

Jealousy is a killer...



you are mine



DIANA
WILKINSON

A GRIPPING
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SUSPENSE

YOU ARE MINE

DIANA WILKINSON

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First published in 2020 by Bloodhound Books

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www.bloodhoundbooks.com

978-1-913419-56-1

ALSO BY DIANA WILKINSON

4 Riverside Close

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A PERFECT CIRCLE

I formed a perfect circle using my thumb and forefinger, pushing the tips together and then let my other fingers spiral round the outside. I slotted my left eye neatly inside the rounded shape and closed my right. Although light oozed through the crack running down the hinged edge of the door frame, I wanted the familiar comfort of a circular aperture. Old habits die hard. I watched and waited.

The Target arrived on cue, their eyes immediately drawn towards the ragged shards of broken crockery strewn across the floor. A current of excitement coursed through my body as I stared, motionless, at my prey. Like a wolf in tune with nature, I recognised the smell of fear, as the rancid stench of body odours filled the room.

I gripped the baseball bat in my right hand and finally lowered my left hand away from my face, freeing the bulging eye from its confines. I emerged slowly from the shadows, smiling triumphantly as the Target turned towards me. There was an almighty crack as the bat smashed down onto his skull. After years of impotent silence, I was never going to be content with one hit. Death was not enough.

As I pummelled the head repeatedly, I knew only total decimation would suffice. No hint of worth would remain.

NEW YEAR 2005

*Long lost first love lies buried
under thick layers of life...
A haunting presence
teasing with illusions
of how things might have been.
Like death's finality
not quite believed.*

REBECCA

Perhaps acceptance is all there is. Desire had lain dormant for what seemed a lifetime. As we shuffled along, excusing ourselves as we nudged and squeezed past the hotbed of sweaty bodies reclining in anticipation, a gentle wave of contentment took me by surprise.

Arthur managed to upturn a half-empty popcorn container which stuck out from under an empty seat; a stark reminder of his gaucheness. The heat, fuelled by the recumbent masses, was overwhelming. My scarf was knotted so tightly I could hardly breathe.

Arthur's hand was clammy. He wasn't hot or cold. He lacked definition. Arthur was just there; a rock, a foundation tethering my dormant passions to his steadfastness. He didn't complain, of course, about the heat or our unfavourable vantage point behind an exceedingly tall couple. Arthur didn't do complaining.

We slouched down and peeled off our winter layers. Arthur kissed the tips of my frozen ears as he snuggled up close. Momentary claustrophobia engulfed me as I frantically loosened my scarf. Arthur, oblivious to the panic, unfolded my seat and ran a cursory hand across the pad. I struggled to catch my breath, closed my eyes tightly and willed my heart to calm.

Gone with the Wind was made for the big screen. When I first met Arthur, we swapped anecdotal tales about our likes and dislikes. I told him Rhett Butler epitomised my ideal partner; mean and moody with a sexual magnetism to melt the coldest heart. Arthur had laughed, pulled me close and assured me he was more than willing to take on the role.

Arthur just sort of happened, his persistence wore me down. He became an incidental companion. Maturity, people told me; I was growing up.

Uninvited barbs casually linked the wild visceral passion of youth to immaturity. I'd finally made a wise and safe choice.

My companion had smuggled in a couple of small bottles of dry white wine which he decanted into plastic containers. The salted peanuts were difficult to eat quietly and we giggled as the crackling bags drew audible 'tuts' from our neighbours. At the interval the lights went up and Arthur disappeared into the foyer for a top-up.

One glass of wine is never enough; it now dulls the pain of boredom where it had once heightened the ecstasies of passion. In the past it anaesthetised the hurt and fear but now added sheen to a dull humdrum existence. Arthur returned with a Coca-Cola for himself. He always drives on a Saturday night and would never risk more than one glass.

It was only when the lights were dimmed once more and the dark smoky atmosphere re-enveloped us that I let my gaze wander round the crowded cinema. My eyes watered as they worked their way through dust particles dancing in the beam of moving images.

My mood, mellowed by alcohol, and my body had both momentarily stopped battling inner demons. I was at last breathing deeply and a rogue smile settled on my lips, hinting at toxic contentment. Scarlett skittishly fought her lovesick battles while Arthur gripped my hand.

A slow-moving film reel, one frame at a time, was set in motion. The lazy scan stuck as I rewound the last still and held it firm. Surrounded by dark maroon hues of cinema chenille, the image was vague. An indistinct shape of the head; unkempt curly strands of hair unwittingly flicked back every now and then by a stray finger; a certain slump of the shoulders churned up memories from the recesses of my mind.

Arthur kissed me as my body tensed. *'Quite frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.'* As Arthur pulled me close, he brushed the top of my head with eager lips.

I stared, a hawk transfixed, at the silhouette sitting three rows back from the front of the big screen. I knew then, in one fleeting moment, that my ten-year search was over.

WINTER 1994

REBECCA

Looking back, it's hard to see whether youth afforded me arrogance or stupidity or if the two were inexplicably linked. Love had swallowed me whole and while arrogance had unwittingly snared my prize, stupidity was threatening to derail the wagon.

I banged on the door, and kept banging. I didn't care that it was after midnight nor that I was freezing to death in my short skirt and stockings. The front step was icy as I skated around in high heels, using the iron railings to steady myself. The knowledge that desire was better fuelled by mystery had not yet been afforded to me by life's knocks.

'Let me in. It's freezing out here.' My voice screeched through the night air, wine fuelling the 'devil may care', making me reckless.

The curtain on the second floor landing was peeled back and I knew that Mr Perkins would be getting more and more irate by my drunken shenanigans. He prised open the sash window, and leant down to yell through the crack.

'Oops.' I slipped down the top two steps. 'Please. Can you open the door? I think Mitch must be asleep. It's bloody freezing out here.' As I managed to right myself, my head started to spin. The mix of vodka and wine was playing havoc with my balance.

'No. Go home. Sleep it off, for Christ's sake.' Mr Perkins heaved the window open a bit further and secured it by lodging a couple of books between the frame and windowsill.

'Come on, Scrooge. It's nearly Christmas. Just this once, please?'

The full moon lit the night sky, casting voodoo magic all around. My head spun and the frost seeped into my bones. The alcoholic anaesthetic

couldn't stop my knees knocking or the involuntary tremor of my upper body.

'Shit.' I noticed a ladder had run the full length of one of my stockings as I rearranged my skirt. By the time Mr Perkins made it to the front door I was upright again, smiling superciliously through frozen lips.

'Good evening, Mr Perkins. Thanks. You're a star.' I leant in to kiss him on the cheek, leaving a smear of plum-coloured lipstick below his left ear as he recoiled. I started to unbutton my coat and push my way towards the warmth of the hallway, but he didn't budge.

'This is the last time I'm letting you in. Don't do this ever again. Phone your boyfriend first or next time I'll call the police.' As he turned to go back upstairs, I tried to sound contrite.

'I promise. Sorry, Mr Perkins.' But he was gone.

The house was subdivided into a series of studio and one-bedroom flats made more rentable by plywood stud walls. Love doesn't notice décor. The squalor of Mr Perkins' cash cow passed right over my head. If Mitch had been sleeping rough in Marble Arch I'd have found something to love about the urine-stained pavements and cardboard covers. Love has a one-track mind.

Outside my boyfriend's flat, I took out the door key from the bottom of my bulging handbag. First, however, I turned to the cracked mirror hanging on the wall across from the apartment entrance.

The floral green and pink wallpaper was ripped in places and I tugged loose a stray slither of green flowery border and watched it flutter to the floor. Black damp patches gaped through the walls like an invasive disease. But the only appearance that mattered in those days was my own.

The reflection from the rusting mottled glass was of a beautiful woman, but the image could have belonged to someone else; such were my insecurities. I reapplied a thin layer of lipstick and touched up my mascara. Bending over, I shook free my long hair then, right way up, undid the top button of my blouse before I tapped gently on the door.

There was no response. I knew Mitch would be asleep or at least pretending to be and would only grunt as I slipped in beside him. However, in case he was awake I wanted to look my best.

The key stuck. I took it out and tried again. I gripped the stair banister as I momentarily feared I was going to throw up. In my drunken stupor, I thought it must be the wrong key and proceeded to stick another one

attached to the same key ring into the opening. Three different keys later, I reinserted the original. The door wouldn't open. I rapped loudly, with increasing panic and persistence.

'Mitch? Are you there?' I whispered at first but soon started to call out more loudly. 'Yoo hoo. Mitch? It's only me.'

At the time my doubts were all-consuming and I assumed Mitch had changed the locks to put distance between us. I was too scared to know the reason, so didn't ask. It was a long time later before I learnt the truth.



Mr Perkins yelled at me to close the front door on my way out and not to come back. Of course there would be an explanation. There always was. I was like a sponge, sopping up white lies and fabricated storylines.

As I staggered away, the moon lit my path, illuminating the weeds which peeked through the cracked paving stones. I jumped backwards when a black cat squealed and dashed in front of me, away from the squalid rubbish bags stacked against the wall.

The iron gate was rusty, leaning heavily on its hinges. It creaked open. Small splinters of rust attached to my frozen fingers, almost blue from frost, and as I wiped away unbidden tears, some of the brown rotten granules scratched a way into my eyes. I found momentary solace from the pain, blinking hard to clear my vision, and forgot for a few seconds my sense of desolation.

ARTHUR

Snow flurries fell like confetti, soft and celebratory. The wet fluff settled around my head, forming soft water droplets on my face. Christmas this year was going to be my time. I hummed ‘Good King Wenceslas’ as I slithered across the pavement. Every few steps I slid through the slush, with carefully controlled but risqué manoeuvres.

Queues of traffic snaked up the Finchley Road and the blast of horns drowned out Christmas cheer with their din. I passed tawdry little premises which were open late, trying to tempt impulse buyers with their wares.

I got there early. I wasn’t going to be late. I’d already waited two long months for the rendezvous. Candles flickered through the restaurant window and a brightly decorated tree twinkled in the corner.

I peered in, half expecting to see her already seated at our table. Perhaps she intended to be fashionably late, keep me waiting before telling me how devastatingly lonely the last two months had been. Two months, one day and fifteen hours. The trial separation had been torture for her.

‘Good evening, Arthur. Come in. Let me take your coat.’ Roberto shook my hand with professional aplomb and not a little familiarity before he draped his arm across my shoulders. A foolish flush of pride seeped through my bones as the maître d’ led the way.

‘Your usual, sir.’

There was an elderly couple at the next table, clinking glasses of red wine, relaxed and at ease with one another. That would be us in a few years’ time, growing old as one; a couple who did everything together. Age would not dim our passion.

There was a small clock over the bar whose hand determinedly clunked forward. It was a sharp defined movement which was mesmerising through

the mellowing haze of the Chianti. Eight o'clock came and went and the two glasses for Dutch courage soon became three.

'Some olives, sir? A little garlic bread perhaps?'

My left eye twitched as the sycophantic waiter hovered.

Twenty minutes past eight and the hand was about to jerk forward one more notch when I saw her. A red woollen hat matched the scarf. The hat sat at a jaunty angle and framed her beautiful face.

Roberto, rather too quickly, threw open the doors and bent to kiss her; on each cheek, side to side. My scarlet lady of the night shook her wispy hair loose and tucked the red beret into her pocket. I got up.

'Amber,' was all I said. I knew the word spoke volumes. I'd practised the word, over and over to myself.

'Hi, Arthur. Good to see you.' She stood on tiptoe and pecked me on the cheek.

'It's been a while,' she said, smoothing down her black skirt neatly with both hands as she sat down; coquettishly, I thought.

'You look wonderful,' I gushed.

Amber picked up the menu and glanced through the Christmas specials.

'Wine? It's your favourite,' I said and leant across and poured her a glass. I wouldn't accept her reticence at a full glass. After all, this was a celebration.

'I'm trying to be sensible. Everyone goes mad just because it's Christmas,' she said as we chinked glasses. Piped music from 'Carmen' provided the backdrop to our unfolding drama.

'Have you missed me?' There, I'd asked it.

'Of course, but I've been really busy moving into the flat.'

'Will I be allowed to come and visit?'

A travelling guitar player, accompanied by a gaudily dressed lady handing out roses, stopped at our table. I hid my irritation and scrabbled around for loose change. Amber took the rose and laid it neatly alongside her bread knife.

'Yes, of course you can. You don't need to ask,' she said.

Did I notice flippancy? It was hard to tell. The mellow mood brought on by the Chianti was morphing into irritation.

'Do you want me to come round? Perhaps like before, a couple of nights a week at first?' I asked.

In the kitchen behind us, a pile of plates smashed to the ground and Italian obscenities brought embarrassed smiles from the diners.

‘Arthur, I told you before, I’m not ready to settle down. I’m too young and not ready for a commitment.’

The ring was still in its box, the hard square package accused me of failure as it poked against my trouser pocket.

We finished our meal promptly after that. I hid my misery, played the game and kept up meaningless chit-chat.

I walked her back to the new flat but turned down the offer to have a look around.

‘No. Don’t worry. I can see you’re tired,’ I lied.

If she guessed this was a churlish refusal in light of her rejection, she didn’t show it. She leant across and kissed me on the cheek, no hint of passion. ‘Another time, Arthur.’

She smelt of rose petals, the sort my mother grew in the back garden. I didn’t hug Amber but instead swept away the large snowflakes that had settled on her face. I purposefully held back.

‘I’d love to come round for coffee. As friends.’ I winked, batting back the humiliation.

Once she’d gone inside, I glanced round, furtively, before I pulled a small black woollen hat from my pocket and pushed it over my lanky locks. I then wound a bright tartan scarf round my neck. If she looked out from her upstairs window I wouldn’t be recognised.

I waited fifteen minutes under the small covered porch at the entrance to Amber’s flat before I crept back across the road and scurried down the side passage of number twenty-one. By the time I turned the key in the lock and let myself in, it was eleven o’clock.

In the dark half-light, I picked up my binoculars and peered across the road. Amber had already pulled her curtains shut; like she did every night.

REBECCA

Such was my obsession with Mitch that I occasionally allowed masochistic notions to invade my thoughts. Death had become an irrational fear. Not my own death, but that of my lover. A policeman would knock at the door and gently persuade me to take a seat. In subdued tones, he would tell me of a car crash or a robbery gone wrong. A fog would suffocate me while the world came to an end. Death was the only fear greater than being cast aside, no longer the vital lock for another's key.

I think if my job had been more fulfilling I wouldn't have spent so much time and energy consumed by my doomed relationship. I caught the tube to the gallery in Knightsbridge every day, and for the thirty-minute journey I melted into the hot sweaty pot of commuters. I used to be eager to reach my destination, excited and intrigued by the world of antiques and fine art, but my working relationship with my boss Roger Pennington's only other employee had become uncomfortable. Oliver Moreton had once been Mitch's so-called best friend.

Mitch was always going to be my first choice after Oliver introduced us. If Oliver had hoped to earmark me as his partner by right when he'd invited me along to the rugby club, he had both underestimated his best friend's loyalty and my inherent attraction to more-silent bastards.

Mitch had stood aloof at the bar when we'd arrived. Oliver, large and proud, had circled my waist with generous fingers and propelled me towards my eventual fate. The two men shook hands and Mitch stared at me, sealing our future with a wink as the evening came to a close. When my escort went to bring the car round, chivalrous in the pelting rain, his best friend kissed me gently on the cheek and whispered goodbye.

'For now.'

As he walked away, swaying his hips in measured style, butterflies fluttered in my stomach. He turned and mouthed silently, 'See you soon.'

After Mitch appeared on the scene, Oliver never stood a chance. His muscular rugby-playing physique, with mandatory broken nose and misshapen but mildly endearing cauliflower ears, had enticed me as a willing companion to the rugby club but I never really considered him as more than a friend. Three years down the line, Oliver still seemed to believe a 'happy ever after' might be possible.



I peeked through the window, jumping back when I saw Oliver's gargantuan outline hovering inside near the glass. He was hanging Christmas lighting round the wooden frames and muscled aside as I tentatively pushed open the door.

He beamed when he saw me. 'Hi. Thought we ought to make an effort, seeing as Roger's coming in. He's asked us for lunch by the way.'

'You're early. I thought you weren't coming in till later.' I peeled off my gloves, stuffed them in my coat and hung it on the wooden stand in the corner.

'You sound disappointed,' Oliver said. 'Aren't you pleased to see me? Here, hand me up the white lights. They're in the box by the desk.'

He perched precariously on a small wooden stool and wobbled in theatrical delight as he stretched out his left arm and pointed towards the tawdry decorations.

It took an hour to liven up the dimly lit studio. Oliver flirted tirelessly, proffering lively quips and innuendoes about Santa Claus and stocking tops. He less than subtly made sure our hands brushed each time we hung up another string of lights. Recently I'd begun to find something darkly repellent about the thick black hairs on the back of his hands and also those that crept up from his chest like ivy creepers, clinging savagely to his thick neck.

I should have been flattered by the attention but I felt uneasy. Oliver knew I was still with Mitch, or did he? Perhaps Mitch had hinted that something was wrong, that our relationship was cooling off. It crossed my mind that Oliver might have Mitch's blessing to take the prize.

Roger arrived around midday, donned in a velvet-collared great coat, carrying a weathered Gucci briefcase. His softly greying hair was drizzled with snowflakes. As he took off the layers, he invited Oliver and me into his

private office to talk business. This never took long as Roger always seemed satisfied by our efforts.

It wasn't only the moneyed background that endeared us to our boss but Oliver and I were both from backgrounds that had taught us to respect our elders and we automatically treated Roger with the deference that his forty-two years demanded. However, his recent attempts at using his authority to inveigle inclusion into some of our more riotous social outings left me feeling slightly unnerved.



Half an hour later, we locked up and walked together round the corner to Roger's favourite restaurant, The Garter. It was during the dessert course that the conversation took a strange turn.

'Crystal's left me,' he announced.

Up to that point we'd shared meaningless chit-chat about the weather, ski trips and the Christmas holidays.

'I'm sorry,' I said. What else was there to say? To share emotional upheavals with a boss old enough to be one's father didn't rest easy.

'I think it's been on the cards for some time but don't all men stick their heads in the sand until it's too late?' At this point he reached across for the wine and topped us all up.

'I don't know what to say. Is there someone else?' Oliver carried on eating, voicing mock concern. He stuffed the remaining mince pies into his mouth, while waiting for Roger to continue.

'I don't think Crystal has ever really wanted me. Not in the intimate sense.'

We watched Roger, lost in tortured private thoughts. He sipped his wine, swilling and tasting the smooth claret.

Oliver raised his eyebrows in my direction, a faint smirk on his lips, when Roger's eyes were averted. I didn't respond. I waited as Roger took us back twenty years.

'I think if Crystal had ever needed me with the same desperation I felt, I wouldn't have wanted her so badly.'

If Roger was a connoisseur of fine wines, a business man of repute, albeit with integral family connections, he was also an emotional mess. Crystal had been the belle of the coming-out season and he had learnt the value of patience and commitment as she flitted between paramours. He had fallen completely in love.

Oliver and I watched in horror as our greying sophisticated payer of salaries shrank before our very eyes as he relived the past. For a brief moment I forgot about Mitch as I became enrapt in someone else's love story.

When Roger finally excused himself and headed off to the toilets, I'd a sudden and illogical sense of foreboding. Perhaps I was too easy? Perhaps Mitch should be made to work harder and I should play the jealousy card, the 'out with friends' ploy. But it all seemed so senseless. We wanted to be together; together forever. Or that's what I thought.

'Shit,' said Oliver. 'What can you say? It's so embarrassing. Poor old sod. I wonder if Crystal's found herself a toy boy.'

'I feel sorry for him.'

'I wouldn't worry. He's got money. He'll get over it.'



It was a good twenty minutes before Roger returned for coffee, having regained composure. Stiff upper lip would be his mantra. A faint smell of cigarette smoke trailed in his wake.

After coffee, he announced he was catching the early train home to Guildford.

'I need to get back but wanted to say thanks for all the hard work. The last six months have been among the best we've ever had at the gallery.'

Roger extended his hand and we said our goodbyes, a respectable distance between boss and employees safely re-established.

We watched as he left the restaurant, collar turned up high against the cold air that would hit him out on the street. We didn't realise then that this was the last time we would see Roger Pennington alive.

REBECCA

Back at the gallery, Oliver uncorked another bottle of wine which he'd brought back from the restaurant and set it on the side to breathe while we completed the stocktaking.

It wasn't long before we leant back in our chairs, Oliver with his feet up on the desk, and talked about the lunchtime revelations. Although we'd been uncomfortable listeners, Roger's story fed our imaginations.

'How are you and Mitch getting on?' Oliver sprang the question out of the blue. Talking about Roger had been a welcome diversion but I tensed as my colleague changed the subject.

'He doesn't do commitment. You do know that?' Oliver continued. 'He doesn't like to be tied down. Believe me, he gets bored very easily.'

I'd always found it easier to share confidences with men than take part in girly chats and Oliver was offering me the chance to open the floodgates. Foolishly, I let him draw me in. He'd done it before, watched intently, willed me to respond, and I was a sucker for falling into the same trap. I desperately needed someone to talk to.

'We're fine,' I said. 'We're just not ready to settle down.'

'What, he's not or you're not?'

Oliver knew the answer but I needed him to understand. This seemed important.

'He wrote me a poem. Look.' I ferreted around in my purse for the well-worn scrap of paper. I'd show Oliver. The simplistic rhyming couplets (love, dove; ever, clever; face, trace) were Mitch's way of telling me he'd love me forever. I wanted to prove to Oliver, and remind myself, that we had something special.

‘Oh, he gave one like that to Lisa Berger when we were students. It’s his trademark.’

Oliver tried to pull our relationship apart. He stretched his muscly legs further out along the desk, hands behind his head and waited.

‘Whatever. Listen, I need to get off. The weather’s getting worse,’ I said, making a cursory glance out of the window. ‘It’s snowing again.’

‘So soon? We haven’t finished the bottle yet.’

I went to take my glass back to the kitchen while Oliver rewound his legs and stood up.

The overhead beams darkened the room and the late afternoon shadows lent a sense of claustrophobia to the confined space. Ghostly shapes hovered across the priceless paintings. Scenes of war, ballerinas and holy depictions came to life and my companion seemed to have grown larger in the glooming.

‘You need to move on. Find someone else. He’s no good for you.’ Oliver lifted my coat down from the stand and as he handed it to me, he leant across, nauseatingly close, so that I could smell the rancid garlic on his breath. The gentle giant no longer seemed so harmless.

I managed to get round him and reach the front of the gallery, where I yanked the door open and waited for the bell to jingle and announce our departure. Oliver pushed it back, slamming it shut, and made a grab in my direction. He pinned me up against the frame and plastered me with wet kisses.

‘Shit. Get off!’

I tried to push him away, heaving from the stench of stale food and aftershave, but he pinned my hands securely behind my waist.

‘Sorry, Rebecca. You’re just so beautiful. But I’m a patient guy.’

He let me go and took a step back, a wide confident *no-harm-done* smile playing on his lips. ‘It’s Christmas after all. A guy deserves some fun.’

He pointed at the mistletoe which dangled overhead. That would be his excuse.

I wrapped my coat tightly around me and mumbled something about having needed a shoulder to cry on, that was all. As Oliver went to turn on the alarm, I stepped outside. A sharp bitter wind howled and caused drifts of fine fluffy snow to settle in my hair.

‘I’ll always be there for you. Remember that.’

I was aware that he was attempting to level the playing field again, so played along. I wanted to get home. ‘Don’t worry. Thanks for listening.’



As the tube ferried me and all the other city revellers home in their drunken droves, I closed my eyes. Sleep would offer a temporary panacea from the turmoil. I decided to go straight to bed when I got back and shut off thoughts of Mitch and his ‘staff-only Xmas party’. Apparently teachers’ partners weren’t invited. It would have started some thirty minutes ago.

REBECCA

In America they talk of the ‘curve ball’, a strike that comes at a tangent and takes you by surprise.

Caught up in the grip of my own neuroses and embroiled in the all-encompassing throes of first love, I was caught completely off-kilter by an unforeseen event; one which was to have fateful repercussions.

I struggled into work along with merrier-than-usual commuters. Surrounding us there was the gentle hum of Christmas, which was waiting around the corner. The usually dour countenances were more relaxed and the packed carriage felt strangely peaceful.

I browsed the designer arcades on the short walk to the gallery. Roger had given us both a healthy Christmas bonus and a year ago I’d have confidently strolled into one of the boutiques and allowed myself the luxury of being pampered, cajoled and complimented while I spent the entire amount on a cocktail dress. It would have been a dress which would make Mitch wild with desire as he tore it off my shoulders.

This particular morning the sequinned silken offerings held no sway as I wandered on past. The weather mirrored my mood.

When I reached the gallery I fumbled with icy fingers for the keys. I was so desperate to get into the warmth I dropped them twice and had to scrabble round on the gritty surface to retrieve them.

Oliver wasn’t coming in today, which was a blessing. I didn’t feel up to vacuous conversation and his threatening innuendoes. I wouldn’t see him until after Christmas. However, as I tried to get the key to turn, I wondered why he’d left the light on. Through the frosted panes I could see a faint glow.

‘Merry Christmas!’ someone shouted as they passed by. A glance confirmed it was Dominique from La Patisserie a couple of doors down.

‘Hi. And to you. I’ll pop by later for a coffee,’ I said. Without making eye contact, I continued to struggle with the frozen mortise. When I finally managed to open the door, I realised the alarm hadn’t been set or else had been turned off. I immediately suspected a break-in through the rear of the building. I shivered.

The front of house seemed in order as I scoured the walls, confirming that the ten ‘original oil on canvas’ paintings were still in place. The pictures were protected by individual miniature alarms and cameras, and I fingered the frames to make sure each piece was intact.

The half dozen sculptures were also intact. They were strategically sited round the room, in minimalist fashion to draw the eye. The *Mother and Child* piece stood out, curving in erotic lines, depicting the wonders of the female form and a testament to the power of motherhood. It had always been my favourite.

I gingerly made my way towards the kitchenette and turned the light on with a theatrical gesture.

‘Hello? Hello?’ I could sense a presence. There was an exaggerated quietness, a staged stillness and suddenly I was afraid. Something was wrong. There was someone in the gallery with me. They were hiding, waiting.

My first reaction was to call the police but I wasn’t sure what I’d tell them. There was no obvious sign of a break-in and Oliver might have forgotten, in a drunken careless moment, to turn all the lights out and to set the alarm.

But I knew it was something more; something worse. Light peeked out from under Roger’s door. A single beam snaked through the crack and as I stepped forward I lifted the kitchen scissors.

I pushed open the door. It was the shoes I noticed first; neatly arrayed, side by side, under the large mahogany desk. They were handmade brown suede brogues. The small lamp was switched on and its grisly glow was the only illumination in the darkened room.

At first I wondered why the body was swivelling and for a brief second I imagined my boss might still be breathing. He twirled from the high oak beams until his body suddenly seemed to still in front of me.

The scissors slipped from my grasp. I didn't scream or cry out but found I couldn't move. I stood in the doorway for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for someone to lead me away, to explain, to comfort and reassure me.

The phone rang. Mitch was my first thought. Perhaps he wanted to apologise for not calling me last night when he got home from the party. But I let it ring while I stared at the bulging plastic Waitrose bag. It covered the head of the torso and was tightly secured by a skilfully knotted noose. Roger was an avid sailor and the wall behind his mahogany desk sported a unique collection of fifty sailor's knots in a beech wood frame. Crystal had given it to him for his fortieth birthday.

I don't remember calling the police but they turned up and so did Oliver, some forty minutes later. The crime scene soon swarmed with people and all I could hear was the wailing from Dominique of La Patisserie as she handed out strong cups of coffee.

'Oh my god. How awful. Was there a note?' Oliver put his arms round me, hugged me tightly. I was too numb to fight him off.

'Yes. It's on his desk.'

My body shook and the paramedics tried to calm me with sedatives, but not before I'd managed to take a photocopy of Roger's suicide note, and safely tuck it away in my pocket.

'Shit. What did it say?' I felt an irreverent revelling in the ghoulish events from both Dominique and Oliver. They kept pressing me for details but I wasn't going to read the note aloud. I noticed the police were already bagging up the crime scene evidence.

A young DI handed me his card once he had crawled back out from under the yellow tape surrounding Roger's private sanctum. The detective was careful to avoid contact with the sculptures. 'Is there anyone at home, someone you can be with? This has been quite a shock and it'll probably hit you later.'

'Yes, my boyfriend will be at home. Can I go?'

Mitch would be home by 5pm. It was his last day of term and after mince pies and mulled wine with the pupils, he'd no doubt be expecting me. Even though we hadn't spoken last night, my neurosis seemed bizarrely out of place in the present situation and the distraction had temporarily dulled my own emotional misery.

Oliver made me promise to call him later and Dominique gave me a large box of festive pastries to share with my family over Christmas.

‘Sugar is a great antidote to shock,’ she said.



The return journey felt surreal as the train rumbled back through the tunnels. The early office closures on the last working day before Christmas meant the carriage was hot and stuffy. Unlike in the morning, it was now crowded with noisy ebullient home-goers.

I slipped the photocopied note from my pocket and read the final words of Roger Pennington.

My darling Crystal,

I've written many notes, both on paper and in my mind, for this moment. They have all been torn up and shredded. Crystal, I love you with all my heart and soul. Without you my life has no meaning.

Take care, my darling, and move on. You're finally free from guilt and ties.

For ever, Roger.

REBECCA

I rang the doorbell, shivering under my coat. My fingers, numb with frost, stuck to the bell as I jabbed the button.

‘Afternoon, love. Not sure if he’s in.’

The man from flat number two appeared. ‘007’ Mitch called him; a spy coming and going at all hours of day and night. We laughed together when we learned his real job involved work at the postal sorting office.

‘Thanks.’

I didn’t check my face this time in the mirror. The hall clock showed it was exactly five. As I knocked on the door to Mitch’s flat, I realised it wasn’t locked. I gingerly pushed it open, noticing that there was a newly fitted Yale lock.

‘Mitch? Mitch? It’s only me.’

There was no reply. I threw my coat over the sofa and wandered through the flat. He’d probably popped to the corner shop for milk or teabags. Bizarrely I felt like a snooping spouse; looking for clues that might prove my partner was up to no good. Sixth sense took me towards the bedroom.

First I noticed a tiny pile of white powder on the bedside cabinet. Beside it was a small gold chain with the tiny letter ‘T’ attached. I went to the wardrobe and slid the doors open and pulled back the neat row of jeans and shirts. I didn’t know what, if anything, I was looking for.

Secrets are taboo for young lovers, or so I thought when we threw ourselves so tightly together. I wantonly told him all about my previous liaisons as we grew closer and portrayed myself as an icon of interest and intrigue as Mitch listened intently. I believed that any omissions from his own history would have been oversights and, being his ‘first real love’, I naively suspected that there was nothing more to tell. I’m not sure if this

was innocence or a desire to ignore anything untoward that might challenge the strength and longevity of our new-found relationship.

I discovered a file jammed in at the back of the cupboard. I lifted it out onto the bed. Dividers had been neatly inserted, each one labelled with a woman's name: Jan, Shirley, Felicity, Gabriella and Natalie.

I sat on the bed and scanned through heartfelt messages from a motley array of lovesick women, letters dating back over the last ten years starting when Mitch would have been only fifteen.

I suddenly heard the front door opening.

'Rebecca?'

I heard my boyfriend go into the kitchen and I quickly pushed the file back into the wardrobe.

'Hi. Sorry but the door was open. I was checking you weren't asleep.'

'I wasn't expecting you till later.'

Mitch clutched a pint of milk and a packet of biscuits. He stood and stared at me. He didn't seem irritated by my unannounced appearance. But still I worried.

'It's Roger.'

'What's happened?'

'He's dead.'

If I'd wanted an excuse to elicit attention and sympathy then I'd played the ace card. I cried, loud explosive sobs, as Mitch took my hand and led me back into the lounge. He caressed my damp hair and held me tightly, silently, until I was able to speak again.

I milked the drama for every last ounce of affection. I cried buckets, as much for the unknown life of my boyfriend that I'd discovered in the bedroom as for the despair which had led Roger to hang himself.

'What'll happen next? Will you be going back to work after Christmas? Christ, what a nightmare.'

Mitch stood up and returned to the kitchen to rustle up warm sugary cups of tea. My mind, however, was already working overtime in another direction. My random discoveries in the bedroom needed explanation.

The white powder didn't worry me as much as the gold chain. We were a generation that didn't do drugs. I pretended that the white powder was an analgesic for pain. Mitch had a niggling sore shoulder. Even through my fuzzy headache, I tried to explain away the letters. They were from a

bygone era, long before we met. I was good at finding self-serving justifications for all the doubts.

But the small gold chain by the bed, with the letter 'T', was harder to explain.

I went to the bathroom. My face was red and blotchy, my lips cracked and sore from the cold. I opened the cabinet to find a comb and noticed a new little row of condoms neatly placed alongside the razor blades. Mitch didn't like condoms. It was *'like having a bath with your socks on.'* He had marched me off to family planning shortly after we met. I now wondered if he had taken Jan, Shirley, Felicity, Gabriella and Natalie to similar clinics.

Mitch lay prostrate on the sofa, feet up, flicking through television channels as I stood in the doorway, holding up the gold chain. I didn't intend accusation; I wanted an explanation.

'Oh, that's Trisha's. I must remember to give it back to her. She popped round this morning before work and asked me to get it mended. Look, the locking link is coming apart.'

He took it from my hand and pointed at the dysfunctional clasp on his sister's pendant. He leant across to kiss me and explained that he knew a good jeweller who did repairs. Mitch didn't hesitate but then he was always plausible. It was all part of the charm.



At around 6pm, Mitch uncorked a cold bottle of Riesling. He put Carol King's 'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?' on in the background. He was good at romance.

As I started to cry again, for something much greater than emotional distress for Roger and Crystal Pennington, Mitch and I lay down on the sofa and made love. For a short time my doubts didn't seem important. We were together, and having him near was all that mattered.

REBECCA

There was a message from Oliver when I got back to my flat on Saturday morning.

‘Hi. Hope you’re okay. I’m still in shock. Give me a call. Not sure what’ll be happening at the gallery after Christmas. It’s Oliver by the way.’

There was another message from Mum saying that the Christmas tree was up and they were all looking forward to seeing me. I decided not to tell her yet about Roger as she would most likely use it as an opening to interweave her own neurotic appeals for attention with less-than-enthusiastic enquiries about my state of mind.

The shower flickered into life as I stood, naked, waiting for the warm water to soothe my worries. Mitch was still on my skin, the smell of him clung to my body. I tortured myself by wondering why we weren’t still desperate to share the shower space. When had things changed?

Once out, wrapped in only a bath towel, I decided to call him.

‘Hello. Mitch’s phone.’

The flat was freezing. I refused to turn up the heating. My breath cut vapour trails through the room and I shivered as my hair dripped cold water droplets against my skin.

‘Hello. Can I help you?’ A lady’s voice, confident with the slightest hint of an accent, cut through the line. I didn’t speak. My stomach knotted, and for a second or two I thought I might throw up. The kettle whistled in the kitchen. It was last year’s present to ourselves on a Christmas Eve shopping expedition when there was still the expectation that we might one day cohabit.

‘Who is it?’ I could hear Mitch’s voice in the background.

‘I’m not sure, there’s no one on the other end.’

Perhaps it was Trisha, popping by to pick up her chain, but I didn't recognise the voice. The line crackled but she did sometimes pop in at weekends for a coffee.

I hung up and rang straight back. I couldn't help myself. This time there was no answer. It was only 11am.

ARTHUR

It wasn't really Ted's fault but I couldn't help the resentment I felt towards him.

Firstly, if he hadn't started dating my mum, I wouldn't have met Amber and the illusion of happy families might never have arisen. I do admit, however, that as a 'sales pitch' it did have appeal; Ted and my mum, me and Amber. I got a new father and Amber got a new mother. On this point though, I suspect that my gain of Ted as a new family addition might well have outweighed Amber's gain.

Although my mother thrust me towards Amber as someone she thought would be controllable and immensely suitable, Amber was quick to pick up on the problems. She said my mother was overpowering and Amber soon got fed up with the interfering.

Ted, on the other hand, never seemed overly enthusiastic in support of our relationship and I soon wondered if his fatherly concern might have overshadowed Amber's genuine affection for me and perhaps gone some way in encouraging her to rethink.

I was low in spirits as I set off for Ted's house. It was three days after the fateful evening with Amber. I was going on my own, now we were no longer an item. No one knew I was living directly opposite Amber's new pied-à-terre, bought and paid for by her father. I had to learn the bus routes from the pharmacy where I worked in Golders Green as my car was theoretically off the road.

I couldn't risk parking it near the flat as Amber might put two and two together and get an even number. I certainly didn't want her knowing I'd moved in across the road from her. I found a cheap lock-up garage behind

the pharmacy where I decided to leave it until time had passed and Amber and I were rightly back together.

My resolve set like concrete, aided and abetted by my mother's jibes about my inability to successfully hold on to suitable partners. I would prove to the world that Amber and I were meant to be together and, more pertinently, I would prove to my mother that I had resilience and determination. Up until this time, she hadn't approved of anyone I brought home. Amber was different though because she had been my mother's choice. I hoped this would make my task easier.

Ted's house was a 1960s bland brick-built semi-detached house. It was in a leafy suburb near Totteridge Common but Ted, like his semi-detached house, was the poor relation with a postcode of grandeur but an east-end style property. There was a brass knocker on the door but no bell. I spotted my mum's car in the driveway and in one awful instant I realised they were probably living together. Even if my mother hadn't moved in all her worldly possessions, it was obvious she was staying over. She was sleeping with the enemy.

'Hello, darling. Come in.'

My mother, new lady of the manor, flung open the door and threw her arms around me. 'Ted, it's Arthur. Arthur's here.'

She tried to unwrap my scarf and ruffled my hair which stuck to my head like half-dried paint thanks to the woollen cap which was part of my daily disguise. 'You need a haircut,' she said as she led me through to the dining room. The table was set for four.

'Who else is coming?' My hackles rose. I noted the meticulously laid table, complete with place name settings stuck into miniature silver reindeers. There was four of everything; four gaudy napkins in green and gold, and four large silver crackers. A centrepiece, amateurishly arranged, flaunted holly strands, pine cones and bunches of red plastic berries.

My mother joined Ted in the kitchen while I stared in horror at the dining table. I suddenly feared that Amber had reconsidered and decided to turn up and tell everyone that we were now only friends, albeit good friends. Perhaps she wanted to prove that this might be a convivial working way forward.

'No one, darling!' shouted my mother over the clatter of pots and pans. 'Ted hoped Amber might join us but she's come down with flu or

something. A pity, but all the more for you,' Mum teased. She clutched a large metal soup tureen which she carried through to the table.

My mother was dressed in a short black skirt, black stockings and unusually high heels. A tight red top clung to her pendulous breasts. The gaudy ensemble was accessorised by large hooped earrings and a heavy gold chain. I thought of a lady mayoress as the chain clunked against the tureen.

'Mum, what are you wearing?' I watched Ted follow along behind, holding a plate of neatly cut crusty bread.

'Doesn't she look lovely?' He circled her waist with bony white hands. On Amber, the fine skin was like porcelain but on Ted, the fingers looked weak and feminine. He still wore a wedding band.

'Yes, for a twenty-something,' I sniped.

Mum cupped my head between her hands and kissed me on the crown. 'As I'm the only lady tonight and have two men to keep happy, I thought I'd please you both.' As she pirouetted on her heels, she grabbed my arm to steady herself.

'Oops,' she giggled. 'Too much sherry.'

Amber's ghost was in the room throughout the pantomime. Ted served up the turkey. I could feel the insincere pity directed my way. He thought it was cleverly masked.

I spent the evening wondering when Amber would have told them she wasn't coming. I was tempted to go round there later, ring the doorbell, and ask her. Look in the whites of her eyes.

My resolve hardened when Mum insinuated, after one too many sherries, that perhaps Amber had found somebody else. Mum toyed with me, flirting like a sluttish harlot over her two men.

I tried to shut out the memories. Perhaps it had been childish innocence and mother-worship that had made me solely blame the men. Tonight it seemed more likely that my mother had played a willing part.

Ted assured me his daughter had flu. She wouldn't lie to him. Amber was his only child after all, he reminded us in measured tones. I watched him with suspicion as he poured wine with his skeletal fingers. I was looking out for the faintest glimmer of a lie. I hoped he was telling the truth. Perhaps Amber really was bedridden. She might even start missing me if her condition worsened.

But I wasn't that stupid. I didn't suffer from delusions.

REBECCA

I took up Oliver's invitation to meet up at lunchtime as we were both worried about our future. We met at the gallery. Crystal was inside with the door's *Closed* sign facing the street. Oliver and I peered through the bevelled glass.

