. It was his nature to know, but it was a fact of his existence that he never would. He must shift again soon, travel from this facet of reality to another, leaving this version behind him forever. It was who he was, merely a shadow passing across the face of eternity, and his life meant nothing more than that.

Somewhat surprising him, a young officer stepped up beside him and said, "Sir?"

He frowned back and asked, "Yes, officer? What can I do for you?"

He was a younger man, cleanly shaven, and looked like he wasn't really suited for police work at all.

"I wouldn't trust her, Sir!" he said, very matter-of-factly and not at all the way a fresh young constable might address a senior consultant. He had a certain smugness about him.

"What?" Sam said in surprise.

"She's not to be trusted," he told him quite firmly. He smiled to himself. "I was wondering if you'd got the message yet, and I was concerned that maybe you hadn't."

Sam just stared for a moment, gazing into the eyes of this ordinary young man who was behaving so out of character that he was having difficulty making sense of exactly what was going on. His body language didn't fit, his words carried a mature weight, and he spoke with a sly authority.

"Who are you?" Sam asked, and as he said it, it suddenly made sense. Who else could it be?

He smiled to himself and his smile split into a wide, condescending grin. "You know who I am. After all, *who else could it be?*"

Sam shuddered to hear his own thoughts coming out of this person's mouth, for the second time that night. "What do you want?"

"Samuel, my existence has elevated to a degree such that the very conception of what I wanted would be too alien for you to comprehend, even if I dumbed it down sufficiently that a dog might be able to follow along."

"Well, presumably you have a reason to be here that a simple human like me can understand?" he suggested. It had been a long day and he didn't have the patience anymore. Maybe he really was just a very bad man?

"Just checking up on you," the young man said, casting a little glance over to where Sam had parked, and while it was very quick and

subtle, Sam caught it. “Don’t trust her, Samuel. I gave all my children a gift: I tried to make them able to walk the universe in the way I do. None of them seemed able, for one reason or another.

“How interesting that the only true failure of my life was in attempting to create something superior to myself! What a perfectly fascinating paradox!”

Sam glared at him fixedly. “Don’t you achieve the creation of something superior to yourself just before you flush the toilet every day?”

He smiled back in amusement. “How very basic of you!” he said. “So very human still, Samuel. I had hoped that shifting around might improve you in some way. I hoped it might elevate your consciousness, make you smarter, sharper somehow.

“And yet here I find you making toilet jokes like a desperate comedian, working a pub audience on a slow midweek evening, scratching for a titter from the shadows!”

“If you have a message, please deliver it!” Sam told him. “If you just came here to annoy me, then you can consider your mission accomplished.”

He lent forwards and whispered, “I already did.”

Sam’s brow furrowed thoughtfully. “What?”

“What?” the officer asked back. “I’m sorry, Sir! What?”

It was gone, the presence that lit up the man’s eyes, that made him stand a little taller, that made him speak with authority, the wisdom. It was gone like the flick of a switch had turned it all off.

“Nothing,” Sam told him, slapping him supportively on the arm. “It’s just been a long day.”

“No problem, Sir!” the young man replied, catching a glimpse of the ID displayed on his belt. He snapped up straight.

“Thank you officer,” he said.

The car rolled quietly over the uneven road. The grey tarmac was now lit by the mixture of sickly yellow street lamps and the beaming blue-white glow of his headlights. The surface was rutted in parts, broken up and falling away.

“I need to shift back!” Sam told her. His voice was quiet, almost distant and he quickly snapped his attention back. “As soon as I get to the office, I need to go. I can’t risk waiting too long. I have to shift forwards.”

She looked away blankly for a moment. After a long pause, she said, “He’s there. You can go straight back.”

“Is everything alright there?” he asked, sounding worried.

She looked at him thoughtfully. “Everything is fine. Sam there keeps asking who we are and keeps grumbling about someone drinking his whisky. Nothing serious is happening. I told him we’re clients and we’re just waiting for our business partner to come back and begin the meeting.”

“We’ll be about ten more minutes,” he said.

She looked up at him with an oddly supportive look on her face. “What’s wrong?” she asked softly.

“I think I know where the hole is,” he said. “I know how to close it.”

She flashed him a reserved smile. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

He flicked on the indicator and guided the car into a left turning. “It’s good that I know where it is and how to fix it. It’s the fixing it part that isn’t going to be good.”

Sam parked up, slowly dragging his heels over every detail. He made his way up the stairs, taking each one carefully, thoughtfully, as if his mind was occupied and his thoughts were firmly elsewhere. Of course, that’s exactly where they were.

He was dealing with something that he'd never dealt with before, something he had never hoped not to have to deal with, because it had never occurred to him that it was something he might actually have to.

"Samuel, what's wrong?" Lilith asked from behind him.

"I'm fine," he told her. "I've just got a lot on my mind. Don't worry, I'll tell you all about it soon."

They finally came to the office door. He took the keys from his pocket and swung them around his finger. Catching them, he took out the one that unlocked his office door. He stared at it for a moment, just gazing raptly at this completely mundane and ordinary thing. It was a brass key, no different from any other brass key anywhere in almost any world. It looked to him to be identical to any time he had held this particular key in any hand he'd held it in.

It was nothing but a symbol really. His office door was a light, wooden construction. A good kick towards the handle would send it crashing open, splintering the lock away with ease. The key just represented a choice. It was a barrier that only really meant something in your own mind. It meant almost nothing in any real terms. That was how shifting worked, of course.

"I just have to overcome this locked door," he said softly.

Lilith, behind him, nodded in agreement.

"Then I can go inside, align myself physically into the position of my other self, and can then shift back to the other universe. That's really all there is to it, right?"

She nodded again. "We've done this many, many times," she said. "You should know how it works by now."

"I do!" he smiled thinly. "That's how I figured out what's been happening."

With that rather cryptic remark, he slid the brass key into the circular lock and twisted it until it clicked open. He pushed the door and stepped inside, flicking on the lights by reaching out to the side and

running his hand over a pair of plastic switches that he knew would be there, with a strong sense of familiarity. The fluorescent tubes flickered and grumbled to life, flushing away the darkness.

Sam sat down heavily in his chair, behind this version of his desk. It was all very much the same. He reached into the drawer and pulled out a bottle of liquor that was always there. The sight of the label brought a smile to his face. This was the good stuff. Being a police consultant brought in a little more money, it seemed. He could afford to push the boat out.

Sam poured them both a large, hearty glass. "Have a drink!" he told her, pushing a glass across the table.

"Dutch courage?" she asked as she looked at the glass, almost filled to the brim. She scowled disapprovingly thin-lipped.

"Who cares?" he sighed. "By the time this alcohol hits my brain, I'll be living inside another brain. None of this matters, not really."

"What does matter then?" She picked up the glass, not disapprovingly enough to not take a drink with him, it seemed.

"Ultimately, only *I* matter." He picked up the glass, held it in front of his eyes and just stared into the dark brown liquid. "What I take with me is what matters. The choices and the actions I make change me as a person, and only that person matters. Only that person really exists, perhaps?"

"I have to do this in the hope of finding my way home, but really, maybe that isn't the reason I do it. Maybe this is all really because *I have to*? I have to know I'm helping—I can't go through life and see a problem without getting involved and trying to make it better. Perhaps it's just who I am? Perhaps there's nothing else any more complicated to it than that?"

"Nothing else?" she asked.

"I *have* nothing else," he smiled at her weakly. "It's just you and I, floating around an infinite world where everything is the same and nothing really matters."

She drank the whisky, shooting the whole glass back in one with no enthusiasm, no bravado. She drank like it was a glass of lukewarm water, like it meant nothing to her at all.

He sipped and said softly, "It's time to go."

White light flashed inside his head. The shift was a subtle one: he was sitting there one moment with a glass in his hand, and then the glass was gone. He was still sitting, but his legs were suddenly crossed. It felt rather like daydreaming, losing yourself in a good book and then being distracted by a noise and finding you'd moved more than you realised, only with a crippling headache and a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach.

The pain passed quickly, the headache subsided into dizziness, and then it was gone altogether. The closer he was to his other self during the shift, the less pain there usually was.

He stood up, shaking his head and rubbing his temples.

Mallory was looking up at him from a chair on the other side of the table. Lilith was sitting in the same chair she'd been sat in when he'd shifted back.

"Sam?" Mallory asked nervously, sounding distinctly unsure of himself.

"It's me!" he told him firmly. "I'm back."

"Did you find anything?"

Sam nodded and looked away to the window. He stared out into the cold, dark night grimly. "I found what I was looking for," he said.

A shallow smile fluttered over Mallory's lips. He breathed a theatrical, animated sigh of relief. "You found the hole? You know how to close it?"

"Yes!" Sam told him. "I found it."

“Where is it?” Mallory asked enthusiastically. “How do you close it?”

“I’m sorry, Mallory,” he said. He spoke wearily but with a strong sense of resolve.

“What?” He shrugged.

“It’s bad news I’m afraid,” Sam began with a deep breath. “The hole is *you*. You’re causing this to happen.”

“Me?” he gasped. The colour drained from his face and he recoiled back, pressing himself into his chair. “But...”

“And there’s only one way to close it...”

Chapter 44

Mallory felt lightheaded, his stomach knotted inside him. Sweat prickled uncomfortable on his head, down his back and arms. His throat was dry, and he peered out with wide, fearful eyes, gazing at Sam fixedly.

“How am I the hole?” he gasped. “How can a person be a hole?”

Sam sighed to himself and looked away, as if trying to avoid having their eyes meet. “When I shift, it requires that the two versions of me are in the same physical space in both worlds. I overcome a barrier, and it has to be dark. Those are the rules I have to work with.

“The rest is in my head. It’s subtle details like knowing that shifting is possible, and knowing and understanding where I am, and wanting to be in the other universe.

“Every one of the shadows that attacked people followed the same pattern. There were two versions in the same place in different universes, and one of them had passed a lock, overcome a barrier. The only difference was that it was bright in each case—I need darkness to shift, this one needs light.

“The only other factor was you! In every case, there was a connection to you that made the relocation possible. Even the missing drunk was going through your bed. In every instance, you were the connecting factor.”

“All versions of Mallory?” Lily looked accusingly at him.

Sam shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I think it’s just this one, or at least it started out that way. It’s getting worse, though—the problem is growing. It’s like a wound that needs sterilising and stitching up before it rips open the whole world.”

Mallory found the courage to ask that one question that had been scuttling around his brain, burning at his tongue until he dared to speak the words. “Are you going to kill me?”

Sam took a moment to just gaze out of the window. He gave a deep sigh and walked back to his desk. He sat down heavily in his chair and sat for a moment in silent contemplation, rubbing his chin and gazing raptly forward: not at anything in particular. He opened the desk drawer, slowly and deliberately, and took out the last of the whisky. He poured them each a drink, and passed the first to Mallory.

“It’s not death, at least not in the way you think of it,” he explained. “You’ll close your eyes on this version of the world, and open them in the countless others that your consciousness resides in. You won’t notice the difference. The larger version of you will dismiss all this as a passing thought, an imagined idea, a dream, nothing more.

“You won’t cease to be; you won’t go to an afterlife, a heaven or a hell. You’ll still literally be alive, and will carry on normally for the rest of your life.”

“But I don’t want to die!” Mallory protested, crying out in frustration.

Sam took a sip of his drink and swallowed hard. “I don’t want to kill you. Nobody is saying that this is fair, or that you deserve any of this.”

Mallory glanced from one to the other. “This is insane!” he yelled.

Sam and Lily exchanged looks. He said, “Listen! People are dying. *You* are killing people. I know that none of this is your fault, but the fact remains that you’re incredibly dangerous, too dangerous to be left alive.

“I take no pleasure in this: I have never killed an innocent man before.”

“Yes!” Mallory protested, his mind grasping at any shred of sanity he could find as he felt himself descending helplessly into this madness. “I’m *innocent*. I never hurt anyone. I didn’t cause any of this!”

“That’s not true, Mallory. You *did* kill a man!”

“No!” he whispered, shaking his head. He hadn’t, how could he? This was madness.

“This all began for you when you walked into your house,” Sam explained. “When you overcame the barrier of your front door, something else came into your house with you and murdered your parents. You ran to the waste ground in blind panic. It was a safe place you used to play as a child, a place you knew nobody would ever find you. In this universe, a version of you was already there. In yours, you got past another locked gate.

“When that happened, Mallory, you shifted universes. You came through to this one.”

“Yes!” Mallory agreed. It all sounded perfectly reasonable so far, although his memory of it was clouded, fogged by the sheer panic he had been experiencing. It was all so hard to really remember it. Memories and ideas blended together until he just wasn’t sure what was really real anymore.

“You were sucked in, and when that happened you became one of these shadows,” Sam told him, plunging his mind into silence. He could only listen now, blankly taking it all in. “It was you that attacked the other Mallory, the one we found dead. You killed him, ripped his throat out of his neck with your bare hands, your teeth and your animal rage.”

Mallory smiled as if this was a joke. The words washed over him, like he was watching it all happen. It had to be happening to someone else. “But...” he whispered.

Sam drained his glass with one more long drag. “I don’t know what causes the rage!” Sam admitted. “Maybe it’s the act of physically shifting causing a mental instability that drives you temporarily crazy, perhaps?

“Maybe it’s worse than that: maybe humans are designed to behave that way? Maybe it’s built into us instinctively? We can’t allow

two versions of ourselves to exist in one universe, so we feel an overwhelming drive to destroy one of them?

“I don’t know!”

“I killed him?” Mallory muttered softly. “I killed Mallory?”

Sam shook his head. “We’ll find a painless way to do this, I promise,” he told him, sounding like this was a heavy burden and he was struggling to carry it. “Nobody blames you for any of this.”

“I’ve seen people die!” Lily told him. “It’s nothing. They just leave one universe and carry on in all the others. It doesn’t change anything. It won’t matter to you at all.”

“But I’m not dangerous!” he told them weakly. “I don’t deserve any of this!”

Sam continued, “I went to the universe that Detective Roach came in from. They went to your shop to ask questions. One officer vanished into a ball of shadows, and another went looking for him. She was attacked by three other versions of herself who tore her apart and killed the people you worked with, presumably just collateral damage.

“Nobody is saying you deserve this: we’re saying that it’s happening and it needs to stop happening. It’s getting worse Mallory! The hole is growing bigger—you’re getting more powerful.”

Mallory hung his head. He put the glass awkwardly down onto the desk, not a sip taken from it. He felt like someone had torn reality right out of him and only emptiness remained.

He said, with an awkwardly inappropriate smile, “I feel sick!”

“It’s getting worse?” Lily said.

Sam nodded at her. “It started with this version of Mallory but it seems like once the hole was torn open into another universe, the one there becomes a part of it too.

“I don’t know how else to explain what I saw in the last world.”

“I need to go to the toilet!” Mallory said suddenly. “I think I’m going to throw up!”

He got up, his chair pushed back across the floor noisily. He didn't care enough to even notice. He staggered off to the bathroom, his mind reeling under the weight of it all. How could this be happening? How could he, an ordinary man who sold video games, be dragged into a world of dangers where the only way to save everyone was to have himself killed?

And what was it the universe expected from him now? He had to quietly close his eyes and let a man choke the life out of him while Lily looked on with that curious, interested expression she gazed out into the world with. He always wondered what she was thinking, what it might be like to see everything but to be part of nothing?

He turned on the cold tap, catching the bubbling water in his hands and throwing it up to wash his face. Somehow the cool water helped: the sharp touch of the icy winter on his skin sharpened his mind, making the world seem just a little bit real once again.

He looked up from the tattered old ceramic sink to a chipped mirror screwed to a wall above it.

For a long while he just looked into his own face, staring deeply into his own eyes. He didn't deserve to die: nobody deserved to die for something they didn't do, something they had no hand in.

Who was Sam anyway? What right did he have to decide something like this? What gave one man the power to decide such things?

This was a story: it was guesses based on things that Mallory had never seen, that nobody else had actually witnessed with their own eyes. For all anyone knew, that man really was just crazy and this was all some twisted fantasy. How could anyone really be sure of anything?

Mallory glared at his own reflection, angry at himself for letting all this insanity go so far.

With a sigh, he looked out to the side, wrenching his eyes from the mirror. He stared at a window, a window with a fire exit beyond, a

metal set of stairs leading out to the ground. It was a window easily large enough for a grown man to fit through.

Chapter 45

“How are you going to do it?” Lilith asked, as if it was nothing of any great consequence. She may as well have been discussing the weather for all the emotional weight she assigned to the subject. “We could make him swallow a car, or hit him with some drugs. We could even do it the other way round? That might even be better!”

Sam looked at her and rolled his eyes in dismay. “I don’t know. It’s got to be painless: Mallory hasn’t done anything wrong, after all. Something quick, where he isn’t too scared, and where nothing can go wrong.”

“Do you have a gun?” she suggested. “A gunshot to the head is probably best, isn’t it?”

Sam looked down, and began rifling through the drawers. He shook his head and said, “No, I don’t. Guns are usually illegal in England: I’ve not been to many places where they’re freely available.”

“But most versions of you have one tucked away somewhere...” she reminded him.

“They do?” he asked, stiffening and sitting up straight in his chair. “I didn’t have a gun in my universe!”

“You were probably just weak back then,” she told him. “You had a hiding place though, didn’t you?”

He grinned and got up from his chair. He made his way to the corner of the room to where a small metal grill vent was screwed to the wall. He ran his nails along the edges and pulled it forwards. Sure enough, just like back home in his original world, the grill slipped forwards easily. He rummaged around inside, stretching his arm in to where a number of bricks were missing, off to the side. He forced his fingertips inside and edged around, fumbling in the darkness. His fingertips felt the course, dry cloth of a heavy bag.

He smiled broadly and pulled the bag out through the vent, dragging it through with a grunt.

“I found something!” he said. It was heavy, and had a solid and welcome heft to it.

She was right: a gunshot might be the kindest, safest way to do it. Mallory need never know it was coming. It could be a swift shot to the back of the head and he would be plunged into darkness, his brain destroyed in an instant, not able to experience pain, suffering or anything else or any kind. It would just be over, like someone simply turning off a switch!

She stood up, stepping haltingly towards him, craning her neck to see what he had. “Is it a gun?” she asked with interest. “You usually have a 9mm Browning Hi-Power.”

He gave her a suspicious look, at her sudden and unexpected knowledge of firearms.

Dragging out the contents of the bag, he looked at it with a mixture of disappointment and pleasant surprise.

“It’s a ‘*Braes of Glenlivet*,’ a 30 year old single malt!” he said. “I suppose I could batter him around the head with it?”

“Is there nothing else?” she said, looking really quite annoyed.

He looked inside, peering inwards curiously. He pulled out a large wad of money sealed in shrink-wrapped plastic, and a handful of mixed passports.

“The version of me in this universe has a bit of a dark side!” he commented dryly.

She crossed her hands over her chest and glared in thin lipped annoyance. “Not dark enough,” she grumbled.

“Could you do it?” Sam asked, pointing his fingers in the way a child might if he was playing shooting games with his friends. It was simply a question, not necessarily a request for help. The responsibility was his after all.

She simply nodded. "Of course," she said. "You told him that it means nothing, this version of him is just a tiny piece of a greater whole. You say it, and maybe you even believe it, but I know it for a fact, where you sometimes don't.

"The death of this version of Mallory will have no greater negative consequences to the universe than picking a single blade of grass might have to a garden."

"Eloquently put!" he told her, discarding the money and passports into the desk drawers, and pouring them each a glass of the really good stuff. "But it's harder for those of us with actual morals."

"It's only hard in your mind!" she sneered. "I have seen a universe where you were a murderer, Sam. You were a killer for hire, and you were good at it. You shot a man right in front of me once.

"You were told to make a point, to kill him so that everyone would know he crossed the wrong people. You screwed a silencer onto your pistol and fired a single round up through his anus. He writhed around in agony, bleeding profusely, unable to breath, unable to stand, while you just stood there laughing.

"You shot him on his own bed next to his wife, and then you threw him out of the first floor window to die, lying in the gutter with two broken legs.

"You killed his wife straight after with two shots to the head, and then went out for pizza. It had pineapple on it!"

Sam just stood there, gaping in surprise, his mouth slightly open as he just stared at her. "Pineapple?" he mumbled. "That's horrible!"

"That was still you, Sam. There's a part of you capable of that. There are many parts of you capable of that, and capable of far worse. I've seen them all!"

Sam's mood darkened.

"But I would never..."

“You did!” she told him. “And it was you, Sam. It was all still the real you, just separated out by a different set of experiences: the same person following a slightly different path. It doesn’t take much of a push to completely change a person!

“It didn’t take much to turn you into a monster.”

He really didn’t have much to say to that. He sighed to himself, thinking, pondering the idea that this same kind of cold, vile malice could possibly be lurking inside him. “What’s the worst thing you ever did, Lilith?” he asked, regretting it as soon as he had said it.

She shrugged. “I once ate you,” she told him. “I was *very* hungry.”

He stared at her fixedly. “Was I already dead?”

“No!”

He muttered something under his breath and looked away.

“I recommend suicide!” she told him, with a horribly upbeat smile. “Mallory has a family here. Dealing with the idea that he killed himself will be easier on them than believing he died in violence. They already know and accepted that he’s been acting wildly out of character. The police will believe it too, for the same reason.

“We have to do it in such a way that the version of you that lives in this universe can continue his life too. We need to make the very minimum impression on this reality. Suicide is the best way to do that!”

Sam sat himself down, shaking his head at her. “You’ve clearly put a lot of thought into this.”

“It’s obvious!” she told him. “You know I’m right.”

He sniffed and looked away. “I know that what you’re saying is correct, but that doesn’t make it right!” he said. “We’re talking about killing a completely innocent young man with the casual disregard that someone might use if discussing flushing a dead goldfish down the toilet.”

She sat down and held out an open hand for a glass of whisky. He pushed one over to her. She snatched it up, and for a moment, a cruel little smile flashed on her lips. "Mallory needs to be flushed, Samuel, or the whole bathroom is going to get flooded."

Sam sipped on the whisky. It was smooth with overtones of coffee beans and soft spicy oak, and tasted like perfumed malt, pencil shavings, candied ginger and sunlight, all mixed together in a golden bucket.

"I don't disagree with anything you're saying," Sam told her. "The problem is with the way you're saying it."

"We're not *killing* him, Samuel," she told him, as if his position on the matter was a cause of confusion for her.

"It will still feel like I am."

"You could drug him?" she suggested. "Carbon monoxide poisoning is meant to be fairly painless. You could throw him off a roof: he could be unconscious when you did it, and nobody would detect a blow to the head by the time they've gathered it all up in a bucket. Nobody would know!"

He grimaced and frowned at her. "Thank you, Lilith. I know how to kill a man and make it look like suicide."

She looked away, giving one of her painfully blank expressions where her mind was so empty that it seemed to draw in the thoughts of whoever dared to look directly at her. He wondered, very briefly in the moments that passed what she was doing. Was she scanning through the various universes, running through her memories, or was she somewhere else entirely?

"Yes!" she said finally. "You do. You're actually really quite good at it."

He wondered what kind of a man he really was. He thought of himself as a good and decent person, but how much of us was the sum of our experiences? Was there darkness lurking within him, some deep

well of monstrous rage that his upbringing and the civilising influence of the world had forced him to tame?

Remembering the shadows, he wondered if the same darkness was lurking in us all. Was that the truth of what we really are?

Noticing the third glass sitting on the table, untouched from before, he said sharply, "Where's Mallory?"

"In the bathroom!" she told him, gesturing behind her with an outstretched thumb.

"He's been a long time..." he said with a suspicious frown, suddenly fearing the worst.

She shrugged and suggested, without concern, "Maybe he was labouring under the misapprehension that you were intending to kill him, and did a runner, climbing out of the bathroom window and off out into the night?"