'Shit. What should we do?' Oliver stepped back from the door, looking to me for an answer.

'Let's knock, she'll not mind,' I said, assuming to know my dead boss's spouse. 'Anyway, we ought to offer our condolences.'

Crystal came over to let us in. She was dressed immaculately in a short navy skirt and figure-hugging pink jumper. A chunky set of pearls hung round her neck. She was indeed beautiful and quite literally 'to die for' was how Oliver later put it over lunch.

'Hi. Come in.' If she was overwhelmed by grief she showed no trace as she calmly asked us to take a seat while she put on the kettle. We told her how sorry we were, watching for a hint of emotion as she stirred two sugars into Oliver's mug. She wasn't going to share family secrets with her employees and we started to relax when this became apparent.

Over coffee, she assured us our jobs were safe.

'I'd like you both to carry on working here after Christmas. I'm happy to take a back seat and we can discuss finances once probate has been sorted. I haven't a clue how things work but look forward to finding out.'



We didn't hang around. Crystal had told us what we needed to know; our jobs were safe. I agreed to go for lunch with Oliver as I needed the company and it would be the last I'd see of him until the New Year. If I'd

any misgivings, they seemed less threatening in the cold light of day and it felt more awkward to refuse the invitation than to accept.

We ended up in a cosy bistro in Knightsbridge a short distance from the gallery. A fire crackled and blazed in a large brick hearth and the smell from a real spruce chipped away at the misery. It was hard not to cheer up when a waiter handed us each a glass of mulled wine.

‘I can almost see why Roger hanged himself. She’s a stunner,’ said Oliver. ‘Women like her, and I am of course putting you in the same category, my darling, could lead a man to desperate measures.’

Oliver kept the conversation light, boosting my confidence with his throwaway comments. Over Christmas goose, we chatted more freely and the mistletoe incident was briefly brushed under the carpet. I decided to use the opportunity to learn more about his best friend.

‘Mitch always had success with the ladies, more mature from day one. At university, I remember a lady called Felicity coming up to visit. The rest of us were flirting with teenage undergraduates and he was off having trysts with a woman old enough to be his mother. Perhaps it’s a bit disloyal but I suspected at the time that she was married.’

I listened to my companion’s loosened tongue and toyed with the food, moving small mouthfuls round the plate creating space, like a child, pretending I’d eaten enough and should be allowed a dessert.

‘Did you ever fall for the same woman?’ I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to learn everything I could about Mitch.

‘Ha ha ha! Of course. I’m looking at you, chick.’ Oliver summoned the waiter and ordered another bottle of wine, having polished off most of the first one single-handedly.

‘He knew you were with me,’ Oliver continued, ‘when we went to the rugby club but Mitch always wanted what he couldn’t have. Felicity was married with a couple of kids but that didn’t stop him. He knew she was safe. What I mean is that she wasn’t expecting anything from him other than a good time; she was unlikely to leave her husband for a student.’

Felicity. She was the third writer of love letters in the file stuffed at the back of the wardrobe.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, but Oliver assured me it was all Mitch’s fault.

‘He was blinded by your beauty.’ Oliver smiled and laid his hands on top of mine. ‘But he’ll break your heart, believe me.’

Torn between the knowledge that Oliver was a bit in love with me himself and might be trying to steer my ship away from his best friend and the fact that he might be telling the truth, I batted back a few rhetorical questions to lighten the mood. 'Have you forgiven him?'

'No, not really. I know he'll lose you eventually and then it'll be every man for himself.' Oliver tried to link his fingers through mine as we waited for the coffees to arrive. I moved my hands away.

I never did fancy Oliver. He might have made an ideal partner but he wasn't Mitch. Perhaps we all fool ourselves. Oliver may have fantasised about a future together but I was no better, unable to imagine a future without Mitch.

As we buttoned up against the cold, Oliver handed me a small box, neatly wrapped in gold paper.

'To be opened on Christmas morning.' He kissed me lightly on both cheeks and we wished each other all kinds of seasonal joy.

'For the record, I could have murdered Mitch for stealing you away from me. I might yet.' He smiled back as he headed for the tube and waved goodbye over his shoulder.

I watched him, relieved that the holidays would put some distance between us.

ARTHUR

It was only ten o'clock when I left Ted and my mother.

I struggled back through the snow drifts which had ambushed the traffic. Abandoned cars were strewn across the pavements. Stranded drivers rubbed their hands together to keep warm, swapped stories and shared thermos flasks. Great in a crisis; that was the Brits.

'Good evening. Anything I can do to help?'

'Nothing you can do, mate. I think we're here for the night.'

It perked me up to offer unwanted services and a sense of charitable well-being settled on my shoulders as I made my way back down the High Road towards Finchley. The crisp night air helped to restore my humour as the cloying claustrophobia faded into the background.

It was only at the corner of Gladstone Avenue, a couple of roads down from what I had christened *our road*, that I saw them.

I scrambled the hat out of my pocket, pulled it down over my eyes and wound the tartan scarf tightly round my neck. The red beret was unmistakable, slightly askew, fashioned now in devil's pose. The beret had been for me; carefully chosen in scarlet to hint at inner passion. Tonight it was the cap of Satan; burning brightly.

They were holding hands and he, every so often, would stop and pull her towards him and kiss her lingeringly on the lips. They would have been at The Woodman. She mentioned there was a cosy little local a stone's throw from her new abode. Perhaps I could join her for a drink there sometime soon?

I hid behind the wall of the DIY warehouse and dared to peek round every few seconds to observe the treachery. She pulled him round the corner into our road as he pirouetted theatrically, wobbling across the ice. I

heard them laugh. Or perhaps I heard their laughter. They were too far off for me to be sure but the joke was definitely on me.

REBECCA

I've often wondered if we knew in advance that something bad was going to happen whether we would make more of the present moment. Seize the day.

I tortured myself for months afterwards, if only I could have behaved differently on our last night together. Perhaps I'd said or done something which had doused the passion for ever. For a long time my own insecurities laid the blame squarely at my feet for things I didn't understand.

Mitch knocked at my door around eight o'clock. He was relaxed, smiling, as he leant in to kiss me. Everything was as it should be; there were no warning bells.

'Are you ready? Coach and Horses?' He didn't come in but waited on the doorstep.

This was our last earmarked evening together before I was to go home for Christmas. It was inevitable that we would revert to form and drink far too much. Our alcohol-fuelled devil-may-care attitude to life would lead us into bed and to oblivion.

The next morning we'd suffer the consequences and nurse hangovers from hell, but it didn't matter. We were in love. Or so I thought.

'Sounds good. I'll get my coat.'

At the time I imagined his Christmas present to me must be squirrelled away in his skiing jacket; secretly tucked into the pocket. My present for him lay at the bottom of my handbag; a gold signet ring. I'd had it engraved with his initials, MSD. It would fit his fourth finger perfectly.

We drove a mile to the pub and settled in by the log fire. We sat in our usual seat, a long bench, and snuggled side by side. I watched Mitch at the bar as he ordered our drinks; white wine by the glass. He laughed and joked

with the bartender. Without a care in the world was how I remembered my boyfriend that night.

‘How was Oliver?’ Mitch asked. ‘I hear you had lunch with him.’

‘He’s fine. He gave me a little present. I think he still fancies me.’

Mitch didn’t show his usual territorial spike in jealousy. I felt uneasy when I thought about this later.

‘He definitely fancies you. Who wouldn’t?’

There was no interrogation or probing questions. It could have been confidence on his part or apathy. Niggling doubts made me suspect the latter.

Mitch was delighted with his signet ring and it did indeed fit the fourth finger on his right hand. He told me my present was on order and I’d get it in the New Year. I was assured it would be worth the wait.

‘It’ll be something to look forward to,’ he said.

Disappointment filtered through a fuzzy reckoning. It seemed another sign that our relationship had taken a strange turn. I had to remind myself that Mitch loved *spur-of-the-moment* gifts. There were the pearl earrings when we first made love; the silk camisole and designer perfumes; the rich leather purse with my initials embossed in gold.

‘I don’t do commercial dates,’ he said. ‘My gifts are personal; from the heart.’ Spontaneity was part of his roguish charm. Now it didn’t feel so good.

I stayed over and remember a sad melancholic feeling as we lay on the sofa and listened to music, drinking Cointreau from tumblers. Mitch chose the music, a medley of lovesick ballads. He was an incurable romantic.

Something plucked at my heart strings as Phyllis Nelson crooned above the silence:

We made love, slowly and tenderly, on the floor in front of the fire which Mitch had stoked for the occasion. We lay side by side on the long-haired woollen rug. He stroked my hair as he joined in the lyrics and hummed gently.



I left Mitch’s flat early the next morning. I decided to pack my things and leave for home without delay. I told Mitch I’d catch the non-stop train up to Durham that afternoon rather than wait another day. The weather was too bad to drive.

‘I’ll miss you. Love you,’ he said as we kissed goodbye in the cold frosty air.

‘Love you too. Call me.’

He mouthed time-honoured platitudes about taking care and how the week would fly as he waved me off from inside his front door.

I didn’t realise, as the door closed behind me, that I wouldn’t see Mitch again for the next ten years.

ARTHUR

The darkened cell at the back of the pharmacy, piled high with pills, potions and lotions, would provide anaesthetic balm to the chaos. I left the flat early, my disguise in place, and wearing the most ridiculous dark glasses. It was only five in the morning. I couldn't sleep but wasn't prepared to sedate myself for the sake of a few hours longed for amnesia.

The walk to Golders Green took nearly an hour. I trudged warily through the snow and ice. There was a definite smugness to beating the early birds at their own game, and a sense of purpose spurred me on as I picked my way through the blackness. Exercise increased the endorphins and fuelled a sense of well-being and purpose.

Becoming a pharmacist had never been part of a life plan. When I finally gave up infantile dreams of becoming an airline pilot, a firefighter or a front-line paratrooper, my mother steered me towards a career which offered maximum financial stability. Financial stability, that was, for herself.

It was a long time after Dad left before I realised that she'd manipulated my future by moulding me into the breadwinner to replace my father. Finding a job herself was never part of the equation. I fell into pharmacy more through indecision and chance than by any preordained passion for the discipline. At twenty-eight, there was little hope of me veering off in a different direction. Acceptance of my chosen path had offered me a degree of contentment; I had more energy to spend on Amber.

On arrival at the shop, I turned on the lights and convector heaters, which hummed rhythmically in the silence. I felt warmly cocooned in my little domain.

Ellen, my right-hand woman, had draped silver and gold tinsel across the soaps and seasonal cosmetics since I had last been in. Although it wasn't the most dynamic of displays, it jolted me back to the present. Only four days till Christmas and I had no idea what my plans were. Lunch with Mum and Ted and the dreaded possibility of Amber on the other side of the table, as merely 'a friend', was unimaginable.

However, I'm a great believer in fate. I always have been. Karma had brought both Amber and pharmacy into my life. It had all been written in the stars. With only four days to Christmas and misery cloaking me in self-doubt, a strange thing happened. Well, it was an event that only seemed strange in years to come; a fortuitous meeting.

Ellen arrived somewhat later than usual. Her mother was ill and in need of constant attention so I decided not to clamp down on Ellen's tardiness and lack of professionalism until the New Year. I had, for some time, been toying with dispensing of her services and replacing her with a more aesthetic model. Her dowdiness, lack of energy and rancid body odour all conspired against her. Loyalty didn't matter. She was an eyesore and to nurture my own well-being, I needed someone more pleasing to look at.

'Sorry I'm late.' She whistled as she waddled like a pregnant duck towards the cloakroom to hang up her coat. 'Mum's in a terrible way. She phoned me at three this morning and begged me to go round.' I could smell the sweat from my vantage point by the repeat prescriptions and quelled the urge to ask Ellen to leave, albeit politely, there and then.

'Can I get you a coffee? I bought some biscuits. Jaffa Cakes, your favourite, boss.' Her backside blocked the entrance to the kitchenette and I felt a violent surge of loathing as I watched her.

'Yes please. No sugar and no biscuits. Need to lose some weight.' I was stick thin. My revulsion pushed me to cruelty. 'Perhaps you should avoid the treats as well.' I smiled, one of my winning smiles, all gritted teeth.

'Of course I should but what fun would that be?' She laughed and her jowls wobbled. Fat fingers clasped the spoon as she stirred the coffee, dripping dirty blobs onto the worktop. The strength of my disgust threatened sane thought. The contrast between Amber and this hippopotamus taunted me.

'Look, I also bought some baubles for the tree. I used petty cash. Hope that was okay,' Ellen said, slurping from her mug. She extracted, from a

flimsy carrier bag, two boxes of glittering glass balls stuck with bright red *two for one* stickers.

‘What do you think? I got them in the pound shop. Where did you say the tree was?’

I nodded towards the storeroom.



Five minutes later, Ellen was back, hauling the tree out of its box and messily discarding plastic spikes all over the shop floor. Perhaps fate was kind to her because at that moment the front bell pinged to announce a customer. On cue, she sloped off back to the storeroom.

‘May I help you, sir?’ The tall dark-haired gentleman handed me a prescription which I glanced at. I told him it would only take a few minutes and disappeared round the back.

I counted out the fifty diazepam tablets. I thought at the time the man didn’t look like the sort of person who would need sedating. Also, in my experience, it was more usual for women to request tranquillisers than men. I was to be proven right in my summations.

A sudden loud bang made my hand jerk and lose a momentary grip on the bottle of pills. Fortunately I’d already attached the top. The noise cracked through the silence. When I looked round into the shop from behind the dividing wall, I saw the man had fallen off the chair. He had snapped off one of the legs in the process.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ the customer said, holding up the red plastic evidence.

I hadn’t noticed how huge the man was. His hands were abnormally large; like shovels. He had a rugby player’s build, a scar across his forehead and his throat was matted with black hairs that straggled all the way up to his chin. I thought of a gorilla.

‘Oh, please don’t worry.’ I didn’t point out that the seats weren’t made for giants and that surely he could have stood for the few minutes rather than wrecking our shop floor. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine, thanks. No harm done.’ He smiled.

I handed him the pills, issuing professional instructions for usage.

‘Oh they’re not for me. They’re for my girlfriend. She’s terrible trouble sleeping.’

That was the first time I met Oliver Moreton.

But he was impossible to forget.

REBECCA

My flat looked sad enough at the best of times but it always seemed even more drab and shabby after I came back from Mitch's. The bijou bedsit with its peeling paint and iced-up window panes, had only ever been intended as a temporary stopgap.

My friend Jodi had left a cheery message on the answerphone saying she'd call around at midday so we could swap presents. We'd been friends for years. She knew when I was struggling, even before I told her. At five past twelve she breezed in bringing welcome light-hearted company with her and announced we were going to the cinema.

'I can't. I'm going home this afternoon. I'm sorry. I'm all packed up.'

'*Forrest Gump*. I've got the tickets. Look.' She waved the tickets in the air. 'It starts at two. You can catch the later train or the first one in the morning. You owe me.'

'Owe you for what?'

'Ignoring me since you met Mitch. I'm still your best friend. You used to talk to me. Remember?'

'I don't know. I'm ready for a break; get away for a few days.'

'Things not so rosy in the love nest? Go on. It'll do you good. We can catch up.'

Jodi made herself at home, filled up the kettle and rinsed through a couple of mugs. While I vacuumed the lounge, my visitor turned on the television and lay out on the sofa. She wasn't going anywhere.

'Oh, why not? I'll get up early and go in the morning. It'll do me good to do something different.'

'Yippee. You can fill me in on Roger and what else has been going on.'

My decision to go to the cinema led to a turn of events that would torture me for the next ten years. My nightmares might not have been so bad if I'd gone home as planned.

We drank coffee before we set off. Jodi knew not to pry, happy that her elusive best friend was at last around for some fun. There was no one special in her life. She made up stories relating to men she met at work, in the pub or at the squash club. We both knew these were fantasies. She was lonely and confused but I guessed she preferred women. I often sensed a dilemma in my company but I knew, deep down, she'd never make a move in my direction. She didn't like Mitch though. She didn't trust him.



The cinema was packed. We laughed and cried at the ludicrous caricature of Forrest Gump. Jodi spent freely as she refilled our popcorn cartons and later treated me to pizza. It was around 6pm when we finally said goodbye, kissed cheek to cheek and promised to ring each other on Christmas morning and compare family sagas.

'Don't forget, I'm always around if you need someone to talk to.'

'Thanks. I've had a great time. It's done me good.' I waved my friend off and headed home. Snow was falling steadily by the time I reached the bedsit, and I decided to spend my last evening having a hot bath, reading a few chapters of my novel, and getting an early night. I dug out a few candles to brighten up the lounge and bathroom. The subdued scented aroma soon filled the flat.

I lay back and slid under the hot water, swirled the bubbles round the bath, and let my body slowly unwind. I felt the tension melt away and as I opened my book, I sipped from a long-stemmed wine glass and felt a sense of contentment.

I must have fallen asleep for a few minutes because I was only aware of the phone message being left. I hadn't heard the ringing tone. I listened. It was Mitch's voice. I was able to make out a muffled message wishing me a merry Christmas. I would normally have been thrilled that he'd called, especially at a time when I wasn't expecting it, but my body tensed. I'd told him I wouldn't be here, that I was going home.

I stepped out of the bath into what felt like a fridge and threw a huge towel over my shoulders, frantically rubbing away the water and suds. My teeth chattered as I carried my wine into the lounge. I snuffed out the candles which fluttered against a draught blowing up from under the door.

The clock above the kettle showed eight exactly. Although I should have turned on the television, switched up the blow heaters to full power and snuggled down under my duvet to watch reruns of old movies, this was never an option. Instead I turned the lights back on and dressed quickly in jeans and a thick woollen jumper. I had told Mitch I'd be in Durham by eight. He had called to double-check I wasn't at home.



I hurried outside and fumbled about the car, searching for the de-icer and was soon scraping frost and snow off the windscreen. The roads were eerily quiet with random passers-by unidentifiable under thick layers of clothing. I dragged the scraper back and forth over the glass. My hands and body were numb from the cold.

The car finally spluttered into life and I pulled away from the pavement. I slithered along over a treacherous surface, veering left and right as a blizzard blinded my vision.

I parked up opposite Mitch's flat. It seemed an eternity since this morning when we had waved goodbye. I turned off the headlights and cut the engine.

Mitch always kept his curtains open as he liked to see the lights from Alexandra Palace glow on the horizon. He liked the scene from his living room window, especially on dark cold evenings. We often ate dinner at the table which was placed directly under the large glass panel and revelled in the romance provided by the view.

Tonight the curtains were open but at 9.05pm precisely, a woman inside moved towards them. She hesitated and looked down at the snowy scene below. She then drew the heavy drapes across. They didn't quite meet in the middle and I stared up, willing Mitch to come to the window and look out; to see me, to be caught in the act.

I had two options. I could have rung the bell and gained entry into the duplicitous world my paramour now shared with another. This would have sealed my fate and left me with the terrifying prospect that I would have had to dig into all my inner reserves of self-respect and abandon my boyfriend to his peccadilloes. I'd have to tell him it was over, that I never wanted to see him again, and go through the gut-wrenching heartache from which I doubted I'd ever recover.

Perhaps he would come and beg my forgiveness, spell out that we were still single and this was a one-off sowing of his wild oats before he'd finally

be able to settle down. He would ask me to move in with him and then we could be together forever. It would be a gamble.

I restarted the car and selected the only other option; the coward's option. This was the needy choice of a love addict who would carry on with the pretence. I wasn't ready to forego the passions that Mitch ignited and maybe in the New Year I'd broach the subject. Perhaps by then he would have an answer, an explanation and we could face the situation together. Yet deep down I suspected, as I blindly drove back through the driving sleet and snow, that this was the beginning of the end.

ARTHUR

I've never been a *twitcher*; a birdwatcher that is. The binoculars were an impulse purchase from an antiques fair a couple of years back. I suppose though, you could say, that I've always been a watcher.

When my dad left, I was about eight or nine, and Mum and I moved into a small semi-detached house in Wood Green. It was all we could afford with the alimony we made from my father's misdemeanours. It had two bedrooms, a lounge and kitchen in open-plan design, a bathroom, separate toilet and a very long narrow storage cupboard running the length above the master bedroom.

This became my hideaway; my den; my darkroom complete with a pinhead peephole at the end nearest the eaves of the house. My mother stacked the space with keepsakes and mementoes. Old tat, laughed my father as he belittled her aunt's china ornaments and bric-a-brac. Photograph albums of my grandmother gave me hours of pleasure. I hunched over the sepia prints with my boy scout torch, hidden behind the myriad of cardboard boxes.

At first, the dark space had been a secret comforting childhood den, somewhere I could escape reality. However, when the men started appearing out of nowhere, the cramped cell became a hiding place when my mother believed I'd gone round to Connor's to watch television.

I couldn't stand Connor but I hated these men more. At first I felt sad, but as I began to understand what was going on, the misery deepened. By the time I reached puberty, there followed weird conflicting emotions which ranged from murderous rage to incomprehensible excitement. I learnt stealth and silence. These attributes assured my survival when faced with life's basest natural instincts.



The small dark room at the pharmacy suited my needs with its enveloping confines. The voyeuristic instincts that had sprung from my childhood found an outlet, albeit a masochistic one, by watching Amber from afar; but not too far.

My camera was set to take an automatic shot of her front porch every half hour. The camera coped well with the distance and the lens angle was set to capture the length of any visitors from the back. Occasionally the callers would turn round. The postman had been captured several times since I installed the equipment; both from behind and full frontal after he had delivered his letters. When I got back from work, having hopped off the bus a safe two stops from home, I crept upstairs, but not before I'd cased up and down the street for at least twenty minutes. I scanned right and left, high and low. I was a spy on a mission.

I poured myself a beer and settled down by the curtains for my nightly vigil. I'd treated myself to a few magazines on the way home: *Cars and Bikes*, *The Alchemist*, and *Babe Magnets*, the latter a rare purchase from the top shelf.

I jumped when the phone rang and toyed with not answering but with the long night ahead, I decided to pick it up.

'Hi.'

'Hi, Arthur. It's Amber.' I could see the light on in her sitting room from where I held the phone.

'Hi, Amber. What a lovely surprise. How's things?' I was amazed at the sound of my own voice. It was the genuine affectionate voice of an imposter.

'Fine. Everything's good. I thought we ought to talk about Christmas Day. I haven't told Dad yet that we're not going out anymore.'

I stiffened at this point and gripped the phone so hard my knuckles turned white.

'What's the problem? I thought we could go anyway and make their day at least. Friends forever, remember?' I held my breath.

'Are you sure? You won't feel awkward?' Soft, sluttish and duplicitous was how she sounded. Strange how the adjectives had changed in the space of a few days.

'No, of course not. It'll be like last year but without the desserts,' I joked.

She hadn't quite pulled across her curtains and wandered, with the phone in her hand, towards the window. She stared across the road and for one awful moment I thought I'd been seen, that the game was up. She pulled the drapes shut, tight shut.

'Great. I've been worried and didn't know how to bring it up but if you're sure, that sounds good. How's your flat?' Her voice was sing-song, at ease.

'Great thanks. I'm home, cooking spaghetti bolognaise for myself. Our favourite, remember?' I stressed the word *our*. 'What about you?'

'I'm fine. I'm on my own, about to watch telly with an M&S lasagne. Italian all the way.'

A shape had appeared out of nowhere at her front door.

'Oh, there's someone at the door. Probably another Jehovah's Witness.' I could hear the bell through the handset and I watched the shadowy figure push anticipatory fingers on the brass button. 'I must go. See you Christmas Day.'

'See you then. Bye.' But she'd gone. I slammed the phone down and hurried back to the window. The slut opened the door, kissed the caller brazenly on the lips and dragged him into her lair. Bitch.

REBECCA

Christmas came and went. Before I knew it I was back at my flat. The break had done me good, taken my mind off the worst of matters for a brief period but I needed to move forward. I needed answers. My parents asked about Roger but avoided mention of Mitch. They sensed things weren't right. But as families do, we all put on a brave face.

With steely resolve I decided that some New Year's resolutions would have to be set in motion rather earlier than any date suggested by the calendar. I unpacked my few belongings and set my parents' present of a slimline instamatic camera on the coffee table and promised myself to add photography to my list of New Year activities.

There was one message flashing up on the answerphone and I sat down, silently praying and hoping that it would be from Mitch, that he would be round later. I hadn't heard from him since Christmas and I was desperate for explanations as to what was going on. I clicked the button and held my breath not daring to move as the crackly machine came to life. There had been no message left.

I made myself a strong coffee, trying to shake off a lack of purpose and motivation and decided to have a shower before venturing out. I stepped onto the bathroom scales and saw I'd lost a stone in weight since early December. My protruding bones and shoulder blades created a bizarre skeletal outline. I was like a ghost in my severely undernourished state.

By five o'clock my stomach growled so persistently that I dressed and decided to go to the corner shop for some provisions.



Although the snow had gone, my car was frozen over like a giant ice cube and someone had fingered 'Holy Shit' on the windscreen. Instead of

walking to the shop I cleared the car and drove the short distance to power up the battery.

The streets were quiet with little traffic. A few lone walkers trudged off the festive excesses. The corner shop, Patel's Deli, was only a stone's throw from my flat and I was able to park right outside. Mr Patel was packing shelves when I entered.

I bought a loaf of white bread, some cheese and ham and a couple of bananas to get me through the night. Tomorrow I'd stock up on proper adult food.

'How are you? Did you have a nice Christmas?' the owner asked as he placed my items into a carrier bag.

'Fine thanks. Christmas was good.' I remember my father saying, 'Never ask someone how they are in case they tell you.' I certainly wasn't going to bore Mr Patel with my problems so kept it short. On the way out I picked up a copy of the free local paper and shoved it inside the bag.

Of course it was never a conscious decision to drive to the corner shop rather than walk. It wasn't a conscious decision either to take a detour home, to have a quick look up at Mitch's flat. That's what I told myself anyway. Temptation took over and I drove the long way home. I had no intention of ringing the bell, or going in. I would look up from outside, check the lights were on and then drive away and plan how to win back my lover's heart. I still wasn't sure what had gone wrong.

The street lamp outside the house wasn't working and only a dim light glinted through the curtains from Mr Perkins' apartment. The rest of the house, including Mitch's flat, was in darkness.

In the sober light of day I wouldn't dare ring the bell.

About half an hour passed when suddenly the front door opened. I sat upright, heart thumping, and gripped the steering wheel. It was 007, the guy from flat number three. In an instant I jumped out, driven by an instinctive urgency to gain access and yelled across the road.

'Hello! Hello! Can you leave the door on the latch?'

I waved both arms in the air at the diminutive tenant, shouting as I watched him fiddle with his key in the lock. At first he didn't seem to hear. I slithered across the slush but he smiled with the hint of a smirk as I drew close and he pushed the door wide as I approached.

The house was quiet. The only sound was faint music, a Beethoven piano sonata, tinkling in the distance. I tiptoed up the stairs and paused each time the wooden steps creaked. At the top I turned round by the banisters until I found myself once again outside Mitch's flat.

There was no noise. I put my ear to the door and tapped gently. All I could hear was my own heart. I knocked again, more forcefully this time, and finally tried the handle not imagining for one minute that it would turn. The door opened inwardly without resistance.

'Mitch? Are you there? Mitch?' I repeated myself several times, my voice becoming louder, until I dared switch on the landing light. Beethoven had reached a climax and Mr Perkins must have opened a door somewhere because the music was more persistent.

Mitch's flat was empty. I walked through from the lounge to the bedroom but there was no trace of life. The DIY bookshelf had been dismantled, the brick supports neatly piled up against the wall alongside the wooden slats which had held my boyfriend's novel and disc collection. The bathroom cupboard was empty, the neat array of shaving foams and condoms had gone and only a half-used bar of soap hinted at his tenancy. I checked the phone and saw it was no longer plugged in.

Behind me the front door creaked. Mr Perkins appeared out of nowhere and pulled back the curtains.

'He's gone. The new tenants are moving in this week so please don't come back. This is private property and I can't have anyone walking in off the street.' There was smugness, an '*I told you so*' expression on his face.

'Where's he gone? Do you have a forwarding address?' I leant against the wall to check my balance and to try and stop my head spinning.

'No. I've no idea and I couldn't care less. If you do catch up with him, by the way, will you ask him to settle his bill. He's two months owing.'

Mr Perkins ushered me out the door. He took a key and locked up my boyfriend's flat with an air of victory; and of finality. Mr Perkins told me to let myself out. I watched his stooped retreating back mount the stairs and knew I wouldn't be making any more late-night drunken visits to this address.

ARTHUR

My mother told me, after Dad left, that the first time you fall in love is the best, most excruciatingly emotional time of your life. But it is also the worst. She wasn't wrong there.

As I watched Amber close the front door, I knew then what my mother meant by the first cut. All I could think of at that moment was hatred, revenge and loathing, and an overwhelming desire for the object of my torment. Base animal lust thrives alone, separated by the narrowest of threads from sane rational thought.

I tortured myself, like a masochistic self-flagellating monk as I kept silent vigil by the window.

All night I sat. I longed for the lights to go off, for the devil caller to leave, go back to his cave and give me respite from wild imaginings. He didn't.

He stayed all night and I have the pictures to prove it.

ARTHUR

Christmas Day arrived. I got up early and walked from my flat in Finchley to Golders Green. I decided the pharmacy would offer me a haven of calm for a couple of hours before the storm. The brisk walk would clear my head and the dark tranquillity of my emporium would help soothe my worst fears.

On the counter there was a small rectangular package, neatly wrapped, with a card propped up alongside marked 'Arthur'. Ellen must have sneaked back in, a fat Santa Claus, in an attempt to curry favour with her boss. A book, I rightly guessed.

I tore off the cheap paper and was, I must admit, slightly intrigued as to what subject Ellen felt was worthy of my attention; a compendium of smutty office jokes perhaps or a toilet collection of pithy sayings for ageing singletons. Or maybe she had chosen a recipe book for a twenty-something bachelor.

The comprehensive biography of the world's most notorious serial killers took me by complete surprise. Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, Peter Sutcliffe and several other life stories filled the heavy tome. Perhaps I had seriously underestimated my co-worker. I spent the next two hours engrossed in the psychological mindsets of the fascinating celebrities.

Around midday I changed into my best clothes which I had brought with me, neatly packed in an overnight bag. I donned beige chinos, a checked blue and white shirt, and slung a thick navy jumper loosely about my shoulders. I used the small mirror in the toilet to style and restyle my hair. I applied gel to smooth it down and daubed a generous dollop of aftershave on my face. As I peered at my reflection I couldn't help but see a resemblance to Bundy; a handsome bastard.



When I finally arrived at Ted's, my mother ushered me in. This time she was wearing a bright pink and blue floral dress, cut above the knee. Mutton dressed as lamb.

There was no sign of Amber.

'What time's Amber coming?' I asked Ted who was fiddling with the music centre. CDs were strewn across the sideboard. He didn't look up.

'She should be here anytime.'

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. I froze.

'Can you get that, Arthur?'

I gulped down the champagne and instead sauntered back into the kitchen for a top-up. Let Ted answer the door.

Amber looked beautiful; clean, chic and understated. Her fluffy hair had been washed and fanned out round her elfin features. I could make out a hint of 'Je t'aime' perfume. It had been my Christmas present to her last year. A faint flutter of hope wafted by.

'Hello, Amber.'

'Hi, Arthur.' We spoke in unison. Like minds. She stepped up and planted a light kiss, while perched on tiptoes, onto my right cheek.

'Love the perfume,' I whispered in her ear. She smiled, attune with my thoughts. For a brief moment the world was as it should be. A happy family all together. Things might turn out okay after all.

Mum handed Amber a glass of champagne and we all raised our glasses in a merry round of Christmas cheer.



Things started to go downhill when Amber refused a second drink.

'I mustn't drink too much as I have to drive home.'

'Just one more won't hurt, darling. Go on, it's Christmas. You can always stay the night. The bed's made up.' Ted hovered with the bottle.

'Arthur can have the spare room.' That was my mother speaking, making the assumption that Amber wouldn't want me in her bed.

'We can all go walking on Boxing Day, like last year,' Ted suggested.

I didn't speak. No one noticed my brittle façade, my clenched jaw. I let the actors play their parts. My time would come.

Amber seemed inordinately happy. It took a while for the penny to drop that her good humour had absolutely nothing to do with us. It had nothing

to do with Christmas either. For a brief time I'd forgotten what she'd been getting up to.

I played along and pretended to myself and to my mother that Amber and I were a normal couple embarking on a bright future ahead.

ARTHUR

The room was very dark, lit only by candles placed somewhere out of my line of vision. I'd been in my den for at least two hours hunched over some boys' magazines which Connor had sneakily passed my way earlier in the day. I'd seen my mother naked before but there was nothing sexual or untoward about her body when I recalled her bony outline. I heard a faint slap, followed by a yelp. Then there was a harder slap, followed by my mother's persistent pleas to tone it down. Tone it down seemed too polite. I held away the pictures of voluptuous exotic women and instead peered through my peephole.

It was Terry Flynn, Connor's father, beating my mother with a belt. She was tied to the bedpost and even in the dim light I could make out dark stains on my mother's upper thighs; black bruises. As the screams grew from playful pleading to outright terror, I feared for her life. I wet myself, stuffing some old material in my mouth to stop from crying out and to halt the sobs from escaping.

Later on, I became confused by the normality of supper. Mother had cooked my favourite cottage pie with peas and carrots; bright happy healthy vegetables. She had walked into the back door apparently, which explained the black eye. That was her story.

We pretended nothing was amiss and because my mother didn't show any outward signs of distress following on from her violent session with Mr Flynn, I started to consider that this might be acceptable behaviour. However, from that day on I went to Connor's after school rather than hide in the vile darkness of my secret hidey-hole.



As we sat round the Christmas table, I realised my mother had taught me how to play act. I learnt from the best. I knew how to keep my emotions in check. I accepted the happy healthy vegetables that day too. We watched and listened to Amber's amusing anecdotes about the children in her reception class; tales of tiny innocent beauties whom she taught to read and write.

Amber wore a plain navy skirt, which swirled round her shapely legs as she cleared away the dishes. Her white silk shirt couldn't conceal the provocative outline of the lacy bra supporting her rounded breasts. I came to understand Mr Flynn. The need to punish and the desire to drive myself hard into Amber became intolerable as she flitted about the kitchen. I wanted to pin her against the door, smack her from side to side until she screamed and begged for me to stop. But I knew I wouldn't stop.

The charade continued over coffee and liqueurs and then my mother handed us each a white envelope containing our Christmas gifts. Inside were tickets for a week's holiday in the sun. Our parents had given us separate envelopes so we could share the enjoyment of unwrapping our presents individually. They didn't know. They really had no idea we were no longer an item.

Amber would have been wise to own up then and there. She took the coward's way out and thanked them with slobbery kisses. She whooped with delight in my direction over the generosity of such a wonderful gift. Apparently we could book any available departure date before the first of April next year. We could also travel alone.

NEW YEAR 1995

*Jealousy, a fatal flaw, spawned from covetousness,
eats away like maggots on necrotic tissue.
Murderous hatred concentrates the mind
on sadistic imaginings of its prey.*

REBECCA

New Year's Eve finally came around. I'd begun to accept that the phone mightn't ring.

I heard the post arrive downstairs around ten o'clock. I forced myself up from under the heavy duvet and went to pick it up. There were no handwritten letters or postcards poking out from under the charity appeals and takeaway flyers. However, there was a legal letter stamped 'Baines and Hopkins Solicitors'. Anxiously I ripped it open.

'Dear Miss Carrington...' It requested my presence at the reading of Roger Pennington's will on Monday 3rd January. Also enclosed was a small card notifying me of funeral arrangements for the day after.

I sat down on the sofa and tried to eat some dried toast, piling several lumps of sugar into my coffee to counteract the bitter taste in my mouth. I scanned the local paper which I'd picked up from the corner shop, vacantly browsing the property section. News items concentrated on the disappointing festive trade and advertising sales banners blinded the reader with offers of toasters and cameras at half price. At the bottom of the front page a small heading caught my eye.

Christmas Morning Drugs Raid

Police carried out a surprise dawn raid on suspected drug dealers who had been under surveillance. Several tonnes of cocaine was seized and two of the ring leaders have been arrested. Charges include trafficking, dealing and using.

Chief Constable Moreton, who headed up the raid, justified the action of targeting the gang on Christmas morning as the surprise element had been crucial to a successful outcome.

There was a picture of Chief Constable Moreton proudly centred under the article heading. He bore an uncanny resemblance to his son, Oliver. The broad beaming visage and solid countenance assured the public that their safety and well-being were of the utmost importance. I had a vague recollection of meeting this same Chief Constable at the rugby club where he sat on the committee; a former dynamic prop forward according to his son. I topped up my drink and wondered if father and son discussed local issues and if Oliver had been privy to the drugs dealing.

As I sipped the bitter coffee, an uneasy thought crossed my mind. The small white pile of powder by Mitch's bedside table hadn't seemed important at the time, but now, I found myself questioning what the powdered granules might have been. If my boyfriend had been toying with illegal drugs, where had he got them from? Could there be a link between the drug dealers targeted by Chief Constable Moreton and Mitch's disappearance?

REBECCA

I ignored Jodi's pleas to join her on New Year's Eve for some wild fun. Instead I took the phone off the hook and fell into bed, relieved that the year was over.

In the dark, my mind whirled with possibilities of what might have happened to Mitch. Maybe he was in trouble, hiding from the police over some mistaken identity issue relating to a recreational use of cocaine. The newspaper article had spun my thoughts in all directions. Perhaps he was hiding from me, scared to tell me about his secret habit. He knew my aversion to using.



The following morning I set off early and arrived at the sumptuous offices of Baines and Hopkins Solicitors half an hour before the meeting time. I waited across the road in a small café and watched clients come and go. Oliver arrived some fifteen minutes later.

Crystal walked into the offices behind him, clutching the arm of a much younger man. The man certainly didn't possess Roger's elegance. Two other men followed behind. One of them tapped Crystal on the shoulder and hugged her tightly when she turned round. I waited until everyone had gone inside before I left the café and headed towards the offices.

Mr Baines Senior sat at the head of the table and looked up at the clock when I entered. It was ten minutes past ten.

'Sorry I'm late. Rebecca Carrington. I work at the gallery.'

The silent gathering nodded in unison with reverential muted greetings. Oliver raised his hand in my direction.

Mr Baines Senior opened proceedings by telling us that the wishes of the deceased which related to immediate family members would be dealt

with in a private session later. For now he wanted to read out a recently added addendum to Mr Roger Pennington's Last Will and Testament.

'To Oliver Moreton, a trusted and responsible employee, I leave the painting *Provence* by Herbert Flambert. This gift is given on the proviso that Mr Moreton signs a two-year contract to continue his employment with the gallery.'

The bequest was tied in, which we later learned, with other conditions. Crystal was forbidden from selling the gallery at any time in the future. It had been in Roger's family since the early twentieth century and he hadn't wanted to take the risk that it would be sold, with proceeds funding his estranged wife's future with her younger lover. That was what Oliver and I surmised.

'*The Mother and Child* sculpture I leave to Miss Rebecca Carrington. This is in lieu of her work at the gallery, her loyalty and her discretion. Miss Carrington must also sign a two-year contract to continue with her employment.'

The surprise gift certainly lifted my spirits. I knew its value. As I smiled across at Oliver, it hadn't yet occurred to me that my sculpture was double in value to his bequest.



After a short question and answer session with the solicitor, Oliver and I left and headed to the pub, leaving the rest of the family round the table. We were both light-headed and in shock from our unexpected windfalls. If Oliver felt aggrieved at my larger prize, he didn't use this particular moment to say so.

'Mitch and I have split up,' I blurted.

Oliver and I were celebrating our windfalls over a bottle of champagne, and the time seemed as good as any to ask a few questions. I was convinced Oliver knew more than he was letting on.

'Shit. I'm sorry. What happened? I haven't seen him for a while.'

'Neither have I. He seems to have disappeared and I wondered if you'd any idea where he was.'

Oliver sipped his drink, pausing a moment too long before he answered.

'I've no idea. I'm really sorry.'

He leant across and tried to take my hands. I pulled away, irked by what appeared to be an assumption that I'd been on the receiving end of rejection.

‘His flat has been cleared out and he hasn’t been in touch since Christmas Eve. Did you know there’d been a drug’s raid on Christmas morning? I see your dad was in charge. A seek and destroy mission, according to the papers.’

Oliver played for time and instead of answering straight away he asked for the menu. He used the fact that he’d skipped breakfast as an excuse for interrupting my flow. He poured out the last of the champagne before he spoke.

‘Yes, I saw that. Dad mentioned it in passing. Why do you bring it up?’

‘I’m worried it might have had something to do with Mitch’s disappearance. He must have left on Christmas morning or possibly the night before. I can’t help wondering if there’s a connection.’