He got up and began to feel really quite worried. Then he remembered, "It's nailed shut!"

She reminded him, "This isn't actually your office. This one might not be!"

The entrance crashed open as Sam barged his way through, splintering the lock and sending the wooden door smashing noisily into the wall, shattering the plaster behind. The window was open, spilling the cold, dark empty night air into the room.

A cold wind filled the bathroom. As his chest heaved up and down, he could see the white vapour of his breath curling out before him.

"Gone!" he muttered. "Damn it! I should have seen this coming."

"I don't blame him," Lilith added unhelpfully. "I bet you wish you had a gun now, don't you?"

"I do!" he admitted.

He backed out, closing the door back into its frame where it hung unevenly, lolling off to one side on its buckled hinges.

She looked up at him curiously, and he could almost feel the odd sensation of her crawling around in his mind, wondering what he was going to do next.

“We need to find him!” he said. “Mallory is dangerous. If he happens to find a person who recently crossed a barrier in two separate universes, he could create another hole.”

“Where do you think he’s gone?” she asked.

“As far away from me as possible!”

Chapter 46

Lilith poured herself another drink, half filling the glass with the aged malt liquor and downing it in one as if it were drinking-water. “You can really taste the pencil shavings,” she said vacuously. “Cobalt blue, if I had to guess.”

Sam paced around angrily. He was a caged animal, furious for having allowed itself to get trapped. He should have expected this: he should have known this was going to happen.

“You know him better than I do!” he told her. “Where would he go? Who would he run to?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s not stupid. He won’t go home: he wouldn’t go back to his parents. He doesn’t have many friends, at least not many close ones. He just wastes his time playing games mostly.”

Sam rubbed his temples as the stress gripped him, tuning his mind and bringing his thoughts into sharper focus. “We need to find him!”

“We need to *kill* him!” she said with a little flash of a smile and an odd spark lighting up in her eyes.

“Lilith!” he barked angrily, making her physically jump, and startling her enough to make her drop her glass to the floor with a dull thud. “People are going to die because of this mistake! This could be happening all around this world, for all we know. There could have been incidents we don’t even know about yet: in fact, it’s likely that there are!”

“We need to find him and stop this as soon as we can.”

She glared at him angrily, drawing from a deep well of darkness, a sliver of shadow that ran right through her soul. She sneered, “Well you’re the detective, aren’t you?”

He growled and looked away, racking his brain for an answer. There was always an answer: there was a key that fitted every lock.

“Barbi!” he said suddenly. “Mallory’s mother said he’d been seeing a girl! That was the Mallory in this universe, who was killed, but perhaps our Mallory knows her too?”

Lilith shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

“Either way,” Sam said as he snatched the car keys from his pocket and grabbed his coat. “Mallory’s mother is as good a place to start as anywhere!”

The car pulled up to a spirited halt, Sam slamming on the brakes a little too late and a little too hard, as he usually did. The tyres protested weakly, skidding slightly on the tarmac below with a pained little squeal.

“Stay here,” he told Lilith firmly as he snapped open his seatbelt. He cast a look over to the house: Mallory’s house, or at least the version of it that existed there. “Mallory’s mother had to deal with another version of her trying to eat her face today: that’s a bad run of luck for anyone. I don’t want to make it any worse. She knows me: I helped her, so she’ll welcome me.”

“I can look for Mallory!” she told him.

Sam flashed her a surprised look. “How are you going to do that? You keep telling me it doesn’t work that way!”

“It doesn’t,” she agreed with a smile.

Sam grumbled and rubbed his temples in weary exasperation. He wasn’t in the mood for this. “Then how are you going to use your ability to see into other universes to help me find the Mallory we lost in this one?”

She looked at him like he was an idiot. “I’m going to find other versions of Mallory and find out where he goes. He’s gone somewhere; he’s doing something. Frightened people revert to habit, don’t they? We just need to know what his habit is!”

Sam looked at her fixedly for a moment, impressed and a little surprised. “They do!” he agreed. “That would actually be very helpful. Good idea. Well done!”

He knocked on the door, slightly dubiously.

When she opened it, she would be overcoming a barrier, a locked entrance to the house. If Mallory had done something really stupid and returned to this place, then the hole would be in effect. Just because a different facet of his mother had fallen through before, it didn’t mean another couldn’t again, or his father, or anyone else who might visit them.

In fact, anyone who’d had any contact with Mallory overcoming a locked entrance and standing in the same place in two separate universes could be subject to the same effect—literally anybody.

Would it even be possible for another Sam from another place to come through, he wondered?

The door opened just a crack and a pair of scared, cautious eyes peeked out through the opening. “It’s you!” came a slightly unwelcoming grumble. Grudgingly the door was opened and she stood behind it, allowing him inside, but not quite inviting him.

Before he stepped in, he asked, “Is Mallory here?”

She edged forward and a concerned look appeared suddenly on her face. Clearly he wasn’t.

“No!” she said sharply. “I thought he was with you?”

Sam stepped inside the house and closed the door behind him. Patricia Gardener began wringing her hands together nervously and then clutched them up to her chest. “What’s going on?” she asked, pleading for answers. “Is Mallory alright?”

“Can we go inside?” Sam said, gesturing to the living room.

She followed his outstretched palm and seemed to shudder openly. "We're going to the kitchen!" she told him, with a low, accusing tone, aimed at the room itself. "I'm not going in there again!"

Sam gave a half-hearted little chuckle to himself and nodded knowingly. He didn't blame her in the least.

She led the way along the narrow hall, and asked, "Would you like a cup of tea or anything?"

"I'm fine for the moment!" he told her. Tea just wasn't going to do it.

Haltingly, she drew a breath in noisily across her teeth and said, "Something else happened today. Maybe I should tell you about it?"

Sam frowned and sat himself down on a kitchen chair around the table. "Go ahead!" he told her.

She looked away awkwardly and said, "It's my husband..."

Sam bit his bottom lip and nodded for her to continue. He feared the worst.

"He came home from his allotment as white as a sheet," she explained, slowly and deliberately, pulling out a chair and sitting down with him. "It took a while to get the story out of him, but he said something happened to him. He said he went into his shed and it all went dark. Next thing he knew he was standing there with a dead body on the floor."

"*His* dead body?" Sam asked with a sigh.

She nodded.

"Listen, we have a problem here," he said. "This situation is getting worse, and Mallory is the cause of it."

"My Mallory?" she snapped in horror.

It seemed pointless to labour the point that he wasn't technically *her* Mallory. Sam nodded. "He hasn't done anything wrong, it's just that for some reason he's torn a hole in the universe. People around him, connected to him, are falling through from other universes. That's what

happened here with you today. Another version of yourself came through, driven temporarily crazy by the experience, and that's what attacked you.

"We're working on getting answers. Our working theory is that two versions of yourself can't exist in the same place in the same universe. One of them—usually the one who comes through—becomes blind with rage and attacks the other."

She looked even more horrified. "Oh my," she stammered.

"When we found this out—that Mallory was the cause—he ran," Sam explained. "We've got to find him before he hurts anyone else. He won't mean to; he's not to blame. It's like he's a loaded gun that someone left in a school playground. It's not his fault, but it's far too dangerous to just be left there."

"What can we do?" she gasped.

"I need to find him!" he told her. "He ran, so he was obviously trying to get away. Where would he go?"

"I don't know!" she said softly.

"You said he has a girlfriend, Barbi?" Sam suggested. "Might he try to find her? Does he have any close friends he might try to stay with?"

"Barbi!" she nodded. "Yes, he's been seeing her quite a lot lately."

"Where can I find her?" he said urgently, struggling to keep his tone polite and even. He didn't want her scared of him; he didn't want her to put it all together and realise that there was only one way to deal with Mallory, to permanently unload the gun, with Sam being the kind of man capable of doing it.

As the thought ran through his head, he wondered once more just exactly what kind of man he really was. Would he ever really know?

"I don't know!" she said. She looked really very worried, and maybe a little frustrated with herself.

He sighed to himself, “Does he use his computer to talk with her, or a phone?”

“He uses his computer. It’s upstairs upstairs. He spends way too much money on it!”

Sam nodded. It made perfect sense for a man working in a game shop. Of course he would have a powerful gaming machine in the loft conversion of his parents house. He was virtually a cliché!

“May I see it?”

Getting past the password was a formality. There were ways past any operating system, and he knew them all. Sam bypassed the lockouts in a matter of seconds and was quickly able to access the files within.

Patricia hovered behind him while he quickly scanned the computer for information: chat logs, pictures, anything that might indicate who she was, where she lived, where she might be right then.

“How did you know his password?” she asked, a little accusingly.

“I’m a detective,” he told her simply as he rummaged around inside Mallory’s files.

He found a folder marked ‘Barbi’ and opened it, hoping against reason that it might have all the answers he needed. Perhaps a picture of her standing outside her house, the street name posted behind her and the door number clearly visible. Perhaps it might have her phone number, so that he could trace her location?

The file popped open, revealing a rather small collection of pictures. He quickly opened the first of them.

As the picture came up on the screen, he gasped in surprise, his blood turning to ice in his veins. A strong sense of utter dread gripped him.

“That’s her!” she said, pointing to the picture.

“Yeah!” Sam agreed angrily. “*That’s her!*”

Chapter 47

John Barker was not a particularly nice man. He didn't appear to be, he didn't pretend to be, he didn't try to be. He just didn't care what anyone else thought of him. He was what he was, and completely, unequivocally accepted that about himself.

Twenty years ago, a mixture of too many beers and careless eating had given him a fat, jutting-out belly that prominently flopped over the top of his trousers. He looked at it in the mirror, shrugged and carried on with his life, knowing that he wasn't going to fix it, and that it didn't really make any difference to the way he lived his life in any case.

That was the way in which he dealt with everything. Life had ground him down, burnt him out, and he just didn't care about it anymore. He was a middle-aged man with thinning, greying hair, no savings, no money in the bank to throw around, and he had come to realise that he would never have those things.

He wasn't going to catch the eye of a passing supermodel, he wasn't going to have a suited man turn up on his doorstep with the news that a mysterious uncle had died, leaving him a fortune. This was just the hand that life had dealt him and he played it, not with any real passion, not with optimism, not even really making the best of what he had. He simply was what he was.

"You live around here?" he asked through the open glass partition to the passenger in the back of his black-cab as they drove along the quiet streets of the city. He looked at her in the mirror, adjusting it to get a better look at her legs. She was an attractive woman, dressed in a tight red dress. Perhaps she was coming back from a date, or maybe a party?

"Yes!" she said simply.

He gave her a leering smile. That meant she was on her way home. She might have had a bad, perhaps unsuccessful date and was fed

up, angry even. In his head, that meant she was vulnerable, and she might respond to his charm.

“It’s a bit of a shit-hole, isn’t it?” he commented dryly.

She seemed surprised and frowned thoughtfully back at him. “I beg your pardon?”

He laughed, chugging out a stuttering, sharp chuckle at his own joke. “It’s a bit of a toilet, this place. I’ve been driving cabs around this part of London most of my life. I’ve seen it go right down the gutter. They moved in them Blacks first, then the Arabs came. Now it’s got so that *nice people* can’t go out at night without a lead pipe in their back pockets to protect themselves.”

“Right...” she replied after a slight pause.

“A pretty girl like you needs to be careful!” he told her, trying to be flirtatious. “You go out dressed like that round here, you could end up getting raped down an alley. Happens all the time now, all around. I hear stories about it every damn day.”

It was her turn to laugh now. “I’ll be careful,” she told him.

“Thank you for your concern.”

“We all got to look out for one another now!” he said conversationally. “Them foreigners—the Muslims, the Jews, the Blacks—they all get one thing right. They all look after one another; they stick together like glue. That’s where us Whites go wrong, you see? That’s why they’re taking over, and we’re sitting back and just letting them, handing our countries over to ‘em, we are!”

“I see!” she told him, huffing slightly to herself.

“So you went to a party tonight? Had a date?” he asked with a grin. “Dressed up all pretty like that, must have been something special. He’s a lucky man!”

“Um...” she stammered thoughtfully. “I met with some old University friends.”

“Right!” he said. “You’ve got the looks and the brains, haven’t you!”

She smiled awkwardly. “Thanks, I guess!”

“My wife, she was as thick as two planks!” he just carried on talking. “We were out on holiday once, in Tunisia. We were having a cheeky beer and a bit of lunch in a little café one time. There was a power cut, all the bloody lights went out and the air conditioner went off. After a few minutes, it started to heat up, so she started complaining and asked the staff if they could put on a fan to cool her down until the power came back on! Silly bitch!”

The hapless woman chuckled nervously to herself in the back of the car as it slowly meandered along the roads in no particular rush.

“She’s a lucky woman!” she said eventually.

“Not any more!” he told her casually. “Two years ago she walked out into the path of a truck without looking. She was killed instantly, the police said. I guess her luck run out!”

“Oh my god!” she said suddenly. “I’m so sorry, that’s terrible!”

He shrugged. “She had a good run!” he said. “It was a bit of a relief, to be honest. Divorces are expensive, so I considered it mostly a win!”

“Okay...”

“Yeah, so I’m single again now,” he sneered, cleverly dropping that into the conversation and hoping she’d pick up the inference. “I tried that ‘Tinder’ thing on the internet. Didn’t really work out for me: I met all the wrong kind of women!”

“Right!” she said slowly. “Just women looking for a casual thing, was it?”

“Nah! They were all *pigs*!” he told her matter-of-factly. “Some of them were uglier than my own armpit. I’m no prize myself but I’ve got *some* standards. There’s nothing worse than a fat girl in my book, except maybe a feminist.”

He looked round suddenly, ignoring the road ahead to her apparent alarm. "You're not a bloody *feminist*, are you?"

"No!" she shook her head. "But I do believe there are worse things in the world than *fat girls*!"

He shook his head, frowning thoughtfully as he considered this in great detail. "Blacks? Jews maybe?"

"Global warming..." she suggested dryly. "Child poverty... Starvation, war, famine, social-injustice, prejudice... Casual racism?"

He grunted, "The Jews are behind all those things anyway. Maybe a fat, Jewish Black girl might be worse? Especially if she was a feminist."

The woman sighed and looked away, staring out of the window into the night. "I find it surprising you struggle to find a date!" she said sarcastically.

"I know!" he agreed. "I met this one girl a few weeks ago. On her picture, she looked pretty hot, the kind of girl you wouldn't mind your mates seeing you with in the pub.

"When I got there, she looked like she'd started eating without me, like five years earlier, and hadn't stopped to breathe in all that time. She had a face for radio, if you know what I mean. I asked her if she'd had some cut-price plastic surgery recently, maybe after being attacked by a pit bull or something.

"She said that she hadn't. That was just the way she looked, I suppose."

"And they say romance is dead!" the woman quipped.

"Mind you, that didn't stop me!" he said: evidently nothing could. "I showed her a good time. I'm an experienced guy; I know how to make a girl scream!"

Under her breath she muttered, "I'm pretty close to that myself right now, actually."

He laughed, assuming this was all just flirtatious banter. "So, you married? Got a boyfriend?"

"Unfortunately yes!" she said with tones of regret. "Happily married and very much in love!"

"Nice!" he told her. "Shame he doesn't make enough for the pair of you to live somewhere nice. I suppose you could get a job too: you might be able to afford somewhere better between you. Do you work?"

"Of course," she sighed. "I'm an investment banker. He's a solicitor!"

He laughed loudly. "So you're a pair of social-parasites? That's funny: you lot usually live in much nicer places. I don't feel so bad about coming from Essex now!"

"I've never actually thought of myself as a social-parasite!" she sighed. "My husband is Jewish though, so it's probably not new to him."

"Everyone else does!" he told her. "And solicitors are even worse. I get all sorts in the back of this thing: nothing leaves a greasier mark than a solicitor."

"I'm sure he bitterly regrets not driving a cab instead," she told him. "Life is filled with regrets, isn't it?"

"Not for me!" he told her, flashing her a wide grin. "But then I didn't marry a solicitor."

"Just here please!" She pointed out to the side as they came up to a row of small, but very tidy looking town houses. "This is me!"

He looked impressed, gazing out through the side of the window as they pulled up to a halt. "Yeah, that's not too bad, that!" he said. "I guess ripping people off professionally pays the bills nicely."

"As you might," she said, reaching for her purse.

"That will be twelve pounds, please. Tips are optional, but always welcome!"

She rummaged around quickly in her purse. She handed over two notes, and said hurriedly, "Please keep the change. It's a small price to pay for such sparkling conversation."

He tapped his forehead, gesturing as if he was tipping his hat in gratitude. "Thanks, lady. Enjoy the rest of your night!"

She tried the handle to the door but it was jammed. He reached over and flicked a switch. At once the door unlatched and the passenger bay was bathed in light. "I keep it locked till they pay up. You have to be careful round here with all them foreigners. You know what I mean?"

He watched in the mirror as she stepped out, her skirt riding up along her long, slender legs, giving him a little glimpse along her thigh. He grinned to himself lecherously until she shut the door, slamming it behind her just a little bit too hard. He chuckled to himself, craned his neck to watch out of the door mirror as she walked away, clipping along on her elevated heels.

His eyes still behind him on what was *behind* her, he pulled away, heading out into traffic. He faced forward again, and nearly hit a pedestrian that had walked right out in front of him. He slammed on the brakes and blasted the horn.

He hung out of the open window and yelled at a horrified young man, "Watch where you're bloody going, you bloody idiot! Don't you have eyes in your stupid head?"

The young man looked terrified and recoiled away, scuttling back up onto the pavement. "Sorry," he blustered.

"Not as sorry as your mother is, I bet!" he grumbled under his breath.

Inside the cab, darkness began to take over. Shadows rolled in like smoke, filling the car.

Chapter 48

Janet Dawson heard the screech of tyres sliding on tarmac, the wail of a horn. She turned in surprise, almost tripping over on her high—too high—heels. She watched as the cab she'd been riding in narrowly avoided running down a young man while pulling out without bothering to look ahead.

He yelled something out of the window, as she frowned and shook her head at the offensive string of abuse that poured out of the really vile driver. She felt bad for the poor young man who seemed so shaken up.

He drove away, gunning the engine. His black cab powered away, a puff of black smoke billowing out of the exhaust as he shot off angrily. The car headed for the junction at the end, gathering speed instead of braking.

Janet began clapping along the pavement, heading to the young man, just to make sure he was alright.

She cast a glance upwards to watch the cab again. It carried on gathering speed, rolling along faster and faster, heading on to the junction where the traffic lights were red. It began to swerve around, the tyres weakly screaming in protest.

Her mouth lolled open in surprise and she stopped in her tracks, staring, cringing at what she knew had to be coming.

It drove straight through the lights, not pausing to brake at all, and it smashed headlong into the side of a bus, a gut-wrenching smash of metal against metal as it tore into the side, spinning the back end round and pushing it into oncoming traffic. Just as the grating, tearing metal noises died away there was another: two more cars ploughed into the wreckage of the vehicles.

The pair of them just stood, gaping in horrified silence until the noise of the crashing had died away, replaced with screams and shouts as people ran about in blind panic.

“Oh my god!” she muttered to herself. She heard footsteps and turned to see the young man running away.

She looked back to the carnage in front. To her shame, she couldn't help feeling like the driver, at least, probably deserved it.

Chapter 49

Mallory scuttled along the street, cloaked mostly in darkness and lit by the silvery-white moon above him that peered shyly out from behind heavy grey clouds. Sickly yellow street lamps added to the illumination, lending their pale glow from up above, which sent long shadows jutting out from his feet. Every time he walked under one, they vanished for a moment, and then they grew away from him, stretching out like a waking cat, roused to life.

Each and every time he saw one, his heart raced in his chest and his breathing quickened. His mind tried to ignore it, because if he dwelled on the shadows it mean he had accepted it was all real. If he accepted it was real, then he *had to* die.

How could shadows be real? How could they take form into a person: a snarling, growling monstrosity who would shred the skin from the face of a person and then *become* that person? How could Sam accuse him of being one of them, of melting through a gap in the universe and killing another shade of himself?

A hole was a hole. It was an opening in the fabric of something. It wasn't a person who could walk around, a human being that had a mind of its own and a life to take. Mallory couldn't be a hole. That simply wasn't how the universe worked.

Or was it?

He found he was chuckling to himself, forgetting as best he could what had happened to his mother right in front of his own eyes. What was more difficult to forget was the taxi that moments earlier had nearly run him over.

The driver had simply flicked the light on in the interior when suddenly, he contorted into a vicious growl. Mallory recoiled in horror. Would he melt into shadows and fly at him, try to chew through his skin like a frightened rat?

But he had driven off, speeding away into traffic, swerving around and crashing headlong into the side of a bus.

How could that be Mallory's fault? How could any of this?

He dug his hands further into his pockets and sighed deeply to himself. He didn't even know where he was going: he was just walking, trying to walk further, pacing wider, always quickening. He just wanted to put as much distance between himself and Sam as possible.

The cab: it had to have been an accident, some innocent mistake. Holes in the universe don't open up inside a moving vehicle: the world didn't randomly tear itself apart just because Mallory happened to be standing around watching it happen.

No matter what Sam said, this simply couldn't be his fault—it just couldn't be.

He trudged on with renewed vigour. He had taken every dark alley, turned into every shallow side street. He had done everything he could think of to get off the main roads, away from Sam. He just wanted to lose himself in the maze of empty streets where nobody would ever find him.

But that thought pierced at his mind like a splinter under his skin, itching away as it festered, spreading poison through his blood and taking all too firm a hold of him. What if it was somehow true?

He shook his head and gazed straight ahead, hurrying on. He had taken such a twisting and turning path that the road might now be leading him back to Sam and Lily. He might be heading back to a grim, angry killer and his grinning sock-puppet of a sidekick, who stood out painfully against the backdrop of sanity like a beacon.

He had to get away; he had to get further away. He had to be somewhere they'd never find him. Up ahead, he saw the way and he smiled to himself in relief.

Mallory rummaged in his pockets, finding the last of his money—it was enough. He pushed away at the buttons as information flashed on a small screen, and requested a ticket that would let him ride the underground trains all that night, if necessary. The stations were open 24 hours, so he could top up on coffee and stay awake until morning. He could get his head together, work all this out and decide what to do, how to go forwards from here.

Perhaps he could call the police? Maybe if he told them that Sam wanted to kill him they'd help? Maybe they could arrest him, remove the threat before anything happened. After all, there had to be some law against this, didn't there?

A red light flashed on the dull satin metal box that was sealed into the wall. He pushed his money into the slot, first a note and then a series of coins until the screen flashed a message at him. It beeped and rudely spat a little red card out into the tray below.

Snatching it up, he turned to give a wary look behind him. He scanned through the thin crowds for any sign he was already being followed.

"Come on!" a large man grumbled impatiently at him from the queue behind.

Mallory looked at him blankly, and then realised he was in the way. He muttered an apology and shuffled on towards the gates.

It didn't matter where he went: anywhere was better than where he was. He just wanted to be far, far away from Sam and from whatever painless, apologetic forms of murder he had envisaged for him.

Still furtively glancing around, he put the ticket into the electronic gate and pushed past. He grabbed it from a second slot as it popped out, releasing the thick metal bar that blocked his way.

He melted into the crowd, keeping his eyes diverted to the ground, away from people's faces.

He rode an escalator as it rolled unevenly down into the belly of the city. It slowly grumbled down and he stood, just taking the trip in his own good time. He watched a slightly drunk group of young men in suits, laughing and joking at one another as they went up in the other direction.

They were the kind of people he hated most. His school grades were better than most, and yet he had ended up selling video games in a dingy high street shop, while men like that had careers, futures, beautiful girlfriends and the admiration of others.

No matter how often, or how hard he tried to work it out, he never could. Was he just a failure, destined for no better than wasting his life in a dull, empty routine? Was this all he was: a sad, lonely little man running from wherever he found himself to nowhere in particular, just trying to stay out of everyone's way as he did the bare minimum to get by?

Finally he stepped off at the bottom. Huge cylindrical fans whined above his head in the tiled tunnels that led to the platforms. There were two to choose from, with a train heading out in either direction. With no destination in mind, the choice between them made no difference.

He looked up to the electronic boxes suspended from the roof that flashed up the details of what was coming and when it was due to arrive. To the right, the train was set to arrive in only a minute. The choice was made: it didn't matter where he went, so long as he was moving along wherever the path took him.

With hands dug once more into his pockets he shuffled onto the platform.

Already the tracks were chattering with the buzz of an oncoming train. A rush of air sounded from the tunnel. He just stood for a moment and waited.

He couldn't even think of it all now. He was leaving the craziness behind him. He wasn't going back.

A rushing blur of red and grey hissed into the station, slowed and came to a smooth halt, jerking slightly as it finally braked. The doors all hissed in unison and automatically shuddered opened.

A smattering of people left. The small light crowds stood to the sides politely, allowing the passengers to leave before making their way aboard.

Mallory joined them.

The doors closed behind him and the train jerked once more. An electronic whine from the motors began softly, and the train wafted away into the tunnel and onwards. The lights inside the train flickered.

Mallory looked up. The lights that ran across the interior of the carriage, all along the cars of the train, were growing dim. The bright, gaudy white light was melting away and the whole thing was descending into darkness.

Mallory's heart quickened, sweat prickled at his brow and a wave of fear washed through him. He looked around, his eyes now wide and his skin turning pale. He counted around forty people in the carriage with him, perhaps a few more. The next, he could see through the glass in the doors, was even more densely packed: people were standing all down the aisle.

Panting and breathless he looked up again. The darkness was swallowing him: the lights, set along the roof, were glowing just as brightly as they ever were, but the growing shadows were devouring the light.

"No!" he gasped, looking up and down at the people. A fat, older woman was sitting reading a romance novel, frowning to herself and occasionally glancing up at the lights as it grew darker. Beyond her was an elderly man who was staring fixedly out of the door, lost in his own ruminations.

These were just regular folk: normal, average people who had done nothing to hurt anyone. They were mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, on their way home to the people who loved them.

But now the shadows were coming.

It was dark now. The woman with the book closed it, frowned angrily at the lights and began muttering to herself, as Mallory watched in horrified silence. Her frustrated annoyance shifted to curiosity. She, like he, had noticed that the lights were glowing even while the darkness took hold.

Several others were looking up now in confusion and Mallory was falling headlong into his own rising panic.

He heard snarling, growling and roaring. The darkness moved upwards, outwards, spreading like a cloud from several of the passengers. In the tiny, narrow confines of the train, it took hold in a matter of seconds and the world descended into a vicious chaos.

The train pulled into the station, stopping harshly on computerised backup brakes. The doors slid open with a hiss and the passengers on the station reeled back in horror. All up and down, bloodied bodies rolled out of the doorways. Screams pierced the air amidst the still frenzied yelling and growling from inside. The windows were thick with blood, and it ran from the door wells, oozing out through the cracks.

Crying out in terror, people began to crawl, jump and run out in desperation. Several collapsed onto the station floor, holding gaping wounds, cradling shredded flesh in their hands, staring out wide-eyed in shock and pain, their clothes soaked through in their own blood.

The station suddenly descended into chaos: horrified sounds filled the air, men ran from the platform, women yelled in terror while others just stood gaping vacantly in shock.

All the while, more of them tumbled out: bloodied, broken bodies crawling over dead ones, desperate to escape.

The sounds of sobbing, shouts for help and cries of desperate pain added to the screams panicked screams.

Somewhere inside, Mallory lay on the floor, his arms covering his head. He had thrown himself to the floor, rolled under the chairs, and hoped that nothing might find him.

He couldn't hide anymore. He had to face this now.

Sam was right.

Chapter 50

Sam had driven in silence all the way, staring out fixedly at the road ahead. His mind was elsewhere, thoughts spiralling through his brain as he fought to make some sense of it all. He pulled over to a stop now, his fingers white against the steering wheel from the effort of gripping so hard.

His heart was pounding. He felt the sharp and bitter tang of adrenaline coursing through his body. His teeth ached from tensing his jaw as he churned away inside, a broiling mixture of anger and surprise. Nothing would make sense, nothing of what he knew was finding any way to fit together. The car jerked to a final halt, pulling up outside the café: the ‘universal-constant’ that inexplicably existed all across reality for no real reason that anyone could work out.

Maybe there weren’t meant to be answers? Maybe humans, with our limited intellect, could never hope to understand the inner machinations of the universe. Perhaps that was the intimate thoughts of what people referred to as god? Could we ever really know something so far beyond us?

“We’re here?” Lilith said, sounding fairly surprised, gazing out raptly at the familiar place.

With the fate of the universe hanging in the balance, it was slightly out of character that Sam would choose to take a little time out for a mug of coffee, and perhaps a slice of cake. Even he was a little surprised. But then, where else was there to go?

“Come on!” he said sharply. “We’re going to get some coffee.”

“What about Mallory?” she protested. “Shouldn’t you be looking for him? He still needs to be killed, as quickly and violently as possible.” She rolled her eyes thoughtfully. “*Quickly* anyway...” she added. “Although, I’m not strictly opposed to *violently*.”

Sam sighed to himself. "Yes, I hadn't forgotten about Mallory. That unfortunate business is foremost on my mind."

She scowled at him. "I hope so! The longer we leave it, the more he needs killing, you know?"

He looked at her, narrowing his eyes and said, "Murder later. Coffee now!"

"Coffee!" she nodded. "Then murder. Coffee will help us both get into the mood, won't it?"

He nodded. "Well I can see one of us in the mood for it already," he said. "I have to say, I'm getting there!"

They took their places at a vacant booth, tucked away down the back of the café. Sam slipped onto a bench seat, flinging his coat in before him, and then sitting down heavily with a deep sigh.

"What are you doing about Mallory?" Lilith insisted with her usual annoying persistence.

"Lilith," Sam said wearily, struggling to control his ever-rising temper and manage to sound reasonable and level, keeping his mood to himself. "What are *you* doing about Mallory?"

"Nothing!" she admitted with a shrug. "I'm sat here with you having a coffee. What do you want me to do? You want me to kill him?"

Sam looked down to the table, his hands clenched together tightly. "The original version of him that lived in this universe had a girlfriend. Mallory's mother showed me a picture of her."

Lilith nodded enthusiastically and her face blossomed into a wide smirk. "Is she pretty? I bet she's *really* ugly!"

"It's you, Lilith!" he said coldly. "*You* are Mallory's girlfriend!"

"Me?" she gasped, pointing to herself in surprise. "Me? We live in an infinite universe of possibilities, where every thing that can happen is happening somewhere, but in none of those would I find Mallory

remotely attractive. There's certainly nowhere I'd be desperate enough to consider having sex with him."

"Lilith..." he began sharply. He paused, breathing deeply, trying to calm himself. Did she believe what she was saying? It certainly seemed like she really did. "I saw your pictures. I know it was you!"

"No!" she said firmly, shaking her head and looking highly offended. Then she shrugged and said more evenly. "Well, maybe! Anything is possible, I guess."

Sam was angry again, and made no effort to hide it. "We don't have time for this!" he snapped. "You need to tell me right now exactly what is going on here!"

She grinned widely, and then her face suddenly changed as if someone completely different had started wearing it. "I'm a twin, Sam: there are two of me!" she told him darkly. "You had been told!"

"What?"

"I'm a twin!" she shrugged, the same grin her father wore was fixed very firmly on her face. Her eyes seemed different, burning with rage as she spoke. "There's the pathetic little girl, Lilith, that you know, and then there's me. We're two very different people, even though we might look the same to you. We're really *not* the same at all."

He rubbed his temples in exasperation. "What do you mean there's two of you? When did you switch out? Where's the real Lilith?"

She nodded along and answered his questions in order. "I mean there's two of me. There always has been, at least for as long as I can remember. I switched out right here in the café; I did it right in front of you, and I've done it hundreds of times before.

"As for the real Lilith, I'm just as real as she is, and just as unreal too. She's here: she can hear you—she's listening right now! It's just not her turn to speak yet! We have to take turns, and now she's waiting for hers."

“What the hell are you talking about?” he grumbled, as it all refused to make any good sense to him. How many years had he known her? How had he missed this?

“My father did things to my mind,” she began. “He gave me a gift: the ability to see across the entire spread of the universes, but it came with a price. The price was that while my mind makes for an interesting place to visit, it’s not somewhere you’d ever want to live! Both versions of us are in there, living together in just one mind. The older, weaker version of her is the one that’s soft and pliable enough to float over the multiverse, free to surf through the spectrum of reality.

“And then there’s me!

“It took an effort to create what he wanted me to be. He had to break her: he had to collapse parts of her mind so that she lost control of who she was. She became nothing more than a tool, a lens looking out over the world in service of an infinitely cruel man, a pair of eyes to see beyond his own vision.”

“And what are *you*?” Sam asked, finally beginning to realise what it was she was saying, forcing it to make sense.

“I’m what was left!” she sneered. “I’m the angry, twisted, hateful ego he forced her to put to one side so that she could become his tool, a way for him to gain even more power.”

“And Mallory?” Sam said.

She shook her head and frowned darkly. “He’s nothing—he doesn’t matter. He’s a weapon I built to kill my father with. That’s *all* he is.”

Sam just stared at her, his anger deepening and the growing knot in his stomach beginning to tighten. He could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

“You did this?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, gazing out to one side. Her eyes narrowed and she nodded. "I did," she said. "I built Mallory so he could attack my father: kill him, destroy him!"

"I don't understand!" he said. "Help me to understand what you've done."

She smiled, the innocent smile of the lost little girl she had been created to protect, like a scab forming over an open wound.

"No!" she said. "You're the detective. Maybe you'll work it out for yourself." Darkly, she added as her eyelids began to flutter, "But then again..."

"Lilith?" Sam asked.

Her face broke into a beaming smile. "Samuel!"

"Lilith, you're a mess," he told her. "I knew you were a mess, but I didn't realise just how much of a mess you really were."

"I am a mess!" she agreed. "But please tell me honestly, did I have sex with Mallory? Please tell me I didn't!"

"Well... I don't know!" Sam frowned thoughtfully. "But, one way or another, you've certainly fucked him!"

Chapter 51

Lilith took herself off to the bathroom to freshen herself up. It seemed to be a habit of hers to take every opportunity to wash up in public bathrooms, to fill up with food and drink whenever she could, and take every available resource that was on offer. He watched in silence as she skipped along the ceramic tiles on her bare feet as if she was a child with nothing in the world to worry about.

He turned back to his coffee, sighing to himself wearily. Sadly the world gave him plenty of things to worry about, and now it seemed that she was principal among them.

“You’re going to get a call in a minute!” said a passing waitress.

Sam looked up in surprise. She wore that same self-righteous, smug grin that he always seemed to plaster on the faces of the people he borrowed.

“Lilith’s dad?” he frowned thoughtfully. “I was wondering how my evening could get any worse. Your children really hate you, you know?”

He, or rather she, but really he, laughed openly.

“They’re not my greatest success, I will admit,” he said through his chosen conduit. He shrugged and then slid into the chair opposite. “It’s the old story about omelettes. Sadly it does leave behind broken egg shells.”

Sam quickly cast a glance behind him to the toilets.

“Don’t worry,” he assured him. “She’ll be a while. I’ve seen to that.”

Sam frowned back at him. “You want to tell me what’s going on here?”

“You’re the detective!” he said with a wider, deeper grin that sent Sam’s blood boiling angrily in his veins. “You see, of all my children,

Lilith is by far the smartest and most successful. That surprised everyone —nobody more than myself.”

Sam smiled as if hearing a good, but not quite good enough joke. “She’s a success?”

“I built my children very carefully,” he said, suddenly wearing the entirely inappropriate face far more seriously than it warranted. “They were conceived under tightly controlled conditions, born on selected days under just the right circumstances. They were to draw in power and energy from the universe, and that energy was channelled into me.

“I didn’t just wake up one morning with virtually unlimited power—I had to work for it. Part of that work was finding someone else to do the really hard work for me.”

“And their mother?” Sam sneered at him. “She just sat back and let this happen?”

He grinned, behind the borrowed face of a naive, innocent looking young girl, whose eyes now lit up with demonic severity. “Different mothers, Sam!” he said. “They were chosen with equal care. I needed just the right mixture of potentials, you see? Lilith’s mother was a drug-addled prostitute, easily persuaded to do anything at any time for a few pieces of currency.

“You see, humans pass on memory, right along with their DNA—it’s built right into our cells. I wanted helplessness, desperation, and a genetic understanding that the world isn’t a safe and friendly place hardcoded right into every facet of her being.

“A life of just the right kind of abuse sent her walking a path that gave her sight into the other parts of her own consciousness. I took her gift into myself, and I grew stronger for it.”

“And now?” Sam growled, pointing back to the bathroom over his shoulder with his thumb.

He shrugged, a gesture that seemed jarringly out of place coming from a frail, young girl's body with a mind inside it that couldn't be more the opposite. He sneered coldly, "You can keep what's left."

"She was right about you!" Sam hissed through gritted teeth.

"I created others," he said, almost conversationally. "One is a siren, attracting power like a beacon, shining a light out into the darkness, turning thoughts, hopes and dreams into reality.

"The other is imagination. His mind is lost to the real world, and he creates pure possibility, pondering the paths of universes yet to come, literally creating futures."

Sam glared at him. "And what price did they pay?"

He began nodding to himself thoughtfully. "A heavy one! I have found that a single human is a huge, magnificent miracle of a creation, but there isn't very much of it to go around. If we want to be more that we are, we have to compromise.

"Myself, to achieve this power, I've had to die. I've had to deliberately kill myself in every single universe except one. I've had to wipe out my existence until there's only one, single version of myself left remaining. I combined that single facet of myself with the abilities I fostered, and then harnessed in my children. It gave me unlimited power!

"Can you imagine the force of pure will that's required to walk your consciousness across infinite universes and kill yourself in all of them but one? It's a feat no man can achieve, or at least, not without becoming something *more* than just a man!"

Sam just glared fixedly into those deep, dark eyes.

"You hate me, Samuel!" he smiled. "But you're not really that different from me in the ways that really matter."

"We're nothing alike!" Sam told him, almost snarling, enraged at the suggestion.

“How far would you go to get home?” he asked simply. “Who would you hurt? How far would you take the worst of your actions? There are faces of you that have committed acts that would shock you. You are capable of terrible things, Sam. These eyes you’re looking out from, this sense of identity in your head right now is only a tiny part of what, and who, you really are.

“You, are a *monster!*”

“I’m not the one that destroyed my own children!” Sam growled.

“But they are destroyed, and nothing will change that,” he shrugged as though it was of no consequence whatsoever. “I came to discuss the future, not the past.”

“The hole!” Sam asked. “So you are concerned about it after all?”

“I am!” he admitted evenly, the words spoken in the same flat, emotionless way he talked of most things he didn’t care about. “Lilith has been rather clever. I can see right through her mind, right into the very depths of her consciousness. I’ve been in her head when she’s eaten live rats in dark alleys to survive; I’ve seen her do things for men just to get enough money to feed herself, to stay alive one more day. I’ve seen it all!

“But what I couldn’t see was this sliver of madness deep in her mind. This evil twin of hers is a black spot that even I couldn’t control. She’s done this against me, and I never saw it coming. So now I want you to stop it!”

Sam chuckled to himself. “Why should I? Seeing the end of you might not be the worst thing that could happen to this universe.”

“Because if you don’t, people will die, and they will die horribly,” he said simply. “Lilith has been clever to get this far in building a weapon with which to take me on, but she’s confused, sporadic and unpredictable. She’s acted like a murderer that wants to kill a teacher, so she dropped unlimited assault rifles into a kindergarten playground in the hopes someone might pick one up and do the job for her.

“There’s no finesse to her actions, no thought to the damage that will be done to bystanders. She’s a bomb exploding in a crowded room, a truck driving through a mass of innocent bystanders. This is far too dangerous for you to walk away from, and we both know it.”

Sam frowned thoughtfully and looked away. He was right, of course. “You want me to kill Mallory?”

He nodded and said darkly, “I want you to fix this!”

“I won’t do it for you!” he told him angrily, knowing that the job would still get done regardless.

He smiled back, baring the young girl’s teeth. She stared back fixedly, and then the deep, empty, hollow eyes were gone.

“I’m sorry!” she said awkwardly, flustered as she quickly got out of the chair. “Can I get you anything else, Sir?”

Sam sighed to himself and told her, “I’m fine thanks.”

“Sorry!” she said again, flushing bright red before dashing off, almost running back to the counter.

“Who was that?” Lilith’s voice called out from behind him. Sam turned sharply. She walked past, gliding over silently on her shoeless feet. She slipped into the chair and grinned back at him empty.

“That was your father!” he told her.

She nodded. “He’s a *very* bad man.”

“I got that impression.” He opened his mouth to speak further when suddenly, on the table, his phone lit up and began to bleep from an incoming call. He looked at it and his eyes narrowed. “It’s Inspector Grace!” he said, snatching it up and quickly putting it on speaker.

“Grace!” he said loudly.

The phone replied, “Sam! We have a situation.”

Sam groaned and his head dropped into his hand. “Go on!” he told her, waiting to hear the worst of it.

“It looks like it happened again, this time on an underground train,” the Inspector told him, sounding weary herself. “We don’t even

have an accurate body count this time. Dozens of people were killed. The whole train went dark: witnesses can't begin to make sense of what they saw. We've got reports of widespread injuries, bodies lying around with the people who attacked them watching it all happen."

"And Mallory?" Sam said softly.

"He was there," she said, sounding surprised. "How did you know that?"

"He's the cause—the hole. He's the one bringing these things into this universe."

There was a long, thoughtful pause. "I see!" She did not sound like she *saw* at all. "Well, that does explain a few things," she said. "We've got Mallory in protective custody right now. He's asking for you. He says he needs us to take him back to you so that you can kill him."

"Right..." Sam nodded.

"You're really going to kill him?" she asked. It didn't sound entirely approving.

"It's the only way," he said softly, emptily, struggling to believe he was really going to do this, but not seeing how he could avoid it.

"He's asking for us to take him to you," she said weakly. "We're going to do that, Sam, and then we'll talk."

"Bring him to my office," Sam told her. "Keep him in dark places, and don't go near any locked doors... Get him there as quickly as possible."

A little confused, she replied, "OK. We're on our way."

Chapter 52

Sam slammed on the lights of his office, batting his palm angrily, impatiently against the wall until he found the switches. He was careful to leave the door open behind him. He had done the same all along the way so there were no locked barriers, no obstacles for anyone to overcome as Mallory was brought upstairs to his office.

If Grace and Roach brought him there, and one of them was doing the same thing in another universe, overcoming a locked door could trigger a shift, dragging them off into another universe, or bringing another version of them to that one. Either way would have unfortunate consequences, as someone would very likely have their face ripped off with a different version of their own teeth.

Of course, all this was based on a lot of assumptions. Would it ever be possible for Sam to shift from one universe to another without opening a locked door first? Would he ever be able to move from one physical place somewhere to another version of himself somewhere quite different, a place physically remote from where he'd left? Certainly Lilith's father was able to do those things, so it stood to reason that they were possible.

At this point, there were psychological barriers in place around his mind, natural safeguards against accidentally wandering away from where he belonged. Shifting was only possible at all if a person knew they could overcome them. It seemed to be true of Mallory as well, or at least the people he interacted with.

The incident on the train must have been appalling, but how many more had there been that they didn't yet know about? How many others had been quietly sucked out of their own universe and off into another, leaving no evidence of their passing?

Sam rubbed his temples wearily. He was tired, his mind aching and dull. He looked at his watch and grumbled to himself.

“What?” Lilith said.

“It’s one in the morning!” he told her with a sigh. “I don’t remember the last time I slept. I need a rest!”

“We’re nearly finished,” she told him supportively, laying her weak, slender little hand on his shoulder. Her touch was so light he could barely feel it through his shirt.

“Yeah!” he agreed. He sat down, perching himself on the corner of the desk. He looked fixedly into her eyes. Thoughtfully, he said to her, “What do you remember about what you did to Mallory? How did you make him a weapon? How is he any use as one?”

She shrugged and smiled thinly, an apologetic thing. Then she frowned and stared back at him, challenging his even gaze.

“Which Lilith are you asking?” she said coldly, in a voice dripping with pent-up aggression.

Sam smiled back. “There’s only one of any of us. We have different parts, but we’re all really just one person. You should know that better than anyone!”

“So give up, Samuel!” she told him. “Give up on your wife, your pathetic little family, and the tiny life you had clawed out for yourself. Give up on going ‘home’ and just don’t bother to shift out of here.

“In a short while, your brains, your memories and your consciousness will all melt together and this will become your home. The wife you have here will be yours, and that life will be there for you to live it.”

He nodded thoughtfully: doing exactly that was something he thought about all the time, every time he shifted. “I could never do that!” he said weakly. “You know I never will.”

“You’re not my enemy, Samuel!” she told him. “But the words I’m speaking can be heard by someone who is. I can’t explain to you what I’ve done, or why I’ve done it.

“I can only stand back and allow it to happen. When it does, the world will be a better place. I’ll finally be free, and unlike you, I will be very happy to let my minds melt away into one and just be a single, normal person.”

“Lilith...” Sam began sadly. “You’re better than this!”

She grinned widely and said, “No, I’m really not!” Her grin stayed fixed on her face and while nothing seemed to move, she was suddenly somehow smiling at him.

“What did I do to Mallory?” Lilith said. The ice in her voice that chilled his soul was gone.

Sam flashed her a supportive smile. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “All we know is that you made the hole. Somehow you turned Mallory into an opening between universes in order to attack your father.”

She seemed surprised, maybe even a little impressed. “I did that?” she asked. “I wonder what I was thinking?”

Sam sighed. “If you can think of anything, any way you might have done something to Mallory to make this happen, then I need to know. Is there any way you can imagine that this hole might be used to hurt your father?”

She shook her head and looked away sadly. “I’m sorry...” she said softly. “I just don’t know... I can’t think...”

Sam felt a pang of sympathy. In no universe he’d ever been to had she ever been anything but a weak, fragile and broken little thing. Whatever she’d done, she’d done for reasons so far out of her control that she’d had to create a separate part of herself to do it.

“Look,” he said with a heavy sigh, “We’ll work this out.”

She smiled back happily, nodding in agreement. “You’re a detective!” she told him, her voice filled with confidence: certainly more than he had in himself at that very moment.

“I am!” he smiled back. “Tell me everything you know about your father. We’ll work this out between us.”

She nodded and leant in, craning towards him as if she was about to reveal some great secret. “He’s a very bad man!” she told him.

“Right!” he grumbled. “Right!”

Chapter 53

Mallory was a very broken man, crushed by the weight of all that had happened to him. He sat at the back of the car as it made its way slowly to the office, to Sam, and to his final destiny.

The journey had been undertaken in silence so far: nobody in the car had managed to find anything to say. What exactly could there be to say in any case?

“Are you alright?” asked Detective Roach, turning to the back, awkwardly twisting himself around in the narrow passenger seat. “Is everything alright back there?”

Mallory couldn't help but smile to himself at just what a ridiculous question that really was. “I'm fine!” he said with a sigh. He said it out of habit: it was the routine answer for that routine question. Nobody really thought much about it; nobody spoke honestly; nobody really wanted to hear what was really going on. It was just a polite affectation and was, in the end, utterly meaningless.

“Actually, I'm not fine!” he said, snapping up suddenly. “I'm angry. I'm pissed off that this has happened to me. I never did anything to deserve this: I just quietly lived a boring little life where I tried never to hurt anyone.