Oliver kept his head buried in the menu and toyed with the choices. He didn’t look up. ‘I’ve no idea. I doubt the events are connected. Mitch didn’t do drugs, at least not that I’m aware of.’

Oliver was lying. He looked up and I could see it in his eyes.



While we waited for the bill, Oliver asked if I’d like a lift to the funeral the next day. He’d be happy to pick me up. Although I’d have preferred to make my own way there, I decided to accept. We needed to stay friends and I’d have to make an effort. Two more years working together was going to be a long time. But after our joint windfalls, it seemed churlish to refuse.

REBECCA

Although it was a funeral, I rose early. I decided I owed it to my dead boss to make an effort. The only black dress I owned was a flimsy cocktail number that hung at the back of the wardrobe and came out once a year. All I had to do was make sure my shoulders were covered. I washed my hair, which had grown several inches since my last cut, and let it hang loosely round my shoulders. Low-heeled court shoes completed the outfit. I was determined to do Roger Pennington proud. Oliver told me I looked beautiful when he collected me.

On our journey from Crouch End to Guildford we talked mainly about Roger, plans for the gallery and the weather. The sun shone as the small party bundled into the old medieval church where we listened to heartfelt readings from extended family members. In the absence of children, Roger's closest relations outside of Crystal's family were his two brothers. I'd met them only briefly when I first started at the gallery. Rob, the elder brother, who must have been in his early fifties, read a eulogy. He outlined in grave sentiment the sadness of a wasted life.

It was at the graveside that I noticed James, Roger's younger brother. A tentative butterfly fluttered in my stomach when he smiled across; a winsome smile with a hint of flirtation. He was as tall as Roger but with much more defined features. I kept my eyes down, aware of Oliver's ever-closer presence as he took my arm. It was a territorial gesture.



Once inside the local hostelry, everyone's mood lifted. As we all stood around the bar, immediate family introduced themselves to the mourners.

'Hi. I'm James. You must be Rebecca, Roger's right-hand woman.'

'Hi. Yes, I'm Rebecca. I'm so sorry about Roger.'

Oliver leant across and introduced himself. He was stuck fast to my side.

Something about James's confidence and arrogance reminded me of Mitch. James seemed undaunted by Oliver's presence and chatted easily about the gallery and fond memories of his brother.

'I'll pop over next week and we can go through the accounts. I'll give you a call. It was good to meet you both.' With that, James wandered off and mingled with the crowd.

Once out of earshot, Oliver was quick to belittle the entire family, spouting off under his breath about 'silver spoons' and entitlement. The alcohol had loosened his thoughts and his tongue. I decided it was time to go. I suggested we made a move as I wanted to get back before dark.



We didn't speak much on the drive home but when we reached my flat, Oliver asked, 'Why don't I pop up for a quick nightcap? It's been quite a day. Also I desperately need the loo.'

It was a rhetorical question as he was out of the car before I came up with an excuse. For some reason I still didn't want to appear rude. He locked the car and followed closely behind, waiting as I took the door key from my bag.

Sharing company, late at night, with people who weren't Mitch made things worse. It highlighted the sadness. Also I was feeling more and more uneasy around Oliver. I knew instinctively that he was using the turn of events to his advantage.

Once inside, he made himself at home, extracting a half-drunk bottle of wine from the fridge before dimming the already flickering lights. 'Here's to new beginnings!'

It was hard not to join in as Oliver was so upbeat and persistent. He was difficult to ignore and it seemed rude, after having accepted the lift, not to share a toast. I went into the bedroom to change into jogging pants and sweatshirt. I could hear my guest put on some music.

When he appeared at the door, glass in outstretched hand, I felt a wave of panic.

'Hey, I'll be out in a minute,' I said and tried to hide my naked breasts behind a flimsy camisole.

'No problem.' Oliver retreated to the lounge. Yet the damage was done and he'd crossed a line.

The problem with alcohol is that boundaries become ill-defined. I curled up on the sofa with Oliver slouched at one end, and after a couple of drinks gave into the haze of emotional turmoil. We listened to music, chatted about the Penningtons, our future and what we might do with our money. The differing value of our items was the elephant in the room but wasn't mentioned. Even Oliver didn't bring it up.

I must have fallen asleep around eleven. I remembered looking at the clock shortly before nine when we switched the television on to hear the latest weather report and I'd a vague recollection of Oliver snuggling in close, holding me tightly as he consoled me and dried away tears from my cheeks. I'd been telling him about Mitch.



I woke up in bed, wearing only a T-shirt. It was four in the morning and my head was pounding. I couldn't immediately register where I was, and froze when I saw Oliver's naked body next to me. I slipped out of the bed, grabbed my jogging bottoms which lay on the floor, and went to the bathroom and locked the door. I rifled the cabinet for tablets to help clear the fuzz and throbbing in my head. Disgust and disbelief engulfed me.

'Rebecca? Rebecca? Are you okay?' Oliver was outside the door, repeating my name.

As I heaved over the toilet bowl, my mind was in meltdown. What had happened? Why couldn't I remember? I wasn't prepared to ask Oliver if we'd had sex but the possibility of rape had taken root. I needed to get rid of him.

When I finally unlocked the door and came out, Oliver was up and dressed and was drinking from a large mug of strong coffee.

'Fancy one? The kettle's on.'

'No thanks.' I didn't look at him but went and picked up my sweatshirt which was on the back of the sofa, and pulled it over my head. I was shivering but perspiring at the same time.

'You don't look so good. Listen, I'll go. Maybe you should return to bed. Take a couple of paracetamol.' He moved towards me but stopped as I stepped backwards.

'I'm okay. I'll sleep it off. Let yourself out.' I went back to the bathroom, pulled the bolt across and waited. I cupped my ear to the door.

Oliver didn't linger. I heard the jangle of keys and knew he was leaving. 'Thanks for a great evening,' he called back. 'Hope you feel better soon.'

He didn't wait for an answer. He opened the front door and closed it gently behind him. Only then did my legs give way and I collapsed onto the icy bathroom tiles.

ARTHUR

Loss of control was possibly the worst thing about my abandonment. A desperate desire for Amber clung to me, clothed me in a cloak of self-loathing. My voyeuristic vigil continued all the way through until the New Year and with determined intent, I watched and waited.

Amber followed a very boring routine. I willed her lack of scintillating activity to douse the flames of passion but such was the inexplicable nature of my obsession that her normality made me want her more. She was no harlot.

At first I was thrilled that no late-night snapshots had captured the mystery caller on her doorstep but then I became increasingly angry when she didn't ring me, now that she was free and single again. I felt doubly rebuffed because she didn't want my shoulder to cry on.

It was an impulse decision, brought about by desperation and also by not a modicum of boredom, that made me pick up the phone on New Year's Eve. It must have been about seven and I knew Amber was at home alone. She hadn't yet drawn the curtains.

I watched her wander around aimlessly for over an hour as she poured herself a couple of glasses of wine, disappearing every so often into the bedroom and bathroom. My stomach lurched when I finally picked up the courage and dialled her number. I could see her as she spoke.

'Hi, Amber here.' She sounded upbeat. Perhaps she had plans for the evening but I was confident she had opted for a quiet night in. Neither of us was into wild parties.

'Hi. It's me,' I said. I wanted to see if she instantly knew who was on the other end of the line. It was a test.

'Arthur. Aren't you out? It's New Year's Eve. How are you?'

She was fiddling with a picture on the wall, making sure it was level. The Eiffel Tower in black and white. We'd bought it on a romantic mini-break together. It was only a cheap print but large enough to cover torn wallpaper and fingered stains.

'I'm well, thanks. It's a bit of a long shot,' I said, hesitant, 'but I'm at a loose end and thought my best friend might be around for a drink. If you're busy, don't worry.'

She wiped the top of the frame with her fingers and I had to jump back suddenly as she glanced out of the window.

'Perhaps a quick one wouldn't do any harm,' she said as she laid the picture on its side against the wall, manoeuvring it with her free hand. She took regular sips of wine in between the activity.

'Great. Shall I come over to yours or would you like to meet somewhere? What about The Woodman?' I'd wait until she disappeared for her shower. That would give me time to lock up and get round the corner without being seen.



I was already in the pub, sitting at the bar, when she arrived. It was nine fifteen. If I'd been vaguely upset that she hadn't rushed to meet me, getting there unfashionably early, my disappointment soon abated when she walked through the door.

It was like a first date, my stomach churned. I felt confident in that moment that things would turn out all right. They had to.

'Hi, Arthur.' She kissed me on my cheeks in the fashion of long-lost friends. I reminded myself that the charade of best friends was one I'd engineered. The tagline had lured her willingly to my side.

'You look lovely. Wine?'

'Yes please, just one. I've already had a glass,' she lied. She'd polished off the bottle. Her eyes sparkled.

'Seeing as it's New Year's Eve, perhaps we could treat ourselves to a glass of bubbly,' I suggested.

'It would be wasted on me as I'm going to get to bed before the clock chimes midnight.' She seemed melancholic, but her mood was hard to decipher.

'Killjoy! Remember last year?'

'How could I forget?' She laughed.

While I knocked back the wine, sensing that things were going according to plan, Amber brought up the subject of the airline tickets.

‘Have you made any plans yet?’ She was going to ask me to come away with her. I was euphoric, but not for long.

‘No. What about you?’ I waited and was about to take her hand, place her small delicate fingers between my own, when she made an announcement.

‘Yes. I’m going to Italy for a few days.’ Her lips were dry despite the drink. The room was hot, stifling and the noise swelled as the clock ticked and the evening passed.

‘Alone?’ Amber didn’t travel alone. She didn’t have the confidence to stroll through Rome or Milan, Tuscany or Puglia without a companion or a friend. Amber didn’t do casual conversation with strangers.

‘Yes, alone. Don’t sound so surprised.’

I certainly was no longer surprised by her lies. Amber had become duplicitous, two-faced, no longer the beautiful virginal girl of my dreams.



We left the pub around eleven. I walked Amber back to her door. Her insistence that she was fine on her own didn’t deter me. She never walked alone in the dark. I knew her so well.

‘A nightcap?’ she asked.

‘No, it’s fine. I can see you’re tired. Thanks for coming out.’

I was surprised by my self-control. She leant across and pecked me on the cheek. I didn’t reciprocate. Instead I smiled, lips upturned, closed. My eyes bored through to the back of her head.

‘Goodnight, Amber. Happy New Year!’



When Ted called me a few days later to ask if I’d seen his daughter, that she seemed to have disappeared, I told him truthfully that we’d shared a glass of wine on New Year’s Eve but I hadn’t seen her since. Not even through my own bedroom window.

Loss of control is man’s biggest fear. I’m not certain what we all want to control when I think about it logically, but perhaps it’s pure animal instinct, a sexual necessity that seeks domination over our partners. We don’t want to control our wild animal urges, rather we want to give vent to their baseness with gay abandon. We only want to control the appearance that this isn’t true. I for one was fed up with the pretence.

At that moment I wanted to punish Amber, make her pay for what she'd done to me. If I had been able to find her over the next few years, she wouldn't have been safe. Death would, most likely, have been the only option. Her death that is.

As it happened, over time, I worked out that a replacement love, a better and more beautiful Amber, would help heal the pain and bury my impotent fury. It took ten years for the replacement to arrive.

REBECCA

James Pennington just sort of happened. Oliver was off work the day James turned up out of the blue at the gallery. Still nervy, anxious, after the night of the funeral, I jumped when the bell rang.

‘Hi. Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. James Pennington. We met at the funeral.’

It had only been three days ago but seemed far longer.

‘Hi. Yes, I remember. Can I get you a coffee?’

At that moment the phone rang. James picked it up and handed it to me.

‘Hello, Pennington’s Art Gallery.’ The kettle whistled in the background and I saw James make himself at home in the kitchen. ‘Hello?’

Silence then the call was disconnected.

James returned with a steaming hot mug of coffee and sat down at my desk. ‘A wrong number?’

‘Yes. It’s been happening a lot lately.’

My mood lifted, not so much from James’s appearance as from the silent phone calls. Something told me it might be Mitch. It was hard not to be buoyed by the crumbs; a flimsy lifeline.

James invited me for lunch at his club in Mayfair. We left not long after his arrival as he wanted to eat early so he could beat the commuters on his way home. As I was locking up, the phone rang again. James waited to see if I was going to answer it but instead I raised my eyes to the heavens and followed him out into the street.



The Bar Club in Mayfair was filled with well-heeled gents doing business over champagne and fine wines. James ordered both the wine and the food, and assured me that the Menu of the Day was first class. As my

suave companion took charge, I surmised that everything in his life was most probably first class.

Sometimes we miss pivotal moments while we dwell on the minutiae of present dramas. This was one of those times. I suspect my casual acceptance of the attention and flattery over our first lunch together was the fuel that ignited my dead boss's brother's passion. We relaxed and chatted about everything. James loved opera, telling me about trips to the amphitheatre in Verona. He was a good skier, and spent his winters in Chamonix. Golf took him to Portugal; he played off a three handicap. His wife and children were given cursory mention but his suave and less-than-subtle flirtation worked. I'd been starved of attention for too long.

'I hope we can do this again,' he said as we got ready to leave.

'Yes. I'd like that.'

At the time I was still so trapped by futile feelings for Mitch I was totally unaware of the effect I was having on other people. If I thought James was merely interested in me as a pawn in the family business, I couldn't have been more wrong.

'I'll call soon,' he said, offering an outstretched hand once back outside. If the respectful gesture was meant to put me at my ease, the lingering grip hinted otherwise.

REBECCA

The red light was flashing on the answerphone when I got back to work. Following on from the two silent calls earlier, my heart skipped a beat.

‘Hi. Linda Stephens here. I got a message to call you. I’m home if you want to ring back.’

It took a moment to register who Linda Stephens was until I remembered she was a teacher who worked with Mitch. I thought she might be able to help so I redialled the number.

‘Hi. It’s Rebecca Carrington returning your call. Sorry, I was at lunch.’

‘No problem. You wanted to ask me something about Mitch?’

‘Yes. I wondered if you knew where he might be. We lost touch over Christmas and I need to give him back some of his things.’

‘No, I’m sorry. He left school at the end of term and I haven’t seen him since the Christmas party.’

‘Do you know anyone who might?’ I was on a roll.

‘Maybe he’s gone on holiday. Somewhere hot and sunny. Would you blame him? The weather’s ghastly.’

It was her next suggestion that threw me. It fed already-growing suspicions. ‘Why don’t you try his friend Oliver? I’m sure he’d know where he’s got to. They were planning a bender on Christmas Eve.’ I wasn’t sure how she knew Oliver but why didn’t I know he was meeting Mitch on Christmas Eve?

As I would have been on my way back up to Durham, it might have been an oversight. But now it felt more than a coincidence that neither Oliver nor my boyfriend had thought to tell me.

REBECCA

Friday evenings soon became a date in the diary with James. He would wait patiently for me in the hotel round the corner from the gallery.

I didn't suffer from guilt. It felt good to have fun and closeness with someone while my broken heart longed to mend. At first it seemed this might be possible.

I managed to keep Oliver at arm's length. Whenever he suggested an after-work drink, I panned him off with flippant excuses. I even glibly mentioned that mixing business with pleasure wasn't a good idea.

Fridays became my night with the girls. That's what I told Oliver, and James told his family that Friday was squash night; a game with the lads followed by a few beers. The subterfuge didn't bother me as I'd only Oliver to fool and I didn't give much thought to James's lies. They were his stories and he'd have to find a way to deal with any repercussions.



One Saturday morning, following on from one of our evenings together, I woke up to the pounding of my heart after a terrifying nightmare. But it wasn't my heart that had woken me; it was the door of my flat. I sat up and glanced at the clock. It was only nine and I remembered I hadn't got to bed until after two.

'Hold on. I'm coming.' My hair was sticking damply to my head and my nightdress was drenched in sweat. I threw on my bathrobe before I went to open the door. The postman usually left the post downstairs. Perhaps it was a parcel. I peered through the spyhole, jolted alert by the sight of my caller.

'Hi. Hope I didn't wake you.' It was Oliver, his face distorted through the glass. His mouth was wide like a guppy fish as he spoke directly to the

door.

I reluctantly opened up, releasing the safety chain after I'd pulled my robe tight.

'It's Saturday. I was asleep.'

He followed me into the lounge. My first hope was that perhaps he'd come with some news of Mitch.

'I was passing and wondered if you fancied grabbing breakfast. I guessed you'd be alone.' He scanned the flat, checking for telltale signs that someone might have stayed over.

'If you don't mind I'd rather not. I've got plans,' I lied.

'Go on. Just a quick bite to start the day? Then I'll leave you in peace. Promise.'

Without invitation, he sat down and splayed his mammoth body across the sofa. His feet were so large I had to move round them to get past. You couldn't hide from Oliver.

'If you go and let me get ready, I'll meet you at Joe's Café in the High Street. Give me half an hour.' It was the only way to get Oliver out of the flat.

I moved to the front door and opened it wide. I painted on a smile while he made his exit.

'Thirty minutes. Sounds like a plan,' he shouted over his shoulder.

This was the first time Oliver had come uninvited to my flat; turned up without warning. I needed to put him straight; tell him that I didn't like random callers and he should phone if he needed to speak to me. After the night of the funeral, I knew he couldn't be trusted.



Joe's Café was packed with early-morning market traders. Oliver stood when I walked in and pulled a chair out for me.

'Coffee? Tea? Full English? My treat.'

'Just tea and toast.'

Oliver waited patiently in the queue and all I could think of was how often Mitch and I had come here together. We used to buy one breakfast, ask for two plates and neatly halve the food. Mitch would dip his soldiers in the runny egg and pop one end in my mouth while chewing off the other in his own.

'Do you fancy doing something later? Maybe a film or get a takeaway and stay in?'

I'm not sure why I didn't scotch any ideas Oliver might have had then and there. Tell him the truth and that we'd never be more than friends and work colleagues. Instead I took the easy way out. I didn't feel up to confrontation. I'd put him straight at a later date, when I was more prepared.

'I'm sorry. I've already made other plans. Jodi and I are catching up.'

'I thought you did that on a Friday evening,' he said. The upturn of his lips looked like a snarl. He wasn't stupid. That's when I realised he knew what I did on a Friday evening.

REBECCA

Oliver's early morning visit had made me uneasy, and not a little scared. On the way back from breakfast I took a detour by way of the security shop, Boltons. Discussing double locks, window bolts and alarm systems gave me a sense of purpose. I needed to feel safe in my own home.

'I could pop over around six if you like. I can install the alarm then.' Nathan, the shop owner, was very accommodating but the exorbitant price seemed well worth it for peace of mind.

'Yes. That would be great.' The sooner the better. I jotted down my address.

I decided to take a walk through the back streets of Highgate Village afterwards; clear my head. The sun shone, high and bright in a cloudless sky as I meandered through the labyrinth of tiny streets. I passed a small detached cottage covered in ivy and with a front door glossed in garish red paint. A heavy polished brass knocker oozed homeliness and a bike was chained up against the wall.

Mitch had guessed the price correctly when we'd seen it. We imagined it as our future love nest. I'd been several thousand pounds too high, defining how utopian this small cottage had been in my mind.

The *For Sale* board only stayed up for a week but Mitch had promised me there would be plenty more cottages, every bit as perfect, when the time was right. I remember our kiss in front of the small wrought-iron gate. I'd savoured the moment, knowing for certain that such a home would indeed one day be ours. How could I have been that wrong? Or was I?



Nathan from the security shop arrived promptly at six. I spent the time after my stroll around the village giving the flat a spring clean. The

cupboards were dirty, smeared with several years of grease and grime. Love had led me to slovenliness while I wasted time, waiting and fretting, for the future to arrive.

‘Come in.’ I ushered Nathan inside, comforted by the sight of the steel toolbox, extension lead and step ladders.

‘Thanks. A bit difficult to find. You’re quite tucked away here.’

He took off his boots, setting them neatly outside the door. His big toe poked out from a worn left sock.

‘Coffee?’

‘Please. Three sugars, if that’s okay.’

I unwrapped a packet of custard creams, remnants of Mitch’s midnight demons.

‘You live here on your own?’

‘Yes. My boyfriend recently moved out.’

Nathan proceeded to drill holes, measure levels and began to secure my flat. He talked while he worked and drip-fed me his own potted relationship history.

‘Nadine, that’s my wife, has moved out too. Says she doesn’t love me anymore.’

‘I’m sorry.’ What else could I say?

‘Don’t be. It happens to the best of us. Work keeps me busy. What about your guy?’

We kept the conversation on a superficial level, commiserating with each other over our disastrous love lives. There was light relief opening up to a stranger.

‘Mitch. Mitch Dawson. He lived round the corner but I’m not really sure what went wrong.’

Then it happened again; a curve ball presented a totally unexpected revelation.

It was seven o’clock and Nathan was putting the last bolt in place. I offered him a glass of wine; the relaxed easy company felt good. He was about to start packing up his kit when he dropped his bombshell.

‘I did some work for a Mr Dawson. Yes, Mitch Dawson, I think it was. Not far from here. Winton Crescent, I think.’ At this point I stared down at a second hole which had appeared on Nathan’s other sock. The right big toe wiggled free from its confines. I was about to take a sip of my wine but hesitated and set the glass down before I spoke.

‘That must have been just before Christmas. Mitch said he’d had a new lock fitted.’

‘Yes. He was worried about burglaries. Apparently someone had tried to break in a couple of times. I tried to sell him an alarm but he thought that was a bit over the top. This wine’s good. French?’

My mind buzzed with the new information. Mitch hadn’t changed the locks to keep me out. He hadn’t tried to make my surprise appearances more difficult. Perhaps he really had been worried about break-ins. Perhaps I had been over neurotic, insecure. But then again, would he have shared his reasons with the locksmith?

‘Thanks for the drink. I’d better get off. Hope you feel safer now.’

As Nathan packed up, re-laced his boots and disappeared down into the street, a glimmer of hope peeked back through the clouds. The matter of the keys could have been one big misunderstanding. Why had I doubted Mitch so much? I still didn’t know what had happened, or what to believe, but I was starting to think my boyfriend’s disappearance might not have had anything to do with me after all.

REBECCA

It was early May when James announced that his wife and kids were going to France for a few days; to visit her mother apparently.

‘At last we can spend some quality time together,’ he said. He’d been waiting for this moment.

I arrived at the gallery early one morning with a small overnight bag.

‘Hi. Going somewhere nice?’ Oliver was collating accounts and glanced up when I entered.

‘You’re early,’ I said. I casually placed the small bag under my desk. ‘I’m going for a spa weekend with Jodi,’ I lied, as I hung my coat on the stand.

‘Lucky you. Sounds fun. I was going to ask if you fancied dinner but it looks as if I’ll have to wait.’ He pulled a sulky expression, using humour to bolster my belief that he was happy to be no more than friends, but it didn’t work. He was pretending. Although my affair with James deflected my more macabre thoughts away from Oliver, underneath the dormant volcano rumbled on.

‘Oh, by the way. The auction is set for 26 May at Sotheby’s. They’re doing the valuations shortly.’

We had never discussed the price discrepancy between our two bequests but by avoiding mention of it, I was suspicious that Oliver was peeved by the greater value of my sculpture over his painting. His silence spoke volumes.

Oliver went out at lunchtime and although I told him I’d be leaving early, I’d already decided to take a half day. I didn’t want to risk more awkward questions.



James was waiting patiently when I arrived. He was wearing a sports jacket and light chinos and at first I didn't recognise him without his dark suit. His hair had been washed and a strong smell of aftershave clung to him.

'Hi. You look lovely,' he said. His smile had a nervous edge to it.

'So do you.' I leant across and kissed him. He put his hands round my waist and let out a barely audible puff of air.

'One quick drink before we go.' He pulled me down and I noticed a small leather holdall under the table. I placed my own alongside; a guilty duo. James had already bought the wine and lifted the bottle to fill our glasses.

Although James was keen to get away, onto an outward-bound train, where the likelihood of meeting anyone familiar would decrease with each passing mile, a glass of wine would help us unwind. After a couple of large glasses of Chablis, we relaxed and the brown holdalls became less accusatory.

It was over James's shoulder, as he leant in to nibble my neck, that I saw him. The monster of a silhouette blocking the doorway. I frantically straightened my blouse and pushed my hair back from my eyes while James stood up.

Although not as tall as Oliver, James's air of confidence lent him stature. For a moment I thought Oliver was going to turn round and leave. He didn't.

'Hi, Oliver. What a coincidence meeting both of my employees in the same bar.' James was good. The two men shook hands. 'Would you like to join us for a drink?'

I nudged our bags further under the table.

'Hi. Jodi'll be here soon, so I'm not stopping.' If James wondered what I was talking about he didn't flinch.

It was Oliver who spoke next. 'No, it's okay. I'm not stopping either. I fancied a quick one for the road, that was all.'

Oliver summed up the situation well. He knew what was going on; he was no fool. Without a further word, he turned round and headed back out the way he'd come.



If we thought then that Oliver would play along, assist us in our sordid plans for a weekend tryst, how badly we were mistaken. The first inkling

about his intentions came as James and I were preparing to leave the hotel room when the phone rang. It was James' wife and from the end of the bed, I listened to the one-sided conversation.

‘Yes, the conference went well. A bit boring but aren’t they always? Did you have fun at your mother’s? When did you get back?’ Vague, breezy and controlled, that was James. ‘Oliver? From the gallery? Did he say what he wanted?’

I held my breath, scared to look at James’s expression.

‘No problem. I’ll call him when I get back.’ My companion had paled and I knew then it was time for us to call it a day.

REBECCA

My flat was eerily quiet when I put the key in the lock. There was no one around. It was about 7pm and the alarm which beeped on entry gave me small comfort. It reminded me of Oliver.

Everything about my bijou space felt sad and lonely, untouched, unloved. Perhaps it was time to move on. I unpacked my overnight bag and found a strange solace in the silence. The weekend had provided a temporary distraction, nothing more.

Later I soaked in a warm foamy bath and realised I must be making progress in rebuilding my life. It dawned on me that I hadn't bothered to check the answerphone. Perhaps I realised Mitch wasn't coming back. I had placed candles round the room which flickered in the gloaming. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply and luxuriated in the solitude.

The warm soapy water cleansed away the remnants of my deceit as well as the bodily fluids which belonged to someone else's partner. I wondered if I might have been more obsessive in my relationship with James if he hadn't been so keen. With a click of my fingers he would be there but this led me to be more critical. James had fed my ego and now I felt disappointment, rather than sadness, that I wasn't desperate to make another date in the diary. The fact he was cheating on his wife, with no apparent guilt, made criticism easier. I knew there was no future with James.

The phone rang and broke my reverie. It rang twice. I climbed out of the bath, wiped off the suds, wrapped a towel round my wet hair, and wandered through to the lounge. There were four messages flashing up on the answering machine.

'Hi. It's your mum. Just wondering where you are as we haven't heard from you. Are you still alive?' The question, with a touch of sarcasm, was

accusing.

A silent click. My heart skipped. Perhaps.

I shivered as I played the next message.

‘Hi. It’s Oliver. Hope you’d a good time with Jodi. Give me a call. Perhaps you fancy dinner one evening? Anyway catch you later.’ There was a long pause before he hung up. I heard his faint but steady breathing. My eyes darted towards the alarm sensor which flashed in the corner. It no longer seemed so protective.

The last message was from James.

‘Hi. It’s me. Hope you got back safely. See you Friday. Same time, same place. Love you.’ This was the first time James had said he loved me.

The declaration made me realise I needed to distance myself from what was happening. I decided the next weekend would be a good time to go home and see my parents. It would placate Mum and get me out of London for a few days. I’d leave on Friday after work and start back-pedalling, away from my married lover and from Oliver.

REBECCA

By the time the auction arrived, I had made the decision to leave both the gallery and England. Jodi's sister Kim had invited me to Australia and the time seemed right to make the move.

My *Mother and Child* sculpture had been valued at sixty thousand pounds. This would be more than enough to pay for tickets and give me choices if and when I did eventually come back.

Oliver and I met in a small bar opposite Sotheby's on the morning of the auction.

'What will you spend your money on?' he asked.

'I'm not sure. Maybe I'll get on the property ladder. You?'

'I fancy a holiday. Perhaps Thailand, South America. What say we go together? Take some time off. We could get cover.'

Delusions pertaining to our relationship still spurred him on. I didn't tell him my real plans. He'd learn after I'd gone. Instead I played along.

'Come on. Let's go and get rich.'

Oliver led me across the road and into the packed sale room. He chatted excitedly, like a small boy about to be let loose in a toy shop. While the lure of money fed his joviality before the sale, his mood dipped sharply when the gavel went down.

Our seats were close together and Oliver loomed large beside me. He skimmed my leg with his thigh and used the lack of space to lean in close and force contact. I could smell his rancid breath.

His lot came up first.

'Herbert Flambert,' announced the auctioneer. 'Where shall we start the bidding? Ten thousand?'

Oliver was sweating and I noticed sodden patches under his armpits as he hung his jacket over the back of his chair. He kept his head down as the price teased up to nineteen thousand pounds.

‘New bidder. We have twenty thousand pounds. Any advance? Going once, going twice, sold.’

Oliver glanced up, gave a wan smile and closed his catalogue. I looked back at the auctioneer. It was my turn.

‘Where shall we start this lot? *Mother and Child*. I can start the bidding at sixty thousand.’

My hands were clammy and a hot flush reddened my cheeks. I kept my eyes pinned on the rostrum. The wait was interminable. Oliver’s thigh had moved away.

‘Sixty-five thousand; seventy; seventy-five thousand...’ The numbers increased and I only dared breathe when the gavel finally went down. ‘One hundred and twenty thousand pounds.’

I nearly passed out with all the excitement but Oliver was ominously quiet. There was no instantaneous celebration.



We trudged in silence back to the tube station. Oliver didn’t even pretend. His twenty-thousand-pound windfall was no consolation for my greater fortune. Whereas real love relishes another’s success, Oliver was driven by motives far from noble. His darker side took even firmer root in the days following the auction.

REBECCA

I made up my mind to leave as soon as I had James's and Crystal's blessing. I gambled that they would release me from the terms of my contract and let me leave their employ early.

This meant keeping James close a while longer. I told him I wanted to leave the gallery but he didn't know that I was moving to the other side of the world. I spent the rest of the week making plans. My meagre belongings were put into storage and I made do with bed linen, a few mugs and plates and, what I termed 'my essentials' wardrobe. I padded round the bare flat, buoyed by a determination that things were about to change. All that was left to do was book a flight and pop home to see my parents one last time.

It was a Friday and, unbeknown to James, it would be our last Friday together. I locked up at work around five and headed for our usual meeting place. I felt decidedly uncluttered and light-headed as the future beckoned.

Mitch and I had made plans to travel the world, to backpack through Asia, scour the markets of Bangkok and then head for South America; take in the Amazon and Machu Picchu. Love had made us free or perhaps we were free spirits. I'm not sure which.

Although my trip down under might not have been the one of my dreams, for now the wide open spaces of Australia were exciting and it felt good to be moving on.



'Hola! Your wish is my command.' James waved the contract in the air. 'What's it worth?'

We sat at the same table we did every Friday. James had no idea how much things were about to change.

‘Thank you.’ I leant across and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. My gratitude was sincere. I took a deep breath.

‘Please don’t tell Oliver,’ he said. ‘Crystal is determined that at least one of you holds the fort until a replacement is found.’

‘Don’t worry. My lips are sealed.’ I brushed my fingers across my lips, zipping together our secret. I took James’s hand, squeezed it and let it come to rest on my thigh.

‘Shall we have a nightcap somewhere? The Savoy is round the corner and I’m not in a hurry.’

He moved his hand higher, felt me clench. Tawdriness clung to the end of our affair. If he expected a reward, payback for his consideration, he didn’t push.

‘A nightcap would be lovely. But a quick one. You know I don’t like the tube late at night.’

He seemed pleased that I didn’t rush off. Perhaps I misjudged his intentions or perhaps he wanted to protract the romance. Outside, in a heavy downpour, James hailed a taxi and paid five pounds for a hundred-meter ride. Mitch and I would have got soaked. I would have taken off my high heels, splashed and slopped through the puddles, shrieked in agony. Love did crazy things. Instead, James and I sat side by side in the taxi, dry and silent.



It was the last time James and I went anywhere together. Our time was up. The next night his world would fall apart.

REBECCA

I woke early on Saturday. It was only seven but I was on a mission. In one week's time I would be in Australia.

At last I could leave behind the apathy which had clung to me since Mitch's disappearance. I started to think of it rather as Mitch's departure. Perhaps he had deliberately left, bizarre circumstances forcing him away. He had packed all his possessions and fled. The more time that passed, the more I excused myself from blame.

We spend our entire lives waiting for something to happen. We plan for that special moment, that climax linked to love or achievement. We forget that other people have goals too and I never took into account my inclusion into someone else's plans.



I never asked Oliver about his hobbies. I was never really interested. I learned on that particular Saturday night that he was into photography.

He owned an Apple *QuickTake*, the latest model on the market compatible with his Apple Macintosh computer. He'd already stored images to his computer while I was thrilled with the idea of an instant-fix Polaroid snap.

I found this out when we went to dinner with his friends, Bob and Emily. Oliver didn't know this was to be the last time I saw him before I left for Australia. I didn't think it would do any harm when he phoned. It might help divert attention from my affair with James and it felt like the last piece of my leaving jigsaw.



Emily and Bob lived in a small flat in Finchley. Bob was a member of the rugby team and I'd met him a few times at the club.

I deliberately dressed down for the evening in casual trousers and loose-fitting shirt. My flat shoes were perhaps a mistake because, in hindsight, height might have afforded me an advantage.

‘How’s the photography going?’ Bob asked Oliver over coffee. The home-made carrot soup followed by beef stew and sherry trifle lay heavily on my stomach.

‘Very well, thanks. I’ve done some great shoots recently,’ Oliver said.

I remember his large hands that evening and their attempt at delicacy as he tried to grip the small coffee cup. I averted my eyes to stop from giggling. Mitch and I shared amazement at the size of Oliver’s extremities, likening his physique to that of the abominable snowman. In private we nicknamed him the Yeti.

‘What sort of photos?’ Emily asked.

‘People mainly, although I’ve done some wildlife. Birds. Rare birds.’ Oliver smiled at me. For a moment I sensed things were taking a strange turn. ‘My friend Mitch introduced me to the art of *twitching*. He taught me a thing or two about the rarer species. Did you know that, Rebecca?’

Oliver’s hand clamped over mine.

‘I didn’t know you were into bird watching.’ I felt sick. My stomach growled from the excesses. Bird watching was Mitch’s secret pleasure. Oliver’s interest had never been mentioned. I was missing something.

I excused myself and went to the bathroom. Small white hand towels sporting peach embroidered initials E and B hung neatly from a rail. I wet the back of my neck willing the nausea to abate and rubbed toothpaste round the inside of my mouth.

‘Are you okay?’

I jumped. Oliver rapped on the door.

‘Yes I’m fine. I’ll be out in a minute.’

The extractor fan whirred in the silence. I waited for Oliver to move away. I was desperate to leave, get home. Another couple of hours and I could banish Oliver from my life forever.



We left shortly after that. Oliver waited for me to speak.

‘I didn’t know you were into photography,’ I said as we approached the end of my road. It would soon all be over but something made me probe.

‘There’s probably quite a bit you don’t know about me. I’ve got some wonderful pictures I can show you some time.’ Oliver parked up and turned

off the engine. The headlights dulled.

‘I need the bathroom. Do you mind if I come up? Maybe a quick coffee.’

There are moments in time, moments we look back on and say, ‘if only’. This was one of those times. Whether Oliver would have accepted a rejection for a late-night coffee and a chance to use the bathroom will always haunt me. Perhaps I could have hopped out. I could have thanked him and said I was tired; another time perhaps.

He pounced on my hesitation, opened his door and before I knew it, was mounting the stairs behind me towards my flat. It was a snap decision to tell him I was redecorating the flat on the back of my windfall. He would otherwise be shocked at the barren interior and perhaps put two and two together; he mustn’t know I was leaving.

‘I see you’ve got an alarm. You didn’t tell me.’

I keyed in the combination, shielding the number code with my spare hand. Once inside, I set my bag on the coffee table and I noticed Oliver had placed a small leather case alongside. I wondered what it contained and suspected he didn’t like to leave valuables in the car.

‘It’s milk and two sugars? I should know by now.’ I spoke too loudly.

We drank our coffees while I sat atop the windowsill, glancing vacantly at the stars through the skylight. Conversation was uneasy.

‘When did you take up photography?’ I asked.

Oliver leant across and picked up his leather case. ‘As I said before, there’s a lot you don’t know about me.’ A lazy arrogant smile played on his lips. He opened the case and pulled out a couple of large brown envelopes.

‘Perhaps you’d like to see some of my work.’ He motioned for me to sit beside him on the sofa and patted the bare seat. He flicked biscuit crumbs onto the floor and dared me to take up his offer.

The light was on in the bathroom so I played for time by moving to turn it off. Perhaps that was the moment the chain slid across the front door of the flat. I can’t be sure.

I came and sat down on the sofa. Oliver handed me a black and white photograph from a small clutch in his hands. Time stood still as I looked at it. There was a woman, lying in bed, asleep. One of her feet poked out the side and her long blonde hair streamed across the pillow. It didn’t register at first what I was seeing.

‘Do you recognise her?’ The rain was steadily beating against the window and a full moon stared through the skylight. Oliver pushed my hand down and snapped, ‘Look closer. Go on. Take a good look.’

‘Where did you get these?’ There were several more images of the same woman squirming around in sleep. One showed a bare breast exposed to the lens.

It was like a nightmare; a nightmare when you wait for events to unravel, for the horrors to abate so you can wake up. The last picture showed Oliver next to the woman – me – stroking her hair, my hair, and beaming at the camera; victorious.

‘You bastard. How dare you? When did you take these?’

I grappled for the pictures, trying to wrest them from his grasp. He pinned me down and threw one leg over the top of me. I couldn’t move.

‘That’s not all. Let’s have a look through the other envelope before we decide which one’s the best.’ I squirmed under his weight. He flicked a couple more photos in front of my face.

Who was the woman with James? Why was he showing me James kissing some random person? They were on a railway platform, boarding a train, hand in hand. Through the train doors I could see they were kissing.

‘Let me up, you shitty bastard. Let me up.’ I screamed, kicking and thrashing with futile effort. His huge hand reached for his zip and the other hand ripped my trousers apart. A small button catapulted against the wall. My bladder emptied in fear but that only excited him further.

‘Oops. Wetting me already,’ he sneered as he released his manhood and pinned me down.

‘Mitch was impressed with the pictures. You’ll not see him again.’ Oliver’s breath came in rancid gasps and red wine bled from his stained lips. A caustic odour seeped from his pores and I prayed I would vomit. I screamed out until he covered my mouth with his arm.

‘I don’t think anyone’ll hear you,’ he spat. ‘The landlord passed us on the stairs on his way out. Remember?’

I could see the chain pulled across on the door but it was slightly ajar. I hadn’t released the Yale lock so the door hung loose, swaying on its hinges.

Oliver thrust into me and time stood still. I was trapped in a nightmare, unable to move; paralysed. I counted down from a thousand, willing the time to pass and for me to wake up. I would wake up soon. I always did.



It's hard to piece together, into any coherent timescale, what happened next. I must have awoken from the nightmare, jolted alert by the breaking of the chain. The door smashed back against the wall as semen from my assailant spurted over my face. I threw up at that moment; a minute too late. The intruder grabbed the long pole which opened the skylight and swung it hard across Oliver's back, skimming his skull with the hook.

I couldn't piece together what was happening. I saw a small familiar overnight bag atop the coffee table, alongside the mess of photographs. Someone had come to stay. I ran into my bedroom while the two men wrestled in the living room and opened my bedside drawer. I lifted out a wallet, my passport and a bank book. There was nothing else to take except a couple of pieces of jewellery and my car keys. I changed my ripped trousers for denim jeans and threw on a hooded sweatshirt, leaving my sodden underpants on the floor.



James had blood on his face, a broken nose, I learnt later. Oliver was screeching in pain like a wild animal from the hook that had caught his forehead. Neither man noticed me leave. Like a sleepwalker, I disappeared into the night. It was almost ten years before I saw either of them again.

REBECCA

Jodi let me stay, numb and traumatised, before I fled the country. I should have gone to the police but a misguided sense of loyalty to James and a deep-seated belief that it was all my own fault guaranteed my silence.

Jodi was there; a true friend. She held me together, anchored me to her loyalty.

‘If you want to go to the police, I’ll come. I’ll be with you every step of the way.’ It was never an option. I couldn’t blame someone else for something that was down to me. It took the next ten years for me to realise that I’d been an innocent victim of someone else’s warped and psychopathic nature.

‘There is one thing I’d like to do before I leave,’ I said.

Jodi came with me to the High Street. She understood when I stopped outside the first red stripy pole I spotted. Mitch used to say he was off to the stripy pole for a short back and sides. I walked in and requested the same. I had my hair shorn, spiked on top and shaved up the back.