“Then one morning, I woke up and my life went completely insane, and now I find out that I'm a hole torn into the fabric of reality that monsters are pouring through.

“I just took a ride on a train where dozens of people were killed because of me, and now I have to die so that all this stops happening!

“So, I'm actually pretty fucking far from alright, thank you for asking!”

Roach blew out a mouthful of air and nodded along to himself. “I just meant, *Are you comfortable?*” he grumbled. “I thought it might be draughty back there with the window open.”

“Oh,” he said sheepishly. “The window is fine. Thanks...”

Inspector Grace, who was busy driving said, “We don’t *know* that you have to die.” There was an uneasy silence in the car while the others waited for her to explain. The length of the pause suggested she didn’t really know just exactly how she was going to justify that statement. She continued uneasily, “We’ve only got Sam’s word for what’s going on. We might be able to find a better solution: one where nobody else gets hurt.”

“Maybe,” agreed Roach, not sounding terribly convincing.

“And maybe not!” Mallory sighed to himself. He began to chuckle as a tear welled up in his eye. Inside he felt neither like laughing, nor desperate enough to cry. He was just numb, and a weary kind of acceptance of it all had descended on him, crushing the breath out of him and pushing all thoughts of anything else out of the way for now. “Maybe this is the only way. Sam is the only person with the slightest clue about what’s going on, and he seems to think there’s no choice!

“What can *we* do? We don’t know anything!”

“We do know it’s not right for an innocent man to give up his life without a fight!” the Inspector told him sternly, as if she meant every word of it. Perhaps she did?

“Fight?” Mallory said weakly. “If I fight, more and more people are going to die.”

“I didn’t mean, fight against doing the right thing. I meant, fight to find a different way, maybe a *better* way!”

“Anything is better than killing yourself, right?” Roach added, not particularly helpfully.

It was certainly difficult to think of a *worse* thing.

“I don’t actually want to die!” he said thinly, contemplating the enormity of it all.

Once, not very long ago, the world had seemed so important. The next video game release, finding a girlfriend, perhaps going back to university and finishing his degree: these things were his world. It had all mattered: every tiny little detail had stood out sharply, poking at him like a broken spring in an old mattress.

Now, with the subject of mortality on his mind, he had found some real perspective. Cars breaking down, student loans, a grumbling manager, parents who were disappointed in him but tried never to show it... Suddenly none of it really mattered anymore. In the grand scheme of things, perhaps none of it ever had?

Whatever the truth was, he now knew what was really important.

"We're going to do our best!" she assured him. He believed her sincerity, but they were only human, little twigs floating down an unimaginably vast river. That river had always seemed like the world, but he now knew it flowed out into an ocean, an ocean without end.

"Thanks..." he said, unable to muster very much enthusiasm.

"Cheer up!" Roach told him, before wincing at himself, cringing, and looking away to peer out of the side window.

Grace flashed him an angry glare.

"I'll be fine!" said Mallory weakly. "Sam says I won't even notice. One minute I'll be alive, next I'll wake up as the me in one of the other universes with all of that version's memories. Everything that's happened will seem like nothing more than a bad dream.

"He told me once that most of the universes are so alike that, for the most part, we could never tell the difference."

Grace looked over to her partner. She said, not sounding terribly sure of herself, "You can tell. Just slightly, but you can tell."

Roach frowned back at her disapprovingly. "Not really," he countered. "I mean there might be subtle little details, like someone moaning a little more, or getting a little more angry about everything, but nothing really major stands out."

Mallory felt like the conversation was in danger of being derailed, which actually suited him perfectly fine.

“You really believe all this?” Roach turned back, shifting around again in the seat, holding fast to the belt and struggling to get a better look at him.

Mallory nodded resignedly. “Sam seems to know what he’s doing. I know for a fact that big black holes are opening up and versions of people are coming through them and eating their counterparts’ faces.” He looked up, directly into Roach’s even gaze. “It happened to you, and to me. We both came through from other worlds, and we most likely killed the other version of ourselves when we did it.”

Roach’s face dropped. He had to have known that, but perhaps had preferred not to face the fact directly. Mallory had faced it: he had had no choice when the train erupted into chaos, where limbs and bodies flailed around, the desperate sound of horrified screaming filling the air until the floor was slippery with thick, red oozing blood. He knew what he was, and what he had done.

“I didn’t kill anyone!” Roach told him defensively.

“We may not have meant to, we may have been crazy at the time, but we did it,” Mallory told him. There was no point pretending it was anything other than it was. He had killed another version of himself, in a horribly brutal way.

At least he was spared from having to remember doing it.

Roach gave up and turned away. “Believe what you want!” he growled. “I know I’m not a killer.”

Mallory said nothing: there was nothing left that needed saying in any case. Roach might not like to accept it, but that didn’t stop it from being the truth.

“We’re nearly there now!” said the inspector.

He sighed to himself.

“Great!”

They walked up the stairs, each step getting slower as they drudged along to Mallory's final destiny. In the car he had been relatively calm, almost accepting of his fate. It had seemed inevitable but entirely necessary, and he'd viewed it with an almost heroic degree of steadfast resolve.

He'd left all that behind him in the car. Every pace he took was a greater effort: his legs were weak and trembling, his heart was racing, and sweat was prickling along his back, inside his T-shirt. He looked up in surprise, recoiling back in shock as he felt a hand resting on his shoulder. The Inspector's face was smiling back at him, the supportive crutch of maternal strength. Somehow, her presence made it all just a little more tolerable.

His mind lingered on the thought of people dragged to their execution. Political prisoners murdered for their views in terrible countries where justice had no meaning. He never imagined his end would come that way, that in his last moments alive he would suffer the ignominious fate of being killed simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Come on," she said softly.

She seemed sympathetic, but she couldn't know how it felt to be walking to your end, to be an active participant in your own murder. She couldn't know what was going on inside him, the churning emotional turmoil. She had to at least know that it wasn't a pleasant thing.

It wasn't just fear: that stage had passed by some time ago. It was frustration. It was anger at the senselessness of what was happening, smashing up against knowing that it had to, and *was* going to happen. The two extremes kept the growing rage in check for now. What was left filling his mind was this battle as the two ideas fought one another for dominance on a platform of mild terror, hatred of himself for allowing this to happen, and bitterness at the world for doing all this to him so that it had to.

The entrance was in sight now. The door was left open just a crack. Sam was expecting them.

Who would it be, he wondered? Would Sam himself do the act? Would he break his neck from behind with a deft, swift motion? Would a tight, powerful arm around his throat and a moment of bewildered confusion be his last experience in this world as his soul plunged into endless darkness?

Would a sharp, ice-cold blade dig through his chest, burning hot flaming pain as it slid quietly through his flesh, piercing his heart and sending him spiralling down into emptiness? Perhaps a brilliant flash of a gun held up to his face would be the last thing he'd know. He'd hear the roar of a pistol and then it would all just stop, nothing left but blackness as his limp, lifeless remains collapsed into a shallow grave dug in some backwater woods where they would never be found.

Would they drug him first? Would he feel what would happen? Would they make him do it to himself?

Detective Roach took the lead, pushing the door open into the darkened office. "Hello? Sam?"

Mallory couldn't make out what was said, but a voice called back. Roach straightened himself and stepped inside with none of the hesitation or trepidation that had beset Mallory.

"Come on!" she said one more time. This time, her hand was flat on his back, gently edging him forwards. She took the time to remind him, "We're going to find a way to help you, Mallory. We're not done with that yet."

"Thank you!" he said, his voice trembling, barely a whimper. He realised he was now shaking.

Chapter 54

Sam took a deep breath and composed himself. He wasn't angry that Mallory had run—who wouldn't have? But this needed to be fixed, and it needed to be fixed before it got any worse. He tried to push down his weariness, his regrets that the situation had grown so bad that such a radical, ugly solution seemed to be the only way. He was better than that: surely he should be able to find a better way to resolve things, he told himself.

But he couldn't—there just wasn't any other way.

Roach came in first, edging into the gloom of the office where the lights were low and the mood was even darker than the lighting. Mallory was next, hanging his head sheepishly, avoiding eye contact with the others. Inspector Grace was behind him, gently but firmly moved him forwards.

“Mallory!” he said, not sounding quite as forgiving as he'd intended.

“Sam,” Mallory replied, barely more than a whisper. “Sorry I ran...”

Lilith was already pouring them each a drink. There was a fixed smile on her face as if, in another universe, she was watching something unusually amusing. Perhaps she was?

Inspector Grace took the initiative, stepping forwards past Mallory and almost demanding, “You need to tell us what's going on here! There has to be an alternative to Mallory being killed.”

Sam nodded back and rubbed his forehead wearily. He was tired. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept.

“Take a seat!” he told them, jumping up from the edge of his desk. He sat down at the back while Lilith went and dumped herself into a couch under the window. She playfully slapped the seat next to her as

an invitation for Detective Roach to join her so that Mallory and Grace could sit at the desk.

Roach cast a bemused look at his partner and went over to take his place, conspicuously keeping his distance from the odd young lady.

Grace pushed Mallory forwards and they sat themselves down opposite Sam. She glared at him, not quite angrily, but certainly sternly, like she was expecting the situation to be resolved properly, quickly and simply.

Sam sighed to himself.

“Mallory is the hole,” he began. “Somehow, Mallory has become a tear in the fabric of reality. If two people in two different universes are in exactly the same place, there is a light, one of them overcomes a barrier, and has a connection to Mallory, then one of them will likely be sucked into the other universe. When that happens, one will be driven temporarily insane and will attack the other. My understanding is that the universe will only allow one version of one person to physically exist within it.”

“Sam...” she began with a sigh, doubtlessly ready to attack his explanation, to come up with some reason why it sounded insane, and simply couldn’t be possible. He’d heard it all before, many times. “What?!”

He hadn’t time to debate this at length, and he had even less inclination to do so. “We saw it with Mallory and Roach already. I’ve been shifting to other universes, and I can assure you that it’s getting worse. We saw it on the train! The people onboard had overcome the turnstiles, the doors on the carriages. They had gone, in their minds, from one place to another.

“That means that they were in the mindset that allows shifting: it’s very much the same as how I do it. And with Mallory there as well, holes ripped open and that’s why people died.”

She shook her head, clearly struggling to accept all this.

Sam knew well the incredulous look on her face, the look of a person who had all the pieces of a puzzle in their hands, but was trying desperately hard to make it fit together in a totally different way.

“Look,” she began haltingly, “You’re making a lot of assumptions here.”

“That’s what detectives do!” he told her flatly. “We draw conclusions based on the evidence that we have at our disposal. Right now, all the evidence tells us that Mallory is a rip in the fabric of reality and that he’s incredibly dangerous.

“At any moment another hole could open up. If there was another version of you, sitting in this very office right now and you had just walked in through a locked door, then just by having a connection to Mallory, it could mean that you might get sucked out into another universe, or another version of you might come here to kill you.

“We’ve seen it happen too many times to keep ignoring this!”

Sam looked at Mallory. His head was hung and he was staring fixedly at the desk in front of him. He could only imagine how this poor young man must be feeling.

“But we don’t know!” she insisted.

“We do!” Sam told her, growing more forceful. “You see, someone has told me that they turned Mallory into a weapon to attack someone else. He’s a tool to be used against a *very bad man*.”

“What?!” She had that same incredulous look on her face.

With a sigh he explained as simply as he could, “There is a man who has a great deal of power. We don’t know exactly where he is, but he’s hiding out there somewhere. He had three children, and he took their abilities, adding them to his own. One has an awareness of herself in all the other universes, another is drawn to beacons of power, and the last is meant to be able to imagine whole realities into being.”

Sam looked at Lilith, who waved back with a happy-looking, but otherwise empty grin plastered on her face. Grudgingly he decided that

the best way to move all this along as quickly as possible was just to admit it.

“Lilith is one of them,” he said. “The man that Mallory was weaponised to get at was her father. Lilith can see into all the other universes where she’s still alive.”

Inspector Grace looked at her and frowned, clearly struggling to come to terms with how such a person could have that kind of power. “So who did it to him?” she said. “How did they do it? Tell me what’s really going on here?”

Deciding that discretion was probably the better choice, Sam simply said, “We don’t know.”

“It doesn’t make sense!” Grace said firmly, angrily. “None of this does!”

“No!” he agreed. “Not much of this sounds very rational at all, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true. All we know is that the man is in one universe somewhere, we just don’t know where. Someone, somehow thinks that Mallory can be used to hurt him.”

The inspector was no fool. She leant in and narrowed her eyes at him. “Was it her? Did Lily do this?”

Sam said defensively, “No!” He looked over to the helpless little thing and sighed to himself. “No, she can just see into other universes, and only through her own eyes. She can’t make holes in things: she doesn’t have anything like this kind of power.”

“My dad has!” she called out unhelpfully. “He can do things like this.”

“He wouldn’t attack himself!” Sam told her, snapping wearily, his frustration outweighing his patience. He frowned to himself as an idea struck him. “But how would he?”

“How would he what?” Lilith looked over to Roach, who was listening intently to it all, and very slowly reached out and poked him in the ear. He jumped in surprise and shifted back away from her. She

grinned and looked back at them both with a happy smile, as if nothing whatsoever had just happened. Roach stared at her, looking mostly confused.

Sam stood up as the idea filled him with a fresh sense of optimism. “How would your father do that? How could he make a hole in the universe?”

Lilith shrugged. “I don’t know!” she said happily. “He’d probably use my brother for that. He’s a *very bad man*.”

“Your brother?” Sam and Grace looked at one another.

“He’s an idiot!” she told them. “My father gave him the power to live in his own imagination, but he stripped those powers from him so he could use them himself. He’s almost nothing now: there wasn’t much of him left after that, his brain broke.”

Sam kept on, “How did he do that?”

“I don’t know!” she said again, deepening his growing frustration. “I think he’s still powerful, but he’s damaged, so he doesn’t use his abilities anymore. In all the universes, he’s just locked in his bedroom playing video games. He rarely leaves. He was diagnosed with autism, no social skills, is massively overweight, and just plays video games all day.”

Mallory muttered, almost to himself, “Sounds like half of my customers.”

Sam and Grace looked at one another, a tiny flicker of a smile shared between them.

Sam sat back down and stared at him fixedly, the sudden enthusiasm washing away all the fatigue, all the frustration and exhaustion that was otherwise threatening to engulf him. “What if he *was* one of your customers?”

Mallory looked up. His eyes widened as he looked at the expectant faces gazing back at him. “I don’t know...” he mumbled.

Sam pushed again, "Are there any customers that stick in your mind? A fat young man, about Lilith's age? Very difficult to talk to, maybe obsessed with video games?"

"Sure!" he said, looking awkwardly from one to the other.

"He has brown hair and smells like a wet dog!" Lilith added, for reasons no doubt as mysterious to her as it was to anyone else.

Mallory shrugged: clearly that didn't narrow it down much.

She continued, "He's about your height, usually wears a blue T-shirt, has a beard because he's too lazy to shave..."

"That could be Michael, John or Joe!" said Mallory with a thoughtful frown. "Or Dave, Kevin, Other-Joe, Frank or Martin."

"John!" Lilith snapped with a sudden effervescent burst of enthusiasm. "His name is John!"

Sam slapped his forehead in exasperation. "Why didn't you just start with that?" he grumbled.

"OK!" said Grace. "But what does this mean?"

Sam smiled and said, "That's the connection: that's how Mallory became a hole. John, somehow, imagined it. He probably took an interest in Mallory through his work. It wouldn't have taken much: he probably already thought of him as being a gateway to different realities, if he helped to supply his games to him."

"But why?" the Inspector shrugged. Then her face lit up into a wide smile. "Because in one universe, he gets close to his father, right? Because when he opens the locked door to his bedroom after playing a game Mallory gave him, then a hole might open?"

"Yes!" Sam grinned back at her, as the pieces of the puzzle came crashing together. "Because potentially thousands of shadow versions of himself might come pouring through a hole in his bedroom, killing everyone they find. At the very least, it would kill John, maybe taking the power back from her father. At best, he would be killed in the onslaught!"

“This is insane!” Grace told him, failing to look like she meant it, as her face broke into a broad smile. “Can we fix this?”

“I think we can!” Sam told her. “I *think* we can.”

“I don’t have to die then?” Mallory asked nervously, hopefully.

Lilith interjected, “I think you should kill him just to be on the safe side.” She didn’t sound like she was joking.

Chapter 55

“So what do we do?” Inspector Grace asked as Sam paced back and forth, thoughtfully rubbing his chin while he worked on just exactly that question.

“There’s nothing *we* can do,” Sam told her firmly, only half paying attention to her and trying much harder to ignore her than to listen. “*I* need to go to the universe where this all started. I need to find their version of John, and somehow get Mallory out of his mind. Once that happens, all this should stop.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “How will you get Mallory out of his mind?”

Sam looked at her fixedly. His eyes narrowed into defensive slits and he churned angrily inside, annoyed at having his train of thought completely derailed. “A gunshot to the back of the head should do it!” he quipped.

“You can’t kill him!” Grace insisted loudly, her voice rising until it was high and shrill by the end.

Sam rolled his eyes moodily and muttered to himself, “I can’t kill Mallory, I can’t kill John. Who can I kill?!”

Detective Roach pushed his way into the conversation. “Look, I’m not sure I believe any of what you’re saying, but you need to explain to me what the hell is going on! We’re police and you’re meant to be a detective. We can’t just stand around casually discussing a potential murder.”

Sam glared at him. “The great thing about reality is that it doesn’t matter whether you believe in it or not,” he said impatiently. “It’s true regardless. The truth doesn’t give a shit what you think of it.”

They really didn’t have time for this. In just a few short hours, the sun would rise and his ability to shift would be over for another day. Sam wanted this done that night, before it got any worse, and before

anyone else died. He briefly wondered if they could lock Mallory up in his office, keep and keep him away from other people. Perhaps they could lock him in a darkened room so the shadows couldn't get hold, unlock all the doors all around him, and keep everyone else away?

They might make it through the day without anyone else getting hurt.

With a sigh, he explained to Roach, "Somewhere, in another universe there is a young man. He was born with special abilities that means that he can create reality. He can imagine things into existence, just by picturing them in his mind.

"All humans have that ability. We create the universe as we go, imagining our own paths until they become our unique perspective on reality. This man has that power tuned to a far higher degree than the rest of us.

"But sadly, he can't control it: he's been so damaged by the process of developing these abilities that he's completely dysfunctional as a person. Consequently, he's now just an overweight, autistic shut-in that spends every day of his life mindlessly playing video games quietly in his room."

Roach's eyes flashed angrily as he looked from one face to the next. "But how does that have any effect on Mallory?"

Sam looked at Lilith and sighed to himself. "We don't know, but what we do suspect is that Mallory's connection to this '*John*' is what's created the hole in the first place. We have to break the connection."

"How?" Roach yelled aggressively. "You don't know anything for sure, and you're throwing around ideas of killing people like it's the only solution!"

Lilith stepped up, since she hadn't offered anything of value for some time, and said, "Could we kill Roach?"

Roach turned to her, startled, and stared at her in wide-eyed surprise.

Sam smiled and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't see how it would help, but I'm happy to give it a go anyway. It's not like we've got anything of value to lose by trying!"

Roach flashed him an angry stare. "Wanna try it and see?" he sneered.

The Inspector pushed him back forcefully with a hand firmly pressed on his chest. "Roach is right, you need to explain to us exactly what's going on here. I can't stand back and let you kill anyone without a good reason."

"I don't need to explain!" he told her, increasingly agitated. "I don't need you to understand! Hell, sometimes I don't understand."

"I've been doing this a long time, long enough to know it doesn't always make perfect sense. What I can tell you is that the whole universe is really little more than an idea. We imagine the whole thing into existence, without really understanding what we're doing."

"We're like a rat running through a sewer. To that rat, the concrete pipes are the entire world: they accept it without the ability to question it. A rat would never understand that those pipes are simply a tiny part of a much greater whole, a sprawling city above where things happen beyond its conception."

"I was told once that ideas are the only reality. You see everything that you think is real, the floor beneath your feet, the light in your eyes, the sound of my voice carrying across the room, but it's just electrical signals being processed in your brain. None of it is objectively real: we only know what our brains can make of it, and our brains are just made up of atoms, energy, vibrating at certain frequencies."

"All we are is energy, existing in an idea of ourselves and imagining the world around us exists. So if all that is true, which it is, then it's only the idea that really exists at all, because it's the only thing we know is actually real."

"You've lost me!" Roach grumbled at him.

“You’re just a rat in a box!” Sam told him, in growing exasperation. “There are noises from outside and you can feel the box moving, but we don’t know what’s making the noises. We don’t know if the box is moving, or if the whole world is. We don’t know anything for sure, except that we’re a rat in a box. Everything outside the box is guesswork.

“We hear a sound and we think it might be a voice, but another rat in another box might hear the same sound and think it’s something else.

“None of us really know anything, except that we’re a rat in a box. All we know is that we exist. We’re nothing more than ourselves: everything beyond our mind is a guess, nothing more.”

Roach shrugged and said simply, “So?”

“So this doesn’t always seem easy to understand!” Sam told him, trying to move it along. “It means that we don’t all live in a simple, single universe with a single set of rules where we all see and know the same thing.

“We are energy, living in bigger waves of energy.

“It means that one little piece of Mallory made a connection with one little piece of John, and somehow they got tangled up. We have to untangle him, and that means that finding the tangled part and cutting it off, like a fox gnawing off its feet to escape a trap.”

The Inspector frowned and wearily rubbed her temple. “By killing this version of Mallory?”

Sam nodded darkly. “But Mallory is the fox! We might be able to open the trap for him.”

“By finding John?” Roach guessed.

“Yeah!” Sam smiled, relieved that he’d found a way to explain it that seemed to resonate with them. “I don’t know what we’ll be able to do, but we might find out how this started. Then we can stop it.”

“Right!” Roach grunted.

“Well, where does he live?” Grace said.

Sam shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. I have to go back to the universe this all started at."

She sighed. "Where is that? Where Mallory comes from?"

He shook his head. "The one before," he said, suddenly realising how impossible the odds against him actually were. "Mallory's family was first attacked by a shadow when a rift opened up in their house, killing everyone and later displacing Mallory. That was the first one, I think. The hole came from the universe I need to get to."

"It's like finding a loose thread in a jumper and pulling on it. Everything begins to unravel, and the hole gets bigger as it does. What we know now is that the thread comes from that one universe."

Grace and Roach exchanged worried, confused, and slightly desperate looks to one another. "So how do you get there?"

Sam shrugged. "Lilith?"

"I know where it is!" she said happily. "I can send you there! It's easy!"

Sam glared at her. He huffed to himself, managing his temper. He reminded himself that none of this was really her fault.

"It's easy!" he said wryly, looking up at the others with a weak little smile.

"Easy for me!" she added. "Not easy for *you*."

Sam shook his head. "I'm shocked!" he quipped. "And everything had been going so swimmingly up to that point."

"The Sam there is in bed with his wife," she explained. "He's asleep."

Sam rubbed his temples. Of course he was.

"I'm outside the house now. The lights have been out for hours. I'm pretty sure they were having sex earlier: I could hear it from where I was standing. Your wife was quite loud this time."

Sam was uncomfortable. It didn't help in the slightest that everyone was now staring at him.

“Actually,” he began. “That might work out pretty well. If I go back to my house and open the front door, while you go and knock at the door in that universe, then that Sam will come down to see who’s knocking. We’ll be lined up ready to shift!”

Lilith just stood there staring back at him with a silly little grin on her face.

“Sam in that universe does live in the same house, doesn’t he?”

She nodded, much to his relief.

“Then I can take his car and go and find John!” he said. Sam turned to Roach and slapped his hand onto his shoulder. He could have chosen the Inspector, but he needed the detective to be on his side.

Roach was a man of action: he needed to be busy when the odds were against him.

“Roach, I need you to get me John’s address!” He flashed a look back to Lilith. Certainly he felt sure he could trust her all the while she *was* Lilith, but if she changed, if the darkness inside her surfaced, what then? It was better to use a resource he knew he could trust.

“How?” Roach shrugged, somewhat mystified.

“You’re a detective!” he reminded him. “Talk to Mallory, use your connections. I’m going home with Lilith to shift to the first universe. By the time I get there, I need to know where I’m going from a source I can trust!” Sam stared directly into his eyes. “That’s you!”

He nodded slowly and agreed, “You’ll have it!”

Sam looked over to Grace. “I’ll be as quick as I can, but I might not be able to get back. If daylight breaks while I’m there, I’ll be stuck. I can’t shift unless it’s nighttime!”

“OK!” she nodded, but he sensed she understood more than he was telling.

“I don’t know what I’m going to find, and I can’t afford to fail!” he continued. “Mallory is a loaded gun in the hands of a child. We can’t leave this situation unresolved. If I can’t get back, and if this happens

again, then you understand there is only one way we can deal with it for sure, right?"

She sighed a weary sigh, looking away in disgust. Finally, she replied, "I understand."

Roach stared at her with wide eyes. It seemed he understood too.

"Roach, do you have my address yet?"

Chapter 56

Sam unlocked the door to his house. It felt strangely like it was his house, even though he knew it wasn't. His home was in a universe far, far away, but he was standing exactly where it existed. Trying to understand all this with a human mind was a little bit like trying to get a large elephant into a small fridge. It didn't stop him trying, and trying *constantly* to do so.

He knew the dangers of it all, of course. Knowing more than a human was designed to tolerate was probably what had done the damage to Lilith's fragile little mind. Her brother John had similarly snapped under the weight of it all, most likely. Was he to be next?

Only their father seemed able to deal with it all properly, but whether he qualified as sane remained to be seen. What could you presume about a man who thought he had created the universe, or at least his own personal branch of it?

It worried Sam, on levels he didn't like to admit that he had, that he was walking too fine a line between sanity and a pit that would swallow him up into unspeakable depths where his mind would be lost forever in a psychotic delusion: a delusion where he would never again know what the difference really was. For all he knew, that was where he was right now, but that could be true for any of us, in as far as any of us could possibly know.

He checked his phone one last time, hoping against reason that there might be a message. With a sigh of relief, he noticed a text from Roach, giving him the address he needed to go to. He knew the area and said the number and the name of the road over and over again in his mind, willing it to stick hard in his memory. He needed to take it with him, no matter what.

He opened the door, slipping the keys back into his pocket. He pushed it open, standing just behind it and waited. He said to Lilith, very quietly so as not to wake anyone inside, "Where is he?"

"He's coming!" she said. "I knocked really loudly on his door. There was grumbling and swearing and I could hear him moving around. He'll be here in a few seconds and you'll shift into him as soon as he is."

"Right!" he said. He checked his watch: it was just after two thirty. They still had several hours of night left for him to shift around in. The later the hour, the more difficult it was to find the people he needed to find. Nothing about his life was ever easy, he mused.

"Keep this version of me here!" he told her. "Convince him to go to bed. Tell him he was drinking whisky with you back at the office and has been complaining about headaches and memory loss. Tell him that he told you he was going to sleep it off."

She crossed her arms and pouted at him. "I *have* done this before, Sam!" she grumbled at him. "I don't think there are many universes left now where you don't think you've got memory problems that you sometimes need to sleep off!"

"Alright!" he smiled at her. He opened his mouth to speak, to ask her what she was going to do, when the world erupted into a flash of white light. He gasped in surprise as it caught him off guard, exploding behind his eyes in a moment of all-encompassing pain. Just as suddenly there was darkness and he was standing behind the door, now dressed in a pair of black and white boxer shorts with an alloy baseball bat in his hand and a frown painted on his face.

He grunted to himself and looked at the bat. His thoughts were muddled at first, but he realised that when someone was banging on his door in the early hours of the morning, that might be the only way a man like him could possibly respond.

Lilith was nowhere to be seen, of course. She had departed the scene, probably hiding in a bush somewhere in case her timing was off.

“Lilith!” he called out softly into the night. Sure enough her head poked sideways out of a bush, the same innocent smile painted on it as before.

“Sam?” she said. “*My* Sam?”

“It’s me!” he told her, whispering loudly. He looked down at his scant attire. “I need to find some clothes. Wait here—I’ll be out in ten minutes.”

“Five!” she said. “I’m cold and hungry!”

He grumbled to himself. “Just wait here,” he snapped quietly.

Quickly he made his way inside, gingerly closing the door behind him, careful not to wake anyone up. It then occurred to him that he’d shifted. He wasn’t back in that other universe now where he was quietly letting himself into the house. In this universe, Lilith had been hammering on the door to wake him up. He didn’t need to stealthily creep through the place, he needed to come up with an excuse to placate an angry, perhaps scared, family.

“Sam?” an accusing voice cried out from the top of the stairs.

He winced at the sound of his wife’s voice calling out to him. He dreaded interacting with her in any universe, it just made it all so much harder.

“It’s work!” he told her. It then occurred to him that he didn’t even know what his job was in this universe.

“For god’s sake!” she grumbled. “Does this have to happen every single week?”

He smiled to himself at that tiny little piece of luck. “I’m sorry,” he said to her. “I have to go.”

He rummaged through a pile of clothes neatly stacked up on the kitchen counter, the fresh laundry that was intended for putting away in the morning.

“I’ll get your gun!” she told him wearily, heading back to the bedroom.

“Gun?” he smiled to himself. That might certainly make things easier, especially if the best way to untangle John and Mallory was to kill one of them. It occurred to him that he had no idea if he was psychologically capable of pulling the trigger in any case. In every way, John was just as innocent as Mallory. If anyone was truly guilty here, it was Lilith, and that wasn’t something he was ready to deal with just yet.

She came down the stairs, wearing only an oversized white T-shirt with the words ‘Property of the wife. Do not touch!’ emblazoned across it in very bold letters. She rubbed her eyes blearily and handed over his things.

He snatched up a black Browning pistol in a black, concealed holster and a set of Ids. Two spare magazines of ammunition in holders were lying on top. Sam smiled to himself. There were certainly differences in this universe. Perhaps that was why she’d chosen it?

“Be safe!” she told him. “Good men are hard to find!”

That was something she told him in his own world, something she’d always used as the front end of a joke at his expense. He smiled as he remembered it, the familiarity touching him lightly on the soul.

“That’s why I gave up and got stuck with you!” she said. “I’m too lazy to start over, so be careful!”

He grinned to her and she smiled back as he tightened his belt buckle and slipped the pistol in beneath it, just around the back, snugly fitting over the rear of his right hip.

She silently mouthed the words, “Be careful,” looking directly at him, a slightly worried look on her face, but it was tempered with confidence in him. She knew he could take care of himself. They both knew that!

He didn’t look worried, and in many ways, he wasn’t. He was going to face off against a young man that likely wouldn’t fare well in

combat against a small dog. Lilith's father wouldn't intervene, as this was all in his own interest. Threats were likely to be thin on the ground. What scared him was doing what needed to be done.

He was nothing more than an idea, a cloud of experience and memory floating between universes, occupying different bodies in different places. What would remain after this? What part of him was going to be left?

"I'll be careful!" he told her.

"I'm hungry!" Lilith said, whining like a small child who hadn't yet got her own way, but was determined she eventually would.

"You're always hungry!" Sam grunted at her, as the car drove slowly, carefully along the road. He didn't want to attract the attention of the police, in case any of them might be around, so he kept everything about his driving strictly under control.

"I'm homeless, Sam!" she told him, grumpily. "I never seem to find enough to eat. The only person that helps me is you. Everyone else wants something in return, and not usually something good."

He felt a pang of regret run through him at the harshness of his words. He always made sure she had a meal when they were together, but there were countless versions of her, each of them languishing cold and hungry in places he could scarcely imagine. He could never do enough.

"If we see a place, we'll stop and get something," he told her, relenting. A few minutes either way wasn't going to make much of a difference, after all.

"I want a kebab!" she said firmly. "Chicken!"

"If we see a place!" he said.

"It makes me feel warm inside," she explained. "I won't feel hungry again until tomorrow if I eat one of those, maybe even longer."

Sam sighed, looked away through the side window guiltily. She could leave, of course. She could go further into town, perhaps wander away, but she never would. She tried to always stay close to Sam, just in case he needed to shift in. That meant that she was just as trapped here as he was.

Sams in most universes knew her. They had learned to use her as a source of information, and that meant she got paid, often fed as well. He had told her how to manipulate him, how to pluck at his heartstrings so he would help her as often as he could. It was something, the best he could do from the one place he was, *whatever* one place it was at the time!

“There’s a place just up the road!” she said. “It’s not far out of the way!”

“Alright!” he told her, heading off to detour slightly towards the main road. He knew the place she meant, a 24 hour establishment that catered to the people drunkenly staggering out of the station on their way home. In any case, he needed to check a map. He knew where he was going, but he wasn’t sure exactly which road he needed to take.

“Five minutes,” he told her.

“Ten!”

Chapter 57

Sam sipped on a cup of coffee, served in an incredibly thin plastic cup. It flexed alarmingly when he picked it up, and the strong, bitter contents sloshed around inside, running down the sides and making sipping at it significantly challenging.

Lilith ate her kebab. She snapped at it greedily, devouring it like a starving predator who had proudly chased down its prey with the last of its energy, and this meal would save its life for one more week. Sam wondered just how far that was from the truth.

This was the universe where all this had started. He was looking now at the physical version of Lilith that had begun all of this. Her twin had come here to this very place to start this attack on her father. Whatever monstrous things she'd faced, they'd caught up with her in this spot. She'd created a new, stronger persona inside the frightened, damaged little child she really was. She initiated this plan, this callous attack on this even more callous man, presumably knowing that whatever she did would threaten a lot of other people around them.

Was she really that dark? Were any of us? Was she just the product of the horrible things that had happened to her, or was there always a splinter of ice running through her, a vicious little streak that had run through her soul, straight from her father's cold, inhuman heart, deep down into the core of hers?

Sam pondered what that meant of him. What was he really? If he was a killer in other universes, then he was a killer in this one, just a killer who had followed a different path and ended up in a slightly different place. What scared him most was the pistol, nestling roughly against the small of his back, pressing uncomfortably into his skin. Very soon that weapon would be in his hand, and all of these questions would be answered in a way that there would never be any coming back from.

“How’s your dinner?” Sam asked, distracting himself from the dark shadows opening up in his mind.

She mumbled through a mouthful, “It’s breakfast actually! Breakfast from yesterday.”

Sam smiled thinly at her. She had never looked more frail, more helpless to him than she did right there in that moment.

There she was, this tiny little twig being swept along on a huge ocean with no power to control any aspect of her life, but cursed with having to live every awful fragment of it in every awful universe, every terrible second stretching out infinitely.

“You want anything else? Fries?” he asked. Certainly, stopping her brother was the priority, but just then, it didn’t any longer seem like the only thing in the world they had to do.

“I’m good!” she mumbled through a mouthful. “If I eat too much I get sick. When you don’t eat very often, your stomach shrinks.”

“Right!” he said, sipping on his coffee. His thoughts dwelled on his wallet. When he’d paid, he’d noticed it was well stuffed with cash. He resolved to leave some of it for her before he left.

“Thanks, Sam!” she said, finishing up and wiping her greasy fingers on a tissue, and then rubbing them vigorously up and down her tattered woollen jumper.

He shrugged, not quite sure what she was thanking him for. “For what?”

“Thanks for looking after me!” she told him with a smile. “I know I’m not always easy to be around. I know I’m a horrible person.”

“You’re not a horrible person!” he said.

“Then why did my father do this to me? I must be awful, just like my mother!”

At first he assumed she had to be making a joke, some kind of ironic statement, but then realised she meant every word of what she was saying. For the first time he wondered if maybe everything that had

happened to her hadn't turned her into a person that had no choice but to live on the streets: perhaps she was simply punishing herself this way for being this terrible someone she imagined herself to be.

"Lilith, you're not a horrible person," he told her firmly. "Your father might be, but there's nothing wrong with you. Well, not a lot. Well, nothing that makes you a horrible person."

She smiled back to him and cocked her head to one side curiously. "I'm *not* a horrible person?"

"No!" he said simply, smiling thinly at her.

"Even the part of me that caused all of this?"

That was a more difficult issue to resolve. Warily, and much less sure of himself, he told her, "There are parts of me in other universes that have done terrible things too. I'm not saying we're not responsible for who we are and what we do, but maybe we can't be held responsible for what we become when things happen to us that are completely out of our control?"

She smiled again. "Thanks, Sam!"

"Go and clean up," he told her. "Then we've got work to do!"

"OK!" she agreed. She shuffled out of the chair and happily made her way out to the back.

Sam got up as soon as she vanished out through the door. It was time to go. He couldn't risk the other part of her surfacing while he was working, and then working against him. He couldn't trust her at all really.

She was essential to the fact of him shifting between universes. The two versions of him had to be in the same spot for the bridge to be made. Without her being able to see across the infinite span of reality, that simply couldn't happen. Without her doing that for him, he was trapped and he might never shift again.

But, of course, none of that mattered now. He wouldn't be shifting again after tonight. He was about to go up against a storm, to

step into the centre of a hole that was swallowing up the universe, and he was going to close it once and for all.

He wasn't going to walk away from this one, and at this point, he didn't care about anything else anymore.

He walked up to the counter and the man working there looked up sharply, standing up from a small kitchen chair he had perched himself on to watch some television program in a foreign language.

Sam handed him a £50 note. He noticed that the queen wasn't pictured on it—instead it was a man he didn't recognise. He wondered if that was significant in some way. "My friend, Lilith," he began gesturing out through the door, "Please use this to pay for whatever she needs over the next few days."

The heavysset, middle aged man looked at him, regarding him strangely. "Sure!" he grunted.

"I'm a policeman!" Sam said, just to make sure he wouldn't just put the money in his pocket and forget all about her. "She works for me. I want to make sure she's fed."

"And after it's gone?" he huffed the perfectly reasonable question.

Sam looked away. "There are limits to what I can do, and everything comes to an end," he told him. But now it was time to go and he quickly shuffled out, getting outside before Lilith finished up. He wanted to be gone so that when she exited the bathroom, Sam was simply a memory.

She couldn't walk to the house as quickly as he could drive. By the time she got there, it would all be over.

A bell rang behind him as the door closed, sealing off a chapter of his life. He had no regrets about what he'd done, and no hesitation about what lay ahead. It had to be done and there was nobody else who could do it.

If there was to be a sacrifice, a life given to the void in order to end the carnage, then so be it.

Either way, his path had always led forwards and was finally coming to an end.

The house that John lived in was achingly, annoyingly normal. He had expected him to have lived in a hostel, perhaps some kind of shelter. As he pulled up outside, he realised that he hadn't thought that through and should have managed his expectations. If the young man sat all day playing video games, then he had to have a room of his own. He had to have been in long term care, fostered perhaps. Now, sitting outside of a very normal suburban house at the junction of two little roads that seemed to lead nowhere, he realised that this was more than just accommodation. This was home. John lived here! He had a life here.

He sat with his hands on the steering wheel, but his thoughts were fixed, dwelling uncomfortably, on the weapon tucked under his belt. This was the end now: the end of his journey and the resolution of this case.

He had flitted between worlds and universes so similar that he might have been walking a single line through them, and if he could have taken someone along for the ride, they still might never have believed him.

And it had all led him here. It had all come to this final moment. None of what had gone before mattered; none of it was worth mentioning. It had all just been the universe preparing him for this final challenge. It had all just been setting him up to plug this gap in the world. After this he would give up. The stain on his soul would dissolve as his consciousness melted away and this whole part of him ceased to exist.

Sam would continue, but not this version of him. His fight, his struggle to get back to his own universe might be over, but his sacrifice would mean that the battle to save the world wouldn't be lost.

What was left would be a Sam that was better off without him, and would quickly forget.

He got out of the car, closing the door behind him softly, pushing it shut so that it didn't make enough noise to wake anyone in the neighbourhood. He looked around furtively, noticing the few windows with lights still spilling out from behind closed curtains. There seemed rather a lot, especially for a quiet little neighbourhood so far removed from the bustle of the larger city.

The door to the house loomed ahead of him, grim and foreboding as he made his way over. Without looking down, his fingers reflexively moved to his pistol, lightly touching the grip to remind himself that it was there, safely packed at the back where it belonged. The spare magazines were on the opposite side, meaning he was well armed for whatever he might find up ahead. That was all reassuring, he thought to himself.

In his home universe, he had employed subtlety. He might have picked the lock and slipped quietly inside, exploring in silence, edging along the walls like a ghost. In this world there were no picks in his pockets: where there used to be tools, there were now weapons. That limited his approach options down to one.

He kicked the door in!

Chapter 58

The door smashed open noisily, swinging hard against its twisted hinges and clattering with a forceful crash into the wall behind it.

Sam was flushed with adrenaline, a pounding in his chest that was so hard that his temples throbbed from the blood surging through his veins. He could hear his deep, heavy breaths below him, and feel the pumping of his heart through his ears.

His pistol was in his hand, pointing forwards into the gloom aggressively as he made his way inside the house behind it, following the front sight that glowed an eerie green up ahead of him. He had already reflexively swiped down the thumb safety, and positioned his right forefinger pointing forwards. The hammer was locked back, ready to drop onto a live chamber with the squeeze of a light, single-action trigger, ready to send a flaming blast of lead into whatever horrors he might encounter up ahead.

The silence was deafening. Nobody in the house seemed to have stirred from the noise of the shattered door. It was as if nobody had even reacted to it. He felt the sweat prickling around his neck as he gripped the pistol harder, pointing it fixedly forwards as he crept along, edging deeper inside the darkness of the house.

He spun. He had heard a noise behind him, some shuffle of feet against the cheap carpet. He had turned, acting on pure reflex, even before he had realised what the sound was, or even being entirely sure he'd heard it.

A woman was stood in front of him. She seemed half asleep, dazed and confused by it all, her face expressionless and her eyes gazing out emptily like two hollow glass spheres. She shuffled forward, moaning weakly, while her arms draped limply down to her sides. Every exhalation of breath came out with a low rumble from her chest that reverberated out through her lolling open mouth.

Her long, dark hair was untidy and hung down lifelessly across her gaunt, pale face.

“Stop!” he warned her sharply. “I’m armed.”

She shuffled forwards, moaning darkly. Light from an outside street lamp through a side window illuminated her face a soft orange. Her eyes stared forwards fixedly, seeing nothing, but as Sam spoke they swivelled up and connected with his. She stared blankly and began shuffling forward more quickly, straight at him.

He couldn’t shoot her. He knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that this wasn’t John, and she certainly didn’t appear to be any kind of threat. What exactly she was, though, was a whole different question. She certainly wasn’t behaving rationally, that much was certain.

Very slowly she reached out for him, both her arms raised up haltingly, as if someone had tied a bunch of helium balloons to them. They raised up unevenly as she continued shuffling towards him, groaning, grumbling, and even lightly snarling under her breath.

Sam narrowed his eyes and took a small step backwards. He lowered the weapon, carefully making sure it was still pointing forwards in case he needed it, but he was more confused now than anything else.

“What are you...?” he said, not really knowing what else to say. “Stop!”

She looked up, craning her neck forwards, ignoring his pistol as if having a firearm pointing at her was nothing at all. Suddenly her eyes lit up. Her skull erupted into fire, glowing a brilliant red, so brightly that Sam recoiled, shielding his face from the blinding light.

Everything was darkness but for two glowing orange halos that stayed burned into his mind, lighting up the inside of his head as he blinked inside the black emptiness that seemed to have swallowed him.

He rubbed his eyes, blurring looking around to find her, to understand what had happened.

It was colder now and he could hear the sound of wind rushing through, around and over him. He was outside: somehow he was no longer in the house. He couldn't be, but he was.

He looked around blinking, clearing his mind and trying to marshal his thoughts. He was outside the house in a narrow street in the dark, the dim dusk of a late evening. It was quiet, the sound of human activity conspicuously absent.

Debris was scattered about, rubbish strewn around the edges of the road along cracked concrete paving slabs. Along the way a blue hatchback was upturned, smashed through a wall surrounding a house and left quietly abandoned, blades of grass shyly growing out of the shattered windows.

"What?" he gasped in surprise, looking down and noticing, to his dismay, that a large axe had replaced his Browning pistol. That, on top of everything else, wasn't at all reassuring. He gaped at the axe fixedly, trying desperately to figure out exactly what was happening. Perhaps he had shifted, he wondered, and if he had, how on earth had that happened?

He snapped up suddenly as a noise up ahead caught his interest in a way that wasn't particularly reassuring. At first he began to make his way towards it, but then he saw the source and stopped, rather abruptly, in his tracks.

The woman was at the front, the light now picking up her long, ragged white clothing that hung untidily off her gaunt, slender frame. Her hair was matted with dirt, and she stared at him from behind cold, dead eyes. At least four more of them fanned out from behind her, sunken, decaying, blackened flesh hanging off their craggy, bony and skeletal faces.

The flock began shuffling towards him, weakly growling to themselves. Sam glanced back down at the axe, really much preferring when it had been a semi-automatic 9mm pistol.

He cast a look behind him to where a truck had been parked across the road, blocking his retreat, almost as if it had been dumped there for precisely that purpose. He was oddly boxed in, and the only way out from where he was, was forwards—and forwards meant fighting his way through the hoard of monstrosities heading inexorably directly towards him.

With little choice in the matter, he stepped ahead and warned with some uncertainty, “Step aside! I will defend myself!”

The first of them, which might have been an old man before he had died, made his way forwards, slightly quicker than the others but dragging his left leg awkwardly behind him as he lunged frantically along. His hands were outstretched, his fingers contorted into claws as he grabbed at the air eagerly. His twisted, dead face snarled hungrily and his yellowed, oversized teeth snapped open and shut with vigour.

Sam’s chest pounded, his head swimming with fear. He had never seen anything like this before in the hundreds of shifts he’d made. With no choice remaining and the growing instinct to lash out driving him, he hefted the axe and pulled it up behind him, ready to swing it in defence.

“Last chance!” he growled at the dead thing that was aggressively shuffling closer.

The creature just snarled in response, flinging itself forwards in one last, desperate lunge. Whatever it was, its mouth lolled open and the thin, stretched-back flesh of what remained of the lips were pulled back completely as it went to bite its victim.

Sam swung the axe. He put all the power he had into it, the adrenaline stretching every ounce of power from his aching muscles. The heavy metal blade flashed through the air, arcing forwards towards the ugly, twisted creature.

It impacted with a hard, wet splatting sound that sent a shower of blackened, bloodied flesh up into the air as the blade cut easily through its neck. For a moment it seemed to freeze on the spot. The body

crumbled to the floor as the head rolled through the air before crashing down noisily to the floor and tumbling around on the ground, the jaws still snapping aggressively, and the dark, hollow eyes gazing raptly up at him.

Sam watched, a little horrified, as the thing seemed to be trying to reach his ankle, shuffling along by opening and closing its mouth.

“Nice!” he said to himself, looking up just as a heavy, older woman dived towards him, dead, black eyes staring out from rotted away flesh with dark, old bones jutting through a gash down the side of its face.

He pulled back reflexively and swung the axe again, this time bringing it down from over his head, swinging right down into the top of hers. The angry, hateful look of pure rage vanished to be replaced with two halves of a more thoughtful, introspective face, of someone who might be regretting the more recent choices that had led their life to its current juncture.

The axe remained fixed in the base of her skull, having cleaved it into two roughly even halves. The creature grunted, sighed and tumbled to the ground emptily, as if the strings holding up a puppet had been cut.