That day was when I took control.

WINTER 2004

*A child's impotent silent suffering lives on,
long after adulthood has drawn a cloak
across the scars.*

*Pretence that all is well soon fades
and impotent rage follows in its wake.
Control is what will ease the pain.*

ARTHUR

Meeting her was fate. It was written in the stars. Perhaps the time was right. A perfect alignment of Pluto with Saturn and Uranus must have occurred above the zeniths on that particular day: 12 November 2004.

The date is forever etched in my memory. If future meetings were not always a coincidental colliding of souls, our first locking of eyes had been completely out of my hands. Rebecca was a gift from the gods.

I'd been using the gym in Muswell Hill as a place to escape my self-inflicted solitude. There was a healthy buzz about the place that sucked me in and lured me unwittingly onto the treadmills. I'd been a member for about six months when she appeared, as if by magic.

People watching had become a hobby but I soon moved on from Starbucks and the local coffee joints where idle customers had lost their thrall. I now preferred to mix with people working out; people with a sense of purpose in life.

After a leisurely round of the workout room, building up a minor sweat, I showered and went in to the café. I had brought a book with me, a comforting camouflage against intriguing glances from bored housewives. Any interest in their fit toned bodies was fleeting on my part. I was after something much more cerebral.

As I listened to vacuous self-serving conversations, minding my own business, she walked in. I glanced up from my book, *The Wrong Man*, a thriller to accessorise my image. I didn't read fiction as a rule, preferring biographies about purposeful lives. *The Wrong Man*, a second-rate shelf-filler, however, offered potential opening conversational gambits. I'd rehearsed a few rejoinders for inquisitive chat-up lines. Prepared, watchful, smart and extremely patient was my mantra.

I did a second take, the way they do in movies. I looked at her, glanced back to my book but my eyes kept returning. Amber was my first thought but this lady was much taller. She was blonde with shorter but more lustrous hair than my absentee girlfriend. With flawless skin, pale under a faint tan, she was both exotic and beautiful. Something about the way she walked caught my attention. She stood tall and erect yet I sensed an apprehension as she looked around the foyer. Was she waiting for someone? A husband, boyfriend perhaps?

I gripped my thriller and read. She glanced in my direction then turned away. She was on the lookout. She checked the windows, and then traced the ceiling with her gaze. It was if she was casing the joint. Perhaps she was an architect, I mused, congratulatory at my powers of perception.

All around was the buzz of activity, people coming and going. I took my bag off the spare seat beside me. I tempted the beauty with a few pleasant words and indicated the free seat but she seemed wary and slightly ill at ease. Instead she moved to the back of the room and sat on her own.

I picked up my kitbag, disappeared towards the car park, and waited.



Thirty minutes later she came out. I slouched down in my car which was parked some distance away. I was keen to find out how she had journeyed to the club. As she headed towards me, I pulled up my coat collar and yanked my black woollen spy hat over my ears. It felt good to be back in disguise. At last I had a purpose. The black thick-rimmed spectacles, with plain glass lens inserts, fitted nicely.

She walked past my vehicle, and on up the incline to the other side of the car park. I got out, zapped my car closed and followed some distance behind, making sure to keep a safe distance. At one point, I was forced to hop into the rank-smelling public toilets at the top of the incline when she suddenly stopped and turned round.

Silence hung in the fading afternoon light. When she set off again, I jogged to the top of the road, fearful I'd lost her. But then I saw her in the distance. We crossed the road in tandem, at an even pace, with less than twenty metres between us.

Then she disappeared. I panicked. I crossed the road to shelter from a persistent drizzle and ducked into the doorway of a chemist's shop; a sad little affair, I might add, in comparison to my former emporium. I looked around, floored at where she might have gone when suddenly I saw a light

switch on across the road. It shone in a little room one floor up. My mystery woman's silhouette was outlined in the window.

I lit a cigarette, bent over my lighter, aware that she'd looked out and might have seen me in the doorway. I was confident, however, that she wouldn't recognise me in my professional costume. I was such an expert spy.

REBECCA

The biting north-east wind sliced through my bones. My eyes smarted from the icy blast. I braced against the bitter chill, head bowed, and looked into the ground.

I wondered what was in the coffin. It certainly wasn't my father. He was long gone. My mother gripped my arm and leaned heavily against me in her misery. As I stared at the box I could see my father's face, puckered in sadness, lined with years of disappointment at not being able to fulfil his wife's dreams. Perhaps on that cold dank November morning my mother finally realised his worth but I found it hard to care. My father had been my idol, my mother the spoiler.

Jodi made the journey north for my father's funeral. She was delighted to have me back from down under. She was accompanied by her new partner, Taylor. Their new-found happiness offered me a lifeline, a way to start again.

'Come back to London,' Jodi said. We huddled together for warmth. 'Taylor and I've moved in together so my flat in Muswell Hill is free. It's waiting for you.'

She splayed one arm round Taylor, the other round me, as we walked back to the pub for the wake.

'My mother thinks I've come home to look after her.'

'It's your life. What would you do up here anyway? It's the back of beyond. Go on, come back. It'll be like old times.'

If I'd seriously considered coming home to be with my mother, the ramifications of such a move suddenly became too apparent. Family friends came and went, kissed my mother reverently on the cheeks and offered

condolences and insincere promises of help. She would suffocate me the way she had done Dad.



It was sometime in the late afternoon that I felt heat rise in my neck and sweat gather on my hairline. I excused myself from the dwindling party and headed for the bathroom. The panic attacks still came when least expected. The claustrophobia, grief and emotion had set my heart racing and stifled my breathing.

‘Here, deep breaths and try to stay calm. It’ll pass.’ Jodi had appeared and was stroking my hair, tucking stray strands behind my ears. It took me back to that fateful night.

‘I think it’s time you grew your hair again,’ she said as she turned off the torrent of cold water.

I looked at the stranger in the mirror, at the sun-tanned face, smooth except for the faintest creases around the eyes. The spiked hairstyle which had characterised my inner turmoil for the past few years was giving way to a softer image. But the turmoil persisted.

I hugged my friend and said, ‘Yes, I think I will, and I’ll take the flat if the offer still stands. I think I’ve been away long enough.’

‘Brilliant. The flat’s yours.’

Taylor crept up behind and encircled us in her grasp. Her toned arms pulled us together in a bond of female strength. Their friendship might get me through. After ten long years, I let myself be held and the tears flowed. It was time to re-enter the real world.

REBECCA

The first thing I did when I moved into my new flat in Muswell Hill was secure it against the outside world.

The flat, located on the first floor of the building, was split level and a stairwell led directly from the tiny hall up to the living area. The bareness of the white walls and faux wooden flooring offered up a blank canvas. It was a chance to put my stamp on new beginnings. A small skylight over the top of the staircase reminded me of my old flat. A faded green blind was stubbornly stuck across the opening but I wasn't yet prepared to unlock the view.

Through the window I saw a small white van park up outside. I gripped the balustrade and braced myself for letting a stranger into the flat. There was no other way.

'Hi. Thanks for coming so quickly. Here, I've written down a very specific list of things I need.'

Mr Harper from the security firm took the list and read it out loud.

'Front door bolted, top and bottom. Double mortise lock, Yale lock, safety chain. All windows to be alarmed, including the skylight, and all secured with safety catches. Do you really want two alarm keypads? It's only a small area, love.'

The windows were wide open and cold air tunnelled through the rooms. I'd opened them in advance, in case no one inside heard my screams; someone outside might. The buzz of traffic and beep of horns provided a companionable cacophony of sound.

'Sorry. I'm trying to air the flat. It's been empty for a few weeks,' I said by way of explanation. 'Yes. I'd like two keypads please. Also I need the alarm linked directly to the police station.'

Mr Harper politely asked if I'd like my quote sent by post or email.

'Sorry. I didn't realise there'd be a delay. I need it done today. Straight away.'

'Okay. But it'll not be cheap. Let me make a couple of calls.'

My instant acceptance of a vastly inflated price guaranteed Mr Harper would start immediately.

By teatime, the work was done.

REBECCA

The health club was only a short walk from the flat so I managed to put my paranoia to one side and venture down the hill. It was exactly one week since I'd moved in but I was still reluctant to go out, even into old familiar territory. The threat would always be there. However, my body craved exercise.

The health club entrance was hidden behind the all-night supermarket. It was neatly tucked alongside a terrace of 1930s red-brick houses. Inside the newly fitted glass entrance doors, a foyer buzzed with women in bright-coloured lycra. To the left of the reception desk was a dimly lit cafeteria.

'May I help you?'

'Yes. I'm interested in joining.'

'No problem. If you wait here, I'll get someone to show you round.'

The young receptionist thrust a new members' pack at me and paged through to someone in a back office.

'Take a seat in the café. Someone will be right with you.'

I didn't notice him at first. I was too caught up in trying to get through my ordeal. I had to stake out the joint, as I did with every new environment, and automatically checked for window openings, emergency stairwells and fire exits. The smallness of the entrance area, bunched tightly between the adjacent buildings, had tempted me to turn back.

Yet once inside, there was something casual, airy and peaceful about the health club which made me feel more confident. I might be able to blend in and get my body back in shape. Mental well-being should follow.

I wandered into the café and bought a hot mug of camomile tea.

Arthur told me, many times, that the first moment he saw me he was hooked. If I believed my wild dishevelled hair and dull grey training clothes

played down my beauty, I was wrong. He told me he'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

'Here, let me help you.' He pulled out a free chair next to him and offered to take my holdall. 'Arthur. Arthur Beck at your service.'

I didn't shake the outstretched hand. Instead I fiddled with the string of the teabag which had slithered to the bottom of the mug.

'Hi. Rebecca. Thanks but if you don't mind I'll sit at the back away from all the noise.' With a sideways glance, I indicated the gaggle of women beside him.

'I don't blame you,' he said.

I then took out my mobile phone, feigned an urgent incoming message, and walked to the far end of the room.

The receptionist suddenly appeared at my side and asked if I could come back later. They were currently very busy. She could book me in for an induction that evening.

'Yes. That'll be fine. I'll finish my tea and if it's okay I'll have a look around?'

'Of course. I'll see you at eight.'

After a few minutes, I saw Arthur stand and prepare to leave. I kept my eyes down, studied the brochure and looked up only after he'd gone.

ARTHUR

Insomnia is something that sort of inveigles its way into your life. I learnt to live on very little sleep; two or three hours at a time and would catch forty winks in my car at service stations all around the country.

After selling the pharmacy, I became a freelance travelling pharmaceutical salesman. My new career path offered plenty of flexibility and I liked to reach destinations in the early hours when traffic was at a minimum.

When I didn't have to travel, I would park my car opposite Rebecca's flat at night-time. I kept a beady vigil and monitored her movements which were logged meticulously in a notebook. I had to be certain she was single and not toying with my affections. I wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

My actions might have appeared a bit spooky or bizarre to more uptight individuals and Rebecca did eventually freak out when she discovered them. The violence of her reaction told me I might have hit a nerve. But I carried sympathy when I asked, calmly, if she had never been enticed to spy on a loved one. Perhaps she might have been tempted to drive past and look up at a lover's window? Catch them out or catch a glimpse? I thought Rebecca would have appreciated such commitment and dedication. Her use of the term *psychotic obsession* was a bit harsh.

One Saturday morning, early, I was jolted out of a peaceful reverie when I saw Rebecca leave her flat in jogging kit. My cover was nearly blown when a neighbour, a young unkempt man in his thirties, knocked on the car window.

'Hey. This is residents' parking. Do you mind finding somewhere else to sleep,' he shouted, indicating for me to roll down the window. Rebecca

looked round to see what was going on, while I tugged my hat low over my face.

‘Sorry. I’ll move on. No sweat,’ I mouthed without opening the window.

‘I’ve seen you before. Find somewhere else, you *perv*, or I’ll call the police,’ the guy yelled through the glass.

Someone behind was telling him to make a note of my number plate. For my part, I was more concerned that I’d lose sight of Rebecca than I was of neighbourhood rage. She was already moving at a steady pace along the high street. I revved up the engine, did a full three hundred and sixty, and nearly knocked over my accuser as I sped off.

When I drew alongside Rebecca, I slowed, then drove on past. I kept a clear view of her in my rear-view mirror. As she wasn’t carrying a kitbag I guessed she would probably be going to the park. I decided to go straight there. I was right.



Twenty minutes later, she arrived with another woman, by which time I was out of the car and had taken cover amongst the cluster of trees by the entrance. It was not yet eight o’clock.

Early-morning health fanatics jogged in the crisp bright air. The only other people about were parents with buggies and restless children, all headed for the swings. I followed the trail to the playground from where there was a good view of the lake circuit, and sat down.

I’m good with children. They trust me. I planned for Rebecca and me to have a big family. Although we would have to start straight away. She wasn’t getting any younger and there was a great temptation to hurry things along. However, I knew the need for caution. Pressure wouldn’t work. Patience and intellect would.

I saw the two children first, a boy and a girl. Pretty little things full of energy. They belted through the gate towards me. The father was by himself and he looked vaguely familiar.

‘Hi. You’ve got your hands full.’ I smiled.

‘Yes indeed. I don’t know where they get their energy from. Their poor mother’s still asleep.’

I’ve always thought of myself as substantially masculine, nothing feminine about my characteristics, but this guy was enormous. He was a giant, his huge hands encased in monstrous woollen gloves. He wasn’t unpleasant looking but quite scarily large; front row of the scrum, I guessed.

‘You got kids?’

‘No not yet but we’re working on it.’

‘Changes your life. Certainly changed mine. You’re tied. No longer time to call your own,’ the man said as he pushed the boy with one hand and the girl with the other. ‘Don’t get much sleep either. My wife takes sleeping pills to knock herself out.’

It was then that I remembered the face. Golders Green, the pharmacy; a few years ago I’d bottled up the diazepam myself. There was nothing wrong with my memory.

The girl pushed the boy off the swing and I moseyed on, wishing the father luck with his charges. That would be us one day but we would be here together, holding each other’s hands as well as those of our children.

I strolled over to the lake path, keeping well behind Rebecca who was up ahead. I saw the large gentleman and his two charges head back towards the car park. Then something very unsettling happened. Rebecca fell over; perhaps a sprained ankle. She slithered to the ground and for a second I nearly blew my cover and rushed across to pick her up and offer words of comfort. Her friend, joined by a small concerned group of walkers, stopped to help. I put my dark glasses on to shield my eyes from the sun and from danger of recognition.

Rebecca wasn’t looking in my direction. Her eye had caught sight of the father leaving the park. I knew this because she turned back to look at him a second time; then she collapsed. I’m intuitive, always have been. Rebecca knew the giant. I was certain and I felt that perhaps they shared an unsavoury history.

Okay. It was a rather outlandish summation but my mother always taught me to trust my instincts. The trip to the park had thrown up a piece of the jigsaw; the jigsaw that made up Rebecca Carrington. Her surname had been offered up to me by an indiscreet receptionist at the gym. If I was going to complete the puzzle, and capture her heart, I needed all the information at my fingertips. There was work to be done.

REBECCA

The sun came out, weak but determined and heralded a winter brightness which shone through my skylight. It was exactly two months since I'd moved in. After a couple of glasses of wine one night, I gathered the nerve to climb the flimsy stepladder and yank the green blind off. Dead moths and flies plummeted to earth, decaying remnants from a forgotten graveyard.

It was a Saturday. Jodi and Taylor had managed to persuade me to attend their one-year anniversary at the local pub. My regular fitness regime had armed me with renewed vigour and a welcome, though cautious, level of confidence. On Monday I had a couple of interviews lined up and felt at last that things were turning a corner.

I decided to forgo the treadmill and headed early for the park, clad in a navy hooded sweatshirt and shorts. Vanessa, who ran a clothes shop in Highgate Village, was limbering up when I got there.

'Rebecca? Oh my god! Long time no see.' She stared at me, not quite sure if she'd got it right. 'It must be almost ten years.'

'Yes, I left in May, ten years ago.' I jogged on the spot as Vanessa stretched out her calves and limbered up her back. She leant down and touched her toes and I felt a pang of envy at the long thick red hair which skimmed her trainers.

'Where in God's name have you been? I thought you'd died.' Her warm Irish directness mingled with the winter sun and sent a judder of contentment, if not happiness, through me. I swivelled my hips, skipped from side to side, and waited for her to straighten up again.

'Australia. I came back for my dad's funeral,' I said as I joined in with the muscle stretching.

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear about your dad, but it’s great to see you. There were all sorts of rumours when you left but let’s not get into those. I bet you’re sick of the gossip.’



We set off together, circuited the lake, and chatted about all the changes in the area, the unpredictability of the weather and bus lanes in Muswell Hill.

‘We’re like a couple of men, discussing the weather.’ Vanessa laughed before we grew silent from the exertion and fell into a steady rhythm side by side. It felt good to be in company and I realised how much I’d missed having some fun.

‘Where’re you living? You were in Crouch End?’ she asked. We had stopped for a breather on a park bench.

‘I’m in Jodi’s old flat over the deli in the High Street. Handy for pastries and cappuccinos. What about you?’

‘Living above the clothes shop. I couldn’t afford the commute so decided to live in. Did I see you at the gym the other day?’

‘Yes. I’ve started working out, trying to get fit again. Too many beers and barbecues in Darwin.’ We laughed and shared mundane chit-chat. Vanessa didn’t push me.

‘Perhaps we can go out one evening?’ she suggested. ‘I’m on my own again. Seamus left and disappeared when things got tough.’

She bent down to redo a shoelace. I sensed she didn’t want to explain but there was definitely comfort in a kindred failed relationship.

‘I’d like that. Pop round. I’ll give you my phone number when we finish.’

The lakeside was sparsely peopled with early morning dog walkers and young parents who had been up all night with colicky offspring. It was not yet nine when we reached the ‘Inn on the Park’.

‘Coffee? My treat,’ Vanessa asked as we slowed up.

The sky was cloudless and our breath made patterns in the frosty air but all at once the sun dipped behind the clouds and an icy spear stabbed at my heart. I couldn’t breathe; the pain intolerable. Vanessa panicked, told me to relax, take deep breaths and sit down.

I told her, in a rasping whisper, that it was a panic attack. I’d had them before. ‘It’ll pass. I’m sorry.’ I felt as if the episode was somehow my fault. I clung to the fence. Of course it would pass but where was it going to go?

Vanessa didn't look convinced.



A boisterous laugh in the distance cut through the air. Swings creaked under the weight of little bundles, forwards and backwards; backwards and forwards. The screech of unoiled hinges grated on the nerves. It felt as if we were in a Hitchcock movie, the background noises cranking up the sinister atmosphere. Next to the slides there was one of those whirly things that go round and round and I remembered the fear, as a child, that I would fall off. They spun so fast and the hard ground beckoned. The chatter from a couple of young mothers grew louder, exacerbated by the emptiness of the park.

The man was walking away, towards the car park. He held on to two small sets of hands. It was him. It was Oliver. I yanked my hooded top round my head, stuffed loose strands of hair inside, and pulled the cord tightly to hide my face. Vanessa was looking about for help, scared that I was having a freak heart attack, one of those random events that cut short healthy young lives. A group of people huddled round and a man took my pulse and made me sit down. He laid his coat on the frozen ground and covered me with a blanket. Over his shoulder I saw the hulk move away. He was swinging his small charges high in the air. Their squeals of delight blew back in my face.

'I'm fine. I must have overdone it,' I lied, huddling in against my knees which I hugged to my chest. 'It's so cold.' I shivered and my teeth chattered. I had to get home, away from prying eyes. I needed to breathe again.

'Come back with me. I'll make you a hot tea, lots of sugar,' Vanessa said, as the crowd reluctantly dispersed. The minor drama had offered temporary respite from their own worries.

'Do you mind if I go home? I need a hot bath. I feel much better now. But thanks.'

Vanessa accompanied me back the way we'd come. We walked slowly, and every so often she would touch me and mumble a concerned 'okay?'

'I'll pop round later if you like. Give me your phone number.'

I scribbled my number on the back of a train ticket which I found in my shorts.

'I'll be fine. Promise.' But this was a lie. I knew I wouldn't be fine. How could I be?

REBECCA

When I got back to the flat, I scrambled back up the flimsy ladder and covered the skylight with newspaper. I stuck sheets raggedly across, attaching them to the frame with reams of sticking tape.

I slithered back down and grabbed my 'to-do' list, pinned to the fridge door, and wrote down 'buy a new blind'. I drew across all the bolts, double-checked the window fixings, several times, and vigorously set about scrubbing the sweat from my body in a boiling hot shower.

All the violent emotions of the rape had reasserted claim over my fragile psyche and anger seethed through my pores. I lathered soap all over my limbs, scoured the skin with a nailbrush until the surface shone and the pain was unbearable. Thick froth globules collected in the shower tray, threatening my balance with their slippery sheen.

My body was rigid with a fury which I'd bottled up for so long. It had lain smothered by my blameless guilt. Now it felt as if crocodile jaws had snapped shut and trapped the anger inside. I had no idea how to let it out. It was one thing to imagine one's assailant's life carrying on, unaffected by their evil, but to see it with my own eyes had floored me.

Oliver had two children. No doubt there was a doting wife at home, a steady job and smugly earned peace of mind. It was the latter that I coveted most as this would never be mine.

There must be a way to get revenge, to settle old scores. I needed closure and as the hot water scalded my body, I knew I had to find a way.

ARTHUR

I enjoyed our first date. Patience, perseverance and not a small amount of guile helped me set up the rendezvous without the uncertainty or indignity of a straightforward request. I wasn't going to brook hesitation or outright rejection. That wasn't the game plan.

I had become adept at trailing some fifty paces behind her, nonchalantly stopping every so often to browse in shop windows. One time I had to hop into a late-night corner shop and buy some chewing gum when she paused to answer her phone. My confidence grew by the day and I enjoyed the subterfuge. It added spice to our relationship.

It was a dull damp evening and Rebecca had stopped outside a small pub not far from her flat. I knew the place as I'd been there a couple of times before. She hesitated and then went through the main entrance. I remembered there was separate access through a back door next to the toilets so I waited a couple of minutes, circuited the pub and made my way to the gents.

Inside one of the confined cubicles I took off my spy gear. I shoved my hat, gloves and dark glasses into a small rucksack I carried with me. I folded my mackintosh and pushed it in on top. Underneath the winter layers I was dressed and ready for such an occasion.

My best trousers, brown corduroys, and a smart cream and beige checked shirt, leant me a dapper appearance. The brown sweater, casually slung round my shoulders, added a relaxed homely touch. I combed my ever-so-slightly thinning hair and smoothed it down. With a last glance in the rusting mirror over the sink, I went out into the pub.

I settled at a table next to the back door and opened a book I'd brought with me. I looked engrossed and easy on my manufactured stage; and then

she spotted me. She came across and I feigned delight in the apparent coincidence.



After that it was plain sailing. The noise and crowds in the bar played into my hands. It wasn't difficult to prise her away from the party. I led her to a quiet romantic wine bar around the corner and she followed willingly.

I claimed this as our first date. We chatted with ease, like an old familiar married couple. It felt exquisite to be part of something real at last. Careful not to appear nosey, rather mildly interested, I managed to join up a few more pieces of her jigsaw. She had been in Australia for several years after working in an antique art gallery in London where her boss hanged himself. The wasted lengths some people will go to in the face of unrequited love.

I decided not to ask her out again straight away. If we were to be together forever I felt there was no rush. Anyway, we were now in a proper relationship and had shared the perfect date.

REBECCA

I no longer dressed in party glitz. I had ditched short skirts and tight tops in favour of plainer clothes.

Tonight I chose a black skirt which reached the knee and a simple white collarless blouse. Round my neck hung the small gold heart which Mitch had given me on our first anniversary together. It was engraved on the back with the words *forever mine*.

I fingered the chain and allowed myself a rare memory of my ex-boyfriend. I wondered if he would recognise me. I was thinner, sharper round the edges; but would he ever come back to find out?

There was no let-up from the November rain. Car and bus drivers drove through dirty puddles of water and sprayed rancid muck across the pavements. I clung to the shop windows, every so often touching the walls to ground myself. It was a struggle to pull my mind down from the heightened awareness and panic.

The Victoria pub was a fifteen-minute walk from the flat and I arrived early to help Jodi and Taylor prepare for their big night. The pub was festooned with *one year on* banners and helium balloons. Seventies rock music blasted out from tin speakers. The tackiness bore proud signature to their lesbian love.

‘Rebecca,’ whooped Taylor as she whisked away my coat and thrust a glass of cheap champagne into my hand.

Jodi appeared and whispered in my ear, ‘Not in party gear? Don’t worry we’ll pretend you’re in fancy dress.’ She winked. She understood.



After the rape, Jodi had taken me in, washed my face, run hot baths and watched over me like a hawk for the next few days. She organised taxis,

itineraries and fended off questions from my parents. I lay in a heap unable to move. I could never repay her. She shuffled me onto the flight to Hong Kong, my stopgap on the way to Australia. Other than Jodi and Oliver, no one else ever knew what had happened. And James, of course, whose own indiscretions had led him to the wrong place at the wrong time.



The pub was soon packed with an eclectic mix of people. Taylor worked in theatre, treading the boards in local productions, dreaming of her big break. The fancy dress theme allowed men to dress as ladies and vice versa. Although I felt uncomfortable, everyone looked strangely at ease. Jodi had nothing to prove. Apart from a silver stud in the side of her nose, she was the picture of middle-class respectability in jeans and T-shirt.

The noise drowned out meaningful conversation. I mooched around and suddenly spotted Arthur in a corner, sitting on his own.

‘That’s the guy from the gym, I think. Arthur something. How do you know him?’ I asked when Jodi appeared.

‘I don’t. He’s probably a regular who’s walked in off the street. I’m on the way to the bar. Same again?’ she yelled through the thumping background beat.

‘Okay. Just one more.’

Arthur was reading a book again, relaxed and bizarrely able to concentrate through the hubbub. I think he smiled from his shady corner, over the top of a pint of lager. I can’t be sure but that’s what I thought.

I dithered and tried in vain to control an overloaded bladder. I finally gave in and headed for the Ladies’. He was sitting beside the swing door. It never occurred to me that this was anything more than coincidence.

‘Hi,’ I said.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to walk past without some sort of acknowledgement. It was only a few days since I’d seen him and it would have been rude.

‘Rebecca. What a surprise!’ He stood up.

I told him I’d be back shortly and excused myself to find the toilet.

As I sat on the seat, I felt a faint tingle of excitement. In Australia I’d offered up storylines to hopeful Casanovas of dead fiancés and a need for space. Perhaps I was ready to try again. Arthur might be able to help.

When I returned, he suggested we escape the noise and chaos. I was only too glad to accept. I’d catch up with Jodi and Taylor in the morning.



Arthur and I ended up in a wine bar round the corner. It was empty apart from a lone couple drinking by the bar.

‘Wine bars are so yesterday,’ Arthur said, ‘but at least it’s quiet. White or red? I’m guessing you’re a white lady. Am I right?’

‘Yes, white please. A small glass.’

He ordered a bottle of fizzy water to help make it last. I told him I’d only be having the one. He said he liked restraint when it came to drink, especially in women. Later this struck me as odd. I wondered if his pleasure in my decorum might have something to do with control. However, I didn’t worry. Arthur turned out to be easy company, pleasantly attentive and quietly spoken. He was a good listener which helped me relax.

In the dimly lit environs of the wine bar we swapped stories. Arthur was well read and well travelled, if a tad boring. He made me laugh with anecdotes about his travels round the world. He had done *out of the way* places: Peru, Indonesia, Uganda and Alaska.

‘What do you do now?’ I asked.

‘I’m a pharmaceutical sales rep. I drive around the country and try to undercut and outmanoeuvre the large conglomerates by selling pills and potions from less well-known companies. There’s good money in it.’

Arthur’s wine glass remained half full. He told me he liked a clear head. It was hard not to compare the drink-fuelled sessions with Mitch. We had no such inhibitions. We drank far too much before tumbling into bed and making mad passionate love. Arthur was the opposite of spontaneous; but he was safe. This was important.

‘What about yourself? I haven’t seen you around before the other day at the gym.’ He watched me with a soft smile on his lips. His lips were thin, but defined; neither too wet nor too dry.

I told him about the gallery, about Roger’s suicide, my bequest and subsequent move to Australia. Arthur was adept at prising information out of me with short unemotional questions. He exuded genuine interest without ulterior motive. I didn’t mention James, Oliver or Mitch. They were my past and it felt good to be in the future.



An hour later, Arthur walked me back to the High Street. I said goodbye on the corner, not willing to let him know where I lived. He didn’t ask. He kissed me gently on the cheek and said he hoped to see me again soon. I

remember a faint disappointment that he hadn't at least tried to make another date.

Once inside my flat, I went to close the blinds and glanced down at the street below. In the shadows I could have sworn I saw Arthur shielding from the rain in a doorway across the road.

An eerie chill seeped through a gap in the wooden frame. It was hard to be certain from this far up and I couldn't see clearly through the downpour. I was probably mistaken. Arthur had told me he'd be getting the bus back up to Highgate. That was where he lived. Yet if he'd caught the bus on the High Street, it would have taken him in the opposite direction, away from my flat.

REBECCA

I had come full circle. I was back on the tube, heading into London and making the same journey I'd made every morning, ten years ago; the spring in my step, this time round, less pronounced.

West House Auctions was less than a mile from Pennington's Art Gallery. The auction house premises were larger, more modern than those of my previous workplace and were fronted by a huge expanse of glass. The receptionist asked me to wait in the foyer and less than five minutes later, the proprietor appeared.

'Hi. You must be Rebecca. Welcome to West House. I'm Marion Villiers.'

The manageress of the auction house extended her hand. She towered over me in skyscraper heels and wore a figure-hugging red dress. I thought of the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*.

'Come through.'

Marion led me upstairs to a private office. We settled on opposite sides of a large shiny topped table and the interview began.

After a few minutes, my prospective employer brought up the subject of Roger Pennington.

'I see you were working at Pennington's Art Gallery when he committed suicide. Tragic.' She scanned my CV as she tried to piece together my history.

'Why did you leave?'

'Roger left me a sculpture in his will. The money gave me a chance to travel the world, and I wasn't ready to settle down. Also, it wasn't the same after his death.' It wasn't a lie. I straightened my skirt, fiddling with the waistband. I was nervous. It was hard to relive the past.

‘I understand James, his brother, runs the place now. There was some talk of assault at the time. Against your co-worker I think?’

‘Yes, I heard. But I think the charges were dropped. I’d already left.’

I looked up at the ceiling, then at the ground; anything to avoid eye contact. I suspected Marion had me down as a liability, perhaps a manipulative pawn in the two men’s hearts.

‘I’m just curious.’ She seemed to sense my unease.

Fearing the worst, I was thrown by her next question.

‘Rebecca, when would you like to start? If you’d like the job, it’s yours.’ Marion stood, brushed down the side of her sheer dress with her hands. ‘If you need time, please don’t dither. Sales are getting busier by the day.’

Her smile was genuine. If she guessed at my past, it didn’t matter. As she collated the paperwork and pushed her chair back under the table, I took a deep breath and replied.

‘Yes. I’d love the job. Thank you.’



It was inevitable I’d make a detour home past my old place of work. It was a trip that had to be made. I walked past Harrods, not stopping to window-shop. I pulled my coat tighter and carried on. Black cabs and red buses squeezed past, cheek by jowl on the road while tourists and shoppers crowded the pavements. I realised then how much I’d missed London.

The side streets grew familiar. Haunting memories flooded back.

At exactly midday I reached the patisserie. Bright lights blazed over the displays of homemade sweetmeats. I glanced through the window, over the top of artificial snow sprayed into the corners. Dominique, her hair tucked neatly under her white cap, was busy with customers. It was as if time had stopped.

I paused when I reached the door to Pennington’s Art Gallery; to catch my breath. The *Open* sign faced outwards. I remembered Oliver playing with the sign, turning it to *Closed* when he knew we were alone. I glanced through the small pane of glass in the door.

At first I didn’t realise it was James. The man behind the desk looked smaller, shrunken, his hair completely grey. He was hunched over, engrossed in paperwork.

When I realised it was him I wondered if he would recognise me. My hair was short but softer round the edges with subtle highlights.

The bell tinkled. It was the same rickety bell. There was still a slight glitch as the door grated against the wooden floor. Oliver had promised to plane the door, make it glide.

James looked up. 'Good morning. Can I help you?'

I was shocked by his appearance. Money and breeding hadn't afforded him eternal youth. It wasn't until I unfolded my hood that he gasped.

'Rebecca? Oh my god. Is that you?' He gripped the top of his desk to steady himself. He looked shaken. I couldn't connect the broken figure in front of me with the James I remembered. Before I answered he got up, walked round and kissed me. His hands shook.

'Hi, James. Yes, it's me. I'm back. I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye. How are you?'

I took in the room, noted the new paintings, new sculptures. The back of the shop had been extended and Roger's room opened up. Over James's shoulder I noticed a small furniture display. Beside his desk leant a battered briefcase; a macabre replica of his dead brother's.

'All the better for seeing you. I can't believe it's really you.'

He stood with a faint stoop. I had fallen for his self-assurance, his ramrod back, and now wondered at the fickleness of illusion. I couldn't connect this man with my memories.

'Listen, I'll lock up. It's very quiet. What say we go for a bite of lunch?'

'Yes, I'd like that.'

'We've some catching up to do.'

He lifted his coat off the stand. I was certain he'd worn the same coat on our last outing. The velvet collar was tired, shabby, and the cuffs visibly frayed.

I stepped outside while he locked up. He then took my arm and led me back to the same place where we used to meet, every Friday evening.



I watched James request a bottle of Châteauneuf du Pape, 1973, from a bemused bartender and wondered if my perfect illusion of Mitch might also one day be broken. Perhaps then the past might finally be buried.

After small talk about London, Australia, and the weather, I picked up the courage to ask. 'What happened that night?'

'Where do you want me to start?'

'From the beginning. Your own beginning.'

The bar where we sat hadn't changed; only my perception. The lights were now dull, no longer romantic and the air was stale.

'I arrived home from work one evening, a few days after our weekend away. My wife was slumped in a chair and the kids were crying in the corner. I didn't have a clue what was going on. She held out an envelope. It was photographs.' He paused for breath. 'There was one of you and me boarding a train. Another one of us kissing on the platform. We were holding hands. We seemed so happy. I think that was the worst for her. She told the children that Daddy would be leaving, going somewhere far away and wouldn't be coming back.' He emptied his glass and offered me a top-up as an afterthought.

'It was a nightmare. My overnight bag had been thrown on the bed, along with a random selection of clothes. I begged her to listen, to let me talk. She wasn't interested. The photographs spoke for themselves. Oliver had sent them.'

'I'm so sorry.' I wasn't sure what for but I felt sad for the narrator. There wasn't much else I could say.

'I thought she would calm down, in time, be more rational and let me explain.'

I wondered what he'd hoped to explain. Perhaps he would have told her 'it meant nothing'. But he would have lied. The truth doesn't come easily to deceivers.

James ordered a second bottle of wine, clocking up an obscene bar bill. At least money worries weren't part of his equation.

'She threw my half-packed bag out the window like some wronged wife in an American movie.' A hint of a smile tried to lighten the mood. 'While turning up at your flat wasn't the cleverest of decisions, it seemed the most obvious place to be.'

He laid his hand on top of mine. 'Perhaps fate played a part,' he said, pushing back a strand of hair from my forehead. 'At least I gave you the chance to escape.'

'What happened after I left? I vaguely remember you cracking the skylight pole over Oliver's head.'

'I only managed to skim the edge of his skull before he lunged at me. I went to hospital with broken ribs. The police cautioned him but let him off with a warning. Rape wasn't mentioned.'

James looked down, sheepishly, guilty of something. Perhaps he would have felt better if he'd killed his assailant. 'You had left, disappeared, and when I realised you weren't coming back, it seemed easier to try to move on. I had my children to consider.'

James blew his nose and stared into the bottom of his glass.

'I understand. Don't worry. It's water under the bridge now,' I said. I was lying again. The pain would never go away. I withdrew my hand. 'They say what goes round, comes around. Oliver will pay. One day.'



We wandered out into the damp foggy afternoon air. James tried to take my hand.

'I'm with someone else but if I'd known you were coming back, I would have waited,' he said.

The sodden handkerchief which he stuffed back into his pocket told its own story.

My smile held nothing but pity. I felt sorry for James; that was all. As he made a weak pass in my direction, I stepped back.

'I'm sorry, James. But it's been good to see you, catch up. Bye and take care.'

I walked away, paused by the patisserie. I turned round, lifted my right hand and waved my fingers back at him. He was staring after me.

I thought that was the last I would see of James.

ARTHUR

I continued my surveillance, as my new girlfriend came and went. There was a thrill in watching her and, as Christmas loomed large, I felt confident there was no other man in her life.

The weekend before Christmas something very unsettling happened and prompted me to action. I had become too complacent while I waited for our consummation. At night I'd started to re-park my car, opposite Rebecca's flat in Muswell Hill, in the original lookout spot; the one with the raging residents. False number plates offered me a measure of comfort and control against the uptight assholes.

It was the early hours of one Sunday morning, around 2am. I'd been dozing off and on as I kept vigil. The streets were quiet, eerie, with only the occasional drunkard shattering the silence. It was impossible to miss the giant figure that suddenly emerged from the shadows. It looked like the mythical Yeti with its sloping gait and mammoth shoulders.

I sat upright, jolted from my complacency, as this monster dared to call at my lover's flat. He was clutching an envelope and rather than stick it through the letterbox, he carried on through the main entrance to the property, which must have been left open. I was right. She knew the weirdo. Couples share everything, yet she hadn't told me about this freak.

I'm not one for coincidence. I'm a planner, slow and methodical, and leave nothing to chance. I map the future with meticulous attention to detail. This takes time and patience. However, the appearance of the monster forced me to action. Rebecca's and my relationship needed to move forward. I wanted recognition as part of a couple, one with a future. My aim was to have this ticked off by Christmas. Rebecca would learn to trust me, tell me everything; all her secrets.



Christmas Eve set off a glorious chain of events which played into my hands.

Rebecca's mother, Hazel Carrington, was the key to my success. Trailing Rebecca to Kings Cross incognito was challenging. I didn't want to blow my cover until the time was right and this took subterfuge. It wouldn't have been too coincidental to bang into her on the tube. But that wasn't the plan. I needed to meet her somewhere else; somewhere she couldn't easily escape from with casual platitudes about seeing me soon.

The flat cap came right down over my eyes. It was a natty little purchase from a local fashion store; inexpensive but functional. It wasn't my usual type of hat so I rightly guessed that she wouldn't give me a second glance. We shared the hot stuffy compartment, Rebecca at one end and me at the other. Next year we'd sit in the middle, tight together, holding hands.

The train heaved and lurched under the weight of Christmas travellers. I hung on to the overhead strap and kept my face averted from her wandering gaze.

Rebecca alighted at Kings Cross and, sandwiched among the sweaty hoards, I was able to keep a safe distance behind. When she reached the information board, her eyes glanced my way a couple of times. She scanned the arrival times and then headed towards the platforms. I bought a newspaper from a kiosk and held it high. I must have looked ridiculous but it did the trick and hid my face.

Her mother was not at all like her. Hazel was frail, stooped, with an old person's forgettable characteristics. She clung to Rebecca's arm as her daughter dragged the suitcase along the walkway. From a distance I thought her mother was crying. However, Rebecca was purposeful. She wisely ignored the aged attention-seeker and walked steadily further away from my vantage point.

I scurried along the wall, snaking between the crowds, hopping sideways every so often to avoid collision. Her mother kept stopping, theatrically catching her breath in what appeared to be a ruse for attention. I must say Rebecca's patience was extremely impressive.

My chance came when they paused for a second and Rebecca pointed at the pub up ahead, The Horse and Pitcher. It was located at the far end of the station concourse, next to the underground entrance, and at the top of a long

flight of stairs. It was touch and go what their next step would be but I was pretty confident Rebecca would opt for a drink and respite from her mother's demands.

While my girlfriend struggled with the suitcase and her mother hobbled along behind, I hurried past and mounted the stairs, two at a time. It was exhilarating to pass so close by, unnoticed. Before they'd reached the top step, I'd already disrobed from my disguise and was sitting, pint in hand, near the pub entrance. Although I was breathing more heavily than usual, I was composed, my magician's carrier bag tucked neatly under the table.

'Hi. What a small world!'

After a moment's hesitation, Rebecca smiled. Although surprised, I could tell she was delighted to see me.

My enthusiastic considerations aimed at her mother were fated to be my secret weapon. I fired compliments thick and fast.

'This must be your sister,' I beamed.

Hazel would help me lead Rebecca to the altar, of that I was sure. Although it was nauseatingly difficult to ignore Hazel's ugly self-interest, with such a prize at stake it was worth the effort. I played a starring role.