Sam put his foot on her head and pulled hard, yanking the axe back out of her skull, and resumed brandishing it threateningly.

Threats didn’t seem particularly effective, and the remaining three came at him together, all diving at him at once, a snarling, gnashing mess of teeth and flailing limbs. Sam swung the axe one last time and the sharp, heavy blade tore through the flesh of an arm, impacting onto a bone, shattering it but not even slowing down the approaching hoard.

He backed off, gasping in horror as the three rotten things came at him, gazing emptily with soulless, dead eyes. Fear was washed away by one last surge of rage. True to his nature, he found the strength to lash out one last time, angrily punching hard into the face of the woman, the horribly dead woman who he’d met first in a quiet little foster home

somewhere in the quiet suburban streets of London and who was now dead and trying, presumably, to eat his brains.

His balled fist connected, sending her head rolling around limply on the end of her green tinged and thoroughly rotten neck. She collapsed to the floor in a blaze of red and white light that spewed like the roaring exhaust of a pair of jet engines from her eyes.

Sam staggered backwards in confusion as an explosion of hot flames seemed to coldly wash over him. He put up his hand, balancing himself against the wall and watched as the woman slumped to the floor, moaning softly and then just lying in silence, unconscious and unmoving.

He looked around in confusion. He was back in the house, the quiet, normal house where all this had started.

“What?” he mumbled to himself, trying desperately to make sense of it all. He clawed through his memory, struggling to recall if something like this had ever happened before, or if he’d ever even heard of such a thing ever happening before—ever.

His thoughts were shattered as a man put a hand on his shoulder. In the fractions of a second that passed by, Sam cursed himself for his lack of preparedness, scolding himself for not being more alert, and for allowing whatever was happening to get the better of him.

He turned quickly, finding himself gazing into the empty stare of a middle-aged man with greying hair sprouting from a mostly bald head.

The world once more exploded into orange light and Sam was washed away in it. He covered his eyes with his arm and then, just as suddenly as it had started, the world was dark again.

Chapter 59

This time it was colder than ever. He looked around quickly, trying to button down his confusion, trying to focus against the total lack of logic and reason that was happening all around him.

He was in a cave, it seemed. He was surrounded by jagged rocks with long, straight cones pointing both down from the ceiling and up from the floor, like he was trapped in the mouth of some giant stone creature.

It was bitingly cold and clear glass panes of ice clung to the walls like sheets of diamonds. Dotted around the place, simple structures had been fixed to the walls, triangular assemblies of wooden frames with torches jutting out, burning away and lighting the place with their cold, yellow flames. Jagged orange light flickered all around him sending dancing shadows out from behind their hiding places.

He held up his pistol, which was now a sword. It was a long, straight, squared off rapier of cold, white steel.

“Great,” he muttered to himself. “I wonder how well my firearm training has prepared me to use this bloody thing?”

“Defend yourself!” came a voice piercing the gloom, proudly calling out from the shadows and echoing around the cavern.

Sam spun around sharply, somehow bringing up the sword in a roughly defensive posture, something like he might have seen in a movie: perhaps correctly, and more likely, not.

The man from the house stood before him, now dressed in flowing white robes, a long, grey beard stretching down from his chin tied neatly into a series of tight little knots. His head was shaved clean. A black belt was secured around his middle, inset with gold lettering, and he wore a necklace with a glowing jade pendant attached to it. His eyes stared forward aggressively as he glared at Sam, his own sword held above his head, ready to fight, ready to attack.

Sam looked once more at his own smaller, lighter blade and grumbled to himself about the apparent injustice.

“I don’t want to fight you!” Sam, the detective, called out. He wasn’t a sword fighter, some ninja master languishing in a cave, out to test his skills against a worthy opponent. In fact, in terms of swordsmanship, he was largely bereft of skills, and that suddenly seemed like it might be quite a serious issue.

“Defend yourself!” he said again, this time more aggressively as he paced forwards, his robe catching the wind and billowing majestically around him. He began twirling his huge, swept-back and menacing blade. It spun around in his hand, slashing at the air with a whooshing sound as it sliced around deftly.

He was close enough now that Sam could almost reach out and touch him. He glared at Sam hatefully as his eyes narrowed into ugly little slits, and carried on plunging into a deep well of pure hatred.

“Defend yourself, or I will cut you down like a weed.

“Show some honour, man!”

Sam decided that he was more likely to show his internal organs if he fought this assailant on equal terms. Sam edged backwards, his feet crunching down onto loose rocks beneath his black shoes, shoes that were perfectly suited to life as a detective running around the streets of London, but fighting martial-arts experts in shadowy caves, very much less so.

“Fight!” he hissed through an angry snarl, sounding exactly like a final warning. “Fight or die!” He slashed around with his razor sharp blade, the edge glinting from the light of the flickering fires.

Sam turned the sword over in his hand, looking down at the heavy, cold steel of the horrible thing. He turned it downwards so the blade pointed to his feet and then launched it with all the strength he could find, grunting loudly. The hilt flew through the air, slamming headlong into his opponents nose.

He cried out in painful surprise as he crumpled to the floor in a heap, clutching his face as blood cascaded out through his fingers.

Sam kicked as hard as he could, slamming his steel toecap into his adversary's head. He reeled back with a sigh, a weak gasp expelled from his lungs, followed by a sickening crack as his head smashed into the cave floor.

His eyes exploded into a blossoming flower of red light, burning into his skull and then erupting out into a blinding white light.

Sam reeled back, covering his face with his hand and felt the cold, hard steel of the slide of his pistol rubbing against his forehead.

He looked down in surprise, finding the man at his feet, dressed like before in a T-shirt and striped red and white boxer shorts. Sam looked around nervously, wondering just exactly what was happening, and how exactly whatever it was that was happening *was* indeed happening.

Footsteps against the carpet behind him made Sam turn, startled as he flushed with fear. His reflexes took over, and he pointed his pistol once more fixedly forwards.

All he saw was a pair of black eyes erupting behind his own, filling his mind with two glowing pools of crackling red flames.

Chapter 60

Sam's eyes fluttered open and he found himself in a warehouse, a wide, open and cavernous place, dishevelled and crumbling. He was surrounded by ageing grey concrete and peeling plaster. Windows in far away walls were smashed, blackened glass with holes blasted through where daylight shyly peeked in from outside.

He was lying on a powder-strewn floor on top of a dusting of light gravel, small chunks of brick digging into his back. With a sigh, he hefted himself off the ground, propping himself up on his elbows to take a better look around.

The place was clearly disused, and clearly hadn't been occupied in a very long time. Broken furniture was strewn around: overturned chairs, and a large office desk languishing shyly in the corner with only three legs. At the end, behind him, was a car. The doors were left wide open and the inside was missing, burned down to the outline of the chairs with the swirling patterns of rusted-down springs. It had been reduced to a skeleton and clearly left abandoned there many years prior.

Sam hefted the little 9mm pistol in his hand and breathed a sigh of relief. For once, his weapon had come along with him and hadn't been turned into something utterly pointless, or something he had no idea how to use, at the very least. He was grateful for that much, even if he had no idea where he was or what was going to happen. Hopefully not samurais or zombies, he thought as he stood himself up, rubbing the dust and grime off from his long, dark coat.

There was a loud crack as a gunshot split the air. Sam ducked in surprise as his heart raced suddenly, diving to the ground for cover, rolling reflexively away from the sound of the discharge. In one of the many doorways, a man was standing, brandishing a shotgun menacingly. He racked the pump. The metal lock-work of the horribly brutal weapon clattered noisily with a solid, heavy, definite clunk.

Sam had no choice: he knew with absolute certainty as the muzzle of the weapon began to bear down on him what he had to do.

“Drop it or I’ll fire!” he demanded, as authoritatively as he could manage, while so clearly heavily out-gunned.

The man was dressed in a suit: a cheap, dark blue number stretched over a powerful and muscular frame. His head was oddly square and his eyes were dull and empty. His face held what might have been a permanent grin and it was directed mercilessly at him.

The weapon began to clunk again as he clicked the pump back forwards. A fresh round locked into place ready to discharge, blowing him to pieces if it found its mark.

Sam fired twice; his finger squeezed down on the slender, steel trigger and the gun bucked in his hand. He lined up the sight almost instantly, and it bucked again sending a double-tap impact into his adversary, two bullets ripping at his flesh.

Two red holes opened up in his chest and he roared angrily as his body convulsed from the blasts. He dropped the shotgun to the floor and collapsed backwards, staggering into a dusty wall and slowly sliding down to the floor.

He had killed him, he thought coldly. He hefted himself up to his feet and just stared at the fallen man. How easy it had been to simply pull the trigger, and watch the life ebb away from a human being and know that he was gone, his soul snuffed out because of an act of violence that had come from him. This wasn’t some story about another shade of Sam: this was the real him, and he had killed a man without a second thought.

He felt empty inside, cold and numb. It was like his emotions had flicked off and his blood had turned to ice in his veins. He just stared raptly at the dead man while a single word occupied his mind so loudly he could almost hear it in his ears.

‘Murderer!’ it screamed.

Whatever it was that he would become before the end, the change had started. This was now a Sam that he had never wanted to be.

His emotional exploration into the morality of taking a life in self-defence all came to a very abrupt end as the world around him exploded into a horrible burst of staggering rapid gunfire. Jagged flashes and bangs sounded around the place. Pistols sent streams of lead in his direction, while something bigger, uglier and more frightening spat out bursts of shots, hammering bullet after bullet into the ground around him, tearing up the floor, each impact working its way closer to him.

Sam ran and dived for cover behind the burned out hulk of the old car as the floor beneath his feet exploded, sending concrete and dust spewing up all around him. He threw himself to the ground, rolling as he hit the deck, grunting as the wind was knocked out of him.

Bullets shredded through the metal body noisily. Sparks exploded out from each impact and coils of dust were kicked up from the ground behind him.

Then there was a moment of deathly silence. For a just a moment there was nothing, and then he heard a chattering of metallic clicks as guns and weapons were reloaded. He looked down at his diminutive 9mm pistol that, not so very long ago had seemed very reassuring in his hand. Now it seemed hopelessly inadequate.

He tapped his belt, reminding himself that the two spare magazines were still in place and hadn't been lost. At least they were still where they should be.

"Come out now and we'll kill you quickly!" a voice barked out, echoing around the almost empty place. "Make us wait and we'll come in there, and tear you apart slowly. I'll walk out of this warehouse with your gums in my pocket and your eyes slowly digesting in my guts. You won't be done at that point: you'll be bleeding slowly to death as you hang upside down from a pair of meat hooks through your ankles, as my men here cut off your fingers one knuckle at a time!"

Sam weighed his options, and frankly none of them sounded anything but *utterly appalling*. He chanced a look over the top of the car. He peered up over what had once been the nearside wing but was now a rusty, tattered piece of pressed steel, pitted and used-up. He counted at least four, among them the one that was making the promises. He was shrouded mostly in shadow as he yelled at him from behind a pillar. He was a hulking, gigantic behemoth of a man.

With his tiny little pistol as his only defence against them, things really didn't bode all that well at all.

"Who are you?" Sam cried out. "What did I do to you?!"

One of the men stepped forward, brandishing a horrifyingly purposeful piece of black hardware over his shoulder. He began to laugh maniacally.

The voice shouted back at him, "It doesn't matter who we are. We're going to kill you, and we're going to enjoy it too!"

Sam watched as the gigantic man walked into his sightline, still laughing loudly. He quickly hefted his shotgun from his shoulder and racked the pump with a mighty crunch of the metal machinery inside.

Sam needed to make a point that he wasn't a rat in a trap, even if he only needed prove it to himself. He took careful aim over the car and fired off a single shot. His pistol cracked and he quickly pulled away, ducking back behind his makeshift cover.

There was a loud grunt and Sam peered beneath the car at the floor on the opposite side. He saw the man falling limply to the ground, the shotgun crashing down noisily beside him. He moaned and rolled around, clutching his shoulder as thick, red blood oozed out, darkening his light grey suit.

"Slowly it is!" the same, familiar voice called out, sounding like he was enjoying it, perhaps even laughing as he spoke.

A barrage of shots rung out; a deafening boom of shotguns and pistols fired together as white, acrid smoke filled the room and the

stench of gunpowder hung on the air. The explosions carried on and on, seemingly endlessly until, after way too long a time, they died out and silence fell once again over the scene.

Sam peered out through the coiling, billowing clouds of smoke as it all began to clear.

He could see two of them, chuckling to themselves as they stepped confidently forwards, slamming more ammunition into the magazines of their shotguns.

Sam stood up sharply and quickly took aim. A series of shots rang out as he carefully picked his targets, two rounds into each before diving once more behind cover.

One sighed gently and fell to ground, collapsing backwards like a domino toppling onto a table. He slammed down hard and his weapon clattered to the ground helplessly. The other slumped to his knees, clutching his arm.

He noticed yet more advancing, another two heading straight for him, brazenly motivated to end his life. Who were these people? They were fearless and unstoppable, and walked headlong into gunfire without a second thought. What kind of man was that crazy?

Sam took a chance to break cover and ran. He left the relative safety of the car and went as fast as he could to the open doorway behind him, hoping the shell of the vehicle would cover his retreat. Several gunshots cracked behind him but nothing impacted anywhere nearby. Then, several gunshots exploded into a crackling cacophony of explosions as more erupted all around.

It was clear there were more of them than he'd first assumed, and shooting a few of them wasn't having as much of effect on the situation as would have been ideal.

He ran, his chest heaving, his legs burning until he finally made his way through. As he came to the door, he reached out, grabbing the edge with the fingertips of his left hand and spinning himself off around

to the side, out of the way of the hailing storm of bullets ripping through the air all around him.

He slammed his back into the wall outside, huffing breathlessly.

A staccato burst of horrifyingly loud cracks exploded from inside and the concrete wall around his head began to come apart. Sam ran, sprinting off down the side of the building, fist sized lumps of concrete exploding out behind him as a massive weapon chewed the wall to pieces.

This was not good!

As he came to the edge of the warehouse, a man jumped out before him. He was dressed in the same unflattering style of suit in the same kind of pastel shade as all the others. It was as if, whoever these people were, they had bought the clothes in bulk and stretched them uncomfortably over the lumpy, overly muscular builds of disposable, stupid men who had no idea how not to get shot in a gun fight.

The man racked the slide of a very large, and very threatening silver pistol and grinned as if the idea of shooting someone was a happy, fuzzy thought to him.

Sam shot first, sending two rounds forwards as he sprinted along. At least one found its mark. The big man jolted hard in an exaggerated way, the force of the bullet jerking him backwards, sweeping him back off his feet and slamming his empty, lifeless body into the ground beneath him.

Sam was relieved at finding himself still alive, so far. He sprinted on, jumping over the body of the fallen man that his pistol had so effectively cut down.

Clearly this weapon, in this universe, wasn't loaded with the same semiwadcutter ammunition he normally used. He didn't know what kind of bullets could rip such a gigantic man completely off his feet, but what he had was evidently highly effective, and he was grateful for this one small mercy.

He heard voices from behind as three more of them spilled out from the door, firing indiscriminately from their huge, ugly weapons.

Sam swung himself around the corner of the building, finding cover just as quickly as he was able. He turned to fire back on them, pulling the trigger as fast as he could, emptying the rest of his ammunition until the slide locked back.

They kept coming. Being fired at didn't seem to faze them in the slightest, just as it hadn't before.

Sam cursed himself for not counting his rounds. His pistol carried thirteen bullets in the magazine and one more in the chamber. He was trained to fire twelve, keeping one for emergencies while he changed for a fresh load: the weight of the last round in the magazine helped to flush it out for quicker changes. He had missed that, forgotten to count along, and now had run his weapon dry.

Stupid!

He pressed the button on the receiver and flicked the empty magazine free, slamming a fresh one home and snapping the slide closed. He was armed again, but now with only thirteen rounds and with the same stowed on his belt. He grimly acknowledged the fact that this wasn't going to be enough.

He chanced a look around the edge. Three of them were advancing on him, coming closer with every passing second. As they caught sight of him, they all stopped in unison, adopted a shooting stance as they opened fire. He tucked back in quickly as the air around him exploded into fire and sizeable chunks of concrete flew out, blasted out from the edge of the wall.

Sam breathed deeply and began running, heading away as quickly as he could.

In front were metal shipping containers, worn and battered and painted in a variety of dull colours, some with logos chipped and peeling

along the sides. A tall wire fence marked the perimeter behind them, with a spiralling spring of barbed wire hung around the top.

He swerved hard, making his way into the crates. He tried to find a way through where it would be harder for them to follow, but his options quickly limited themselves. It was like a path had been laid out for him.

Two men, dressed in more of the same suits jumped out, one pointing a shotgun, the other snapping a small submachine gun into place.

Sam stopped in his track, reflexes and training getting him instantly into position as he shot a series of double-taps. The first went into the shotgun-wielding man who was blown backwards by the force of the blast.

The second man calmly, quietly cocked the weapon, as if nothing important was happening around him. He grinned madly as his cold, vile eyes peered forwards from his bony, square face.

Two rounds cut into him and he spun off to the side, collapsing in a bloody heap on top of his comrade. The third set of shots missed altogether.

Sam stood watching, breathing heavily, his head spinning. He was reacting now. Thoughts were washed from his mind and he was doing nothing more or less than surviving. At that moment, nothing else mattered; there was nothing else in the world!

He ran past them, pausing only to scoop up the submachine gun, not yet fired and presumably loaded with a full magazine. It had a slightly curved clip jutting out from in front of the trigger and a plastic foregrip stippled with diamond checkering. It looked vaguely like half a dozen different weapons but wasn't exactly any of them. Whatever it was, it wasn't something he'd encountered in any other universe.

He dashed forwards coming to a wide opening with a concrete loading deck some way before him.

He was standing there, huge, dark and menacing, shrouded partly in shadows. A weapon of absolutely ridiculous proportions was ready to fire, a machine gun with a massive round drum of ammunition poking out from the bottom.

Sam could feel his heart sink in his chest and his shoulders slumped. Even before he spoke, he knew this was their leader. This was the man who had threatened him so imaginatively, so coldly, grinning to himself while doing it.

“You’re dead!” he told him. “Your body just hasn’t gotten the news yet.”

Sam had nothing much to add to that. Behind him he heard the sound of another man shuffling up and heard the unmistakable, teeth-rattling sound of a pump-action shotgun being cocked and loaded.

“I’m going to blow off your legs!” he told him, matter-of-factly. “Then I’m going to drag you by your eyelids to a vat of acid where I’m going to slowly dissolve you away until there’s nothing left but a skull. Then I’m gonna take it home, crack it open, and eat your foetid brains with a spoon.”

Sam wondered briefly just exactly what he’d done to deserve that. Perhaps the Sam in his universe had accidentally backed his car over his kitten?

“And then...” he shouted angrily, as if he’d suddenly thought of something even better.

Sam had heard more than enough. He quickly brought the submachine gun up and opened fire. It shuddered in his hands and a crackling stream of bullets juddered out at the man who had, for some reason, decided he didn’t like him very much.

The man ducked for cover, but the bullets tore into him. He rolled to the ground, gasping in pain. Without a thought, Sam then spun around and dropped to the ground, firing a second burst at the man behind him, just as a shotgun blast rung out, sending a stream of shot harmlessly out

to the side. His chest exploded open as a flaming spray of bullets tore through him, and parts of him splattered up the walls of the containers.

Sam discarded the weapon, empty and useless. He slowly, gingerly made his way towards the leader, the fingers of his hand clenching his Browning pistol tightly. He was rolling on the floor now, clutching his leg and screaming in pain as heavy, crimson blood seeped through the fabric of his trousers. He was wailing like a banshee with its clothes on fire.

Sam frowned. The others seemed almost inhumanly detached, walking headlong into gunfire: no threats seemed to faze them in the slightest. This one, the one with the loudest voice, the one with the biggest gun seemed like the weakest. A single gunshot-wound to the leg had taken him out of the fight. He had flung his massive weapon to the ground, crumpled, and then began sobbing weakly to himself.

He was huge, just ridiculously massive! The closer Sam got, the more insane he looked. He had the kind of bulging, rippling muscles that you couldn't get without steroids and an almost inhuman degree of self-discipline. He had the body of a movie villain but ramped up until he was so big that he seemed not even entirely human.

"Who are you?" Sam said, levelling his pistol at the man's temple. Tears of pain and fear were rolling down his cheeks.

"Leave me alone!" he cried out, spitting the words spitefully. "You shot me! How could you shoot me?"

Sam raised an eyebrow and thought about the bad news he was about to deliver. It probably wouldn't go down well. With the silver-grey muzzle of his weapon pointed unwaveringly at his head, Sam told him earnestly, "I'm sorry, but I'm about to do it again!"

"No!" he screamed, covering his face and cowering, shaking in fear. "Please don't hurt me! Please don't kill me!"

Sam sighed and lowered the weapon slightly, but kept the muzzle on the target. He couldn't shoot such a pathetic creature, rolling around

the floor begging for his life, *could he*? Was he as dark, as cold as they told him he could be? Could he give in to the powerful urge to end this man's life?

Sam's finger tightened on the trigger and his hand began to tremble as a war was fought inside of him. He glared angrily, his mind churning with the rights and the wrongs of killing him, of shooting him in the head and ending it all.

But the war was won. He sighed loudly to himself, lowering the pistol to his side. He bent down and punched him, as hard as he could, right in the face.

The world exploded into white and red flaming light.

Sam blinked and looked around. There were now three people languishing unconscious on the floor in front of him in the hallway of an ordinary house in an ordinary part of an ordinary city in an ordinary universe that looked just the same as all the others he'd been to. The last of them was a medium sized child that someone appeared to have punched in the face, knocking him out cold.

Sam looked once more at his pistol. He popped out the magazine and checked the holes drilled at the back. It was still fully loaded; not a single shot had been fired—so far.

He looked once more at the child and lowered the weapon. Sweat prickled at his brow, and he sighed in relief that he hadn't fired after all.

He had come so close!

Chapter 61

Sam made his way gingerly up the stairs, each step taken with infinite care as he edged his way dubiously through the gloom, the threatening darkness amidst which who-knew-what would be waiting for him.

The three people he'd left behind, sleeping soundly after being punched in the faces in various other universes, seemed to be a family. Perhaps they were a mother, father and child, but what they definitely weren't, were a young, overweight, autistic man who played video games all day.

John was somewhere else, perhaps lurking behind a door, armed with some *ultimate weapon*, ready to be used against him. With the thought of that fresh on his mind, Sam ran his thumb over the hammer at the back of the pistol, making sure the thing was cocked and ready to fire. It was, he noted to himself.

One foot shifted in front of the other as he stealthily made his way up the stairs, placing his feet down flatly, as silently as he could. Below his left foot, a stair creaked. Sam froze and raised his pistol defensively, pointing ahead into the gloom at the top of the stairs. He held it out against whatever dark threats might suddenly melt out of the shadows against him, if he had alerted them that he was coming.

He waited patiently as seconds ticked by, his heart jumping, sweat coldly prickling against the length of his spine. He heard himself breathing, panting almost, as he waited nervously, wondering what it was that he was going to face up there. Would it be as bad as what had happened before, or if not, how much worse would it be?

With nothing happening, no sound coming from the landing, he continued his slow, gentle journey forwards.

Gingerly, he decided it might be best to check the pistol one last time. He was satisfied that the hammer was back, but he clutched the slide with his thumb and forefinger and gently pulled it back, just a

crack. He peered inside to see the glint of a brass casing winking back at him. He let it go and the powerful recoil spring snapped it closed. It was loaded, ready to fire. When he pulled the trigger, it was going to go bang, and something was going to die. He hoped against all reason that it wouldn't come to that.

He sighed, telling himself that he was confident, ready to deal with *this*, whatever *this* actually meant, in the grand scheme of things. How could someone really be ready to face what was impossible to prepare for? How could one defend against the infinite?

Up ahead of him was John. He could be as powerful as Lilith, and like her, had no idea of his true power and no ability to wield it properly. He was a weapon capable of amazing or terrible things, and somehow Lilith had turned him against her father. Somehow Lilith had found a way to use him to turn Mallory into a hole in the universe, a hole through which horrible shadows, twisted versions of people tumbled through, riled up into a murderous rage.

But how had she done it? How had she made Mallory into his focus? Would he be able to untangle them without anyone else having to die? A cold chill crept up Sam's spine and he shuddered to himself. The thought of pulling the trigger was still more terrifying than the idea of whatever might face him up ahead.

Not for the first time that evening, his blood ran cold in his veins, as if his heart was pumping ice around his body.

However, it was the first time he really considered with any degree of certainty that Mallory probably wouldn't have to die. There was no point killing him: it would be like taking the petrol out of a car to destroy it, in spite of knowing that there would always be more petrol to find.

The answer wasn't to take Mallory out of the equation, because there would still be an incredibly dangerous version of John out there

causing who knew what damage. The answer, much as Sam wished it wasn't, had always been to remove John.

He sighed to himself and wondered again if he had what it took to pull that trigger. If it meant that others would survive, and that his family might be a little safer, then he hoped that he would find the strength. He would find whatever it took, plumbing down into whatever depths were hidden deep down inside him: whatever pain it caused him, he would find the strength to bear that too.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he pointed the pistol forwards, aiming it ahead of him into the darkness. Two doors were wide open but the lights were out.

The detective in him told him that people had staggered out half asleep, or were somehow lost in their dreams. Perhaps he'd been lost in their dreams too: was that where he had been when their eyes had erupted in fire inside his mind? Had he walked into another universe that John had conjured into being, a universe that dragged in the people closest to him so that they experienced it as dreams?

At the end of the hall were two more doors. One had a flickering light spilling out from underneath, glowing from a ragged edge dimly as a monitor lit up over a carpet. Sam knew where he had to go.

He gulped as he slowly—even more slowly than before—made his way forwards, heading towards the light.

He would end this tonight, he told himself. No matter what he found inside that room—dragons flicking forked tongues from gaping maws and breathing electric-blue flames, hoards of alien monsters pouring in through tunnels of light, gigantic robotic creatures with horrendous weaponry and the cold dispassionate will to use them, or magical creations set on devouring his soul—he would face them, and he would put an end to it all.

His hand hovered over the door handle, and he stopped. He had never hesitated like this before: he had never faced something he wasn't

absolutely confident he could control. He found himself breathing heavily and noticed his hand was trembling.

“Sam!” he whispered to himself. “You can do this! Whatever it takes!”

As he reached out and wrapped his fingers around the handle, he wondered one last time how she’d done it. How had Lilith found John? How had she filled his mind with thoughts of Mallory and tangled them together until he had been pushed right out of his own universe, creating a hole that was torn right through the fabric of reality?

Sam pushed the door open.

John was just a silhouette, picked out blackly by the glowing light of his monitor. He turned very slowly as Sam watched in silence, his pistol pointed directly at him with the glowing green bead in the foresight targeting his head. As their eyes met, John’s erupted into fire, huge red plumes of flames exploded out of his head, swallowing Sam into the brilliance of a burning, broiling tunnel that seemed to go on forever.

Chapter 62

Sam wasn't the kind of man who enjoyed writing reports. He was really much happier causing problems than relaying the results of them back to people. However, it was a necessary part of his job as a private detective that he create detailed write-ups and provide them to his clients. This particular one wasn't any more interesting than any of the others, and it was frankly becoming somewhat of a chore.

He was sat in his office, a miserable, rundown, slightly grim piece of rented property in an equally miserable, rundown, slightly grim part of the city. The view from the window wasn't particularly inspiring, unless you were planning to jump out of it to end your miserable, rundown, slightly grim life. The neighbourhood was noisy, dangerous, and smelled of rubbish almost everywhere you might be able to go.

None of this bothered him in the slightest.

Sam's fingers tapped away on the keyboard as he pushed himself to get the work completed. All he could think about was getting home to his family where he could enjoy a glass of wine with his wife, a pizza, and watch a movie: ideally some out-of-date-detective drama where the main character ends up hopelessly out of his depth, but was tough, smart, and resourceful enough that he would never admit it, even to himself. Eventually, he would beat the odds: he would triumph and win the day, slightly bloody, slightly damaged and slightly wiser for the experience. He would rely on his wits, his brains and his confidence. He loved those movies!

He sighed to himself, glancing up from the screen and gazing around vacantly. He wasn't a police officer anymore, but he had found a life for himself selling his skills on the private market. He had been injured in the line of duty: snatching a child from the course of a speeding car, fleeing the scene of a robbery, that had hurt him quite badly.

It had resulted in damage to his spine, damage he was told was going to cause serious problems later on in his life. In fact, it only made it moderately uncomfortable to sit on barstools for any length of time. Sadly, as a man with a family, he had taken the option to leave the police force and accept a generous severance package that came with a medical retirement plan. There was no going back from that now.

He looked back to his computer, where all the medical details, all the reports, all the proof, evidence and records of his life up to that moment were stored. It brought back flashes of memories, and made him uneasy for a moment. All of this seemed so familiar, like it was a memory itself: it was as if he'd done all this before, somewhere else in some other universe where things were just a tiny bit different.

He shook his head and dismissed such thoughts with a measured smile. He had allowed himself to be distracted by his understandable desire not to focus on his reports.

He might not be an officer any longer, but now he was his own boss, at least, and he answered to nobody. He answered to nobody with the possible exception of his wife—of course...

The job was interesting at times, perhaps even more interesting than his old life. Some days he was just following cheating husbands, but he still had contacts—both in the police department and on the streets—and that meant that a regular trickle of dangerous and challenging assignments fell on his desk, the kind he didn't discuss at home.

His spine was nowhere near as damaged as he had been led to believe. He had a telescopic baton attached to his belt, a weapon he was very well versed in the use of. He had training in several martial arts and had qualified at the police pistol training course. In terms of looking after himself, he was well qualified.

If he'd never accepted the medical retirement, he could have gone back: he was easily fit enough to take up his old position on the force,

but the years had marched by and the world had changed him. He could only go forwards now.

In the rare moments of honesty when he could just relax, ignore the world and think quietly to himself, he would admit that he was probably happier than he had been before.

He pushed himself a little harder to focus on the screen of his computer, to get the report finished, to ignore all the things in there that occupied his mind, to ignore the details of all the choices he'd made. Paperwork didn't come naturally and he groaned quietly as he flicked ahead in his notes and realised there was still some way to go. He was facing at least another hour of work.

A knock on the door forced a frown, but a slight flicker of a smile followed. This might be just the very distraction he needed. He glanced up at the clock on the far side of his office: a round white office-clock with sweeping hands and a grey face with raised numbers picked out with black stickers. The hour was late, almost half past seven, some time beyond his usual office hours.

Sam hefted himself from his seat, taking a moment to flick off the monitor and covering his notes with a manilla folder, just in case.

Fantasies filled his mind of a beautiful young femme fatale waiting for him on the other side of that door, a case that needed solving which would change his life, plunging him into an adventure beyond his imagination.

Of course, she was nothing like that at all. He stopped for a moment, as he realised that his own thoughts made no sense. How could he know that? How could he remember what was waiting for him on the other side of the door? This wasn't a dream—this was real! He put such ideas out of his mind, where they belonged.

"Hang on!" he called out as he unlocked the door and pulled back a very hefty steel bolt. He suspected, more reasonably, that it was more

likely the landlord coming to moan at him, or a neighbour asking to borrow something. It couldn't be *her*, could it?

He pulled back the door to find that it wasn't everything, or indeed anything, that he had hoped it would be: at least with his mind in the present, not imagining itself off in some other world somewhere.

A young girl stared back at him with wide-open eyes with which she gazing up fearfully. She was slender and haphazard, with tousled hair and rugged skin on her bony face. The flesh surrounding her eyes was blackened from sleeplessness and exhaustion, and she stared, looking somewhat confused to see him.

Her clothes were more tattered than she was. She was wearing jeans too long for her frame, and too wide besides. The bottoms were rolled up and they were secured at the top with a belt that looked like it had belonged to a man. Her jumper was a heavy, fluffy knitted thing, bright green and red, but the colours had faded down and dirt had taken the edge off of whatever impression time hadn't managed to dull.

"Can I help you?" Sam grunted, She was not the distraction he had been hoping for, but there was something oddly familiar about her—about all of it.

She was missing a bag, he felt, noticing that she was carrying nothing. The fear was obvious in her eyes, but she never flinched: she just stood gazing up at him with her mouth slightly open. She was homeless, he guessed, but people sleeping on the streets tended to carry their things along with them. If she was, and she really had no things, then she was even more pathetic than she appeared.

Her mouth opened a little wider and then closed again. She gulped, almost nervously, and then finally seemed to find the strength to actually speak. "You're here!" she said.

Sam flashed a supportive, and slightly bemused smile. Clearly this wasn't a fellow detective. "I'm here," he agreed, following her lead. "There's no point denying it-the evidence is overwhelming!"

She smiled back, but an apologetic look melted some of the fear from her lips. She began to back away. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were here."

That made no sense whatsoever. "Are you looking for a detective?"

"Are *you* a detective?" she asked.

"Yes!" he said and nodded proudly. It always gave him a little swell of pride when he said that. "I'm a detective. Are you looking for one?"

She smiled and very firmly said, "No!"

Sam began to chuckle to himself. That didn't help at all. If he had to guess, he would have said she was in her early twenties. She had clearly had a rough life and that made it difficult to be sure. She had the slender, awkward gait of a teenager but the face she wore was of someone who had seen the darkness in the world, and while she may not have embraced it, she seemed to have accepted that it was her home.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Lilith!" she told him, looking away. Her eyes rolled down to the floor. "Everyone just calls me 'Lily' though."

"But you don't like that, do you?" he ventured, knowing exactly how that felt. "My name's Samuel, but everyone just calls me 'Sam!' When I was younger it used to drive me crazy. I got used to it. Still, hearing my name shortened is always like the sound of nails being dragged down a blackboard to me."

She simply nodded in agreement.

"*Lilith*," he said, intentionally making a point. "Why did you knock on my door?"

"I should go..." she said sadly. She gazed at the floor with the helpless face of somebody completely lost.

“Was it a mistake?” he asked. Something about this compelled him. He was, after all, a detective: he felt need to know what it was all about.

She shook her head and began shuffling sadly away.

“Wait!” he said, stopping her in her tracks.

“Are you going to call the police?” she asked sadly. “Are they going to arrest me?”

“Why would I call the police?” he asked, a little confused.

Realisation began to dawn on him. “Hold on,” he said with an amused smirk. “You weren’t knocking to check if I was here, you were knocking to make sure I wasn’t!”

She stood motionless for a moment. Her chest heaved from a series of heavy breaths. “I don’t like the police,” she said, her voice cracking. He could see tears beginning to blur her eyes. “I don’t like being in a cage!”

Sam stepped out in front of her. He crossed his arms over his chest, and despite knowing he should be angry, he couldn’t find it in him to feel anything more than pity for her.

“Were you going to rob my office?” he demanded.

She shook her head. “No, Samuel!”

“Then what?”

She looked off to one side in silence.

“Lilith,” he addressed her sternly. “Tell me the truth so I don’t *have* to call the police!”

She sighed and said weakly, “I’ve been living here...”

“Living here?” he said, surprised. “In my office?”

She nodded sadly. “You have a couch. It’s safe and comfortable. I didn’t break anything, and I always left before you got in. I sometimes drink water from the tap, and once I made some tea to warm up. I never took anything else, I swear!”

Sam smiled and quickly covered his lips with his hand, trying really very hard to take it seriously. “You’ve been *living* in my office?” he asked with a grin. “Really?”

She nodded once more. “Please don’t call the police!” she gazed down at her own slender, flat and awkward body. She looked back at him with sad and hollow eyes, tears welling up. It was the most pitiful look he’d every seen. “I’ll do anything. I’ll do anything you want!”

A single tear slipped down her right cheek. She said softly, “*Anything!*”

Sam huffed to himself and shook his head. He really was a stupid man sometimes, he thought. He’d ended his previous career by throwing himself in front of a speeding car full of burly men with shotguns, and had learned precisely nothing from the experience.

“Come inside!” he told her. “It’s cold, and I think that all this is better discussed over a cup of tea. I think I have some biscuits somewhere. I presume you’re hungry?”

She sniffed loudly and wiped away a tear with the back of her hand. Her eyes lit up excitedly like she had found the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Sam walked inside and she followed him closely.

“Are you going to make me give you a blowjob?” she asked casually, like it was something she was used to.

Sam cringed at the thought of it. “No!” he assured her. “We’re just going to drink a cup of tea and eat some biscuits while I avoid doing a mountain of work that I’ve been avoiding doing for a whole week already.”

“You’re not going to fuck me?” she asked hopefully. “The tea and biscuits are free?”

“I think you’d break if I tried to do that!” he told her matter-of-factly. He flashed her a friendly smile. “Nobody is going to fuck you.”

She closed the door behind her, and it latched with a loud click.
“You’re not going to call the police?”

Sam turned back and sighed loudly. Just exactly what the hell was he going to do with her? What did he think he was doing? “How long have you been sleeping here?” he asked.

“Two weeks!” she admitted with a slightly inappropriate smile.
“*Almost* two weeks. Almost *more* than two weeks. I don’t know...”

Sam couldn’t help but smile. She was different, he had to give her that. “Are you on drugs?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. A lot of people ask me that, but this is just how I am. They tell me I’m a little bit different to other people, but I don’t really have a frame of reference. I’ve only ever been me, you see?”

He smirked. “Who tells you that?”

“Lots of people,” she told him. “And they do seem to be mostly right. Maybe that’s why so many people tell me that, do you think?”

He looked her up and down. “Don’t you have anywhere else to stay? Don’t you have family?”

A darkness enveloped her eyes, even more so than before. “I don’t know who my mother is, or what happened to her. My father is a very bad man.”

“And there are no hostels? Aren’t there places for a young girl like you to stay? It can’t be safe for you on the streets?” He shook his head sadly: he couldn’t just let her go out there on her own, but what choice did he have?

He tried to force himself to remember that she was just a homeless girl who was trying to break into his office. He shouldn’t be trying to help her at all.

A strange little smile fluttered over her face and Sam got the impression that she didn’t smile very often.

“There aren’t any girls like me,” she said, almost to herself.

He didn't doubt it. He sighed and stepped towards her a little, taking care not to crowd her.

"You know you can't stay here. This is an office, a place where people work."

She smiled a little more broadly. "Are you offering me a job then?"

"What?"

Her alarmingly broadened smile suggested she wasn't joking.

"You won't regret it!" she told him excitedly. "I can be security at night: I can stay here all the time to guard the office. During the day I can make tea, and drink the tea, and you can pay me in biscuits!"

Sam laughed. "You've never had a proper job before, have you?!"

Again, her face dropped. She said a little sadly, "I can pay you back in other ways if I have to."

Sam sighed and dug his fists into his sides. Was he really considering this? "That's really not how jobs work either!" he explained. "I'm a married man, Lilith. I am not looking for sexual favours from anyone. If my wife ever found out that I'd even considered such a thing, then her revenge would be swift and brutal.

"I can assure you that you're quite safe from me."

She looked up at him evenly with her big, wide, sad eyes. "I don't need much. Just a place to stay? I can find my own food during the day."

He looked away and rubbed his forehead thoughtfully.

"If I were to let you stay tonight, I'd have to lock you in from the outside to make sure you didn't steal anything," he suggested thoughtfully. "In the morning, assuming I even considered this, we could go and find you a proper place in a proper hostel. I have contacts: we could find something."

She began nodding happily.

"And I'd need to search you!" he said.

She began to scowl. She may have taken that as a sign that he was looking for an excuse to abuse her.

“I would have to see you empty out your pockets, so I can see for myself that you don’t have any drugs on you!”

She smiled again and nodded enthusiastically. “I don’t,” she assured him. “I can find some if you need them?”

Grumbling to himself, he rubbed his face with both hands and exhaled noisily. She was always scolding him for this, his wife. He was too soft, always going too far to help every waif and stray; he was always trying to save the world, no matter what it cost him and how many times the world proved to him that it didn’t want his help saving it?

“Alright!” he told her. “You can stay *one night!*”

“*Two!*” she snapped, with a broad smile. She cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. “Maybe *three...*”

“Maybe not!” he grumbled. “*One!* And in the morning, we’ll find you somewhere proper to stay.”

“We’ll talk about that in the morning,” she said firmly. “Or maybe the morning after that, or one morning next week, or in a few months. Who knows?”

He groaned inwardly. “There’s a takeaway at the end of the street,” he told her, slipping out some money from his trouser pocket and unfolding a small note which he held out for her. “Go and get yourself some dinner, and then we’ll sort this all out!”

She grinned, and he noticed for the first time that there were no lines at the side of her mouth, no creases around her eyes. She must have been either younger than he thought, or smiled even less than he’d imagined.

“For me?” she asked, reaching for the note gingerly, almost as if she was as scared to take it as she was desperate to have it.

Sam nodded and smiled back at her. She must have been really hungry. He noticed a bracelet she was wearing, some ugly, large lump of

worthless crystal set in tarnished silver with a black lace band. It looked oddly familiar. He held the note in one hand and reached out with the other to touch the stone.

“What is this?” he asked. “I’ve seen one just like it.”

“Don’t touch that!” she screamed out urgently.

But she was too late. His fingers had touched the stone.

Chapter 63

Sam saw a white flash, so bright, so painfully brilliant that it wiped out everything else. One second he was standing in his office talking to a pitiful little thing who had been trying to break in to steal his biscuits—by knocking on the door and asking nicely—the next, his mind was on fire and he was dropping helplessly into an endless pit of swirling white light.

Suddenly he fell to the ground, collapsing to his knees and crying out in horrified surprise. His heart was pounding. He was sweating, gasping for air. His thoughts had scattered like a flock of birds after someone had fired a shotgun at them. He looked around, his eyes as wide as saucers, fear choking all reason from him.

“What the hell...” he gasped. “What the bloody hell just happened?”

Looking around, nothing much had changed. He was in his office, but he was in it alone. The door was still closed and bolted shut, as if he had never opened it.

Was this a dream? Nothing seemed familiar now: there was no sense he was remembering anything.

He was at the same place he had been standing in the office as he had been when he’d collapsed. He slowly stood himself up. Things were different, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on just exactly what. It was like looking at two identical pictures, knowing they weren’t identical at all, but being unable to find anything specific that wasn’t the same.

The screen of his computer was lit up, throwing out a cold blue light on the peeling plaster wall behind. He rubbed his temple, fighting his mind to make sense of it. Logic and reason were hard to find when the part of his brain trying to employ them was being drowned out by the rest of his brain: a brain that was screaming out a hundred questions about what had just happened to him.

He was sure he remembered turning off the monitor. When he went to answer the door, that part of the office was in darkness—he knew he had made sure of it. He always took basic precautions like that: he had covered his files too, but as he looked over, there were none to be seen.

Everything was subtly wrong.

“Samuel!” he told himself, with a note of severity. “I hope you just had a stroke. If not, then it looks like you’ve finally lost it. I guess we all knew it was coming...”

He looked over at the screen again. The light dancing on the wall behind began to flicker and flash as he looked on curiously. Maybe it would be best if it really was a stroke, or a dream at the very least. On reflection, a dream might be the better option, if he had to choose.

As he watched, shadows began melting out of the screen. Hands, with long, sharp, curving talons were clawing their way out, slowly curling themselves around the edges.

Sam watched in horror as his blood ran cold through his veins. He felt himself backing slowly away.

The monstrous shadows stretched themselves out, a pair of arms slowly extending out from this hole through reality as the dull light lit the totally black object. He watched, transfixed for a moment, as this thing, this creature made its way into his world, or whatever world this was that he’d found himself in.

He turned and began unbolting the door, rattling the security bolt that would, theoretically, keep it closed against any serious threat from outside. Its use to him while he was locked inside with a monster formed by shadows was questionable, at best.

He looked back: he could see a head, a snarling mess of jagged teeth and snarling rage, picked out in perfect darkness against the gloomy lights from outside and the blue haze of the monitor. He wished

he hadn't. Shaking, almost trembling in fear, he slammed the door open and threw himself out into the hall, running as fast as he could.

The white light flashed again, plunging him headlong into a world of swirling pain and brilliance.

He fell forward, his mind screaming in agony and confusion, and he found himself collapsing onto a tired red carpet, a carpet he knew shouldn't be there.

He gasped in surprise and looked around. The lights were brighter and the paint was darker. Also, there was a man behind him, shouting angrily and poised aggressively, standing over him threateningly punching his fist into his other open hand.

"Get up!" he grunted.

Sam looked up, narrowing his eyes, wondering just what the hell was going on. The man was large and had the kind of face that demanded punching: it had clearly met with many people who had felt the same way about it. He was overweight but stocky, a man who was once muscular but was training less now. His nose had been broken, his left ear was deformed. Who he was, Sam had no idea.

"Get up so I can put you down properly!" he insisted with a snarl.

Sam slowly raised himself to his feet. He waved a hand at him, ushering him back. "Who are you?" he asked. "What's going on?"

Asking where he was never occurred to him. Things were different, certainly, but this was still the corridor outside the office. His door was locked, even though he remembered running through it from a *thing* inside. He appeared to be facing the wrong way: he had been running out, he thought.

With that in mind, he remembered the *thing*: some clawing, wailing, gnashing monstrosity made of darkness that was clawing, wailing and gnashing its way out of his office spreadsheet with intents that were unlikely to be wholly benign.

“Don’t try it on with me, boy!” the angry man demanded.

Sam really had no idea who he was, but the flashing, angry eyes, the rigid jaw and clenched teeth told him that if he wasn’t ready to defend himself, he might just be in trouble here.

With a smooth, deft movement, the man, whoever he was, reached back and clenched his right hand into a fist.

Sam saw it coming and quickly, sharply jabbed him in the throat. If he was a boxer, which was exactly what he looked like, then there seemed little point in breaking his own hand on his jaw. He gasped and his angry, furtive little eyes widened in surprise. He clutched his throat and collapsed to his knees, gurgling weakly, coughing and spluttering from his reddened face.

Slowly and deliberately he looked up at Sam. He stopped gasping and his eyes flashed angrily. For a moment, he just stared raptly as Sam stared back, confused as he staggered backwards, wondering just what he was going to do.

He opened his mouth, slowly stretching his bottom jaw downwards. He grabbed his lower teeth with his fingers, coiling them around and gripping hard while his other hand forced its way in above them, twisting his head slightly to the side to accommodate the awkwardness of this position.

Sam could only watch, frowning in wonder.

With a sickening wrench of snapping bone he suddenly jerked his lower jaw down, tearing the muscles and bones apart. Sam yelped in surprise, turning his head away. When he looked back, this man was pulling down with a force of pure will, the likes of which Sam never dreamed he might witness. He wrenched at his jaw, pulling it free while dragging his own head backwards. The flesh around his mouth tore, the skin ripping back as he pulled his own face apart. His breathing was ragged and he was gasping loudly as blood gushed from inside his

mouth, little bubbles ripping through the oozing crimson, cascading out like a grizzly fountain.

Sam stared in wonder, horrified and confused, staggering back from it.

With his head pulled right back and his chin touching his chest, a dark, black, vile set of claws began making its way out of his now-gaping mouth. Sam began to reflexively edge backwards, his mouth falling open in surprise. Something solid touched his back and he spun in shock, realising dimly that he had backed himself up into the door of his office.

The clawed fingers, picked out in perfect, light-absorbing blackness were all the way out now, and an arm was pushing its way up from his neck as the man convulsed, his whole body gyrating in glorious agony. A second set of claws began shredding at his destroyed face, slashing their way out through his pulped flesh. Sam ran past while he still could, his long, black trench coat billowing up behind him as he sprinted down the corridor.