The invitation to supper, a couple of days later, came as no real surprise. Everything went smoothly and Hazel worked hard to ensure that I would become an integral part of their family. Rebecca seemed to trust her mother's judgement, showing an offspring's uncanny and inherent belief in the omnipotence of one's parents. I suppose in her defence, I still think of my own mother as the Madonna.

After Christmas Day came and went, it was pretty much plain sailing. I was soon able to cut back on the undercover work. Our future was in the bag.

REBECCA

With Christmas around the corner, Jodi and Taylor decided I needed cheering up. On the Saturday before I was due to start my new job, we drove out to a garden centre on the outskirts of Barnet.

‘A real tree. That’s what you need.’ My friends forced me to join in as they sang Christmas carols. ‘Come on. Cheer up. Let’s have some fun.’

Memories belong to Christmas. Ghosts of Christmases past weren’t far away.

We parked the car and my friends led me through the expansive displays of tinsel and gaudy baubles. It was a bright crisp day and I remember my mood lifting.

‘Here, let’s go to Santa’s grotto. You’re never too old to sit on Santa’s lap.’

‘Jodi, don’t be ridiculous. We’d never be allowed in.’

‘Let’s sneak in then,’ Taylor said. ‘We’ll do a bit of shopping first.’

Jodi and Taylor slung glaring purple and pink tinsel round their necks.

‘Here, don’t be such a spoilsport.’ Jodi pushed my hair back and stuck a pair of reindeer antlers on my head. ‘That’s better.’

Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer blared out through the loudspeakers, flooding the centre with noise.

‘Come on. Let’s queue behind the kids. We can pretend they’re with us,’ said Taylor.

I’d no choice. I got pulled along and it felt good to let someone else make decisions. The magic of Christmas was stubbornly beating at the door. We slipped in behind a straggling line of feverish children. They were agog with excitement. Santa Claus was here.

Up ahead I watched two young children, a boy and a girl, jiggling from foot to foot. They looked alike, same height, both with frizzy brown hair. Twins most likely. They held on to their mother's hands, one on each side. The woman was pretty, medium height with blonde hair, dressed in a faux fur coat and matching hat. Her red lipstick glossed generous lips.

'Here will do. These kids are perfect camouflage.' Taylor and Jodi giggled like a couple of love-struck teenagers playing hooky from school.

We inched our way up towards the grotto.

'We know he's not real, Mum,' whispered the little girl to the lady with the bright lips. Her brother leant over and spoke quietly.

'Daddy told us we wouldn't meet the real Santa today. He only comes on Christmas Eve.'

I smiled at the conspiracy. I managed to catch the mother's fleeting comment before they disappeared behind the wall to collect their five-pound gifts. At the time it was funny.

'Please don't let on that it's your father. It'll ruin it for the other children.' She winked at her charges who scurried forward.

There was no way back. By the time we caught a glimpse of Santa it was too late. The chorus of *ho ho ho* stopped for a moment as Santa adjusted his belt. The excited young duo were already on their way, waving goodbye to their father and exiting on the other side.

'Ladies, aren't we a bit too old to sit on Santa's lap? I'll let you, this once, provided you've been good all year.' As he patted his lap, I lunged at Taylor.

It was the hands. They gave him away. Black hairs straggled through the ends of the fur-lined suit and his neck bulged to escape its tight confines. Oliver's eyes bore through me.

'I see we've got some really naughty girls here.'

I heard the voice through a fog. The background music had changed to *Jingle Bells*.

I stared through the eye slits of the tawdry costume and froze.

'Rebecca? Are you okay?'

'Come on. Join me on Santa's lap,' Taylor squealed.

I scrambled for the exit, buffering from side to side in the confined space. Behind me I could hear Taylor settle jovially on the proffered knee.

Jodi came after me, ignoring her partner's pleas not to be a spoilsport.

Outside I saw the fur-clad lady bundle the children into a large four by four. There was a red nose attached to the front bumper and a large red setter was panting in the back seat.

REBECCA

I woke around 2am. There was a strange smell in the flat. Christmas had come early.

My stocking hung over the fireplace, laden with small packages. The smell was of spruce and I braced against the discarded needles as they pierced my feet. Moonlight shone through the skylight and I wondered what had happened to the newspaper which I'd stuck across the frame. It must have fallen down. Perhaps that was how Santa had got in, through the skylight. Maybe I forgot to close it.

I couldn't find the pole. I couldn't see properly but knew I needed to get to the parcels and start opening my gifts. They wouldn't come out of the stocking easily and I started to sweat as I tugged the bright paper loose.

The smell was making me nauseous and I could hear a rapping sound coming from somewhere. The small red tightly bound box gleamed teasingly in front of me as I carefully undid the ribbon. I dropped the box as two round bloodied eyeballs rolled to the floor.



I leapt out of bed, alert and wide awake from the nightmare, and checked for eyeballs under the bed. I turned on all the lights and, dripping in sweat, went through to the bathroom to splash cold water over my face and neck.

I remembered the rapping noise in my dream and glanced over at the front door. The bolts, double locks and mortises were in place, the chain secured. I walked over to check all was as it should be and noticed a small white envelope on the doormat, with *Rebecca* handwritten on the front.

I ripped it open and read the message inside my first Christmas card.

Happy Christmas, Rebecca.

Great to see you're back. Must get together.

So much to catch up on.

Love, Oliver.

The picture was bland; a church silhouette covered in snow.

I slumped to the floor, sliding down against my heavily fortified entrance. Someone downstairs must have left the front door open by mistake, and Oliver had been right outside my flat. No amount of locks was going to secure my soul from the torture. I had come back to face my past head on, and the trial was only beginning.

REBECCA

I managed, somehow, to get myself ready for my new job on the Monday.

Rush hour, or ‘commuter hell’ as I called it, hadn’t abated in the past ten years. I sat cramped between the silent robots but found solace in the familiar anonymity. The Christmas buzz had begun to infiltrate the drab carriages, infusing the drudgery with a light relief; cautious smiles nudged through the tension.



The welcoming staff at West House Auctions drew me into their frantic work schedule. Marion didn’t waste time on niceties. She marched me through the offices and introduced me to the team members one at a time.

I spent my first day cataloguing items for the New Year sale. Concentration on making a good impression helped the time pass and before I realised it, five o’clock had come around.

‘Fancy joining us for a quick drink? We’re popping next door for a pint.’

Dylan Linton was tidying his desk, shuffling papers into a briefcase, when I walked by.

‘I’ll pass this time but thanks.’ I tightened the belt on my coat and said my goodbyes.

Keeping a distance from my work colleagues was a plan, weakly formulated, but one I meant to stick to, for the time being. There was a small drinks vending machine tucked behind the toilets and as I plied my spare change into the slot, I heard muted voices from the men’s room.

‘She’s a bit of all right. Wonder where she’s been all my life.’ It was Dylan’s voice. I heard the tinkle of water followed by a sudden violent blast

from the hand dryer which blocked out his colleague's response. Then the dryer stopped.

'Roger Pennington. Remember the guy who killed himself?'

The machine started up again and I rushed towards the exit. I heard a voice behind me as I reached the door.

'Hey, Rebecca, you forgot your water.'

Dylan must have lifted out the bottle of water which I'd left in the vending machine. I pretended not to hear and scurried on out into the cold night air.



Small events, unbidden comments and careless whispers can cause their own ripples. The stray gossip spiked in me a new determination. Perhaps I would otherwise have gone home, uncorked a bottle of wine and drunk myself into another night of fitful sleep.

Instead I headed for the gym with a hardened resolve to strengthen both my physique and sense of worth.

REBECCA

I bumped into Arthur regularly at the gym. Working out became part of my routine and I put down our meetings to coincidence; we were two people who shared similar daily timetables.

It was only on Christmas Eve that I started to question his random appearances. Events took a strange turn and I got pulled into what I later realised were his preordained plans for a future together. It happened because of how easily he inveigled his way into my mother's affections.

She arrived on the thirteen twenty train into Kings Cross on Christmas Eve. I watched her hobble off the train, weakly hauling a huge suitcase for her seven-day stay. I would tick off the days, hours and minutes until I could help her back onto the train. Childhood resentments lingered; the damage done.

Automatically I tidied my hair, pushing it back from my face and then stretched my skirt, determinedly towards my knees. It would give my mother two less things to criticise.

'Darling.' She quivered, opening her arms wide. Tears sprung to her eyes.

'Mum. Here, give me your case. What the heck have you got in here?'

I kissed her lined and powdered cheek. My role was one of carer rather than loving offspring. There was too much water under the bridge, too many sad memories.

'I need to get my breath back before we catch the tube. Maybe we could stop for a coffee, or perhaps something stronger.'

It seemed churlish to refuse and at the time, it felt like a good idea. The week ahead was going to drag. A brief interlude would help pass off some time.

We ambled toward the Horse and Pitcher pub. I struggled with the case and my mother struggled with the walk. Throngs of travellers were heading home for Christmas and a sense of purpose filled the air. Carols boomed out over the loudspeaker system, drowned out every few minutes by announcements of train delays.

I managed to lug the suitcase up the stairs while my mother wheezed along behind.

As we entered the pub, my mother untied her silk scarf and stuffed it into her heavy fur coat. 'Perhaps I could have a small sherry,' she said.

The room was dimly lit and soft wall lights provided an eerie glow to the faux Victorian carriages. Holly wreaths hung overhead; a token celebration of Christmas. Funeral rings, my mother called them.

Arthur was sitting in the corner, sipping a pint of beer. His head was bent over a newspaper and he looked like all the other travellers, whiling away a few hours on their journey home.

I wasn't sure what to do but Arthur made an easy move in our direction. He seemed surprised by our sudden appearance. I wasn't convinced.

'Rebecca. What a small world!' He folded his newspaper and tucked it neatly under his arm like a seasoned commuter; but he wasn't a seasoned commuter. He worked out of local premises a mile from his flat in Highgate. That was the story I remembered.

'Arthur, how weird.'

'Aren't you going to introduce me?' My mother fiddled with her hair in a bizarrely flirtatious manner and extended an arthritic hand in the stranger's direction.

'You must be Rebecca's sister,' Arthur joked. 'Here, let me buy you ladies a drink. I've a couple of hours to kill. What would you like?' He didn't flinch nor comment on the unlikelihood of the event.

'A sherry, a large one please.' My mother had perked up. A pink tinge brightened the deathly pallor. She ignored my meaningful stare which hinted at caution and uncertainty.

My mother wasn't going to pass up male company. Women bored her. Her twenty-year-old self rose spectacularly to the surface in a display of self-delusion. I watched on helplessly. Arthur ordered me a large glass of red wine, it was Christmas after all, and another beer for himself.

We settled tightly round the table, pinged our glasses together, and became locked in our own seasonal pantomime. I waited until my mother made a trip to the Ladies' before I spoke.

'What a coincidence. Do you come here often?' Light flirtation was aimed to put him at his ease and ferret out the truth.

'I'm on my way home to see my family. Well, my mother. She comes from Cambridge.' He smiled with familiar ease and for a moment I was ashamed of doubting that our meeting was more than coincidence. Arthur's plausibility was faultless.

'I leave it to the last possible moment before going home. Always have done. She's not an easy woman,' he said. Perhaps he'd read my own relationship with my mother, quickly and cleverly, and aimed at collusion.

Mum returned from the Ladies', bright blusher applied to her sunken cheeks. Pink lipstick outlined her thin lips, faint streaks seeping through the wrinkled tributaries. She was walking more upright, making a deliberate effort to straighten her ageing stoop.

'Arthur, are you married?' The large sherry was followed by another and I sat back and watched the developing camaraderie.

'Imagine, Arthur lives up the road from you.' This time my mother didn't miss my angry stare. I glowered at her, willing her to be quiet. I didn't want Arthur to know my address.

My mother took over the conversation. 'When are you coming back from Cambridge?'

I sat in silence.

Arthur winked at me. He was trying to win my trust.



How easily we are fooled by a smile, a kind word or a carefully timed action. Arthur checked departures on his phone and told us the fifteen thirty to Cambridge was leaving from platform four in fifteen minutes. I was comforted by facts. He was going to catch that train. I was certain.

As he got up to leave, my mother made the next move. She stepped in and saved us the embarrassment of skirting round our friendship any longer. 'Why don't we invite Arthur for dinner, before I go home? Perhaps I could rustle up a nice meal with the cold turkey,' she suggested.

'Sounds like a plan. I'd love that Mrs...?'

'Carrington. But call me Hazel please, Arthur.'

‘What a lovely young man. You’ve been keeping him well under wraps,’ she said as we watched him stride down the stairwell towards platform four.

‘I gave him your phone number. I hope you don’t mind. He seems too good to let go.’ My mother chuckled, the matchmaker, the picker of suitors, as she staggered to her feet.

We only had to wait three days for the call.

REBECCA

Claustrophobia, boredom and my mother's incessant one-sided monologues acted in his favour.

The three days which followed on from the meeting with Arthur dragged. Other than a brief outing to the Boxing Day sales, I was trapped inside the flat with Mum. By the time the phone call came, I put misgivings to one side in return for the chance of conversation involving subjects other than growing old.

My mother's weakened bones weren't quite so brittle after meeting Arthur. His flirtation and flattery had put a spring in her step. She compiled a shopping list for his visit, weighing him up as a potential son-in-law. I took the easy option and let her get on with it.

By 7.30pm the table was laid, the casserole simmering in the oven. I went to change, closing the bedroom door in a vain attempt at privacy. Only another three days with my house guest and I could get my life back.

The first real pangs of doubt hit me when the bell rang on the dot of eight. I didn't really know Arthur. While my mother's presence lent me a sense of bravado, I harboured niggling doubts. Who was he? Had he really been at Kings Cross by chance? Perhaps he'd been waiting for me at the gym, determinedly cycling until I turned up.

Arthur arrived, not a minute early, not a minute late. I thought he mightn't be able to locate the entrance for at least five or ten minutes as it was round the side of the building. There were four buzzers, each one linked to a different flat.

'Hi. Come in, Arthur. Lovely to see you. Yoo hoo. Rebecca. Arthur's here!' she yelled.

When I appeared, she was already pouring the drinks. Arthur had brought flowers for me; a dozen red roses. My mother nodded knowingly as she arranged them in a vase. Belgian truffles buttered up the cook.



‘Well, Arthur, what do you do for a living?’

The guest lounged back in his chair. While he complimented my mother on the food, I put on classical music in the background but I didn’t light any candles.

‘No candles tonight?’ My mother couldn’t help herself. She usually moaned about potential fire hazards every time I struck a match.

‘It’s good to see what you’re eating,’ I said. I kept the bright centre light on over the table. It was an incongruous accompaniment to the red roses which screamed from the sideboard.

‘I’m a pharmacist by trade. I used to own a chemist’s shop in Golders Green but now work freelance. I sell medicines for pharmaceutical companies to different health organisations. I travel a lot.’ Arthur’s smile showed off his small even white teeth. His thin lips were moist.

‘Sounds very highbrow,’ my mother simpered. ‘I used to be an actress.’

As they chatted, I learnt more about Arthur. He’s an only child. His father abandoned his mother when he was a small boy; seven or eight, I think he said. His mother never remarried but, until recently, was with a long-term partner, Ted. They used to spend a lot of time in Italy where Ted owned a small apartment overlooking the shores of Lake Trasimeno.

Arthur didn’t pry into my past. He asked casual non-probing questions. However, he seemed to know some things about me which I was certain I hadn’t told him.

‘You lived in Darwin, Rebecca. I’d love to go to Australia one day. It’s somewhere I’ve never been.’

Perhaps I had mentioned Australia but I was certain that Darwin had never come up. It must have been over snatched coffees at the gym that I told him I’d worked in an art gallery in Knightsbridge, but I couldn’t remember.

‘Roger Pennington hanged himself. I remember that,’ Arthur said. He sipped thoughtfully at his wine.

My mother interjected every so often in an endeavour to turn interest back in her direction. She reminisced over my father. ‘He was the love of

my life. We did everything together. I don't know what I'd have done if he'd run off with someone else.'

'That's the way it should be, Hazel. My mother and Ted lived in each other's pockets too.'

I wondered at Arthur's ability to always say the right thing; no hint of contrivance.



It was only towards the end of the evening that Arthur found my Achilles heel.

'Have you ever been married, Rebecca? I never thought to ask before,' he said.

'No she's never been married,' interrupted my mother. 'But she's had her heart broken. Remember that awful Mitch chap? He was a disaster.'

NEW YEAR 2005

REBECCA

The panic attack hit, unbidden, without warning. The cosy warmth of the cinema had morphed into a red-hot furnace, its heat suffocating. My heart pounded in my chest and drummed in my ears. The darkness no longer offered a balm to the outside world. I struggled to stand, desperately battling to unwind Arthur's tentacles from my shoulders.

'I need some air. I feel woozy,' I whispered as I pushed him back down onto his seat. I needed to be alone, to think. 'Give me ten minutes.'

Arthur stood, to audible groans from the people behind. He was stubborn, determined to follow. I forced myself to pucker my lips in a kiss, assuring him I'd be back, and staggered over the limbs stretched out across my path; tree roots teasing me to trip. A concerned usherette led me to the foyer and offered me a random seat when she witnessed my distress. I didn't sit down but instead went outside. The air was bitter and shocked me back to the present.

Mitch was here. He was in the cinema. Ten years of memories flooded back; abandonment, loss, rape, Australia and even Arthur vied for prominence. I felt I was drowning as I gagged for air.

'Rebecca.' It was Arthur. 'Are you okay?' I knew in that one instance that the charade of Arthur and I was over. He had become like an irritant on my skin.

'I'm fine. I got a bit too hot. I need the loo.'

Pushing his persistent arms away took all of my strength. I battled past, back inside, to find the toilets. I didn't know what to do.

I was aware of Arthur watching me. He seemed unusually flustered. Decency made me turn round and proffer a token smile. I didn't want him to take the blame for my distress.



I came back out into the foyer as if in a fog. The lights were going up in the cinema and I could hear music as the credits rolled. The muted chatter grew louder as the audience gathered up their belongings and headed towards the exits.

Sometimes we don't know what to do. Carefully drawn-up plans of practised speeches would be *gone with the wind* had I ever bothered to rehearse. I hadn't, because I was resigned that you weren't coming back; that I would never see you again.

As you strolled out into the foyer, unfolding your jacket and knotting your cream cashmere scarf against the cold, I gripped the wall, and hesitated. Then I walked forward, slowly, as if floating in a dream.

'Mitch.'

'Rebecca.'

Your eyes were the same, dark and dangerous but something else. Perhaps a hint of sadness had seeped through their windows. Time stood still as we took each other in. We moved to one side and I watched a small pretty lady tap your arm and say she'd be back in a moment. She needed the loo. Arthur was nowhere to be seen.

'Now isn't a good time to talk. Take my number. Call me. We need to meet.' The desperation in your voice was balm to my thumping heart. You scribbled your number on the back of a ticket and I shoved it into my pocket. The breaking of the enigma code was within my grasp.



After what seemed like an eternity, I watched you walk out with your companion, into the darkness and out of view. I thought of Captain Oates. 'I am going outside and may be some time.' I smiled, deep in my soul, as I knew you were coming back. It had been a long time but my future was about to begin again.

Arthur suddenly reappeared, looking very pale. He had fallen silent and I was worried that he had seen Mitch and me talking. Perhaps he had put two and two together. But he didn't ask.

'You're looking better,' he said. 'The colour is back in your cheeks.'

I thought he was sulking because he didn't take my hand or smother me with wet kisses. Rather he wandered along, subdued, beside me. It was hard to contain my euphoria which I desperately needed to share with someone. I leant across and planted a kiss on Arthur's cheek, and said, 'Thank you.'

ARTHUR

Victory was nigh and control well within my grasp. Rebecca was playing along to my tune, a slow and subtle melody of practised skill. Late February offered a chance of earlier than anticipated success.

My new routine involved Rebecca's name scribbled on every diary page. Mondays we talked on the phone after she got home from work, tired and exhausted. I suppose I didn't need to verify this by my increasingly sporadic late-night visits to her flat but the plan was to continue the vigilance until we were living together. Cautious to the end was my motto.

On a Wednesday she would cook me dinner at her flat and I would leave around eleven. We shared work stories mainly. I avoided the temptation of inveigling past histories from my girlfriend knowing that in time all would be revealed. Friday or Saturday night teased me with possibilities of the jackpot. I had waited patiently for the invitation. I was prepared to wait a lot longer but an unexpected tearful episode lent a helping hand.



After supper one evening, my girlfriend started to cry. She sobbed intently, drowning the top of my shirt with her tears. She said there was no real reason. It was just 'things'. There was a sense of sadness and resignation about her.

I didn't push or pry too deeply but simply asked if she'd like me to stay. I'd be happy with the sofa. She took my hand and led me into her bedroom where she patted the sheets. I slipped in beside her, the most natural thing in the world. At last she was mine.

'*Gone with the Wind* is on at the new cinema in Barnet at the weekend. Do you fancy going?'

It was the Monday night after ‘consummation Saturday’ as I referred to *the* event. There was a slight pause before she answered; nothing sinister.

‘Yes, that sounds nice. Something different,’ she said. Perhaps it was paranoia but I sensed her lack of enthusiasm. Something different wasn’t the best choice of words.

‘I know it’s your favourite. Friday or Saturday? Name the day and I’ll get the tickets.’

‘Saturday would be nice as I’m going to see Jodi and Taylor on Friday.’

It wasn’t the time to discuss her girlfriends, both in the unsuitable choice of companions but, more importantly, I wouldn’t be cast aside much longer in favour of girly outings to the pub with lesbian freaks.

I ticked off the hours until Saturday, popping round at midnight each night to make sure Rebecca was safely tucked up in bed. All went according to plan. As I mellowed, I thought perhaps I should meet her friends next time rather than letting her go out alone.



The cinema was packed. I would have preferred an evening in front of the television sharing popcorn for two, cocooned from intruders. Rebecca was quiet, slightly offhand, but I tried not to overanalyse things as we settled down in front of the screen.

‘I need to get out. I don’t feel too well,’ Rebecca announced towards the end of the film. She seemed to be having a panic attack, her breath rasping, or perhaps it was asthma.

I was happy to leave as romantic films leave me cold. ‘I’ll come with you,’ I said and stood up.

I’m not sure why she so vehemently pushed me down. A wave of anger threatened confrontation. I let her go, waited five minutes, and followed. The rancid stench of stale drink and sickly confectionery aggravated my mood. Popcorn littered my route to the foyer.

At first I couldn’t find her. For one awful moment I thought she’d gone home, without me. A searing red-hot rage shot through me and I struggled for control. Then I spotted her pink jumper. She was outside in the freezing cold.

I watched from a distance. She looked odd. Something was up. She was breathing more easily but was still agitating. Something had happened. I knew because I’d been watching her for so long. I joined her on the pavement.

‘Come in. You’ll catch your death. What’s up? Are you okay?’

She pushed me aside, flapping her arms against me. She needed the Ladies’. An attendant was watching and smiled at me as Rebecca headed for the toilets. It was a sympathetic smile, but sarcastic and invasive. I sidled towards the popcorn kiosk and took up a sentry position opposite the toilet entrance, and waited for Rebecca to reappear. Perhaps she was throwing up, projectile vomiting of the sickly treats which we’d been force-fed.



The unexpected rarely provides a complete shock, not to me anyway. I am always prepared, armoured against the most bizarre of occurrences. However, when the lights came on in the cinema and the seething mass of humanity spilled out through the swing doors, I clutched the pillar. My eyelids opened and closed rapidly, with an uncontrolled twitch. I stood like a statue with moving arms. My left hand undid the top button on my coat, a minor innocuous action to confirm my sanity.

It was over ten years since Amber had left. Perhaps I should have pestered Ted more for the address of his place in Italy and followed her there but I stayed put. I bade my time. Revenge would come later. I always knew she would be back and I would have my chance.

Amber looked smaller and much less pretty than I remembered. For one minute I took my eye off Rebecca who seemed to have banged into Amber’s companion. I watched my petite ex-girlfriend disappear into the Ladies’.

‘Hi, I’m much better. Sorry. I hope I didn’t ruin your evening.’ Rebecca was back. Perhaps it was my imagination, but she seemed over excited, exuberant almost. A fleeting thought that she had taken a happy pill crossed my mind but I no longer wanted to talk.

I told her she was looking better, then said, ‘Let’s go home.’ I put my arm, more loosely than of late, round her waist and we wandered outside. She kissed me, tenderly, albeit on the cheek, and said ‘thank you’.

REBECCA

The passage of time seems to vary with each new event. A minute can drag like a year and in another instance, a different set of circumstances, a year flies past. A whole decade later, I was petrified of going back, to when seconds defined my life.

When I fell in love with Mitch, you, the first time, I was like a prisoner of my own making. I counted the minutes, one at a time, until the hour of our arranged tryst came round. I would set off, relieved and over-excited to consummate the longings that filled my being. You were like a drug. I craved the fix like a heroin addict.

When you disappeared, time became the enemy from whom there was no escape. Misery and time were linked. They gripped me in their vice. I was naïve to suspect that the obsessive feelings of desire could be transferred easily to another suitor.

I called the ten years that had passed my *acceptance decade*. I had reined in the natural passions and buried the libidinal longings that raged within. I began to accept the aching emptiness believing that the illusion of *forever after love* was purely a ruse to aid procreation; nothing more. It sucked us in and spat us out.



I put the tatty piece of card with your scribbled phone number in my bedside drawer, pulling it out every so often to look at it. Each time my stomach flipped with old familiar longing.

I waited one week and one day, ticking off the seconds, minutes and hours until I could wait no longer. At last I picked up the phone.

You answered after one ring.



We arranged to meet in Highgate, The Spaniards Inn, at eight the next night. I tried to quell the excitement when you told me to name the time and the place. You'd be there. Hope toyed dangerously with my emotions.

It was a Monday night so I spoke to Arthur, as usual, telling him I was getting an early night. He hadn't been as intense since the cinema trip, phoning less often and within a much-less-regimented time frame. However, he was far from my mind as I set off for my date with destiny.

Being late was a last-ditch attempt at holding on to a modicum of self-respect. I drove round and round the pub at least half a dozen times so that I would be at least fifteen minutes late. An extra fifteen minutes on top of the ten years seemed risible but it was a vital fifteen minutes in the passage of time; in the passage of my time.



You were there, two glasses of white wine in front of you, with a plate of peanuts, salted, alongside. I pushed past the customers at the bar, weaving through the old familiar space to reach you. The past decade melted away. Everything was as it used to be.

'Rebecca,' was all you said. You stood up and kissed me, gently near my lips and then impulsively hugged me, pulling me tight. Of course you were wearing the aftershave I'd bought you. A new bottle, I guessed. The scent took my breath away.

'Mitch.' Perhaps we didn't need to say any more. Perhaps there was no need.

You handed me my glass, Sauvignon Blanc, our favourite. It tasted delicate, aromatic and like nectar. We chinked glasses, holding the receptacles by the stems to hear the chime, crisp and celebratory.

'You look gorgeous.'

You smiled deep into my eyes with the same effortless charm. You were even more handsome than I remembered, if that was possible. Age had afforded you character wrinkles, faint but distinct at the corners of your eyes; the deep brown eyes which still melted my heart.

'Love the haircut,' you said.

'You haven't changed at all,' was a safe rejoinder.

The wine slipped down and fed our courage. You went to the bar, relieved, I suspected, to escape the intensity of the moment. I recalled all those times I'd watched you order drinks; flirting with bar staff, and joking

easily with customers. I remembered the pangs of jealousy as you freely shared yourself.

‘Ten years is a long time,’ you said when you returned. ‘Where are you living now?’

We exchanged innocuous details. You lived in Barnet, in a rented flat but had been in Italy until six months ago, teaching and learning the language; eating too much pasta and drinking expensive Barolos. Where had I been?

Australia seemed distant enough and a bizarre pride that I’d managed alone in such a far-off place fuelled my storytelling. Ayres Rock, the Great Barrier Reef and the Sydney Opera House all got a mention. Perhaps we had never been honest, never done more than skirt around the surface of each other’s souls.

Around ten, we decided to go into the village and have a meal; Italian, of course. It would provide an interlude to our unfolding drama.



‘Mitch, what happened? Tell me.’ The wait was over.

‘I never meant to leave. Not for good. I did something bad and had to get away.’ A slight hesitation as you cast your eyes downwards.

The instinct to hold, comfort and entwine my body with yours was unbearable. ‘I got into drugs. It started off innocently enough, a few snorts of cocaine with the lads from the rugby club but before I realised, it had spiralled out of control.’ You watched me, waiting for comment. I stayed silent. I had nothing to say.

‘It was coming up to Christmas and some of the lads came over to the flat, bringing supplies with them. All lads together.’ You tried to smile, gritting your teeth and willing me not to judge you too harshly. You drank steadily. Perhaps I’d never understood addictive personalities until that moment. We shared the characteristics.

‘We had a fun evening; no girls, I promise. You were the only one for me in those days.’ You stalled. ‘Still are.’

‘Was Oliver involved? Did he “do” these evenings?’ Churlish, hurt and angry, I wanted the truth.

‘Yes. He knew people who could get the drugs. He got me into it, like he got me into you.’

‘Go on.’

‘This guy, Zach, a headbanger, was bad news. Front row of the scrum, no one dared confront him. He was a heavy user, always looking for the next fix and a regular dealer. Oliver told me to watch him. The party was a few days before Christmas and you were out with Jodi. Things got heavy and Zach was boasting about his contacts and throwing around bags of the white stuff.’

The mention of Oliver made me anxious. I was sweating. Neither of us ate much as we toyed with the spaghetti.

‘Anyway, on the night before Christmas Eve... remember, you said you were leaving that evening to go home?... I got a panic call from Oliver around five o’clock. The drug squad were doing an impromptu raid on properties in our area over Christmas and Zach’s operation was at the top of the hit list. Oliver’s father was Chief Constable Moreton, remember?’

It all sounded unreal, like a bad dream. I was an outsider listening to a story about drug running, cops and robbers. You stretched your hand across, seeking mine and willed me to understand. The wine clouded my thoughts. I let you carry on.

‘Zach had hidden his stash of cocaine in various places and Oliver had a tip off that a large quantity had been smuggled into my flat on the evening of the lads’ party. I needed to find it and if not, get out and fast. Otherwise I was looking at a long stretch.’ Oliver, of course, had played the loyal friend.

‘I searched high and low and found nothing. I even pulled up floorboards. Can you imagine Mr Perkins’ face when he discovered his precious flat ransacked?’ You tried to make light of it. For you it was a long time ago but it felt like yesterday to me.

‘Anyway, I wasn’t prepared to hang around and find out. I couldn’t tell you. I knew how you hated drugs and I wasn’t prepared to lose you. I decided to disappear, clear out the flat and leave for a short while; until Oliver gave me the green light to return.’

‘It never came, did it?’

‘What?’

‘The green light.’ I felt the bile rise as the storyline unfolded. The drink made me reckless. I wanted to scream, smash the glass, and hit you hard across the face. I needed to scratch your flawless cheeks until they bled.

‘Who was she, Mitch? The girl you went away with. I saw her in the window, helping you pack. You thought I’d gone to Durham but I waited until Christmas Eve and I popped round to see you.’

I didn't tell you of my suspicions after you left a message on my answerphone when you knew I wouldn't be at home. I didn't mention the instinctive distrust that had been brewing the weeks before your disappearance, nor my neurotic spying outside your flat. There was no point. I needed the full story and reminded myself I'd done nothing wrong.

'That was Amber. She was a primary school teacher at the pre-prep department where I worked. Oliver introduced us. He thought she was a lot like you. She was nothing like you.' You moved your hand back over mine, willing me to listen, not to interrupt and to understand. You needed me to believe you.

'I had a fling with her, once, a few months previously. It was a drunken one-night stand which Oliver instigated. I went along on a double date to keep him company. I always felt guilty at having snatched you from under his nose and I kept trying to make it up to him. Back then I thought he was a good friend.'

I looked at my watch. It was eleven and the bistro was empty apart from us. A window had been opened and a distinct chill wafted through the room. The background music had been turned off. We had to leave. I needed to leave, feel the full force of the frozen night air on my face. I didn't want to hear any more.



We strolled through Highgate, and left our cars at the pub. We walked in silence, side by side, as we sobered up. Perhaps it was fate that led us through the cobbled back streets, along quiet leafy cul-de-sacs past the expensively priced residences of young high-flyers. You took my hand, threaded your fingers through mine, until we reached our cottage. There was a *For Sale* sign up again in the front garden but with a *Sold* sticker plastered across the board. The cloudless sky was bright and stars twinkled in the galaxies. For that one moment in time, none of it mattered. We stopped outside the cottage and faced each other.

'Shhh. No more,' I said. 'Not now. Let this be a special moment in time. It can wait.'

You pulled me close, wrapped me inside your coat, kissing first my cheek and then my lips. It had been a long wait.

Nothing yet everything had changed.

ARTHUR

Perhaps I'd fooled myself into believing Amber was dead. I played make-believe that she had died, some sudden and violent demise. Perhaps she had fallen under a train or drowned in the ocean. She liked to swim, to battle the waves and tease the force to drag her under.

My flat became an incident room. It was cathartic to pin up photos of Amber, Rebecca and the mystery men, my love rivals, on the wall to help devise a plan. I made notes beside the characters, clues to help analyse behavioural patterns. An old photo of me, taken by my mother when I turned twenty-one, was pinned at the top of the collage. I was the mastermind, the controller of hearts.



As I planned the future, I was transported back to my dark den in the roof space. I remembered how I used to watch my mother's visitors through the spyhole. I would fight back the urge to leap out and slam a cricket bat down on someone's head.

At first it was Connor's dad, followed not long after by Mr Horton, one of our neighbours, but then I gave up on names until they all morphed into one. They became a common enemy usurping my mother's love. Of course, I was now mature enough to realise that my mother had played an active part in the treachery, as Amber had done. A cricket bat would not be subtle enough, I mused. That was kids' stuff. I would concoct a plan; an adult's revenge. Someone had to pay. I would carry on as normal, using banality as my plotter's disguise.

Rebecca was still my future, my perfect bride, but I had to be certain that she wouldn't turn out like Amber; a selfish thoughtless whore.

After *Cinema Saturday* (neatly labelled as *Incident No. 1* on my wall), I carried on as normal. I phoned Rebecca on Monday, asked all the pertinent questions: was she feeling better? How was work? Was she ready to tackle her first auction? What about dinner on Wednesday, as usual? Perhaps it could be my treat, a local restaurant?

I decided not to mention her coming round to my flat. I wanted her to believe that this was down to respect. I meant for her to feel safe and unthreatened by expectations which might arise. It was only as I surveyed my domain that I realised an invitation was further away than ever. The walls of my nerve centre might have made her question my sanity. I would eventually take down the pictures, notes and scribbling; but only once our future was secure.



Rebecca seemed different when I picked her up. She was relaxed, less edgy and more loving than of late.

‘Have you been drinking?’ I asked as she leaned over to kiss me in a rare show of affection.

‘No. I’m happy. Isn’t that allowed?’

‘Did the auction go well? You’ll soon be up on the rostrum,’ I said.

To contemplate that her high spirits might be down to anything other than work was unthinkable. I’d kept up my vigil and was confident no man was involved. I was certain.

A rare smug moment of self-belief made me lift her up and swing her round, twice. I let myself be sucked into a spontaneous display of gaiety. We talked about work, present and past, and I used the mood of relaxation and apparent trust to delve deeper. It was time to build on the bones of my master plan and fill in the remaining gaps of Rebecca’s past. There would be no skeletons in our closets.

The wine loosened her tongue and names materialised out of nowhere; as if by magic. She seemed, for once, mellow in my company.

‘James Pennington. He was the brother of my dead boss. I told you about Roger? He hanged himself when his wife went off with a younger man.’ I wasn’t happy at her flippancy and it took me by surprise when she smiled. She seemed to be belittling the misery.

‘You had an affair? That was risqué.’ A rhetorical question masked my horror.

‘It wasn’t an affair, as such. We were just good friends. We were both in a place where we needed an outlet, someone to talk to,’ she continued. Keep calm and carry on. Act normal and pretend you didn’t hear and didn’t see.

‘You’re not shocked, surely?’ She was mocking. I was aghast at the sudden mention of a third person who might be linked to her upbeat mood.

‘No, of course not. We all have a past.’ I smiled in assurance.

‘Go on then; what about you? There must have been other ladies. Anyone serious?’ I didn’t like the way she flicked her hair back, flirtatiously. It was a mannerism of affectation, a strange spontaneous tic linked to the unknown.

‘No one really. A usual first love but it sort of fizzled out.’ I watched Rebecca for signs of pity. I wasn’t the sort to warrant jealous outbursts but pity would have been a vicious taunt.

However, a gold star would be added alongside Rebecca’s photo, I decided, when she asked quietly, ‘What was her name?’ Perhaps she had known all along. Perhaps she had been jealous. Maybe that would explain her reticence. How perfect would that have been?

‘Amber,’ I said.



James Pennington’s name was added to the board. I cut out from a magazine a picture of a minor celebrity, an actor with short black neatly cropped hair, and pasted it beside the other characters. This would have to do until I got a genuine photograph of this bit player.

It wasn’t too difficult to find out where Amber was now living. Although Ted had finally ditched my prematurely ageing mother in favour of a young Italian housekeeper, he was my obvious first port of call. I was confident he would let me make casual contact with his daughter after such a long time. Ten years was proof enough that I was no stalker, rather an old friend interested in a catch-up. Time can be used to advantage if one has patience and guile. These were my forte.

REBECCA

The memories of our reunion, however brief and unconsummated, filled me with euphoria for days afterwards. Every minute took on a magical quality. My senses woke from a deep slumber and anything seemed possible.

Mitch made me promise to phone him the next day but I decided to take it slowly, make him wait. He didn't have my phone number or my address so, for now, all the cards were in my hands.

If I didn't stay late at work cataloguing items for an auction, I jogged round the park every evening. Life had meaning again and I was filled with renewed hope. I cleaned the flat from top to bottom and even managed to be civil to Arthur. I would tell him soon that we were over and gently break off our relationship.

I savoured the days before I finally picked up the phone. I decided to risk the Saturday night tease, testing your intent. Time had killed off the innocent ebullience of youth and replaced it with not a small measure of cunning. I needn't have worried. You were free on Saturday.

I concocted a feeble storyline for Arthur. Women's problems, I said. He'd become tetchy recently, albeit in his bland *unwilling to cause a scene* sort of way, when I mentioned nights out with the girls. His silent response was accusatory. His throw away *whatever* made me err on the side of caution. I'd talk to him, as usual, on Monday evening and meet up with him on Wednesday. Our routine had become tedious and when I picked up the courage, I'd knock it on the head once and for all. Arthur was not for me. Perhaps I'd write to him and explain it all in a letter.



I drove to Barnet where you were now living. We'd arranged to meet in a small pub near Hadley Highstone. Your car was already in the car park, a reconditioned orange MG Midget. I smiled comparing its panache with Arthur's dull maroon Ford estate which he used to transport drug supplies round the country.

It's hard to explain the longing in my heart, the anticipated climax to years of waiting. Tonight, however, there was more work to be done. I needed to hear the end of the story and see if my head would allow my heart free rein to let you back in. Having found you again after so long, I suspect that even if I couldn't justify a less than plausible storyline, I wouldn't have been able to let you go. Deep down I suspected you knew this but I had to make you wonder.

'Just like old times,' was always going to be your opening gambit. The drinks were again on the table, time having been swept aside like a pesky fly.

'Not quite,' I said with the merest upturn of my lips. 'There's been a lot of water under the bridge.' I felt an overwhelming urge to be quiet, touch you, run my fingers through your unkempt curls and wrap my arms around your neck, to forgo the questions.

It was as if we were alone; the only two people left on the planet. There was a faint buzz of conversation from other customers, but it seemed far off. The lights were dim, a yellow glow enveloped us, and sleepy music played in the background.

'You're still so beautiful,' you said as you leant in close. You smelt the same.

'What happened after you left? Where did you go?'

'I went to Italy. Amber's father has a small villa on the borders of Umbria and Tuscany, near Lake Trasimeno. It was so beautiful. I want to take you one day.' You made it sound so easy. You took a sip of your lager, licking foam from your lips.

'Why didn't you call? Didn't you care?' All the years of anger, hurt and misery collided in that one minute. 'You bastard. While I was crying my eyes out, desperately trying to find out where you were, you were living it up in some Italian paradise with a fancy woman.' I heard my voice rise from the abyss. People looked round as I swatted your hand away.

'It wasn't like that. Let me finish. Please. Amber was a means to an end, nothing more. I had to get away. It was all so rushed, so last minute, and I

was shit scared. I used her. There was nothing between us. I was still in love with you.'

I waited.

There was a huddle of men round the bar. A spontaneous outburst of laughter erupted as the landlord added the punchline to some joke. I thought back to the rugby club; the men-only affairs.