He reached the stairs. His fingers grabbed onto a wooden beam at the top of a steel bannister and he chanced a look back. The man, kneeling on the ground now had two, fully formed black arms jutting from his neck. They grabbed at Sam impatiently as the man they were jutting out from just quietly, passively let it all just happen.

He ripped open, a horrible, brutal sound of tearing and crunching as his ribs snapped open and his skin was torn into two, exploding out in a shower of blood and sticky flesh that painted the walls around him with gore.

Sam watched in horror for a few seconds. From a crouching position, a gigantic black shadow of a manlike creature began to uncurl itself, slowly standing upright, stretching itself as if waking from some terrible slumber. It turned slowly so that its gaping mouth was picked out in the light, long, rapier-like teeth jutting from its powerful jaws.

Although it was just shadow, black against the white and red of the walls behind, with no specific features to its face, somehow Sam knew it was grinning at him.

He ran!

His head was ringing, his heart pounding, the muscles in his legs, chest, and arms were burning, but he wouldn't stop. He slammed open the final door and ran headlong into the street. The road before him was lit with the soft orange glow of street lights. A few cars were dotted around, parked along the sides of the road.

He looked around, snapping his head left and right, not knowing which way to go. Gasping, breathing heavily, he began to run again, but then he stopped in his tracks. He didn't know what to do, how to get away. Realisation hit him, solidly and indisputably. He wasn't a man who ran away from things and there was only one place left for him to go; there was only one thing left that he *could* do. He searched his pockets and pulled out the keys to his car.

His car pulled to a screaming stop outside his own house, the tyres squealing from the merciless abuse poured onto them. Sam flung the door open, not bothering even to close it as he leapt out, sprinting towards the door of his home.

Inside was his family, the only thing that mattered to him. This was his world: no matter what else might change, this was his true heart and soul. If there was anything wrong, anything breaking its way out from whatever hell it was coming from, then this place needed him here. If he couldn't stop it, then he would die trying, and he would do it with a smile on his face!

His front door was red, even though he knew that he had personally painted it white himself the previous summer. He had painted it after his wife had insisted that he make it fit in, theirs being the only one that stood out in the whole neighbourhood. He had countered that he

hadn't installed it in the first place: it was red when they moved in, and nobody had grumbled then. Insisting on anything with his wife was invariably nothing more than a precursor to doing exactly what she wanted.

But now it was red again. He frowned, the sight of it giving him pause. What did it mean that things were wrong, details weren't quite right all around his world?

It was like he was dreaming, but dreaming inside someone else's head, where they didn't quite know just exactly how everything really worked. It was like he was in a reality that someone else had imagined for him. Was it all just a dream?

He stood for a moment, just staring at the door, wondering how this could be possible. The porch light glowed above it, casting a myriad shadows around the place darting out from every bush, every shrub and blade of grass. He stood for a moment and fear began to grip him in its icy cold talons.

He saw the claws of a hand coming out of a bush. For a moment he couldn't tell if the shadow was just a trick of his mind, or if a black, perfectly dark hand was stretching out in front of him. Then there was another, then another still.

He began stepping back, edging away from it. His eyes widened as he gazed on in horror. His hand reflexively went to the telescopic baton he kept on his belt. Where it should have been was a pistol instead. He looked at the thing, even more confused. It was long and black, an ugly piece of metal, brutal and businesslike, much larger and more destructive-looking than anything he'd carried or trained with before.

The shadows came out in front of him and he staggered back, recoiling from them. He pointed the weapon at them, but they clearly weren't fazed in the slightest.

There was seven, twelve, countless more.

Sam was gasping for breath, descending into panic now. He couldn't even count these monsters, these shadow creatures, as their perfectly black bodies overlapped one another. Hoards of them stood before him, blocking the way to his house.

The door opened and his wife's face peered out from behind. She didn't look afraid. The danger that was so evident, and so clearly apparent, didn't seem to have registered in the slightest. She just looked lost and confused.

"Sam?" she said, almost pleading. "Come home, Sam!"

He brandished the huge, totally ineffective pistol as the shadows converged on him. Occasionally, from within the hoard he would see a flicker of claws, a glimpse of a set of teeth as something gnashed at him. All around were the sounds of endless growls and constant snarling.

He pointed the pistol but the shadows still didn't react. He felt himself falling into panic, trapped with no way out, no options left to him. He turned to his rear, reeling around in despair, and that's where he saw her standing there.

The young girl he had met in his office, the one who had broken in was just standing there, gazing at him sadly.

She was there, but now she looked different. The harsh, rugged sheen to her skin was gone, her hair was combed, styled and perfect, and she was dressed in clothes that suited her well.

She smiled at him and said, "You can't go home, Samuel!"

"I have to go home!" he told her, his voice a desperate growl. "Look at these things. I have to fight them!"

At his feet was his own shadow. The light from his house, the glowing illumination from inside casting a long, black outline along his concrete path. It began to move, its hands reaching out as it slowly, deliberately began to stand itself up. It snapped itself free from his feet and became another of these terrible creatures. It was even larger, even darker than the others.

He watched in horrified silence as it stretched itself out and stood up, towering above him. He felt its sightless eyes boring down on him. He staggered back, edging away. His mind could only fix on the idea of his family. He could only think about what he could do to save them.

“No!” he gasped.

The girl, Lilith, told him, “You can’t fight them, Samuel.”

That only made him more determined. He gritted his teeth, set his jaw angrily and pushed the gaping muzzle of his pistol up into where it would keep its face, if these things had such things to keep.

“We’ll see!” he growled and fired a shot. The pistol bucked hard, exploding viciously in his hand as a plume of flaming gas erupted out behind the bullet.

Nothing happened, the shadow stepped forwards slowly, advancing on him threateningly.

“What are you?” he hissed at it helplessly.

“Samuel!” she said to him evenly, no emotion colouring her voice. “Samuel, you can’t destroy them.”

He frowned. “I can’t?”

“They’re you, Samuel!” she explained. “They’re just you!”

Upon hearing those words, he lowered the weapon and turned to her sharply, an angry scowl on his face.

“They are all the things that have happened to you, all the darkness you’ve seen and done. They’re your regrets, your missteps. They are the shadows your actions cast on the world.”

“But I can’t get home to my family,” he cried out.

“No.” she agreed sympathetically. “Not while they’re in the way.”

“So what do I do?” he pleaded.

“I don’t know!” she shrugged and smiled warmly. “I don’t have the answer to that, but you do and one day you’ll find it.

“It’s not too late, Samuel. You’re still here and you’re still alive. If anyone can find a way back, it’s you. I know you’ll find a way.

“These things aren’t the whole you, Samuel; they’re not everything that you are. The real you is the person inside of all this. That’s the reason why we do the terrible things that we do.

“Your love for your family, your willingness to help anyone that needs helping. That’s the real you, not the actions the world forces upon you, or the mistakes we make along the way. We aren’t the things that happen to us, we are the things we hold onto. We’re what’s left at the end of the fight, Samuel.”

She looked at him fixedly and he could feel a sadness in her. “The fight hasn’t ended yet, Samuel!”

Sam looked back at the face of his wife. She was staring at him, as if she couldn’t see the creatures at all. Perhaps they were invisible to her? Perhaps they always had been?

He looked down and said weakly, “I just want to go home.”

“You can’t today,” she told him. “Nothing will change that, but the fight isn’t over yet: you just have to make sure you don’t let the fight damage you in ways that can’t be fixed. There are some doors that can’t be closed once we find a way to open them.”

The shadows, the monstrous things came closer, bearing down on him until he was surrounded by a solid, teeming wall of darkness. He dropped the pistol to the floor where it hit the concrete with a loud clatter.

“Come on then!” he said weakly. “I’m ready.”

He blinked in the murky darkness and gasped loudly as his own eyes erupted into fire, and then cleared, leaving him back in the room where it had all begun. He couldn’t remember very much, and what he did recall had already begun to fade.

Suddenly it all seemed so obvious.

The room was hot and heavy, filled with the warm, sickly breath of a man who didn’t go out often enough and only washed rarely—if

ever. It was stale and ugly, close and grim. A desk ran along the side strewn with rubbish that had been casually discarded and had piled up until it had overflowed, tumbling down to form a haphazard pile on the floor. Amidst the junk, plates, and bowls of food that had been tossed out, emptied and forgotten, remains hardened into scars that had set fast onto the white ceramic surfaces.

At the front, directly ahead of the door sat a man with his back to him. He was naked, huge sweaty rolls of white and hairy flesh folded over on top of one another, sagging down towards the floor. He never looked, he just stared fixedly at nothing in particular with oddly hollow, empty eyes.

Sam stepped towards him. He slipped the pistol under his belt, tucking it away safely, as it seemed he would no longer be needing it.

The walls around him were covered top to bottom with pictures. Photocopies, digital prints and printed downloads from social media had been stuck up everywhere. Each and every single one was a photograph of Mallory. In every corner of the room, every space, every edge and area of free surface, Mallory was staring down at him. His eyes gazed forwards, glaring at the hapless young man who wasn't able to work any of this out for himself.

"Wow!" Sam sighed at how obvious it all now looked. John appeared nothing more than some pitiable creature, hopeless, helpless against being manipulated and used. He was no threat to anyone, and if he was left alone, he never would be.

"Are... you... here... to... kill... me?" he said harshly, chewing at each word that seemed to come to him with a great deal of effort.

Sam shook his head. "I'm here to help."

Without looking away from his screen, John said, "The eyes are always watching. Make them go away, so I can sleep again in peace!"

Could it really be that simple? The horrendous collage made *him* feel uneasy, so he could scarcely imagine what it must be like to live in that room day in day out.

And how could that be to a man like John? Those eyes, the eyes of a relative stranger staring down at him constantly... When he went to buy a game, those very same eyes had glared back at him too. To someone whose brain wasn't quite up to making sense of it all, it must have been like having a splinter in his mind, a constant nagging irritation, an itch he couldn't scratch.

It had kept him awake at nights: he had been afraid to sleep, so he buried himself even further in his one and only escape, the flickering light of his monitor where he didn't have to think about the faces as they glared down on him.

Sam began taking the images down, ripping at them purposefully, tearing them down one by one. For each picture he removed, another was partially revealed underneath. The collage clearly hadn't been made in one go: it had been added to, layered and evolving day by day into a living presence that would drive the sanity from even the strongest mind. He kept at it with increasing ferocity, using his nails to force down great wads of paper into a messy heap on the floor, until eventually, the eyes were gone. It was done.

"Who are you?" a voice suddenly asked blearily from behind him.

Sam turned quickly, almost reaching for his pistol out of habit—he managed to resist the instinct. Standing in the doorway, rubbing his head was the man from downstairs, the one from the cave who had tried to cut him down with a sword.

"I'm Sam!" he said. "I'm here to take down these pictures."

"Take down the pictures..." he repeated thinly. His voice was low and slurred, and he barely seemed to know what he was saying. He began to sway lightly from side to side. "I think I need to sleep. I don't

sleep: I dream, but I don't sleep. The dreams are so real that they hurt, but I still don't sleep. We used to, but none of us sleep anymore."

"Go and sleep!" Sam told him firmly. "Take your family to bed and go to sleep. I think tonight will be better."

He nodded back. "Tonight will be better..." he mumbled. "We should go to sleep." The man felt his way along the wall, slowly, carefully making his way down, and then crumpled the last little bit to the floor. He blinked and fell to the side, snoring loudly as he finally collapsed.

Sam had no way to know what kind of dream he might be having, or whether they had ended at all. But as he screwed up the last of the pictures he'd taken down for disposal, he found himself less worried about dreams, and more concerned about whether the nightmares were over.

Chapter 64

He sipped at a cup of coffee. It was bitter, over-brewed and strong. It was served in a little ceramic cup with a handle that was just a little too small to get his finger comfortably through. He sighed and looked out of the window. It was the early hours of the morning now and there was little activity going on outside, but still the odd car would rush past in too much of a hurry to get wherever it was that they were going.

“Is it over?” Lilith asked, sat as she was across the table cradling a cup of lemon tea. The café was the very same one they found in every universe, the ‘universal constant.’ “It’s a little sad that we didn’t have to kill Mallory. I feel cheated, almost.”

“Yes!” he told her. “It’s over.” He smiled weakly, and did his best to look cheerful, despite feeling oddly empty inside. None of this felt like a very much of a victory. “You know what would go really well with this cup of coffee?”

Lilith smiled back and guessed, “A rotisserie chicken?”

Sam’s smile vanished and he glared at her in abject confusion. “No!” he grumbled a little over-dramatically. “Not a *rotisserie chicken*! I was thinking of a croissant, or a pain au chocolat, or something else that’s sweet and isn’t spelt the way it’s pronounced! Who eats a whole roasted chicken at four o’clock in the morning?”

“OK!” she agreed. “I don’t like chicken anyway.”

“But you asked for...” he began, even more confused, but put the brakes on. There really was no going forward with this discussion, and persisting with it threatened to destroy any of the precious little shreds of sanity he might still have left.

“It’ll be light soon. I can still shift you back!” she said, sipping on her tea.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not going back. What would be the point?”

“You could explain to them how you saved the world without anyone having to die,” she said blankly. “You won!”

“You can do that for me,” he said, flashing a hollow smile.

“Going back really wouldn’t be my style. I move forwards, not backwards. I don’t need hearty congratulations, pats on the back, people telling me what a wonderful job I’ve done.

“My job is just to do what needs doing, and then quietly move on before people start asking awkward questions. Life is for the living, not for people like us.”

Lilith tutted. “I thought you’d be in a better mood!”

“I’m in a fine mood.” he told her moodily.

She looked him over, her head curiously cocked to the side. After a moment of what looked like contemplation she said, “You said that when John looked at you, you went into another universe that felt like a dream. What did you see in there?”

He huffed to himself and looked out of the window. A taxi sped past outside, all lit up with a passenger in the back. Someone had a place to be, a family to go home to; people would miss them if they didn’t turn up. It felt like that someone was never going to be him again.

“Well...” he began haltingly, but thought better of it. “I’m fine.”

“There are loose ends back with Mallory,” she reminded him.

“What about all the bodies in shallow graves that we left behind?”

“Exactly!” he agreed. Perhaps she was finally getting it after all.

“Grace and Roach can figure all that out. They’re good people—they’ll do the right thing!

“The point is, their lives *will* go forwards. They need to tidy up the mess and restore some kind of equilibrium, because that’s where their lives are. Mine is on a different path. I don’t belong there with them.

"I'm like a plumber: you call me up when there's a problem, I fix it, and then I leave. I don't join you for dinner afterwards; you don't phone a week later and invite me to your kid's birthday party."

"I know!" she said, in a rare moment of lucidity. "You belong in another universe with your family, and you're sad because you can't get back there."

He glared at her, but then softened. He agreed with a nod. "Yeah, that's right. I can't shift back because the body I left unoccupied is dead now. I'm stuck looking for a way back, when there is no way back."

"I don't really want you to go back!" she told him honestly. "You're all I have."

He looked at her sadly and nodded. "Well, I guess that's a good thing then, because it looks like I'm not going anywhere."

She sipped some more of her tea, eying it up like she didn't really like it at all.

"There are other loose ends, you know!" he said thoughtfully. "The biggest one is you! It worries me that you were capable of doing something like this. A part of you found your brother, and turned him into a weapon in the hopes of hurting your father. It scares me to think of what you might be capable of."

She looked guilty. "I don't remember anything," she told him. "And I did try to help you fix it. If I hurt anyone, then I'm really very sorry about it."

"We do need to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again," he told her firmly. It was hard to imagine a way that such a thing might even be possible, despite living in a world where he knew literally anything was.

"I'm sorry I nearly broke the universe!" she said with an apologetic shrug. "I'll try to make sure it never happens again."

"You do that!" he said, as if scolding a small child.

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

He chuckled to himself at what an odd question that was for a grown adult to ask of another. "Yes, you may," he said with feigned sincerity. "Take your time. I think we're here for the rest of the night."

"Thank you!" she said, flashing him a wide, beaming smile before she clambered out of her chair.

He watched her go, frowning to himself and shaking his head. What was she exactly, and how had her father made her like this? What had happened to her to make her into the person she now was?

The waitress appeared and sat down on the seat opposite, slipping in and grinning with a smug look like the cat that had got everybody else's cream.

"What the..." Sam grumbled before he realised what was happening. "It's you, isn't it, Lilith's father?"

She nodded back at him. "Well, I have three children, Sam. I'm not *just* Lilith's father. I have four if you count the twins!"

"You're not much of a father at all, from what I can tell," he accused him grumpily. "It takes a special kind of father to inspire his daughter to risk destroying the universe in order to get back at him."

She leant forward, ginning widely, a strange kind of light in her eyes. "I don't think you quite understand the wider scope of all this, Sam."

Sam nodded in agreement. "I'm sure I don't. I'm sure there's some enlightened reason that you do the things you do. I'm sure you've justified away all the pain and damage you've caused, because the end results of your actions are worth the harm.

"Nobody thinks of themselves as a villain, do they? We all have good reasons for what we're doing."

"Indeed," he, or she, agreed. Sam wasn't entirely sure how he should be thinking of him. Or her. "You've seen firsthand what happens when one of my children misfires. That was all brought about by a tiny little hiccup, and look at the damage it managed to cause. I needed the

power they have and I took it. After that, I did the only responsible thing I could—I neutered them! I took away as much of their ability to use it as I was able. I tried to make the universe a safer place, and the only way to do that was to leave them the way you found them!”

Sam looked away. It was hard to refute the logic of his words, but it was even harder to hear a father speak with such callous disregard for his own children. This discussion was no less distasteful than every other dealing he’d had with him.

“So shall we get to the point?” Sam told him. “You’re here to thank me?”

He grinned behind the waitress’s pretty little face. “Thank you? No! Why would I do that?”

“I stopped the holes! I faced John and fixed the problem your daughter caused.”

“Sam, there’s a lot you don’t know,” he told him. It made him cringe to be lectured by a man who looked like a girl who was roughly half his age. “I made Lilith: I built her, I developed her, I turned her into what she is. There is nothing in the universe that she could do that would be of any conceivable threat to me, and the same is true of my two other children. I think I mentioned that before?”

Sam glared at him, confused and angry. “Then what?”

“What worries me more is that my children do appear to have fashioned a weapon by combining their abilities,” he said evenly. “It was something that I didn’t see coming, but it seems that they’ve created something that actually could prove to be a threat to me. They’ve made something I actually don’t fully understand. This is why I decided to test it.”

“Test it?” Sam asked, increasingly confused.

“You see, I have three children,” he began. “One was designed to be drawn to the currents of power that flow through the universe.” He gestured around the café. “This place, for example, is made on one of

those currents. This café exists in all worlds, in every corner of every layer of the universe. It has power: it is special, and it was important that I was able to find such things if I was to use them.

“I created another who saw across the world. I needed eyes that could see beyond the limits of a single plane.

“The third was able to dream. He can imagine realities with such clarity, with such perfect detail, that those imaginings can become real.”

“So?” Sam muttered.

“So they came together and they made something to destroy me with.” He looked angry for once, glaring from the eyes of an innocent young girl.

“The holes?” Sam guessed.

He shook his head behind the puppet body of the waitress. “You!” he said darkly. “They made *you*!”

“Me?” Sam said in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“You’re the weapon, Sam,” he told him. “John imagined it, pulling such things into existence with such clarity that he forged you somewhere in the darkest, deepest confines of his twisted mind. My other child found it, unconsciously drawn to the power of its creation, locating a being forged beyond human limits. Then Lilith found the one perfect version of you. She hunted you down for years across the entire spectrum of the universe, never knowing she was even doing it. She was looking for the one Sam that would always do anything to help anyone, who would always do the right thing and expect nothing in return.”

Sam frowned, shaking his head and trying, with some difficulty, to make sense of it all.

“I don’t understand!” he said. “They did all this subconsciously? They didn’t even know they were doing it? So how?”

“My children rarely speak to one another, but they *know* who they are,” he sneered. “There is a connection between them, an unbreakable bond. They are family, and they are drawn to one another.”

Sam stared in silence, but there were ice-cold fingers tracing their way up his spine as each word inspired a growing sense of dread. There was only one way that any of this made any kind of sense. “Go on...” he said darkly.

“My daughter was drawn to the hero my son carved into reality through his imagination,” he said. “And then she married you.”

Sam shook his head as the bottom of his world fell away beneath him. Those words chilled him to the very bone. He felt like, suddenly, the weight of the entire universe had landed on his weary, narrow shoulders. “Kelly?!” he gasped.

“Why do you think I killed you, Sam?” he grinned maniacally. “Why do you think I trapped you in this never-ending spiral of shifting through the universes, never stopping long enough to build anything, always going forwards?”

“I arranged to have you killed. I set you on your journey. There is only one of me left, in one universe. I couldn’t allow the only thing that could ever be a threat to me to walk around freely on the same fragment of reality, now could I?”

Sam looked up, glaring angrily from under the bony ridge of his brow. He wanted to lash out, to attack him, to choke the life out of him until he begged for it all to stop. But how could he? She was just a vessel. He wasn’t looking into the eyes of the man who had done this to him, but into those of someone else he was using along the way. He buried his feelings, calming his rising temper.

“You will never go home, Sam,” he said, speaking now with the resolve of a man who had clawed his power out of the world with his own bare hands. “You will never see that world again. I’ve been helping, prodding, poking you along, to see who you are, what you’re capable of. I’m now convinced that you will give up one day: you will surrender to your fate, and you will dissolve away, melting into nothing.”

“Or you’ll kill me?” he growled.

“Sam,” he smiled brightly. “I already did!”

“Who’s this?” Lilith’s voice said loudly, sounding really quite jealous.

The waitress blinked and looked around, seemingly confused about where she was. She flustered, flashing apologetic smiles at her, and back to Sam. “Sorry... Sorry...” she gasped. “I was suddenly tired, sorry. It’s been a long shift. I didn’t realise someone was sitting here... I think.”

“It’s fine!” Sam told her with a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

She nodded, smiled weakly and scuttled away, giggling at herself awkwardly.

“Who was that?” Lilith grumbled accusingly. “Why was she sitting with you? You’re a married man, you know?”

“I know!” he said with a nod. His head was spinning now, struggling with the sheer enormity of it.

Lilith scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. “If you like talking to young girls, you’re allowed to talk to me! ...But *only* me!”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about!” he told her, a little smile fluttered on his lips. “You’re like my favourite kid sister-in-law, and you always will be.”

She smiled and uncrossed her arms. “And don’t you forget it!”

“I’m sure you’d never let me!”

“So what now?” she said happily, now that was all sorted out.

“Now?” Sam sighed and looked back out of the window. He caught sight of his reflection picked out against the blackness of the night outside. He was frowning, and even to himself, he looked angry. He turned back to her and said coldly, “Now I’m going to kill your fucking father!”

“Right...” she said as if that was just perfectly fine. “But I thought we were having cake?”

“OK!” he agreed with a smile. “Cake first, brutal murder later.”

“Right!” she said happily. “That seems fair, since we didn’t have to kill Mallory in the end. I like that idea better, actually.”

“Right!” Sam nodded.

“I like you better like this,” Lilith told him. “I like you when you’re all focused and keen as a new case begins. You’re miserable and sad when they end. This Sam is more fun.”

Sam smiled at her, picked up his coffee and drained it with one last sip. He put it down and it clattered noisily into its saucer. He told her with a degree of absolute certainty, “Your father isn’t going to think I’m any fun when I get my hands on him!”

Lilith smiled happily. “Good!” She went to drink some tea, but hesitated, confused. “Where do we start?”

That was a very good question. “I’ve got no idea,” he admitted. “But I finally know where all this is going to end.”