'I kept trying to pick up the courage to speak to you, to explain. I phoned lots of times, listened to your voice but put the phone down again.'

I remembered so well rushing to the phone, willing it to be you, desperate to hear your voice and to know that you were okay and that you were thinking of me.

'Oliver phoned me every few days to fill me in. He told me you were fine but not really asking about me. It wasn't long before he told me you seemed to be moving on. He said he'd let me know when it was safe to come back. The police were still looking for me so I decided to stay put.' You emptied your glass, downing the lager in one swig. 'Same again?'

I nodded, lips pursed, willing the end to come but knowing there was more.

You joined the men at the bar, gently pushing forward; an outsider in the *men-only* club. You were wearing light brown slacks, Italian, finely cut with sharp defined creases down the front. A fine cream woollen jumper was tied round your shoulders, loosely knotted in a fashion statement and slung over a white linen shirt. You told me you weren't vain; you just loved clothes. It was a weakness, you said. I disagreed. You were vain in the extreme. You always knew what you had and how to use it.

How easily you could suck me back in with fabricated storylines and throwaway charm. Your looks would ensure the conquest. If you told me you'd done time for murder, at that very moment I'd have forgiven you; so I could hold you one more time, lie with you and feel you close. I was petrified. My only trump card was that you might feel the same way.

'When were you going to tell me about Oliver? It's your turn now.' Your mood changed from self-confessional to accusatory. Your expression set as you sat back down. I clutched my glass in both hands.

'What do you want to know?'

'That you slept with him barely a month after I'd gone.' It might have been my imagination but a very fine film of tears covered your eyes, faint but defined.

‘I didn’t do any such thing. Where did you get that from? Oliver?’

‘Yes. I’ve the photos to prove it. He sent me pictures of you sleeping alongside him and a note explaining you were together; an item. He was sorry but he’d taken his chances and hoped I’d understand. That was why I didn’t come back.’

The room swam, the yellow lights moving up and down against the black and white images of Hadley Wood and High Barnet which lined the walls; photos of a past age. My breathing became laboured. The log fire was like a furnace as it hissed and spat. The men by the bar laughed; conspirators with their backs to us.

‘So you don’t deny it?’ You moved sideways, away from me, dislodging your thigh so we were no longer touching.

‘He raped me. I never slept with him. He took those pictures one night after I passed out. I think he drugged me.’

I had to get out, away from the heat and accusations. Stale beer, phoney merriment and claustrophobia pushed me from my seat. I struggled round the wooden benches to get outside. You followed, breaking into a run when you realised I was moving faster and faster down the High Road towards Barnet. I jogged at first then broke into a sprint until I could push no harder.

I collapsed on the green and slithered down against a tree, onto wet grass and debris. Wooden twigs and dead leaves broke my fall, seeping their wetness through my trousers. I cried and cried for wasted years, for loss of innocence, loss of love, and the violation of my body. The list was endless and only crying could block the memories, for now. Cathartic sobs, wild and free, flowed while you stood over me, immobile and impotent, willing me to stop.



The cold winter air was damp and biting. A lady walked past with her dog, a black Labrador puppy. She averted her eyes. Young lovers, she would surmise; a lovers’ tiff. The dog bounded over to me, hesitated, calming its excited tail and scampered away again. It wasn’t interested in misery. A walk was too precious to waste.

It seemed like an eternity before I stood up, drained of emotion, and allowed myself to be held. I collapsed onto your chest, sucking in deeply, inhaling your odour, your scent, your essence.

‘Come back with me. We can walk from here to my flat.’ It would have been that simple. Fate stepped in when I suggested, ‘Let’s pick our cars up

first. It'll be easier in the morning.'

If we had carried on walking straight to your flat, I might not have noticed the maroon estate car. It was parked a few metres up the road on the same side as the pub car park. The last three letters were ARB. Arthur Rowland Beck.

ARTHUR

The pain brought on by the shock of watching my mother with strangers who violated her body had been instrumental in the erection of a fortress around me. I built strong high walls impermeable to invaders. An ability to suffer, accept life's cruel blows and swat them away triumphantly, had become second nature.

However, it took me well-nigh on ten minutes to start the car up outside the pub. While I could have blamed the cold frosty night air for playing havoc with the engine, I realised it was the scene in front of me that was rendering me incapable of coherent action.

I turned the key over and over in the ignition, flooding the engine with an impatience to get away. I mustn't be seen. I had been slunk low in the driver's seat, which I now frantically rolled down into horizontal repose. The couple were walking back towards the car park. I peered up over the dashboard in horror at the man holding hands with Rebecca. He was one and the same person who had been at the cinema with Amber.

When Connor's dad hit my mother and smashed her cheekbones, I had pushed my neatly ironed handkerchief into my mouth to stop myself from crying out. Hot wet urine had dripped through my shorts. If he killed my mother, there would be no one left. Fear had ripped through me but cowardice kept me rooted to the spot. Now the fear was back but this time a murderous rage threatened to break through the manufactured barricade.

I grabbed my binoculars and focused on the man climbing into the orange sports car. I couldn't be one hundred per cent certain but he also looked uncannily like the late night visitor to Amber's flat all those years ago. What was he doing with Rebecca? What cruel twist of fate was punishing me for my cowardice?

I was forced to wait for the car engine to cool down. Once it finally started up again, Rebecca had gone. A panic that she might have spotted my car passed once she'd driven off. If she had seen me, she would surely have come and spoken and introduced her friend; perhaps invited us both back for coffee. They didn't leave together so I felt cautiously optimistic that she would be back in her flat by the time I got there.



The clock stared down from the wall of my self-designed incident room. It was three in the morning. Rebecca hadn't come home. I'd waited in my car across from her flat for three hours, willing her to appear. I tortured myself with images of her having coffee with the stranger. Perhaps her car had broken down. Who was I kidding? She knew the man, I was certain.

The wallchart of images, notes and scribbles was growing exponentially. The front length of my living room was fully covered and the display had already spilled onto a kitchen wall. Some measure of solace was achieved in activity.

I cut out carefully constructed arrows, using cardboard strips and pasted them so they ran from one character in the collage to another and back again. While I maintained superiority over all the players from my position at the top of the board, it was with some horror that I realised most of the arrows (twenty in total) seemed to be pointing to the character in the middle: the mystery man.

Working out the exact relationship between the players would take time and I'd need help. The large hand of my black and white clock clunked through every minute, reminding me of the passage of time. I turned off the centre light and clicked on the small bulb over my character board. I sat in the low light for over two hours, trying to work it out.

There was Amber to the left of Rebecca. Both ladies were joined to me by bold red arrows running both forwards and backwards. James Pennington's picture, or as I imagined he might look (complete with a theatrical curling moustache which I'd scribbled in with black felt tip), was pinned underneath Rebecca's picture. A small arrow, indicating the more minor importance attaching to their relationship, was coloured in green and pointed from James to Rebecca. She was never really interested in him. The relationship had been one-way. The alignment of the arrows caused me anxiety. I was unwilling to acknowledge any significant links between the two ladies and the mystery man.

I cut out a cartoon image of Dracula and stuck it with glue between my two ladies. Without a name and identity, this seemed the best short-term solution. I got a measure of satisfaction by the addition of such a belittling caricature. The picture of Rebecca was now twice the size of Amber's. The latter had already shrunk in my estimation and memory. It was six o'clock before I fell asleep, dropping off into a fitful nightmarish slumber in my mother's old moth-eaten armchair.

ARTHUR

I decided not to call Rebecca for a few days; keep her waiting. She wasn't going anywhere. I spent the next few days travelling round the country, finding solace in bland well-practised sales pitches to slick pharmaceutical companies. Arthur Beck at your service. I offloaded thousands of pills and potions with efficient ease, using slick unthreatening sales techniques to maximum effect.

While I drove up and down the mainland, letting rock and roll classics blast out from the car radio, I regained composure and belief in my invincibility. Something else had been bothering me about the case, a term I used when referring to my relationship intrigues.

I had pinned another cartoon image, this time of the Incredible Hulk on Rebecca's side of the board next to James Pennington. I also cut out an extra-large question mark and stuck it diagonally across the image. Who was he? What relationship did he have, or did he once have, with my girlfriend? I toyed with the possibilities as I cruised around the countryside. He wasn't a threat in the sense that I imagined Dracula to be but he might help fill in the gaps. I wasn't confident that Rebecca would tell me the full story but I knew, from experience, that forewarned is forearmed.

If we were to spend our lives together there must be no secrets. It was a long shot, but perhaps I ought to go back to the park; to the swings and slides and hang around. I felt confident that the Hulk was a regular visitor to that particular playground.

REBECCA

When we reached Mitch's flat, I parked up behind his sports car, the memories flooding back and filling me with trepidation. My hands shook against the wheel as I checked the mirrors, rear and wing. The street was deserted. Mitch lived in a small side street of converted terraced houses located on a steep incline. The dashboard clock showed midnight.

Mitch knocked on the window.

'Are you coming in? Come on, it's freezing out here,' he said, shivering like a seasoned thespian. I did a full three-sixty to make sure we hadn't been followed, before I turned off the headlights. My fear was ridiculous, but real.

'Coming,' I said and opened the door.

I'm not quite sure what I was expecting as Mitch led me down a narrow corridor to a dark green door on the ground floor. It was tucked in behind the stairwell.

'Welcome to my pad.'

There was an incongruousness about the shabby abode and my smooth ex-boyfriend who would have been more at home in an upmarket penthouse overlooking the Thames. His outward élan was in stark contrast to the dull interior.

'I only moved in recently and haven't got around to decorating. It's a stopgap,' he offered as an excuse for his embarrassment. This time I harboured no dreams of helping him decorate the sad shell.

'Coffee? One sugar, strong with a dash of milk?' He remembered.

'Please.'

I had to quell anxieties that sprung up from the sight of two mugs which sat, side by side, on the draining board. They were stained and dirty. Mitch

read my mind.

‘Trisha came round yesterday. She’s glad to have me back.’

I wandered through the empty flat, sidestepping unpacked cardboard boxes.

‘How long have you been here? It looks like you moved in yesterday.’

‘A couple of months but I can’t bring myself to unpack. I’m not sure where I want to be.’ He switched on the kettle. I stood behind him as he opened an empty cupboard, searching in vain for phantom sugar cubes. The bashful helplessness that had once seduced me was still there.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll have it black, no sugar.’ I smiled. ‘My tastes have changed.’



After toying with our coffees, Mitch spoke. ‘I’m sorry. Can you ever forgive me?’ We didn’t need words. What was there to say?

He lifted me up, carried me through to the bedroom and switched on a small pink bedside lamp. The colour was always going to irk. It wouldn’t have been Mitch’s choice.

A soft feminine glow infused the room and, ever the seducer, Mitch turned on some romantic music which matched our mood. The world could have ended then and there and we wouldn’t have noticed. For a brief moment, there was only the two of us. It was a moment that no one could ever take away, that perfect climax.

Life teases with the possibility of happy endings. We both knew tonight was the culmination of years of waiting, wondering. The future no longer mattered. That would come in good time.



‘What did Oliver tell you happened between us?’

The strength provided by your warm body gave me courage. The music had stopped and the pink glow had faded. There was one picture on the wall; a Tuscan villa surrounded by sunflowers and Leylandii. In the half-light the image was surreal, a far-off paradise drowning in a sea of faded gold.

‘He said you disappeared off to Australia, to find yourself. I didn’t push for details. I was glad you hadn’t settled with him.’ You leant back against the dark wooden headboard and scrunched the pillows up behind your head. I held my breath.

‘He kept in touch, eventually announcing he was getting married. I had no idea what he did to you. By the time he said it was safe to come back, I’d decided to stay on in Italy and travel. I took odd jobs at first but eventually settled in a small school in Arezzo teaching English and cricket to teenagers.’

‘Amber?’ I tugged the duvet around my chest, pulling my knees up hard.

‘She was heartbroken when I moved out. It was very difficult to get away. She phoned incessantly, visited me in Arezzo, and started to self-harm. At first I felt guilty, that I owed her something. I took time to end it which was probably a mistake. Eventually she seemed to get the message. I don’t know when she came back to England.’

You pulled me down again, uncurling my locked fingers from the duvet. They were white from gripping.

‘Rebecca, there was never anyone else. We were young when I left and perhaps I hadn’t been ready to settle down. I love you.’

There was a scraping sound outside in the corridor and a faint mewing noise as something scuttled past.

‘It’s only the cat.’ You smiled. ‘Bowser. It lives upstairs.’



I saw you in the distance. You were in a small rowing boat, waving at me. The sun was strong and I tried to cool down by taking off more and more layers of clothing. A larger boat appeared, out of nowhere, behind you. As you wobbled from side to side, gripping the oars against the wash, I saw a man on deck looking through binoculars. They were pointed in your direction. You kept waving, frantically, in my direction.

I ran, screaming towards the lake, yelling out for you to turn round. Perhaps you knew that danger was nearby but you were so happy waving at me that you dropped the oars into the water. As I watched on in horror, they slipped away, into the deep.

You were asleep when I awoke from the nightmare. There was a strange stillness in the room. My mouth was parched from alcohol and dehydration. I slid from the bed, slipped on my clothes and fumbled in the dark for my car keys.

As I pulled the door closed behind me, something warm rubbed against my legs and made me jump. I banged my head against the stairwell and tried to muffle the screams.

Outside in the half-light I ran for my car, zapping it open before I collapsed onto the driver's seat. I made sure to lock all the doors.

ARTHUR

The residents of the old people's home where my mother was now living, sat in a circle, glued to threadbare armchairs with wooden armrests. Frail slippers covered gnarled feet which swung rhythmically back and forth. Heads lolled.

'Come out, come out wherever you are?' Mother squawked when she spotted me coming through the swing doors.

I don't remember when she lost her front teeth and she was unrecognisable from the sex siren of my youth. She staggered towards me in her threadbare fluffy-back mules and tugged at my sleeve.

'Is Ted with you?' she asked, directing me from the room with a relentless grip. A rancid smell of age and urine pervaded the room. Muffled moans seeped through from behind closed doors.

Mother led me into a small conservatory with a Perspex roof and a whirring overhead fan. The latter defused the stench outwards towards the perimeter of the room. On the other side of locked windows were unkempt gardens struggling under the weight of invading weeds. A red pull chain hung down for emergencies; death and such like. My mother yanked it victoriously and pushed me down onto a cane sofa.

'We'll have two cups of tea,' she demanded from a young nurse, 'and biscuits too. This is my son, Arthur, by the way.'

The nurse's smile was weary. As she trudged away, I noticed the sensible lace-up shoes which emphasised her thick ankles.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are? Don't you remember?' Mother wouldn't stop. This had been her favourite chant when I was hiding in the loft space. She thought it was funny.

Her ageing ugliness left me cold. Years of maternal adoration dissipated into thin air. The absence of front teeth meant that she hissed when she spoke and, with every word, jets of saliva spurted onto her blouse. I had to lean backwards to avoid the deluge.

‘Where’s Ted? My Ted. He said he’d be over later.’ She carried on the charade. ‘Am I coming home this week? I can’t wait,’ she spat. Then she cried loud indulgent tears of self-pity.

‘Soon,’ I lied.

She’d never be coming back. My years of Madonna worship were over, killed off by her rancid breath. I’m a man who loves beauty and strength. This whinging ugly creature, hissing and spitting like a viperous rattlesnake, was repellent. This wasn’t my mother. She had long gone.

A wave of panic at being left on my own soon passed. I didn’t need this old crow to look out for me. As I stood up, it hit me that she never had. She’d hidden me away while she assuaged her own passions. Now it was payback time.



It took two nurses to restrain her as she screamed and sobbed. I smiled and walked away from my past without a backward glance. Mother would forget about me in a couple of hours. She always did.

ARTHUR

It was with renewed purpose that I prepared for my evening with Rebecca. It was time to move forward with my plans. I was thrilled she had phoned and asked me round. Dinner for two.

With vigour I prepared for our date. I popped to the florists and bought a rather sumptuous bouquet. Pink, red and white roses were a visual declaration of my intent. Rebecca wanted to talk; she had something to say. I was euphoric and counted down the minutes. I spent the final hour in my car across the road from her flat. It was one minute to eight when I got out and approached the front door.

‘Come in,’ she said. She looked so beautiful. Golden hair flowed loosely across her shoulders. She had listened to me when I insisted she grew it. She was even wearing the pale buttoned-up shirt; it wasn’t showy but exquisitely tailored. I had admired it the last time we’d gone out. Oh the perfection of it all. Rebecca was the new lady in my life and would replace my mother in every way.

Rebecca had prepared a cold pasta salad followed by cheese and biscuits. It wasn’t a spectacular choice of fare, rather bland, but I kept my mother’s old recipes under lock and key and would present these to my girlfriend in due course. One thing at a time.

We chatted about the weather, the upturn in the temperature, and we even toasted the onset of spring.



The phone rang for the first time at 8.20pm. It then rang again at 8.45pm and at 9.15pm. I checked my watch each time the noise broke the silence.

‘Aren’t you going to answer it?’ I suggested. ‘Someone seems very keen to talk to you.’ I smiled, calmly biting my lower lip against the irritation.

Rebecca excused herself after she finished toying with her pasta salad. It was hardly touched. I guessed she would be going to put the music on, George Michael, her favourite. Instead she went to the bathroom and locked the door with a distinct bang.

When the phone rang again at 9.30pm, I decided to pick it up.

‘Rebecca? Why haven’t you been picking up? I’ve been so worried, for God’s sake.’

‘Hi. It’s Arthur here. Rebecca’s not around at the moment. Can I take a message?’ Rebecca’s exit from the bathroom coincided with my putting the phone back down. She stopped and stared at me, eyes ablaze.

‘Why did you answer my phone?’

‘It kept ringing and I thought it might be important. Sorry. They said they’d call back. No harm done,’ I smiled. I certainly didn’t like her tone of accusation.

‘Who was on the phone anyway?’

‘They didn’t say. They hung up,’ I lied. Mitch. That was his name.

I’m not sure at what point in the evening my girlfriend had planned to tell me she wanted a break. Although I might have been a bit out of line in answering the phone to unknown callers, I soon suspected that she had been planning all along to discourage our advancement. Mitch, or Dracula as I knew him, seemed to have blocked my path.

‘I’m sorry,’ she repeated.

‘Is there someone else?’ I swivelled my cheese knife round in circles, balancing it skilfully on one finger as it spun. ‘Do you like my party piece?’ I grinned as it flew off in the opposite direction. ‘Oops!’

Rebecca looked pale in the half-light and I wondered if she wasn’t feeling too well. She hadn’t eaten and was drinking copious amounts of fizzy water.

‘I’m not ready to settle down,’ she lied. I’d heard that one before; on the night Amber had rejected my advances and disappeared into the night with her fancy man. Dracula had ruined my life once before but he certainly wouldn’t be doing it again.

‘I’ll leave the cheese if you don’t mind,’ I said.

The phone rang again in the background and this time we heard the caller leave a message.

‘Hi. Oliver here. I think we need to talk, clear the air. Mitch is back and I hear you’ve been catching up. Call me. I’m on the same number.’ I made a mental note of the digits as he read them out. ‘Hope you’re well,’ he concluded.



I heard the lock and chain clunk into place as she closed the door behind me. My lover seemed inordinately scared of the dark.

When I reached the street below, I took out a pen and jotted down the phone number.

Oliver. I had a feeling he might be my Incredible Hulk.

REBECCA

Early on Sunday morning I headed for the park to clear my head. I jogged purposefully round the lake. My mind spun with questions. Did Mitch really only use Amber to get away? Had he ever had feelings for her? Did he really not know about Oliver and what his friend had done to me? Why was he still in touch with Amber if it had been over so long ago? The questions battered my brain, torturing my fragile psyche. I pounded faster and faster, willing exhaustion to stem the angst.

Arthur was also a worry. It was time to end our relationship, once and for all, before things got out of hand. I didn't anticipate a scene. Arthur was placid, undemanding. Perhaps it was naïve arrogance which dismissed his bland gentleness so readily. I believed he was happy with the casual company, no strings attached. I couldn't have been more wrong.



When I got back to the flat, the phone was ringing. I knew it was Mitch before I picked up.

'Hi. Where did you disappear to? Hope you're not avoiding me already.' There it was: the lightness of tone; the devil-may-care. How easy it would have been to brush the last ten years under the carpet and forget they ever happened.

'Of course not. I've been jogging and catching up on work.'

I heard his moment of hesitation. Mitch being unsure provided slight comfort.

'When will I see you again? Is tonight too soon? You can't keep a guy waiting.' The teasing tone masked his confusion.

'Can I call you? It's all rather fast and there's stuff I need to do,' I said. The desire to see him tortured me with its urgency. Mitch was also suffering

but I wasn't prepared to assuage his anxiety too readily. There was work to be done, trust to be rebuilt and more answers to be gleaned.

'Give me a few days. Yes, I promise.' I smiled down the phone at his persistence. He made a faint kissing sound and I laughed. Then he was gone.



As I fussed around the flat, uneasy at Arthur's upcoming visit, I decided not to mention spotting his car in Barnet on Saturday night. I didn't want confirmation that he might have been following me. Once I put him straight, told him it was all over, his pride and self-respect would force him to get the message. I hoped he would leave without a fuss.

Preparation of bland fare and an early declaration that I was off alcohol for health reasons was as far ahead as I'd planned.



'Hi. Come in.' I wore a buttoned-up blouse, a work outfit, to play down any sexual overtones. Efficient with a mission was my intent. The ostentatious bouquet of flowers and expensive champagne threw me off-kilter and tension followed when I realised we were singing from two completely different hymn sheets.

'Thank you, they're lovely,' I lied.

'Just like my hostess. Smell them. Exquisite,' he said, sticking his nose hard up against the delicate buds. 'Hmmmm.'

Arthur seemed more upbeat than of late and without preamble, leant over and kissed me on the lips. There was no time to turn my cheek.

In that moment I realised I should have written him a note; a short missive, telling him it was over. I could have used polite words to let him down gently without having to endure the masquerade. What cowards we all are. The truth comes slyly, pokes through a myriad of lies and pretence. I consoled myself in the knowledge that I'd no idea where he lived and a face-to-face meeting was the most grown-up option.

I went into the kitchen and spent fifteen minutes removing the bands and ties that secured the bouquet, snipping the stems and displaying them in a cheap vase. When I cut my finger, nervously licking away blood droplets, Arthur appeared and offered me his handkerchief.

When we finally sat down at the table, lights ablaze around the room, I waited for the right moment.

‘Arthur,’ I began. ‘I’m sorry but I’m not ready for a commitment. I’d like to take a break for a while.’ I looked directly into his eyes for the first time that evening. The roses on the table, the fizzing champagne and my companion’s merry demeanour conspired to make me feel unreasonable. I felt almost cruel. Arthur ignored my speech, and instead offered me a top-up.

‘More champagne?’

‘Water only for me, please.’ My abstention from alcohol had been meant as a hint, but he hadn’t taken it.

‘I’m really sorry, Arthur,’ I repeated.

‘It’s okay. I understand. Is there someone else?’ At that moment the phone rang.

‘No. No one,’ I lied. It didn’t seem fair to tell him the truth.

When the phone rang for the third time, I willed him to leave. I went to the bathroom, shaking and sweating, and wondered how to make him go. That’s when I heard him pick up. I rushed back to the living room.

‘Who was that?’ I snapped. All good intentions of letting him down lightly evaporated, replaced by a stinging anger. As Arthur replaced the receiver, I noticed his eyes hinted at a smug determination. Perhaps it was my imagination but there was something else. I saw on his face satisfaction that he’d caught me out. A sly grin curled his lips.

‘No one important. They said not to worry. They’ll call back.’

Arthur was never going to make a fuss. He didn’t do fuss, overplaying his *in control* card once too often. His persona was gentle and unthreatening but it could have been contrived. I wasn’t sure. This was the first time I felt threatened in his company. I covered the cheese and suggested that perhaps we should call it a day.

‘I’m happy to leave the cheese. Look after the waistline.’ He patted his flat stomach and wiped his moistened lips with the edge of a serviette. He stood and scraped back his chair across the wooden boards.

The phone rang again. My thrill at Mitch’s determination and persistence was shattered when I heard the caller’s voice.



After Arthur left, tail between his legs, I replayed the message. Oliver. The bastard. Mitch must have spoken to him. Perhaps Mitch had been phoning to warn me. Perhaps he had confronted Oliver, head-on. While I was desperate to know what was happening, I decided it would have to

wait. I was exhausted. Dealing with Arthur hadn't been as easy as anticipated.

ARTHUR

I treated myself to a new jacket, pale linen with an expensive cut. The navy trousers were hand tailored in Milan and the crisp white shirt in Rome, according to a fawning sales assistant.

I wandered through Knightsbridge, glancing every so often at my reflection in shop windows and whistled confidently in the bright sunshine. Away from the pungent claustrophobia of the underground, the exclusive streets welcomed me into their bosom. I would definitely pass as a serious connoisseur of fine art; a wealthy collector of expensive treasures.

Pennington's Art Gallery was smaller than I imagined, more bijou. Cramped might have been a better description. I extracted my Gucci sunglasses from my jacket, set them on top of my head and pushed open the door, confident but nonchalant.

'Good morning, sir.' James Pennington welcomed me as he stood up from behind an obscenely large mahogany desk located at the back of the shop. 'How can I help you?'

I did wonder if this was the real James Pennington or some ageing lookalike who had usurped his position and was covering the business while the real owner was sunning himself on a yacht in the Mediterranean. His voice buried the doubts. It was nauseatingly upper class, crystal cut.

'I'm interested in eighteenth century Italian art.' I took the sunglasses off my head and swivelled them teasingly in my fingers. If Mr Pennington was counting pound signs no one would have guessed. Money didn't appear to be a driving passion. 'I'm a good friend of Rebecca Carrington. She suggested I pop by and have a look at your collection,' I continued. I peered inquisitively at printed details attached to a monstrous modern collage of multicoloured shapes. The creep turned to face me. I'd caught his interest.

‘Rebecca? How is she?’

‘My goodness. Is this a Kandinsky? How exciting.’ I passed my finger lightly across the canvas. I was taken aback by the seedy desperation that oozed from such a well-heeled prick. I continued to scrutinise the frames, working my way along the walls as if I’d all the time in the world.

‘Rebecca used to work here. I haven’t seen her for ages. How do you know her?’ The tension was delicious. I continued to toy with my shades, baiting with my tardiness.

‘We’ve been seeing each other. Dating, I think you’d say.’ I taunted him as I feigned interest in his wares. ‘Wow. I do love modern art. Perhaps you’ve a piece of paper so I can make a few notes.’

A rather off-guard Mr Pennington (I couldn’t quite bring myself to think of him as James, far too intimate) retreated. I watched him scurry around, bizarrely flustered by the simple request. He returned and handed me a glossy catalogue.

‘Tell me. Where’s she living now? We were very good friends once. Well, perhaps a little more than that,’ he smiled, embarrassed. A crimson hue tinged his sunken cheeks.

‘We’re living in North London; Muswell Hill actually.’ I sat down at the front table, spread my legs and scribbled on the brochure.

‘She used to work here; years ago. Would you like a coffee, Mr, em?’

‘Beck. Arthur Beck. Sorry, I didn’t catch your name. Rebecca never mentioned names, just pointed me in the direction of the gallery.’ How joyous it was to watch her spurned boss fish for information. He insisted I call him James.



Mr Pennington offered me a seat and as we drank coffee, I dangled carrots of information about Rebecca and myself. At the same time I gleaned some useful facts.

‘She worked here for a couple of years. She left shortly after my brother committed suicide.’ I leant back as the storyteller slumped uneasily in his chair.

‘Yes, I heard. That must have been dreadful. Do you have a price list, if I might be so crass?’ I teased. How joyous fate can be. I asked the next question, totally unplanned, to fill a moment’s silence and what a pleasant surprise.

‘Did she work here on her own after that? She doesn’t like to talk about it, as you can imagine,’ I said.

‘No, she worked closely with another guy. Oliver Moreton.’ James stood up at this point, taking our mugs back to the kitchenette. He then disappeared to print off price details. The Hulk. He’d worked here, with Rebecca. When Mr Pennington returned, he carried on.

‘Unfortunately Mr Moreton was an unsavoury character.’ James grimaced and handed me the printout. ‘If there’s anything you’d like more information on, please give me a call.’ He handed over his card. James Penrose Pennington MA. His receding hairline, rounded shoulders and trembling hands filled me with pleasure.

‘Thank you. Perhaps lunch one day might be a nice idea and you can advise me on investment opportunities.’ We shook hands and said our goodbyes.

Outside, I walked away from the gallery and headed towards Hyde Park. A walk along the Serpentine would be refreshing.

ARTHUR

As I joined up the dots of Rebecca's past, I set about reinventing my flat as a *control tower*. It had a more positive ring than *incident room* and besides, I'd started to envisage an end game. Dedicated planning would ensure a final victory.



My small childhood hideout had been furnished with collections of innocent paraphernalia. In the beginning, Lego sets, Beano annuals and Solitaire kept me company. I ate off a packing case which acted as a table. A spare case was placed alongside for my imaginary friends and a cardboard box, crammed full of sweets and biscuits, was regularly replenished.

A scout torch lit the space until I reached my teens. I then found an extension cable and plugged in a small lamp, minus its shade, next to the table. No one ever came into my den, except make-believe companions. A shrug sufficed to allay my mother's suspicions when household items went missing. Possessions didn't bother her. They never had. Men were her passion.



The arrangement of players in my adult abode constantly changed. Rebecca's picture was no longer pinned alongside my own, but rather underneath it. Only when I could trust her would she be granted equal status.

I dug out an old Cluedo set, using the contents for inspiration. I made sketches of the weapons on my wall and linked the different *modus operandi* to the individual characters. The rope circled Mr Pennington (call

me 'James') in satirical remembrance of his dead brother. Perhaps, one day, Mr Pennington (call me 'James') might also be so inclined to hang himself.

The dagger pointed sharply towards Amber. Short and sharp seemed the best way to forget her. Perhaps a fatal stab wound? Time had mellowed my hatred towards her. Perhaps I might afford her some leniency; but then again, perhaps not.

I shuffled the cards and swapped the Dining Room for the Library, then the Conservatory for the Billiard Room. The possibilities were endless. In the gloaming I toyed with various options. Lead piping, spanners and candlesticks were all possible weapons of choice. They were means to take out, disable and overpower.

Then there was Oliver and the more minor bit players of Ted and my own mother to deal with. I thought a pillow might provide a more satisfying hands-on experience with the former harlot.

There was only one revolver and it was directed quite stubbornly at Mitch whose face was circled with large bold black marker rings. Dracula stared back at me. Somewhere in the recesses of my subconscious, I remembered that Dracula could not be killed except by a stake through the heart at full moon. The question now was not whether this enemy lived or died but how best to achieve my goal using all the players and instruments at my disposal.

REBECCA

Logic finds it hard to conquer neurosis.

I'd become increasingly paranoid, splashing out an exorbitant amount of money to have my alarm system routed through to the police station. Yet no amount of reasoning would quell the fear. Although desperate to see Mitch again, I didn't contact him for several days following on from my evening with Arthur. I had to play the long game.



My first turn on the auction rostrum was scheduled for the Friday after the break-up. The sales room was abuzz with activity as picture lots were hung, bulky furniture tastefully arranged and china items unpacked ready for viewing. The sale was due to start at six, aiming to catch after-work traffic. By five o'clock the room was already heaving with customers.

'All set to go?' Marion fussed round and bellowed out last-minute instructions. Dylan came up and tapped me on the shoulder as I went to mount the platform. 'Good luck, Rebecca. You'll knock 'em dead.'

It felt good to be in the limelight, efficient and with purpose. For a short period I forgot the traumas that had come to define my life.

'Who's going to start the bidding? I have commission bids on the book and can start at ten thousand pounds. Do I see eleven?'

My eyes darted left to right and back again. The rows of velvet-covered mahogany chairs were full and an overflow of bidders lined the back wall. I was on the stage, my opening night, and an overhead beam illuminated my script.

Jodi had given me an antique gavel, sourced through the internet, and each bang against the hardwood sent a thrill through my bones. Marion's

gestures of approval helped build my confidence and I soon became lost in the action.

The room started to thin out around nine, although there were a few lots to go. Suddenly I noticed a familiar face by the double doors. James Pennington.

Marion coughed, subtly at first and then louder in an attempt to refocus my attention.

The lights came on shortly before ten. The show was over. I stepped down from the podium and excused myself from the congratulatory celebrations, saying I'd only be a few minutes. I ignored the pop of champagne corks, and wandered down the aisle.

'Hi. What are you doing here? It's good to see you,' I said. The past seemed as if it would never go away, rapping persistently at the present.

James's buttoned-up raincoat swamped his emaciated frame and if I hadn't seen him a short while ago I mightn't have recognised him. The suave self-assurance had gone and his thinning grey hair was oiled into place.

'Well done. You were marvellous.' The voice was the same and a faint twinkle in his eyes gave recall to the man I remembered.

He waited a second before asking, 'Can you spare half an hour for a drink? I'd like to run something past you.' The last thing I wanted was to revisit old ground and behind me I could hear the bustle and merriment following on from the evening's success.

'I'm sorry, James, but I can't get away. It's been a big night.'

James looked uneasy, and for a moment, I feared he might still harbour hopes of a future together.

'I was keen to see you again but that's not why I'm here.' A prick of fear made me tense. 'I had a strange caller at the gallery yesterday. Someone who said he was your boyfriend. He seemed genuinely interested in some of our paintings. I'm after a little inside information.'

Mitch was my first thought. Why had he gone to the gallery? It wasn't his style. He had never checked up on me in the past. Surely he wouldn't have visited without telling me. It wouldn't have been Oliver. James wouldn't have let him in.

'What was his name?' I leant heavily onto the back of a chair.

'Beck. Arthur Beck.'

REBECCA

The incongruousness of James's description, which portrayed Arthur as a suave sophisticated connoisseur of modernist art, made me wonder if we were talking about the same person. There surely couldn't be more than one Arthur Beck.

I managed to slip away from the post-auction celebrations with a lame excuse about nervous fatigue, coupled with a threatening migraine. If Marion was disappointed in her new gavel-wielding prodigy, she kept it under wraps and smiled when she saw James in the aisle.



James and I ended up in a small bistro next door to West House with a bottle of wine between us; it was a poignant moment of *déjà vu*. However, this time I was after information. If James harboured any intention of milking the situation for his own benefit, I put him right. I kept my coat on and sat on the opposite side of the table, accepting a very small glass of wine. I let him speak.

'The guy said that you were dating and living together in Muswell Hill. He seemed genuinely interested in the paintings, spouting knowledgeable facts in relation to various artists.'

'Did he say anything about coming back? Or seeing you again?'

'He suggested we might do lunch so I could advise him on investment opportunities.' I avoided James's hand which he stretched across towards mine. I was keen to leave, escape out into the cool night air. Yet a feeling that I might need James's help in the future made me linger.

An hour later I stood up, expounding further on the fictitious headache. James stayed to finish the wine. I smiled when he commented that Arthur and I didn't seem a likely pair. James knew I had better taste. As I was

leaving the restaurant, he promised he'd call me if Mr Beck made further contact.



I'm being chased, running wildly from my pursuer. There are people hiding in the shadows but I can't see properly. I try to open my eyes and through tiny slits can see flimsy curtains billowing in the wind. The window is open and I'm aware of a faint scratching sound and a cat meowing in the distance. Mitch and I are holding hands. I know it's him because our fingers are intertwined; lock and key. His hands are smooth except for the light downy hair tickling my skin. I turn to look at him; my lover, my soulmate. He smiles with upturned lips but I see bared teeth behind the grin. His face keeps changing. It's like a rubber mask. The mask doesn't fit his skin properly. It's much too large and his head seems to keep growing and growing...



My screams woke me in the silence. The small alarm clock ticked rhythmically and outside there was a faint hum of traffic. I wouldn't get to sleep again and knew I no longer wanted to sleep alone.

I went into the kitchen and turned on the kettle, making comforting noises with spoons and mugs. I had to see Mitch, sort things out. It wouldn't wait any longer. Today the future would begin and we would start to make plans.

ARTHUR

Mr Flynn, Connor's dad, used a red tie to bind my mother's arms to the bedpost. With nervous laughter, my mother squirmed, naked and spread-eagled across the bedstead. A few moments later she was hysterical.

To stop from screaming, I gripped the rafters so hard that my knuckles turned white. A sense of foreboding told me he was going to kill her. Transfixed, I stared through the spyhole.

That afternoon I had sanded the hole wider so the diameter matched that of my eyeball. I used an old tape measure to match the dimensions and, with not a smidgeon of self-congratulation, I aligned the two apertures. My eyeball fitted neatly into the slot.

When Mr Flynn stuffed a handkerchief into my mother's mouth, fear made me urinate over the floorboards again. A look of terror replaced excited hysteria on my mother's face and her eyes made a futile plea towards her captor. I stared as he penetrated her with hard, violent, relentless thrusts.

In the darkness I hummed *London's Burning*, but only in my head. Mother and I used to sing it together. She would join in on the repeat stanza, always one beat behind. We would collapse in laughter when we reached *Fire, Fire* as the rendition got noisier. We tried to foil the concentration of the other. On that day I sang silently, mouthing the words for both of us until the bed springs quietened.

Next day, after school, I popped by the Flynns' house to return the red tie. I handed it to Connor's mum, using considerable acting prowess by denying all knowledge of the item. I had no idea how it came to be in our house. On the way out, I passed Mr Flynn on the garden path. I clambered over rusting objects and a couple of slashed tyres on the way.

‘Good evening, Mr Flynn.’

He nodded, no idea of what I’d done.

The following day he forced his way into our house and beat my mother black and blue. He screamed abuse, calling me all sorts of names and yelling at my mother for having spawned a devil child. Sly, evil and psychopathic twisted little bastard were the words he used. I’d no idea what psychopathic meant back then, but I got the gist.

I watched my mother’s frail frame hurtle backwards and forwards across the kitchen. But it would be the last time. My innocent manipulation of events ensured that Mr Flynn never came back. I learnt early on that positive outcomes could be achieved with only a small measure of cunning.

ARTHUR

Amber agreed to meet. Ted had reluctantly given me her phone number when he realised I wasn't going to give up. A calculated mention of my mother's misery, now that she'd been abandoned, helpless in a nursing home, seemed to prick his conscience.

I suggested the café in the park at midday on Saturday. At first I didn't recognise her. The skinny mousy woman who turned up with a lifeless mongrel in tow shocked me. I hadn't expected such a rapid decline. Amber was only thirty-two but looked older than my own mother.

Perhaps I was overly harsh in my judgement owing to the fact that I was riding the crest of a wave in my own new-found confidence. *My Plan* imbued me with a sense of the invincible, that anything at last was possible.

The designer shades, which I continued to sport on top of my head, helped accessorise this new, more self-assured, persona. I wasn't one to harbour illusions pertaining to my perception of others. I've always prided myself in recognising the reality of a person, adept at peeling away superficial layers which cover up insecurities. However, when I saw Amber for the first time after so long, I wondered what all the fuss had been about. How had I ever fallen for this sad pathetic excuse of a woman? While I preferred women without the adornment of chemically enhanced make-up, I did wonder why Amber hadn't made even the smallest of efforts.

'Hi, Arthur,' she offered blandly as she tied the scrawny animal against the table leg. One of its paws was covered in a dirty white bandage, which it licked and worried. She didn't lean in to kiss me and while a lesser individual might have taken this as a slight, a rebuff, I felt enormous relief. There was a definite smell of dog in the air and I didn't want to get too close.

‘Amber, you look well,’ I lied. ‘Coffee? One sugar?’ How wondrous, to be in control. To no longer desire an object which once held you in its thrall was sweet. It felt like a victory. A click of the fingers would have won her back. A mild pang of regret that she looked so pathetic flitted past.



We sat outside in the warm sunshine and I was next to speak.

‘Amber, where have you been? What have you been doing? Jeez, it was such a surprise seeing you at the cinema. I didn’t know you were back.’

I unwound my silken scarf, slid it from my neck and displayed the expensive label, face upwards, on the table. Amber took off her thin threadbare gloves and patted the dog absent-mindedly on the head.

‘I got back about a year ago. I’m teaching again at Fortis Primary School. What about you?’ Her eyes were ringed by dark patches and I thought of pandas. Broken veins blemished the back of her white hands. Hands, once so delicate and bird like, now reminded me of claws; talons of an ugly scavenger.

‘I travel round the country selling my drugs. I sold the pharmacy when I got a good offer.’

We engaged in fifteen minutes of mindless chit-chat before I asked, casually, about her love life. ‘Are you settled at last? The handsome guy you were with at the cinema,’ I teased, increasingly impatient for information and to be on my way.

‘No, I’m not. That was Mitch. We’ve been together off and on for some time. I went to Italy with him, remember?’

The dog started to choke, making wild retching noises, as it spat up white bits of chewed gauze. Amber disappeared to get the animal a bowl of water.

When she returned she seemed flustered and took off her jumper. Red and purple welts lined her inner arm where a knife had cut deeply into the skin. I leant over and ran my finger across the marks.

‘He surely isn’t that important,’ I said. She tugged frantically at her sleeves, having unwittingly offered up a glimpse of her hidden misery.

‘Are you still together? You and this Mitch chap?’ If Amber found solace in my questions, fooling herself that she still had the wherewithal to break hearts, she didn’t show it. She appeared all but dead, emotionless, and I was eager to get away.

‘No. We never really were. He’s always been in love with someone else,’ she sighed, pulling her jumper back on over her head. ‘What about you, Arthur? Did you ever find that special someone?’

‘Yes, indeed I have. Rebecca. The amazing thing is that I believe she used to know your boyfriend Mitch.’ I waited. How glorious the moment. It had been a long ten years, the first few wasted on futile dreams of this bag lady. Now I watched her tense. Bitch. Then I carried on.

‘I was with her at the cinema when I saw you. She said *hello* to your friend.’ They say revenge is best served cold and this was indeed proving to be true.

‘That was Rebecca?’ Amber’s eyes stared in amazement. A toddler passed by, bent down to stroke the hound. It snarled back.

‘Yes. The tall gorgeous blonde. I’m a lucky man. We’re going to be married.’

I toyed with Amber’s emotions, bandying questions and answers about my relationship with her boyfriend’s first love. Amber squirmed. No doubt she’d add a few new knife marks to the criss-cross pattern on her arms when she got home.



As we were packing up to go, I asked a final question.

‘Do you know a chap called Oliver? A good friend of Rebecca’s.’

‘Yes, Oliver Moreton. He was Mitch’s best friend until he went off with Rebecca. Oliver introduced me to Mitch. You remember, during the time when you and I were seeing each other?’ This was the first nail in Oliver’s coffin. How clever he must have thought he was, using Amber to entice Mitch away from Rebecca.

‘Big chap isn’t he. A bit like Frankenstein.’ I laughed. ‘Rebecca doesn’t talk about him. They seem to have an unsavoury history.’ I waited while the dog sprang to life, anticipating a return to activity.

‘I think Rebecca suffers from sour grapes. She made some ridiculous accusations about Oliver attacking her, raping her. Oliver wouldn’t hurt a soul. He’s my best friend. A real gentle giant,’ Amber said. ‘Anyway, it was nice to see you, Arthur. Keep in touch.’ With that, she and the dog were gone.

I watched her walk away, up the hill towards the car park, before I moved. I finished my coffee, draining the cold milky dregs from the bottom of the cup.

Rape indeed. That was the final nail in his coffin. He would be my weapon of mass destruction.

REBECCA

Experience had taught me to live in the moment; savour the present. Losing Mitch for all those years had instilled in me a sense of realism. A happy-ever-after future was the dream of youth, of innocence. Perfect moments; that was all there was.

As we cruised along the motorway, roof down on the MG Midget, sun in our eyes and wind raging through our hair, I knew this was a special moment. Years of longing, sadness and misery were brushed aside on that May morning as we sped out of London.



The hotel in Maidenhead overlooked the river's edge. Other than a nautically themed decking terrace which had been added at the rear of the dining area, nothing had changed since the first time we'd booked in as Mr and Mrs Knights. We had laughed and giggled when I put a curtain ring on the fourth finger of my left hand and teased the receptionist to book in the newlyweds.

The double room with the en suite had been where we'd consummated our relationship. Room number twenty-six. It was halfway along the second floor landing.

This time we walked more tentatively along the corridor. The wallpaper was tatty, peeling around the door frames. Ten years ago we hadn't paid much attention to the floral pattern or the dull ambience. I remembered Mitch had fumbled nervously with the key, unable to open the door. 'Hurry up,' I'd squealed with excitement, desperate to get inside.

We stared at the numbers on the door. The *two* was slightly off kilter. The screw attaching it had come loose. Mitch was even more anxious this time round but the new-fangled key card fitted easily into its slot.

Side by side on the bed, we kissed, slowly and gently. There were tears in his eyes, a fine film of moisture which only self-pride prevented from becoming a deluge of emotion.

‘I love you, Carrington. Always have, always will.’ He used both hands to cup my face.

‘I love you too.’



The moment was too special to rush. I went and pulled back the curtains, flicking away a dead moth as it sank to the ground. You came and stood beside me, circling my waist, as I opened the window to let in some air. The sun shone brightly through the glass. You pointed out the yachts bobbing around in the marina.

We strolled down to the river, deciding to see what the day held in store. ‘No plans,’ you said. It felt wonderful to wander freely, without fear or panic. In that instant the world was perfect. We rolled back the years and lived in the present, young and carefree.

The Jolly Roger was a quaint seafood restaurant on a platform built out over the river. We chose a table by the window which offered views of neat rows of slickly painted boats. There was a distinct salty sea smell wafting through the windows.

‘I didn’t think you’d phone,’ you said as you held your glass up to mine. The white wine coated our climactic date with a fine gloss of perfection. ‘I’ve missed you so much.’

A slight pause, a heartbeat passed, before I answered. ‘I’ve missed you too.’

‘Can we go back? Start again?’

I watched the pleading in your eyes.

Below where we were sitting, a pantomime sailor, clad in a fancy dress striped nautical costume, was trying to untie his boat.

‘He can’t undo his knot.’ We laughed. A faint relief loosened the tension.

‘One step at a time. Let’s enjoy this weekend and see where it takes us.’

‘Oliver has tried to call me.’ You tensed as you spoke. ‘He’s left messages wondering why I won’t call him back. He doesn’t know we’ve met.’

I felt your pain and wondered if perhaps we could unite against the hurt. I was naïve. The sailor finally undid the knot and prepared to set sail. A

young teenager, sporting a bright yellow life jacket, hopped on board clasping several beer cans.

‘I could kill him. Oliver,’ you continued. I had suffered in silence, in the dark, behind closed doors but this wouldn’t be your way. I guessed you’d been harbouring wild vitriolic notions of revenge. But now, all I wanted was to forget the past, bury it along with the fear and misery and move on, together.

‘Leave it, Mitch,’ I said. ‘It’s over. I’ve moved on and you need to too. That was then and this is now.’ I lifted your fingers tenderly to my face. Soft white clouds floated across the azure sky, momentarily masking the sunlight.

‘I’ll try.’ Oliver would be his battle. Mine was to forget. I finished off my glass and topped us both up. We smiled as you inverted the bottle into the ice bucket, an invitation for the waiter to offer us another.

‘Amber,’ I said. One word was enough.

‘I’ve finished with her. I saw her earlier this week and told her. What about you and Arthur?’ You toyed with some bread, dipping it absently in the oil. The nonchalant activity was meant to conceal your thoughts.

‘We never really got started.’ I smiled into your eyes, confidently asserting that Arthur was no threat and never had been. ‘He was my stopgap. My mother loved him but he’s so clingy and weird.’ I surprised myself at the terminology. Yes, he was weird but I’d only recently realised this. ‘What about your mum?’

I smiled at the hovering waiter, nodding assent to another bottle. We were celebrating. It was a special anniversary.

‘She’s fine. Glad to have me back. I think she’s relieved I didn’t settle in Italy. Perhaps we can go round and see her?’

‘Perhaps.’ Pat Dawson wouldn’t spoil the moment. I vividly remembered her dismissal of my aching loneliness and her euphoric victory that I hadn’t managed to usurp her son’s affections. She insinuated that Mitch had fled from my neurotic clutches. She could wait.



We finished our meal and staggered out of the bistro into a mild and balmy afternoon. Several boats had left their moorings. We wandered past and clung tightly to each other, swaying perilously close to the water’s edge. We giggled at the names, *The Hazel Rose*, *Sloppy Sailor*, *The Penny Pot* and *Carter’s Charter*.

‘What would you call your yacht?’ I asked.

‘Em... let me see. Maybe *Saucy Sue*,’ you winked, ‘or *Bonny Becca*.’

‘And you? What would you call yours?’

‘*The Mighty Mitch*. Or perhaps *Dawson’s Dinghy*. Although I do rather like the ring of *Carter’s Charter*,’ I said, pointing to the glossy italic paintwork on the way past.

By the time we reached our room, replete with food and love, we were ready for each other. Our minds were satiated and our bodies craved the same.

I threw my sandals across the room and unbuttoned my blouse. I could hear the nervous water splatters in the bathroom, the door gingerly pushed to.

I sat, like a nervous virgin on the edge of the bed, and toyed with the radio controls on the headboard. You finally emerged, having taken off your polo shirt and unbuckled your belt. You held out your hands for me to stand up. The culmination of all those years of waiting was here, in this one moment. It would be perfect; a moment to remember.

And it was.



We headed back to London late on the Sunday night. The traffic slowly built up and the grimy suburbs soon enveloped us. We became engulfed by a companionable silence. Spent on excitement and conversation, unbidden worries crept back in.

I turned down Mitch’s offer to spend the night at his flat as I needed to get ready for work. This time I didn’t worry about not seeing him again. We were going to move forward, slowly and steadily, and our future together seemed secure.

My flat felt less dull and daunting when I returned, and as I threw my overnight bag on the sofa, I instinctively went to check the answerphone. The knot in my stomach stubbornly reattached itself to my insides and for a moment I braced against a flashing red light. It was oddly still.

Although relieved, I was surprised there wasn’t a message from Arthur. Perhaps I’d read him wrong and my surmise that he wouldn’t take rejection lying down, without a fight, might have been wide of the mark.

I crawled into bed, exhausted, and switched off the bedside light but I soon became more aware than ever of the quietness. The sound of silence hung in the air. I turned the light on and off several times, before I got up

and went through the flat to check in cupboards and under beds. Once I made sure all the window locks were firmly bolted, I clambered back to bed and fell into a fitful slumber.

It was shortly after midnight.

ARTHUR

The Target always left his flat around 8am, returning most nights about five, give or take twenty minutes.

I tore up and disposed of the cut-out of Dracula, superimposing a large 'T' over the peeling wallpaper. A letter 'T' seemed much less personable than Dracula. I now needed army-like discipline so I could strike with razor-sharp precision. Careful surveillance, using imaginative disguises, had been inked in boldly on the master plan. I took annual leave from work and allotted the two-week period to concentrate the mind and prepare my end game.

Hatred threatened my patience and every time I watched the Target move around with nonchalant ease, I had to quell an overwhelming desire to bash his brains in. However, I knew that waiting and meticulous planning were needed to ensure success.



On the fifth day into my leave, I hit the jackpot.

Hunched down by the back wheel of my new little car, a forgettable black banged-up Ford Fiesta, I toyed with jacks and tools mending an imaginary puncture. It was then that 'T' came into sight. I spotted him from under the brim of a navy baseball hat, my usual dapper appearance camouflaged in oil-spattered overalls.

Gripping the spanner, I watched him stop, pick up some litter and realign the lid of a dustbin. He scratched around in his pockets outside the front door for a few minutes before he reached up, checking there were no onlookers, and ran a finger along the ledge of the frame. He blew dust off a key and cleaned it on his jacket sleeve before unlocking the front door. He then disappeared through to his flat, slamming the door behind him.

The asshole certainly lacked imagination. Whereas the spare key might have been more readily discovered under the doormat or beneath the sad display of potted geraniums on the front porch, I did feel that the ledge above the door was only one rung down from risible. The guy was a complete prick and deserved what was coming to him.



The phone shop in Finsbury Park, Handy Mobiles, was located between a fish and chip shop on one side and a kebab joint on the other. Clad this time in jeans and trainers, suitably scruffy and anonymous, I went inside and muttered cursory pleasantries to an Asian gentleman manning the counter. The shop was crammed full with a variety of makes and models of cheap imported phones and laptops.

‘Hi. Can I help you?’ The proprietor didn’t even glance in my direction.

‘Yes. I’m after a cheap mobile; pay as you go.’ I tucked my hands into my jeans, avoided eye contact and kept conversation to a minimum.

‘Yes, sir. That’ll be no problem. Any particular make of phone?’

He pulled out half a dozen varieties of handsets and splayed them across the counter. His stubby fingers greased the keys as he tried to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the different choices.

‘Any model will do. It’s for my daughter. She’s going on a trip to India. Something cheap and cheerful.’

‘Whereabouts? I’m from Mumbai.’ He beamed. ‘Such a beautiful country, India. I often wonder why I’m living in Finsbury Park.’

A couple of teenage lads entered the shop and started picking up phone cases and laptop covers from the shelves. I kept my head down and jerked sideways when I noticed a CCTV camera on the ceiling pointing in my direction.

‘Can I help you, lads? Please don’t handle the goods unless you’re thinking of buying,’ the owner barked. He was about to come out from behind the counter and confront the boys when they sidled, laughing, back out onto the street.

‘You can’t watch them closely enough. You know, I lose more merchandise through theft than I sell. Anyway, back to business.’

The stench of curry wafted through from a back room and as I fingered the phones, I tugged my hat further over my face. Indian pipe music broke out and stemmed the need for further pleasantries.

‘This one’s fine, thank you.’ I extracted a wad of banknotes and watched the shopkeeper lick his fat fingers as he counted out the spoils.

‘Keep the change.’ Might have been a risky move, offering something that I could be remembered by, but I’d already delayed longer than planned and was eager to get away. I turned down the offer of a carrier bag and hurriedly pocketed the phone and receipt.

The two teenagers were moping around outside and watched me leave before they reopened the shop door and went back inside.

ARTHUR

It wasn't through concern that the owner of Handy Mobiles might confer with the hunch-backed manager at Cut Price Keys, but changing outfits for a second time that day added to my sense of purpose.

A trip back to Kings Cross, dressed as a city gent, proved to be a very pleasant time-wasting exercise. A recently purchased biography of 'The Yorkshire Ripper' made a riveting read as I melted into the hotpot of smartly dressed commuters.

Nondescript husbands, balding bankers and second-rate marketing consultants shared my tube carriage. I was pretending to be a lawyer at a top firm, a legal eagle, and was researching facts and figures relating to serial killers. The thick-rimmed glasses lent me gravitas and intellectual nous.

When I got off the train I walked the short distance along the main station concourse, away from the ticket barrier, until I arrived at Cut Price Keys. I'd spotted the kiosk on the day I banged into Rebecca and her mother.

'One copy please,' I said and thrust the rusty key across the counter.

'One moment, sir.' The stooped proprietor, in his thick safety goggles, bent over his machine and sparks flew out from all directions. He didn't look up. My own glasses were so thick that it was hard to see through the lenses but I'd decided to keep them on until the purchase had been made and I was heading home.

'You can get a second one half price, sir.' As he spoke, the old man carried on shaving detail off a metal strip. I wasn't tempted by his sales pitch.

'No thank you. One is enough.'

A young woman, Bella, as I surmised her name might be, stood behind me and shuffled from one high heel to the other. She looked like a PA, perhaps in the employ of a high-flyer like myself. I smiled at her, switching my copy of the *Financial Times* from under one arm to the other. 'I hope you're not in a hurry,' I whispered to her.

The sparks had stopped flying and the elderly man, goggles removed, stared accusingly at me. He handed over the key and smiled in a conciliatory manner. I needed to regain my personable and nondescript persona.

I slipped the newly cut key into my pocket, which I patted down with the palm of my right hand, and Bella smiled. Another time I'd have been tempted to follow her, strike up a pleasant conversation and invite her to join me for coffee.

But today there was work to be done. I had to make final preparations for my master plan. The time was nigh. With a slight reluctance, I headed back.



Wednesday was the chosen day. Midweek was less likely to afford random surprises and although I'd tried to anticipate all eventualities, I knew I might need resilience and the ability to adapt at short notice. However, I wasn't concerned. Imbued with an overwhelming sense of invincibility, I harboured no doubts as to the outcome of my plan.

I spent all day moving furniture into the middle of the rooms in my flat, preparing it for a makeover. Sometime after lunch there was a sudden persistent rapping on my front door.

'Hello. Arthur? Are you there?' I quickly turned down the music volume and yelled back.

'Mrs Kennedy. Sorry, I've turned it down.'

'Can you let me in? I need to speak to you. It's urgent,' she persisted. I peered through the eyeglass on the front door and saw her peer back. She was waving one arm frantically in the air, rightly assuming I could see her.

'I'm a bit tied up but I'll pop down as soon as I can!' I yelled. I put my back to the door, willing her to go away.

'I've got a burst pipe and can't stop the water!' she screamed, and knocked even harder.

'Okay. I'll be down. Give me five minutes. You go back and wait for me.' I couldn't let her in, not until the walls had been painted.

I tore off my blue overalls and baseball hat and slipped a light blue jumper on top of my splattered T-shirt. Mrs Kennedy mustn't know that I was redecorating my control centre. As I stood back and surveyed the random colour swabs dotted around the walls, I thought the deep red seemed absolutely perfect.



After I managed to stem the flood at my neighbour's flat, I texted Oliver and began my vigil.

It was five o'clock.

REBECCA

I mooched around Harrods' food counter and teased myself with the rich colourful displays. My heart missed a beat. A surprise picnic would be perfect. The Italian counter was crammed with highly spiced salamis, Parma hams and strong pungent rich blue cheeses.

‘Madam, may I help you?’

My heart sang as I wandered past the glass display, sampling biscotti tasters as I went. Platters of truffles tempted the connoisseur. A handsome young Italian guy smiled as he shadowed my movement along the counter.

‘Yes please. I’d like a selection of antipasti. It’s for a special occasion.’

Giuseppe, a white label pinned to his pristine overalls, reeled off endless options. ‘Garlic stuffed olives; mozzarella filled red peppers; truffle topped toasts; smoked artichokes in olive oil. Anything in particular?’

‘I’ll let you choose. It’s for two people,’ I added and pointed towards the Gorgonzola dolce; Mitch’s favourite. ‘Also, I’d definitely like some of that.’

‘He’s a lucky man,’ Giuseppe grinned as he spooned expensive delicacies into plastic cartons. Japanese tourists photographed the counter, jostling with each other to get a better view. As I paid for the goods, Giuseppe suggested I come back another time. He knew this great little spaghetti house across the road.



Surprises had earmarked our relationship. Mitch used to magic small boxes, mythical white rabbits, from under tables, and slip them into my eager hand. The first gift, a small nine-carat gold letter **R**, was the first present a man had ever bought me.

We were leaving the rugby club, one evening not long after we'd met, and were saying a rather stilted goodnight in the car park when he'd presented me with the surprise. It was shortly after we'd consummated our relationship but Mitch wanted to show his hand, make sure that I was in no doubt as to his intentions. I set the charm on my dressing table that night and kept checking it was there. It was like eternal proof of his commitment. I hung it on a fine gold chain around my neck, where it stayed until he produced the gold heart one year later.



I decided to surprise Mitch around seven o'clock. He'd told me he was staying in to catch up on some marking and would phone me before supper. The following night, Thursday, he'd booked tickets for the cinema to see *Million Dollar Baby*. Mitch had no idea what the movie was about but the title appealed to his sense of romance.

I dug out an old picnic hamper from the back of my wardrobe. It had been a whimsical present from my parents on my eighteenth birthday. I had fancy notions of picnics on Hampstead Heath or taking it with me, crammed full of goodies, to concerts at Kenwood House.

The melamine plates and plastic champagne flutes were neatly strapped to the wicker basket and I packed some serviettes alongside. I left the food in the fridge until after my bath and decided I'd leave around six thirty. This was early enough to be confident that Mitch wouldn't have already been tempted to pop out for fish and chips. He never ate before seven, always determined not to be starving again by bedtime and tempted to snack.

I turned the music up loud, left the bathroom door ajar, and sank into melancholic oblivion for what seemed an eternity. I closed my eyes, relaxing to Wet Wet Wet and hummed along to 'Love is All Around'.

I sank under the bubbles, held my breath and let the warmth saturate my senses. For me, the meaning of life was Mitch. It always had been, since we first met, and now we were going to be together forever. Finally, everything was right with the world.



As I buckled up the hamper, my stomach churned and somersaulted in anticipation. I told myself it was excitement at surprising my boyfriend, a nervous sickness brought on by the depths of our passion. But there was a nagging doubt, a baseless anxiety which needled. Perhaps it would always

be there but as I prepared to leave, I ignored the warning. Nothing would spoil the moment.

I checked the window locks, pulled the blinds full length to the sills, and unplugged all the appliances. I had a phobia over power surges and lurking fire hazards. Perhaps I procrastinated a moment too long. I opened and shut doors several times over, checked and re-checked under the bed and at the back of the wardrobe, before I finally left the flat.

It was always going to be raining. A wet sheet of warm persistence mocked my picnic hamper. It was exactly six thirty when I got to my car. I kept looking at my watch because timing was of the essence. I hoped an evening of casual surprises would mask all the meticulous planning.

‘Bit wet for a picnic love.’ Mr Jacobs from next door winked from under his flat cap as he marched past tugging his collar up around his ears. Under a large umbrella he disappeared round the corner. He would remember later that it was six thirty because he had gone to buy a last-minute lottery ticket.

Rush hour had slowed the traffic right down and as I crawled through Friern Barnet towards Whetstone, I became irritable. I should have left earlier. I imagined Mitch watching television, a can of lager in one hand, remote control in the other. He would be putting off work till the last possible moment. When I arrived he would forgo the marking altogether and leave it until tomorrow.



It was six forty-five by the time I reached Whetstone, the persistent rain now a summer torrent. A golden oldie hour on the radio was playing old favourites. The Beach Boys, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison and The King provided a fanfare to usher my arrival. A man in the traffic queue next to me smiled. I turned the volume up and smiled back. Perhaps he guessed where I was going.

It was one minute to seven when I parked up outside Mitch’s flat in Barnet, smug that my scheduling had worked out. I looked towards the window of his flat. A faint light filtered through the curtains. He was at home.

The rain had slowed to a trickle and I threw my hood down and freed my hair as I stepped out of the car. The front door was open and as I entered, clutching the hamper, I glanced sideways at my reflection in the hall window. Ten years ago I’d used a mirror in a similar hallway, brushed

my hair and reapplied lipstick to bolster my doubts. This time it was a glance; nothing more.

ARTHUR

I didn't mind the wait. In fact it was electrifying and the excitement was almost unbearable.

I wandered round the sparsely furnished space, noting the minimalist masculine take on interior design. Two large black and white canvases hung on magnolia-coated walls. They were bland photographic shots of random skylines. Laminated floorboards were strewn with striped rugs, probably cheap purchases from a Moroccan bazaar.

I found a couple of mugs in the kitchen which I took into the lounge. I held them up and dropped them from a great height. Crockery shards ricocheted across the room. I moved on to the bedroom which oozed machismo. Black satin bedding defined the square cube, and dark cheaply lacquered bedside tables bore a lone alarm clock and a single textbook on Medieval England.

Agitation ruffled my mood as I checked out the Target's clothing. A wardrobe crammed full of designer clothes gave proof of vacuous arrogance. Rebecca was far too clever to be fooled by outward appearances, and this prick was no man of substance. He was the dispensable kind, a person the world could do without.



The minutes ticked by and before I knew it an hour had passed. I'd been sitting quietly, but alert, in the armchair. On the dot of five, the front door opened and I hurried stealthily into the bedroom. The element of surprise was vital. In retrospect I was sad that, when I did appear, he didn't recognise me immediately.

'What the fuck?'

I heard the expletive from behind the door as I peeked through a crack in the frame. The Target stepped gingerly over the splinters and stopped momentarily to listen.

‘Is anyone here? Come out, you bastard.’

When a few minutes passed in silence, he proceeded to the kitchen cupboard under the sink and dug out a dustpan and brush. He didn’t hear me as he leant down on hands and knees to clear up the mess.

‘Boo.’

He reeled back in terror. The bastard’s fear was exquisite.

‘What the fuck?’ He seemed lacking in vocabulary. He swung round and stared at me. ‘If it’s money you’re after, help yourself. There’s nothing in my wallet.’ He fished around in the pockets of his jeans and spewed the contents onto the worktop.

‘Have a look.’

Perhaps if he’d said: ‘Hello, Arthur. How are you, mate?’ I mightn’t have hit him so hard; but then perhaps not. A baseball bat was my preferred weapon of choice. I knew the crunching noise would be satisfying and I battered his head long after he was dead.



I left him on the floor while I extracted the new mobile phone from my pocket and laid it on the coffee table. Blood oozed from the dead man’s skull and the polished floorboards had already started to lose their shine. The red tie, one not dissimilar to Mr Flynn’s, which I managed to secure round Mitch’s neck, was a last-minute effect. It was purely a theatrical ruse, a clue that would yield no answers. I was the only one who knew the reason for it.

Once I was sure the coast was clear, I left the scene of the crime and walked with nonchalant stride towards my car. The heavy rain washed over me, taking with it any rogue droplets of blood that might have attached to my person. It had all gone perfectly.

It was almost six by the time I got back home. I planned to shower, dump my accessories to the crime, and get back up to Barnet to watch the aftermath. Oliver wouldn’t know what had hit him. I wanted to watch the drama unfold.



When I got back to the scene, I realised I must have left the front door ajar in my hurry to get away. I watched aghast as Rebecca appeared out of

nowhere and proceeded to push it open. Before I knew what was happening, she'd disappeared inside, carrying a wicker basket of some sort in her hand.

I sat up in horror. Wednesday night was our night, the night she reserved for me. Since we met, she'd never ventured over the doorstep on a Wednesday. I couldn't believe she would have moved on that quickly.

Ten minutes must have elapsed with no noise or commotion coming from the Target's address. It was then I saw Oliver approach. He lumbered along, tentatively pausing by the front door. For a few seconds I feared he wouldn't go in and that would have left Rebecca alone with the dead monster.



I waited, stricken that my plan was going horribly awry. I needn't have worried because things turned out even better than I could have imagined.

REBECCA

The main entrance to the flats was ajar. It was unlike Mitch to leave it open. He'd be even more surprised by the gentle rap at the door. He would yell 'coming' and smile his roguish grin when he spotted me, already inside, on his doorstep.



Death has a presence. A sense of foreboding accompanied me along the corridor and I slowed my step. Perhaps it was because the door to your apartment was also unlatched that sent me a warning. Maybe it was something else. Later, all I remembered was the chill that seeped through my bones.

Red is what I remember, the colour red. The red striped rugs on the floor merged with the blotchy stains around the body. A halo of congealed blood circled the head and a red tie seemed to victoriously circle the throat, proclaiming victory. Bizarrely, I didn't scream. At any minute I knew I would float up into the corner of the room and look down at the scene of my worst nightmare. Then I would wake up, bathed in sweat and relief that my imaginings weren't real. At first I didn't recognise you. It could have been anyone.

I knelt down and gently laid a cushion under your head, to make you comfortable. One cushion only. You couldn't sleep with two pillows. That strained your neck. I didn't make a sound as I held you, scared to let go in case you disappeared.



I didn't hear the door, probably because it was already open. My hand was bleeding with what appeared to be a shard of crockery embedded into my palm. The pain was like balm, a searing distraction. Suddenly I was

aware of someone else in the room. Oliver. He towered over us as we lay side by side on the floor.

‘Oh dear God. What’s happened? Rebecca... what the fuck’s happened?’ He cried out in shock, but not in anguish. Oliver wouldn’t cling to the body, why would he? He didn’t care. ‘Is he dead? Let me check.’

He tried to push me out of the way as I clenched Mitch’s hand, aware of its cooling stiffness. He felt Mitch’s neck, checking for a pulse, sensing the futility of his actions.

‘Have you called an ambulance?’

‘He’s dead. There’s no point.’ Tears flowed silently down my cheeks. As I wiped the wet from my eyes, I covered my face with our blood. I mixed together the fresh bright living liquid which oozed from my palm with the thick heavier traces from around your head; together forever.

Oliver kept talking. He repeatedly asked me what had happened, agitating around us and by the time the police arrived, he was slumped on the sofa with his head in his hands. He was also holding a baseball bat.



Detective Chief Inspector Eddie Kent was middle aged. He was the stereotypical TV cop with wizened face and unkempt greying hair, the fringe of which drooped over his forehead. He tried to coax me up. I don’t know why. I told him I was quite happy where I was.

‘What’s your name? Please, let me help you.’ He extended his hand and made me sit in the armchair but couldn’t persuade me to let go of Mitch.

Several officers mooched around the flat which was soon marked out as a major crime scene. Yellow tape across the front door forbade entry, except to the ambulance men who arrived next. Two smartly suited members of an emergency crew pushed their way through. I slapped away a hand that tried to free my fingers from the corpse.

‘Her name is Rebecca. Rebecca Carrington,’ I heard someone say in the distance. It was a voice from a long time ago, someone I didn’t like and someone who made me uneasy, angry and distressed. He was talking on my behalf.

‘It’s okay, Rebecca,’ DCI Kent continued. ‘I need to ask you some questions and we must let the medics deal with the victim.’ I wasn’t sure who the victim was at this stage. If he was talking about me then I didn’t think my cut palm needed urgent attention. I could hear another officer

speak quietly to Oliver, who was sitting like a giant robot in the background.

‘Oliver Moreton. I’m a friend, or should I say ‘was’, a friend of the deceased.’ He was crying, large blubbing sobs of insincerity.

‘I don’t think ‘friend’ is quite the right word.’ It was the first thing I said. Detective Eddie Kent latched on.

‘What do you mean, Rebecca?’

‘He hated Mitch,’ I added.

Someone with a camera came to photograph the body and someone else bagged items that were littered round the room. No one was allowed to touch anything until the camera had done its job. A strange presence seemed to hover alongside all the manic activity. You were watching, not yet willing to leave the world behind. I saw your ghostly outline in the corner.

I put my left hand down the side of the armchair, an innocuous gesture, while clinging desperately to the bony hand of death with my right. It was the merest slip of paper, a small crumpled receipt for something irrelevant. I slipped it into my pocket.

Shell-shocked, Oliver and I watched as Mitch was manoeuvred into a black body bag, neatly zipped up and carried out on a stretcher. The red tie, the shiny silk embellishment, hadn’t been removed. I noticed a tiny end had caught on the bag’s zip.

‘I’m sorry, Rebecca and Oliver,’ DCI Kent said, ‘but I need to take some notes. It’s very important while everything is fresh in your minds. You do understand?’

Kent determinedly made us sit at the dining table, having extracted a notebook from his pocket. It was a quaint little book with an elastic fastening that held the leaves in place.

‘I need to know about your relationships with the deceased,’ he continued.

In hindsight, I don’t remember too much about the interview. Oliver spoke at length, choking back crocodile tears with dramatic gasps for air, while I gave clipped answers. I think Kent was aware of my stony stares at the other witness.

‘How do you two know each other?’ Kent was sharp. He wasn’t going to miss much. Oliver talked about relationship issues, blushing when the

detective asked if we'd ever been *an item*. 'Yes. We went out for a while,' Oliver said.

When I snorted with disdain, the sharp sleuth turned his beady eyes in my direction.

'Is that not right, Rebecca?'

I scowled, finding it hard to keep my hatred in check.



It was eight thirty when the questions came to an end. Oliver and I were summoned to the police station for fingerprinting and DNA swabs; it wouldn't take long. Before we left, the detective asked one more question. It was the one I'd been waiting for.

'Who was first on the scene?' Kent watched me, waiting for my knee-jerk reaction. I didn't speak immediately. Instead, I pointed. Then in a slow concise voice, I said, 'Oliver. He was here when I arrived; hunched down over the body.'

ARTHUR

I bought six different newspapers on the morning the headlines hit.

Barnet Murder

Brutal Homicide of local school teacher. Suspect in custody.

Baseball Bat Bloodshed

I spread the papers out in the front of my car, parked in a service station off the A1M on my way to Peterborough. It was all so perfect.

Three days had passed since the event and I felt distinctly piqued that the police hadn't seen fit to call on me. After all, I was Rebecca's boyfriend. Also I was eager to hear intimate details of the aftermath. I might soon be on the suspect list but I was confident I'd left no trace of my presence at the scene.

School teacher, Mitch Dawson, thirty-eight, was bludgeoned to death in his own flat on Wednesday night. A blood-splattered baseball bat was found at the scene. The murder took place between five and seven o'clock, and witnesses are asked to come forward with any information which might help police with their enquiries. If you were in the area of Lower Station Road, Barnet, early on Wednesday evening, please contact the crime office on...

A picture of the Target, taken when he was considerably younger, beaming broadly between his mother and his father, was on the front page of every broadsheet. Other than the photograph, there was little information about the victim's past. There was nothing new, nothing I didn't already know, no sordid titbits. I'd hoped for a few words describing the force with which the murder weapon had been wielded; perhaps mention of the unrecognisable nature of the corpse.

I decided to dump the stash of newspapers in various places around the country and chucked the first one in the forecourt litter bin of the service

station. I didn't want to be flagged up as having an unhealthy interest in this particular case, by hanging on to the reports. You could never be too careful. I then restarted the car and continued my journey to Peterborough where I was to drop off several thousand packets of sedatives.

'Hey Ho Silver Lining' blasted out from the tinny radio. I turned up the volume and banged the wheel victoriously as I careered up the motorway, euphoric at the masterful outcome of all my planning.



The police car was parked outside my flat when I got back. A female officer, with very shapely legs encased in seamed black stockings, was questioning passers-by as I got out of the car. A rough-looking man, with the appearance of a homeless hobo, leant against the panda car. He glanced up and down the road. One hand shielded his eyes from the dazzling sunlight and the other one pointed a zapper at the vehicle doors. I heard the locks clunk shut as he approached.

'Good afternoon.' I smiled, jiggling my house keys up and down in my left hand as I approached the front door.

'Mr Beck? Arthur Beck?' The grizzled policeman produced an identification card and stepped forward in front of me, blocking my path.

'Yes. I'm Arthur Beck. Can I help you?'

'Yes. I'm Detective Kent and this is WPC Quinn. We'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's okay. It's in relation to a recent murder in Barnet on Wednesday night.' Despite his weather-beaten face with its complex myriad of wrinkles, this cop had a near perfect set of dazzling white teeth.

'Of course. Would you like to come in? I heard the news. Dreadful.' I smiled confidently at the detective and his stockinged sidekick. As I went to unlock the door, I noticed Mrs Kennedy talking to some random person further up the street. She waved when she noticed me. Thank God for burst pipes.

Inside the flat, the first thing that hit was the overwhelming stench of fresh paint. The walls were redder than I'd intended and certainly more garish than I'd have liked. Perhaps they needed toning down a tad.

'I see you've been painting.'

'Yes, but I should have let some air in. What a stench.' I threw open all the windows and the bright spring sunlight shone through. 'Coffee?' I offered.

‘No thank you. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your whereabouts on Wednesday night. This is an informal chat so we can eliminate you from our enquiries.’ We all sat down. DCI Kent, WPC Bluestocking (I’d already forgotten her real name) and myself.

The detective filled me in on the crime that had been committed and I was subsequently asked a series of bland and uninspired questions. Where had I been on Wednesday evening between the hours of five and seven? Did I know the victim? Could anyone verify my whereabouts? I was being questioned, apparently, because of my relationship as a recent ex-boyfriend of Rebecca Carrington, who had been present at the scene of the crime.

Mrs Kennedy had already told him I’d helped stem the flow of water from a burst pipe. She was confident I’d stayed in all evening. She remembered the noise from my television which was still on when she went to bed around ten. I didn’t mention to the police officers that I often left my TV on when I went out. I liked the comforting presence it provided on my return. Mrs Kennedy didn’t mention this and I certainly wasn’t going to.

In regard to my relationship with the victim, I was able to confirm I’d never met him. How perfect the almost-truth was. On the question of Rebecca, I was careful. I answered succinctly, kept my tone even, and offered up the bare facts.

‘Yes, Rebecca and I were going out until fairly recently. She wasn’t ready to settle down and we were on a short break. No, I didn’t realise she knew the victim.’ Rebecca had never talked about the Target with me, having merrily scouted round their relationship history with aplomb. She had mentioned everyone other than Mr Dawson in passing conversations. I began to feel irritable as the words I relayed to this nosey bastard were not painting a clear picture as to the true nature of the relationship.

‘Did you know an Oliver Moreton?’ Kent continued. I was again confidently able to tell him that Rebecca had mentioned his name in relation to working at some art gallery in the West End but we’d never been formally introduced.



When the detective stood up and wandered round the flat, I set about asking a few questions of my own. It would have been odd not to be curious.

‘It says in the papers that a suspect is being held.’ I took a deliberate sharp intake of breath. ‘It surely can’t be Rebecca. I haven’t been able to get

hold of her but understand she was found near the body.'

I watched WPC Bluestocking open all the kitchen cupboards and wander through my flat, picking up and putting down my personal belongings. I'm not sure the tome about the Yorkshire Ripper on my bedside table would send out the right message, but choice of reading matter couldn't place me at the crime scene. I had been meticulous.

'No. She's not a suspect. You can rest easy.' The detective turned to his colleague and nodded that it was time to go. 'That's all for now, Mr Beck. We'll be in touch if we need to talk to you again. Thank you.' With that they were gone.



Initial euphoria at the apparent success of my operation was soon replaced by an overwhelming sense of anti-climax. Alone in my red cavern, feet resting on the coffee table, I flicked between the various news channels to soak up every detail of the crime.

I freeze-framed a picture of Rebecca which popped up on the screen. Her long blonde hair was blowing across her face as she smiled at the camera. I knew the smile was for me and that it was only a matter of time until we would be together again. There wasn't much longer to wait.

REBECCA

I didn't move for over a week. I ignored the endless calls from my mother, Jodi, and random acquaintances I'd met over the years.

I lay in bed, duvet pulled round my ears to block out the noise. When I finally dragged myself up, I moved my state of apathy to the sofa in the living room.

Oliver had been charged with murder. Intimate and graphic details of his life were plastered across the tabloids. Poignant but nauseating snaps of his kids were paraded alongside the accused and his wife; the latter, pathetically, was standing by her man. But I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore.



Seven days after the murder there was an incessant hammering on my door. I hid in the bedroom, willing it to stop but it continued for over an hour. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I padded across the lounge and peeked through the spyhole. There was a mad-looking dishevelled woman pounding her fists against the frame.

I slid open the door a fraction, keeping the chain fastened, and waited for the woman to stop pummelling.

'Yes,' I said. Although I hadn't faced a mirror in the last week, I reckoned that this woman must have looked worse than I did. Frizzy greying hair stuck out at weird angles from her scalp and broken angry veins criss-crossed her cheeks. The black rings round her eyes gave testimony to some inner hell.

'Please let me in. I'm Yvonne Moreton, Oliver's mother. I need to talk to you. Please.' The temptation to quietly close the door in her face was

overwhelming but something about her tortured countenance mirrored my own. A chink of empathy urged me to undo the chain.

Yvonne Moreton bent down and picked up some post, which had been pushed under the door by a tenant on the ground floor, and handed it to me. 'Thank you,' I said as she stepped inside. If Oliver's mother was disgusted by the rancid array of takeaway cartons and pizza boxes, she didn't show it. There was only one thing on her mind.

'You need to tell them the truth,' she began. Why, I wondered? Her son had ruined my life so why shouldn't I ruin his?

'What's that? What truth are you talking about?'

All of a sudden the phone rang. I heard Arthur leave a short message to say he was thinking of me and hoped to speak soon. Yvonne had slumped onto the sofa and was crying. Wailing sounds followed me as I went to put on the kettle. The phone rang again. This time it was DCI Kent asking if I'd pop by the station. He'd a couple of things he wanted to clear up.

As the kettle boiled I went to the bedroom and pulled on a pair of jogging bottoms and a rumpled T-shirt and ran a cursory brush through my hair for the first time in seven days. I threw cold water over my face and noticed the deathly grey pallor of my skin. I didn't want company; I wanted to be alone, sort things out. I needed time to think.

I returned to the living room, set down two cups of tea, and sat opposite Mrs Moreton. She had managed to regain some composure and launched into a rehearsed but heartfelt tirade.

'Oliver isn't a murderer. He says you were at the scene before he got there,' she began, staring at me, willing me to agree. 'He says he only turned up because Mitch had texted him earlier in the day asking him to come round. Mitch had wanted to clear the air, make up. Whatever happened between them he wanted to sort it out. My son didn't murder Mitch. You know that, don't you?'

I kept my mouth firmly shut. The clock on the wall had stopped at two but it still wasn't midday. The damp patch in the right-hand corner of the ceiling had grown and was creeping inwards, invading the room with its dull wet presence. The flaking yellow walls would never be painted over, not by me at any rate. I'd be leaving soon. There was a small cottage, somewhere far away, with my name on. I still had thousands in the bank.

For a third time the phone rang. I excused myself from the distraught presence and unplugged the wires from the wall beside me. My mobile rang

in tandem and I switched it off.

‘I need to go out. I’m sorry about Oliver,’ I lied. ‘Perhaps you should ask your son what it was they’d fallen out over. That might give you some answers.’ I stood.

Mrs Moreton didn’t budge. ‘I know Oliver stepped in over Mitch’s toes after he deserted you and went off with someone else to Italy. But because my son never loved you, that doesn’t give you the right to frame him for murder.’ I watched spittle spurt from her wet lips and the angry veins pulse in her cheeks.

I glowered at her. ‘When you get the truth from your son, I might be able to help. Until then, don’t come back.’ I flung open the front door then pulled Mrs Moreton out of the chair by the arm and directed her towards the exit. The screams of ‘liar’ continued for at least ten minutes outside on the landing and I had to turn up my music to drown out the noise.

Mrs Moreton’s visit acted as a catalyst to spur me into action. A full confession from Oliver about what he’d done to me might be the one chance of salvation; both for him and for me.

AMBER

The psychiatrist told me I was suffering from severe depression. The unnatural highs followed by abysmal lows formed part of my condition.

However, that night at the cinema I knew my hysterical happiness had nothing at all to do with the bipolar diagnosis. Mitch had come back. After he phoned out of the blue, shortly after Christmas, I stopped the knife cutting and began to wean myself off the bulimic tendencies. This was until after that fateful night in February.



We'd never been one of those hand-holding couples who displayed affection in public. Our relationship went deeper; it was built on friendship and respect. That was my take on it anyway. Whenever Mitch braced against my advances, I told myself he needed time, that he wasn't ready to settle down.

Gone with the Wind seemed an odd film choice for an action movie buff. *James Bond* or *Mission Impossible* would have been a more obvious choices. For my part, I was thrilled when he suggested I join him. It didn't matter what was on the screen and I snuggled up close while the action unfolded.

At the end of the film, as the credits rolled and the bright lights dampened the short-lived romance, Mitch suggested we grab a bite to eat. The screen had gone blank and we were ushered smartly up the aisle.

'Yes please. I'm starving,' I lied. Denials of secret eating battles had become second nature. Tonight I wouldn't move portions from side to side. Tonight I'd behave, clean my plate. I promised myself that I'd stoically swallow without hesitation. This was to be a perfect evening and the start of a future together.



I saw Arthur before he saw me. He was standing on his own near the exit, leaning against a vending machine. My stomach knotted when I recognised the familiar immobile figure. His eyes darted from left to right but his hands were invisible, stuffed deep inside his jacket pockets.

‘I need to pop to the ladies before we go,’ I whispered to Mitch.

I scurried off to the toilets, praying that I could delay long enough for Arthur to have disappeared before I returned.

A queue snaked back from the toilet entrance, excited ladies swapping opinions on Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. The handsome bounder pitted against the weak ne’er-do-well. In that moment, haunting flashes of Arthur, loitering outside my flat, sprung to mind. I recalled the horror when I discovered he’d rented a room directly opposite my front door. Fate had offered me an escape route when Mitch and I fled to Italy and cowardice guaranteed that I’d never own up to the knowledge of Arthur’s subterfuge.

I leant against the door frame, willing the queue to move forward. The noisy blast of heat from the hand dryers muffled the conversations. I dug my fingers into my neck, scraping the surface with my nails to distract my thoughts. Unease crawled under my skin.

As I inched forward, a tall striking woman, familiar, with flawless pale skin brushed past me on her way out of the toilets. Where had I seen her before? There was something about her face; the perfect straight nose and full lips. Her blonde hair hung silkily over her face and for a moment I thought she might be an actress, an icon seen out of context. But no one else was looking at her or whispering behind hands.

I peered round and watched in horror as Mitch took a step towards the woman and she likewise moved in his direction. Oh my god. It was Rebecca.



Mitch and I had been sitting on the shores of Lake Trasimeno, at a small café, when Mitch told me he would be moving on. He wanted to travel, see more of the country. Surprise turned to shock, then despair, when I realised he meant to go it alone.

‘It’s not you,’ he said. It was a throwaway platitude. ‘It’s me. I’m just not ready to settle down, Amber. That’s why I left England, to travel and see the world.’ I knew it was a lie but it didn’t matter. I loved him. Oliver had told me the real reason why Mitch had left England so suddenly. Oliver

confided, behind closed doors, the full story of how his friend had got involved with the wrong crowd. It was a drugs thing; but I didn't care.

The first time I saw him I was smitten. Mitch was so handsome. Dark wavy hair showcased his perfect features. A strong aquiline nose, full sensual lips and deep mahogany eyes, framed by long thick lashes, conspired at perfection.

I remember lifting the cappuccino to my lips, willing myself not to cry, but unable to stop the flow of hot salty tears. Mitch leant across and wiped them away, using a serviette, and gently pushed back the straggling hair out of my eyes.

'I'll wait. Take as long as you want. I love you, Mitch,' I cried. He didn't answer. I waited for the crumbs but they never came. It was the first day of a depression that I feared would never go away. The first cut never really heals.

He took a note from his wallet, got up and went inside to pay for our coffees as I stared out across the lake. Boats bobbed up and down in the distance, tiny figures walked around the lake shore and life carried on regardless. Even in death, I thought, nothing would change.

I leant across the table and picked up his wallet and smelt the rich leather for some hint of his scent. It was a worn black affair with the Étienne Aigner logo embossed in gold. He loved fashionable accessories. I lifted out a small photograph. It was signed and dated on the back. *Rebecca 1994. Yours forever xx*. Of course I would never forget the face. How could I?



Jealousy had never been a weakness of mine before that night at the cinema. It suddenly reared its head and gripped my life in a stubborn vice. No matter how I tried I couldn't shake it off. Sickness settled in my stomach, food got tossed in the bins and the criss-cross scars on my forearms got deeper.

I struggled to work and went through the motions of trying to control my class of eight-year-olds. I smothered their ebullience and enthusiasm with bland curt authority. Courtney Bramston, a tiny blonde girl with bobbing ponytails and floaty pink blouse, presented me with a dreamlike image of our first child; a princess who possessed beauty in looks as well as personality.

The genetics would now have to favour Mitch if this aspiration were to come true. My hair had started to fall out and my skin was prone to bouts of eczema. Dry patches of red flaky skin defined my face. One day the headmistress called me into her office.

‘Amber, we need to talk.’ Miss Harbinger was the modern-day equivalent of Miss Jean Brody. She possessed the neat pernickety mannerisms of the spinster schoolmarm. I reckoned Miss Harbinger was in her late fifties. She was unmarried, cold and efficient.

Certificates hung on the white sterile walls of her study. Rows of Dickens and Shakespeare tomes lined the bookshelves and a tea trolley was set out with fine-glazed china cups and saucers.

I would never turn out like my boss, of that I was certain. I had a life. It was a momentary blip but soon my hair would regain its lustre and I’d put on a few pounds. One day soon Mitch would return. There was no way he would forgive Rebecca who had so readily replaced him with his best friend.

This is what I told myself as the chaste old maid suggested I take time off. There had been complaints. I watched as she neatly arrayed her pens and pencils around an antique inkwell; soulless salves for childlessness.

‘I don’t need time off. I’m fine,’ I said. ‘I’ve had a few personal problems, that’s all.’

‘Amber, you’re not well. Your weight is less than some of the pupils. You need to see a professional. Get help.’ She patronised me over the top of her half-rimmed glasses. What did she know about my life? Seven stones was a perfectly reasonable weight and when I put on a couple of pounds I’d treat myself to a new wardrobe; a short skirt perhaps and some flirty tops.

I agreed to time off, confident that it wouldn’t take long to get back control of my life. But the future never turns out as planned. I’d no idea what was around the corner.

AMBER

I spent the first two weeks of my enforced sick leave locked away in my flat. I promised Miss Harbinger that I'd seek professional help. Proof of such measures would be required before I was allowed back.

My pristine little bedsit took on the feel of a hospital ward as I became more and more neurotic over my health. In between rearranging morsels of food on a plate, I'd begun to gargle with antiseptic mouthwash. The doctor warned me an infection, in my weakened state, could prove extremely dangerous, deadly even.

The phone didn't ring. I kidded myself that I stayed in to avoid infection but the truth was that Mitch had promised to call. I waited and waited, keeping the television volume low, often on mute, willing any small sound to bring forth contact. Silence was all there was and I willed a noise to offer hope. I didn't allow myself to dwell on Rebecca but images of her with Mitch, sharing champagne in bed, making love on silken sheets, tortured me during these quiet times. Apart from a daily trip to the local convenience store for Pot Noodles and fruit, I spent most of the day in front of the television and occasionally picked up a book to distract me from the misery.



On that bright spring morning, nothing had prepared me for the finality of death. Mr Isaacs was chatting animatedly to a couple of customers when I entered the shop.

'Dreadful. Imagine. Bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat,' he announced with macabre importance. 'Poor guy lived around here. A teacher apparently.' Mr Isaacs lifted a mug to his lips and wetted his mouth which was dry from the verbal revelations.

‘Morning, Amber. Can I help you? How are you? You’re looking a bit brighter today. The sun helps lift the mood, doesn’t it?’ He pinged open the till before stretching out his sweaty palm for the coins. ‘Just the paper?’

My worst fears abated when I glanced at the picture on the front page. Thank God it wasn’t Mitch.

Self-obsession blots out the world. Depression dulls the senses and leaves no room for others. Daily survival had become my sole aim. One day at a time. Nothing could jolt me from apathy. That was until I got back to the flat and closed the door. I put on the kettle, needing a mug of peppermint tea to prepare my stomach for a few ounces of muesli.

The phone rang and rang, and for some reason I didn’t answer it, despite the fact I’d spent the last two weeks waiting for its welcome interruptions. I laid the paper carefully on the coffee table, slowly smoothing out the front cover. I used both hands to flatten it. Before I read the article I checked the date at the top of the paper, making sure it was today’s news. Perhaps I’d picked up an old copy of a paper a week or two out of date. The picture was that of a stranger.

It was some other Mitch Dawson whom I didn’t recognise. The black and white photograph was grainy, unclear. The twinkling eyes smiled at me. A castle in the background was an Italian ruin, somewhere near Panicale in Umbria, and the rucksack visible over the victim’s shoulder was purple with the single word *Buongiorno* plastered across the back. I knew this, not from the clarity of the photograph, but I recognised the item. It was a purchase from a flea market in Castiglione Del Lago the week we arrived in Italy. It kept his wallet, phone and passport safe, and it never left his side.

I joked with him that I’d like to hide in the backpack so he’d never go off without me.



I deliberately scalded myself with the peppermint tea. I poured it slowly down my arms and let the pain sear through my body. I managed not to pass out from the pain but instead retched over the sofa, through both the shock and the agony.

A teacher in his late thirties, Mitch Dawson, was bludgeoned to death on Wednesday night in Barnet. A baseball bat was found near the body and it is believed to be the murder weapon. A man was arrested at the scene.

Friends and colleagues or anyone who might have known Mr Dawson are asked to come forward and help police with their enquiries.

Suddenly an agonising scream pierced the air. It went on and on.
For what seemed like an eternity, I was unable to stop.

AMBER

It took several days to sort out a visiting order. Purpose and resolve fleetingly blocked the pain and misery.

I trudged up the long driveway to the prison entrance, aware of officers dotted at intervals along the perimeter fence. There would be no escape from the bleak surroundings. Oliver's hulk wouldn't be able to slither along tunnels and any attempt to scale the fence would be futile. It would collapse under his weight.

When I reached the entrance portico, a nameless prison official thrust an arrival form for me to sign before I was led through to the visitors' room. I waited at a Formica-topped table until the minute hand worked its way round to midday. A large black-framed clock stared down from the wall; a reminder of time, the essence of prison.

The room was painted a dull grey. No merry murals of seascapes or mountain vistas. The walls reminded visitors of why they were here and of crimes committed. I picked at a scab on the inside of my forearm which I'd released from the confines of a woollen jumper. A prison officer stood, a silent statue, next to the door, waiting for it to open.

When Oliver appeared he didn't seem to know who was visiting and after a swift glance round the room, turned to head back the way he'd come. The guard tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. I stood up, smiled and held my hand up in silent acknowledgement. He walked over and sat down opposite me.

'Oliver, I don't know what to say,' I began. If Mitch's bludgeoning to death had rocked me to the core, Oliver appeared to be in a catatonic state, barely able to speak. After a moment's silence, he said my name.

‘Amber, it’s nice to see you.’ We could have been meeting on the High Street after a number of years, swapping pleasantries. There was no familiar hint of a playful grin on Oliver’s lips. He looked down at his hands, which seemed even larger than I remembered as they splayed out across the table.

‘I know you didn’t do it. I know you didn’t murder Mitch. That’s why I’m here,’ I said. I folded my hand over his flattened fingers, giving them a reassuring squeeze. ‘Rebecca killed Mitch. I’m certain and I’m going to prove it but I’ll need your help.’

Oliver’s eyelids twitched, and he blinked hard to contain a tic that beat in his left eye.

‘You see, Mitch and I were to be married. We’d set a date.’ I proudly presented the fourth finger on my left hand. On it was a small white solitaire diamond, simply encased in a plain gold setting. I kept my fourth finger proudly extended and pushed my hand close up under Oliver’s eyes. There was a momentary flicker of something on his face. It was hope. I saw him vaguely register my plan. We’d work together. The bitch would go down for a very long time.

‘Married? When?’

‘When we came back from Italy.’ I pretended that Mitch and I had been a couple the whole time we were away. ‘We took a short break before Mitch decided he was ready to settle down. He was never going back to Rebecca. Remember, she dumped him to be with you? You remember, don’t you?’ A mild aggression accompanied my rhetoric. He needed to understand, get the plot line and agree to play along before I had to leave.

‘Yes, he was furious with both Rebecca and me. I remember.’

‘We need to build on Rebecca’s jealousy. Don’t you see, Oliver? You remember how I told you a couple of weeks ago that Mitch and I were getting married. We were jetting off to the Maldives and doing the beach ceremony thing. I showed you the brochures.’

‘Yes, she never really got over Mitch. Even when we started dating.’ Oliver pondered over the storyline. Confusion over his relationship with Rebecca was leading him in the direction I was hoping; to believe that perhaps Rebecca had been jealous of me when she discovered my relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Perhaps she was devastated beyond belief that Mitch didn’t want her back.

There was a certain ring of truth in what I was saying. If that were the case then Rebecca may indeed have arrived before him and bludgeoned her

soulmate to death.

There was no proof that a man rather than a woman had used the baseball bat. Oliver had already asked the police that question. Rebecca's prints hadn't been on the bat but she may have wiped them off or worn gloves. Mitch probably had decided that she was no good long term and could never have forgiven her.

I watched my confused co-conspirator mull the details over in his head. The sentry glanced at his watch, checking synchronicity with the ticking time bomb on the wall. There was a ten minute window left.

'Oliver, it's your best hope. It's probably your only hope. You're in the frame for a murder you didn't commit. Rebecca was jealous of my relationship with Mitch and couldn't accept that he didn't want her. I'm going to the police station first thing tomorrow morning to make a full statement.' I stopped for breath. Time was up.

'You don't need to change your story. Rebecca was on the scene before you. You hadn't seen Mitch for some time but you do know that he went off to Italy with me and that we spent ten years together.' No one else knew that Mitch had deserted me after two months. Oliver didn't know either, not for certain, but he needed to get this line straight for his defence team.

'Tell them that you and Rebecca started going out shortly after Mitch disappeared and he was furious when he found out. He was upset and jealous but you also know that he would have been too proud to take her back. You see, Oliver,' I emphasised, 'you now have me on your team. My statement will get you off and that bitch will go down for a long time. A very long time.'

AMBER

Perhaps it was naivety that made me agree to supper with Arthur. I believed my own story that Mitch had wanted to marry me and I was propelled into the satisfying role of grieving fiancée.

Even Dad listened, sympathised and showed not a small measure of pride that his plain, bright little girl had bagged herself such an enviable catch. He wasn't quite so effusive, however, in his display of sadness at my betrothed's demise.

It didn't matter because certainty at the foolproof nature of my plan gave me purpose and led me to Arthur's front door. Whereas revenge and jealousy were my original motivations, the role of grieving widow was one I was starting to enjoy.



'Amber. How lovely. Come in.' I'd never been to Arthur's flat or any of his previous addresses. The bleakness of his bachelor pad was reminiscent of the visitors' room in Belmarsh.

Void of curtains or blinds the windows stared directly out onto the street below. While Arthur had proudly announced his address over the phone, carefully accentuating the Highgate postcode, he failed to mention that the flat was on the first floor of a cramped 1970s purpose-built concrete block overlooking the only petrol station in the London N6 postcode.

I didn't notice the binoculars on the window sill until Arthur hastily lifted them and pushed them into the back of a cupboard. The action stirred uneasy memories.

'I didn't think you'd come.' He seemed genuinely pleased to see me. 'And you look so well. Let me take your coat.' He'd always been the perfect gent with never a hair out of place; that was Arthur. Boring, bland

and pernickety. Sex appeal had passed him by and been replaced by efficiency and pedantry.

‘A dreadful matter with that guy Mitch!’ Arthur yelled from the kitchen. I heard the tinkle of glasses and a bottle being uncorked. A long mirror ran the length of the lounge’s front wall which had recently been painted a garish red. I always thought of Arthur as a brown or grey man, with the merest hint of dirty beige. He didn’t do bright tones. The colour in the flat seemed an incongruous choice.

On a side wall was a reprint map, unframed, of the whole of North London. I went up close and saw small black ink dots placed atop familiar landmarks. The Whetstone, Henley’s Corner, Hadley Highstone and Muswell Hill Broadway all had a dark blob over the names. I had to strain my eyes, unsure at first if they were only random dirt smudges.

‘That’s a 1910 copy of the original map,’ chirped my host as he came back holding two large glasses of white wine. ‘Chardonnay for my Amber.’ He smiled and handed me a copious measure. We raised our glasses and it brought back memories of the last meal we shared at the Italian restaurant on the Finchley Road.

A small drop-leaf table was pushed up against the wall and a selection of black and green olives was laid out on top of a plastic table cloth.

‘I thought we could order pizzas and stay in? As you know, I’m not much of a chef,’ Arthur joked. When we sat down, Arthur on his dull brown leather sofa and me on the single worn armchair, he turned the conversation back to my dead boyfriend’s murder.

‘I’m sorry about that guy Dawson. I know you’d been seeing him. I hope you weren’t too involved. He wasn’t a very nice guy from what I’ve heard.’ Arthur had never been a drinker so it came as a surprise to me when he gulped large mouthfuls of wine one after the other.

‘Actually, Arthur, Mitch and I were to be married.’

At this point, I slid off my silky black gloves. I’d been anticipating this moment with relish. I waved my left ring finger skittishly up and down in the air. I remembered if Arthur didn’t like something you said or disagreed with your opinion, he would stay silent and stare right through you. As he glared, I carried on.

‘We were in love, Arthur. I’m sorry. I know you and Rebecca Carrington...’ her name stuck in the craw and the haunting image of her face flashed in front of me, ‘...were going out and it must be dreadful for

her, having been at the murder scene, but I'm absolutely devastated. Mitch was the love of my life. He was my soulmate.' I lifted my glass and took my own large mouthfuls.

Arthur set his glass down on the table, got up and returned to the kitchen.

'Peanuts?' he asked when he came back, holding a bowl towards me.

I shook my head. Arthur was infuriating when he didn't want to discuss things and I remembered, only too well, his ability to fool himself into believing what he wanted rather than admitting the truth. His smile returned.

'Rebecca and I are getting married, Amber. I'm sorry for your loss. We're also very much in love. You can rest assured she had no feelings for your fiancé. She's still in shock at what happened.'

'Why was she there that night, Arthur? Did you ask her?'

'Dawson had called her. A courtesy call, I think, to tell her it was over and although they'd always have a history together, there was no reason not to remain friends. I think he wanted to clear the air. Perhaps he was going to tell her about his engagement to you.'

Maybe I was overly sensitive but I sensed Arthur's sarcasm and disbelief. There was an evil jeering tone to his voice.

When the pizzas arrived, I decided to play my grief card. Of course my host understood. Arthur always understood and complacently took back the cardboard box, unopened, which he had handed to me as I made my excuses to leave.

AMBER

I lay awake all night. At one point a screeching noise, wild and feral, broke through the silence. It came from the back garden. It could have been a bird, trapped by a stealthy cat, pinned down by the feline's claws. Or perhaps a skulking night-time fox, on a covert mission, low to the ground, had clamped jagged teeth onto its prey.

I stared at the ceiling and listened. The high-pitched squeal carried on till all at once quietness fell. An eerie hush confirmed the act was done. In the morning I'd scour the garden for dead carcasses; crows overhead might lead me to the entrails.

In the dark I mulled over the possibilities. Gut instinct told me that Rebecca hadn't murdered my fiancé and Oliver would have had far too much to lose. The question was why they'd both been present at the scene when the police arrived. There were only two other alternatives as to what might have happened.

Perhaps a rogue intruder after money, possibly high on drugs, had crashed their way into Mitch's flat. It could have been a drug-related crime linked to his past. Although I'd provided him with a bolthole in Italy when he was in the frame for drugs possession, maybe the past had caught up with him.

Then, of course, there was Arthur.

REBECCA

When there was a knock at my front door again a few days after Mrs Moreton's visit, my first instinct was to ignore it but the rapping carried on.

Through the spyhole I saw DCI Kent holding up his identification badge. He guessed I was at home.

'Just a moment,' I said, pulling back the chain and unbolting the door. I pushed hair from my eyes and tied my dressing gown tighter. 'Come in. Sorry, but I haven't been answering calls.'

DCI Kent and a young male colleague nudged their way into the flat.

'Miss Carrington, I'm sorry to bother you, but we need to ask you a few more questions relating to Mr Dawson's death. May we sit down?'

I pointed to the settee and sat some distance away on a hard-backed upright chair.

'We've taken statements now from everyone who seems to have had a relevant connection with Mr Dawson. It's come to light...' he continued. At this point I became uneasy with the direction of the conversation. The detective's tone had taken on a more serious timbre. '...that Miss Amber Grey was in a serious relationship with Mr Dawson and they were to be married. Were you aware of this, Miss Carrington?'

The absurdity of the question made me laugh.

'That's ludicrous. Amber was an old friend, nothing more.' The young constable looked ill at ease and up to this point hadn't spoken. I wondered why he was present. Perhaps some bureaucratic rule meant that officers never did house calls alone. Maybe they thought it was safer to work in tandem in case I produced another random baseball bat.

'She has shown us the engagement ring and has backed it up with proof that they were very much together for over ten years in Italy. She also told

us, and this has been verified by Mr Moreton, that you and Mr Dawson had finished your relationship a long time ago. Something about him not being able to forgive you for running off with his best friend some years before? Miss Grey ascertains that Mr Dawson had no romantic intentions in your regard. But she says that you'd been incessantly trying to renew contact with him over the past few weeks.'

The wizened cop had put forward his case succinctly, maintaining an emotionless façade throughout. He took a deep breath when he'd finished. This was the first time that my reasons for being at the flat on the night of the murder were being questioned.

I excused myself for a moment, asking if they would mind waiting while I pulled on some clothes. I needed time to digest what had been said. I was being set up as a jealous woman scorned. That much had come through loud and clear and the implications were starting to sink in.

I spent ten minutes in the bathroom, applying lipstick and brushing through my hair. It had been matted in clumps since the murder. A glance in the mirror and I felt confident that the young copper at least would find it hard to envisage me as a woman scorned. I let my heart calm down before I went back into the lounge.

'Sorry, but this is all a bit of a shock,' I said. 'Mitch, Mr Dawson, and I were to be married. We'd started up our relationship again and I'd gone round that evening to surprise him. You saw the picnic hamper at the scene.'

'Was he expecting you?'

Of course not. It was to be a surprise. Mitch was meant to open the door, fling his arms around me and haul me inside. The food hamper would have been left unopened until we'd made love. It had been staged to perfection.

I could see DCI Kent's dilemma. He didn't give much away though, with his curt bland mode of questioning. If Amber was telling the truth and she and Mitch were to be married, then I might have been fuelled by rage and jealousy, enough to bludgeon my ex-boyfriend with a baseball bat. I was found at the scene of the crime, cradling his head, apparently after the event, rather than calling the police. Perhaps Kent thought I'd intended to flee the scene once my rage had been spent and reality kicked in.

'You say Mr Moreton was already at the scene when you arrived. He denies this and says he found you huddled over the body when he got

there.’ Both pairs of eyes had settled on my face, watching intently for my reaction. ‘He’s adamant that this was the case. He has now corroborated Miss Grey’s story that Mitch and you were finished long ago. He says Mr Dawson would never have had you back after you’d gone off with his best friend. We need to ask, Miss Carrington, if you were jealous enough to have wanted harm to come to Mr Dawson?’

At this point, survival instincts kicked in. I’d seen too many TV cop movies not to know the implications. I stood, my legs weak and my head reeling.

‘I’d rather not answer any more questions. I don’t feel too well.’ Nausea churned up my insides. The true horror of what was being suggested was starting to register.

As Kent and his colleague turned to go, the DCI threw a parting shot.

‘Miss Carrington, I know that you’re still in deep shock but we’ll need to speak to you again. I think you’d be well advised to get yourself a lawyer.’

REBECCA

At first, random sightings of Arthur outside my flat hadn't greatly bothered me. I was so excited to be back with Mitch that I'd dismissed Arthur's late-night visits as nothing more than the actions of a lover spurned, a last-ditch attempt to deal with rejection.

Recalling my own late-night drunken visits to Mitch's flat all those years ago lent me a measure of sympathy. Arthur would soon tire of neurotic vigils and move on. That was what I believed until after the police visit. I realised then that I was dealing with something far more sinister.

Shocked back to reality by DCI Kent's insinuations, I knew I had to pull myself together. I needed to work out what was going on and to extricate myself from the accusations of murder. It seemed bizarre and farfetched to suspect Arthur of murdering Mitch but suddenly things became a bit clearer.

I would happily have left Oliver to rot in prison but now things had taken such a dramatic turn, with a finger pointing in my direction, I had to shake off the apathy. Wallowing in the nightmare wasn't going to help prove my innocence.



I agreed to meet Arthur a couple of days after the police visit. I got my hair cut again, cropped short and severe, and buried my femininity. I dressed down in jogging bottoms and T-shirt. Comfort and efficiency were my choice in dealing with the aftermath of Mitch's death.

At eight sharp, Arthur knocked on the door. I'd been watching him down on the street below from behind the blinds. He'd been standing there, bottle of wine and bunch of flowers in hand, since seven thirty.

A draught filtered through a slit in the window frame where a small piece of rotting wood had come loose. I shivered and opened the door, bracing myself against the stranger who stood on the doorstep proffering gifts.

‘Rebecca, it’s lovely to see you,’ Arthur said as he determinedly stepped across the threshold. He leant in and kissed me on the cheek. The aftershave was familiar. ‘Autumn’ had been Mitch’s favourite. He’d kept a bottle in his bathroom.

‘Arthur, come in.’ I opened the door tentatively but didn’t lock it behind us. ‘How have you been?’ he began. ‘I see you’ve had your hair cut. It suits you,’ he lied. I’d grown my hair back to its full luxuriant length after Mitch and I got back together but now the short style clung savagely to my scalp. ‘Although, if I’m entirely honest,’ Arthur continued, ‘I think I preferred the longer look.’

At first I couldn’t work out what was odd about Arthur’s appearance. He was wearing what appeared to be a very expensive beige cashmere jumper over a silk shirt. His cream trousers had the hang of an exclusive designer label but the dirty trainers and navy socks belonged to someone else.

We sat down and made mundane conversation.

‘Quite dreadful about Mitch. I hear Amber and he were engaged.’ Arthur sat with his ankles crossed, one foot resting over the other and he smoothed his hair down with his right hand. He reminded me of Adolf Hitler. Carefully applied gel gave the impression of a dark helmet covering his head. What I’d once considered blandness about his appearance now seemed macabre.

Arthur had swapped his respectable persona for a strange hybrid, a cross between designer chic and tatty vagrant. Fear gripped as I realised I might be confronting a psychopath. Something warned me not to be divisive.

‘Yes. The police told me.’ A wave of sadness washed over me but I stood up to camouflage my unease. ‘I heard they were to be married.’ I wandered into the kitchen and collected the small platter of dips and crisps which I’d set out earlier. I poured myself a large glass of water, having lost the taste for alcohol.

‘Anyway, I surprised Amber by announcing that you and I were also to be married.’ His voice carried through to the kitchen like an announcement

on a railway station platform. The eight ten is about to depart for Peterborough from platform three.

The salted peanuts shot out all over the kitchen floor as the plate slipped from my grasp. Arthur stood in the doorway smiling. He was holding something aloft, a small box in his left hand. He didn't say anything but watched as I extricated a dustpan and brush and swept up the debris.

'I'll not be a minute,' I mumbled. 'The nuts have rolled everywhere.' My mind whirled with the turn of events. He didn't lower his outstretched arm but teased me to ignore it.

'Will you marry me, Rebecca?' He beamed. Silence. My pulse raced and I couldn't breathe. It was as if the air had been punched out of me as I gripped the sink.

'Sorry, Arthur, you'll have to excuse me. I've got an upset stomach.'

I moved towards the bathroom, closing the door tightly behind me, and quietly fastened the bolt. I gasped for air.

'Are you okay, Rebecca?' Arthur was directly outside the bathroom door. 'Let me in. I can help.'

'I'll not be long. Sorry, I've had a bad stomach all day. I won't be a moment.'



Arthur led me to the sofa, put his arm round me and apologised if he'd frightened me.

'You must know how I feel about you. We're meant to be together. You've had a dreadful shock,' he continued as he took my hand, 'and need someone to look after you. I think I'm that person.' He extracted a simple ruby solitaire from its velvet confines and pushed it assertively onto the fourth finger of my left hand. It was then he played his trump card.

'Once the police understand how much in love we are and that we've been planning our marriage for quite some time, they'll realise that you had absolutely no interest in that Mitch chap. We only have eyes for each other.'

He leant across and aimed his puckered lips towards mine. His tongue flicked in and out like a viper's. Spittle hit my face and threatened a return of the bile. I swallowed hard, motionless against his shoulder.

Arthur had planned it all. He had left no trace and somehow had managed to put Oliver in the frame. He was giving me an alibi, a chance to wipe the slate clean with regard to a motive for murdering Mitch. If Arthur and I were to be married and if we were in love, then I wouldn't have

wanted to bludgeon my ex-boyfriend to death. It would be Amber's word against mine, and Arthur's.

Arthur was offering me an escape route. I guessed he'd perfected what he was going to say to the police. He must have known I was happy to leave Oliver in the frame. He may have found out about our history together, maybe even about the rape. This way, if everything stacked up, his original plan of framing Oliver and getting rid of his love rival, looked likely to work.

'I love you, Rebecca Carrington,' Arthur announced.

ARTHUR

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision to phone Amber, fuelled by desire to witness her misery and to gloat over the turn of events. Smug arrogance at the overwhelming success of my operation, coupled with a strong urge for revenge, forced me to phone my ex-girlfriend and invite her round.

She was even more pitiful in appearance than the last time I saw her. I hardly recognised her. Her once-lustrous brown hair straggled greasily round her face and weight loss had rendered her body cadaverous.

‘Amber, how well you look,’ I exclaimed, amazed by my own insincerity. She had morphed into my mother; ragged, sad and ugly. However, I felt an urgency to discuss recent events with someone closely linked to the crime and wanted to milk the aftermath for all it was worth.

It was risible that she expected me to believe that the Target would have had an inkling of interest in her. Sexless and delusional was my summation. My derision turned to confusion though when she ungloved her left hand and wiggled her tiny claw under my nose. It took a minute for the penny to drop.

‘We were to be married,’ she crowed. The anticipated breakdown of grief didn’t materialise. Instead this tramp, who had unceremoniously spurned and cast me aside, was glorifying in the role of grieving fiancée.

‘Mr Dawson and you? My goodness, I never realised.’ I got up and went into the kitchen. My anger was volcanic. I uncorked a bottle of Chardonnay, cheap and rancid like my guest. As I fiddled round in the kitchen, my attention was drawn to the neat row of knives, and I felt the most intense urge to pick one up and saw through her chicken bones. A small razor-sharp paring knife held my gaze.

If Amber and Mitch were due to be married, or even if her story were to be believed by the investigating officers, then Rebecca would have had a motive for murder. My goddess, the love of my life, would be in the frame. Fuelled by jealous failure and rejection, Rebecca might have pummelled her ex-lover to death with a baseball bat. This possible scenario had been spun with lies told by the ugly harlot sitting in my flat. If Rebecca hadn't turned up that night then our future together would have been secured. Now Amber threatened to derail my plans.

'I've ordered pizzas.' I smiled. 'I don't cook, as I'm sure you remember. I've never felt the need. There's plenty of money in the bank for fancy restaurants.'



I was holding the paring knife when the pizza boxes arrived, preparing to carefully slit open the sticky seals which bound the boxes together.

'Actually, Rebecca and I are to be married too. What an amazing coincidence.'

'Why was she at Mitch's flat that night? Did you ask her?' Harpy, nagging and carping. Bitch. I fiddled with the knife, jostling it from one hand to the other, toying with my notions.

'He'd phoned her. He wanted to clear the air and she felt she owed him a visit. No doubt he was keen to tell her about your engagement.' I laughed heartily at this point, ripped open the top of my box and speared a slice of pizza with the serrated edge. Amber was right to be afraid. She picked up her black silk gloves, slipped them nervously into her handbag and stood up.

'I think, if you don't mind, I'll head home,' she said. I didn't bother to get up. She handed me back her cardboard box. It was actually quite a treat devouring two whole pizzas one after the other.

I hate waste and as I threw the packaging in the bin, I decided that Amber was the biggest waste of all. If she was framing my betrothed for murder, consciously or subconsciously, she needed to be dealt with.

I guessed she knew exactly what she was doing. Jealousy was doubtless her motive.

ARTHUR

Timing is the essence of success; timing and a modicum of fate. Amber's bizarre pronouncements pushed me, rather sooner than I'd planned, to make my final move on Rebecca.

As I stood by the bus lane at the top of Muswell Hill, watching the red behemoths shunt their way round the roundabout, I devised a notion of moving to the country. Rebecca and I would start our own family, up north, well away from the grime and aggression. We'd find a cottage on the moors, an isolated spot with no ready access; just the two of us.

'Oi, mate. Push over.' Some random no-mark shoved me back against the shop front, jolting me out of my reverie. I spotted my reflection in the glass of the florist's window and had to look twice. I hardly recognised myself and laughed when I realised the stranger in dirty trainers was in fact me. I didn't want to overwhelm Rebecca with a totally new appearance so had decided to mix and match fashion statements.

I pushed the door open and strolled into the flower shop.

'A bunch of your finest. It's for my fiancée,' I crowed at the eager shop assistant. 'Nothing but the best.' I drew out a wad of banknotes, five hundred pounds in total, and thumbed through the stash. Payment in cash would ensure top-class service.

I had got used to paying for everything this way. Credit card payments and cheques could be traced. There was also a certain satisfaction at the respect such large casual bundles invoked.

'Perhaps you could pop in a few extra red roses. Red is her favourite colour. Nothing but the best,' I repeated while carefully selecting a gift card from a display. I took out a black biro from my jacket pocket, which had started to leak through into the lining.

The young sales assistant handed me another pen, her shy smile barely visible behind a droopy fringe. Quite a pretty young thing and deserving of the ten-pound tip I slipped her way. Perhaps I might visit her, before my marriage, and offer to take her for a drink, somewhere discreet.

With the huge bouquet held carefully upright in both hands, my next visit was to the off-licence next door. I had become a bit of a wine connoisseur, having spent a large amount of what I termed my *vigil time* browsing vintners' catalogues.

'Saint-Émilion Grand Cru,' I said out loud to myself. Perfect. I lifted the rascal of the vineyard down from the top shelf and withdrew the stash of notes once more from my pocket.



By the time I was back on the street, I was still half an hour early. I walked the short distance to Rebecca's flat and pressed myself hard against the wall opposite the entrance and counted down the minutes. As I stood quietly, patiently, in the shadows, I thought I saw Rebecca, a couple of times, pull back her blinds and look down at me. She would be anticipatory, excited, but I'd make her wait.

I needn't have worried about dressing up or down for our date because Rebecca hadn't made much of an effort. I was more than a little disappointed but she is still a beauty and more importantly she is my beauty. Her hair was sticking to her head, shorn like a sheep's. I put it down to trauma and decided that I would plan her wardrobe and hairstyles in the future.

'Will you marry me, Rebecca?'

Her reaction wasn't quite as planned. She dropped a bowl of peanuts all over the floor and, most irritatingly, seemed to find the task of clearing up more important than my question.

'Rebecca, will you marry me?' I repeated.

I heard her retch into the toilet bowl and wondered what she might have eaten. I must say the well-honed image which I carried round in my head of my beloved was a little askew. I tried to open the bathroom door but it was bolted from the inside. Locked doors will be taboo when we are married. I jiggled the handle up and down.

'I'll not be long,' she shouted through the barrier.

For at least ten minutes I waited outside, standing perfectly still, until she reappeared. She jumped right into my arms.

Rebecca would always have agreed to marry me as fate had ordained. Any initial doubts she might have harboured were soon scuppered when I assured her that our betrothal would negate the jealousy motive for murder which Amber had so carelessly tossed in the direction of the police.

Rebecca leant against my shoulder, craving my protection. At last the wait was over and together we would conquer the world. She was mine forever.

‘I love you, Rebecca Carrington.’

REBECCA

I spent half an hour searching for my pink baseball cap. It had to be the pink one, bright and unmistakable and as I scrabbled under the bed, at the back of cupboards, I panicked that I mightn't be able to find it.

The light blue hoodie, which I always wore when I jogged in the park, had been washed and I laid it out alongside the navy jogging bottoms. My red and white trainers were a size five; the right size. The outfit I had chosen was the most distinctive I could come up with.

I prepared a full English breakfast for Jodi and Taylor who arrived, as agreed, promptly at seven. The certainty that Arthur was a creature of habit made me confident that this was early enough.

I had meticulously logged times and lengths of his vigils outside my flat for the past three days. By 8.50am he was either slumped down in his car across the road in the side street or else sitting in the café on the corner. My view of him was as clear as his would have been of me. I was sure he wouldn't arrive any earlier and as I shuffled my friends into the flat, I went to the window and pulled the blinds tightly closed. Jodi and Taylor needed to be invisible.

'Right, Rebecca. Spill the beans. We've been worried about you.'

Jodi hugged me so tightly I thought she'd crack my ribs. Taylor came round the side and we formed a group hug. I fought back the tears. Taylor's shoulders came level with mine and her short cropped hair, although mousy brown, was shaped not unlike my own.

'I've got everything ready,' I said. Impatient to get going, I ushered my two friends into the bedroom.

'Pink? You've got to be kidding me.' Taylor stripped down to her underwear, a faded vest and boxer shorts, and winked at me as she pulled

my top on over her head.

‘Here’s looking at you.’ She positioned the baseball cap so the brim covered her eyes and pulled the sweatshirt hood up over the top. It was still raining outside which played into our hands; visibility would be poor. We listened to the rain lash against the skylight.

‘Remember,’ Jodi assured Taylor, ‘you only see what you’re expecting. Arthur won’t see what’s really there. He’ll be expecting Rebecca, will see the clothes and follow blindly.’ Jodi leant across and kissed her partner on the lips while I agitated to get going. As my friends drank their coffee and devoured the bacon and eggs I’d prepared, I stood silently by the window. Like Arthur, I’d become adept at watching and waiting. Panic set in when there was no sighting of him by nine.

‘Calm down, Rebecca. He’ll be here. Patience!’ shouted Jodi, who had begun to deal cards from a random pack taken from her pocket. Perhaps Arthur had backed off. Perhaps he had decided it was no longer worth hanging around now he realised I wasn’t sloping off for clandestine meetings. As the minutes ticked by and my friends became more boisterous, I thought maybe we should abort the plan.

‘He’s turned up.’ My heart missed a beat and I drew back from the window. It was fifteen minutes past. Arthur was unusually late. ‘Five minutes, ladies.’ Jodi neatly stacked the cards and put them back in the box while Taylor readjusted the hood over the baseball cap, securing it tightly.

‘Face down at all times. Jog on the spot. Stretch out on the street below until I text you. Keep your face averted towards the shop fronts and don’t turn round.’

‘Yes, Sergeant Major.’ Taylor saluted.

Jodi followed Taylor down the stairs. They wished me luck before they opened the front door and disappeared outside. Jodi would wait at home for Taylor’s safe return.

I had cut a miniscule hole in my front blinds. I didn’t want there to be any noticeable movement when I peered through. Right enough, less than three minutes after the girls exited onto the High Street, Arthur pulled down his hat low over his face and turned the collar up on his raincoat. The bastard would get soaked and hopefully would be halfway round the lake before he twigged that the girl he was following wasn’t me.

REBECCA

Handy Mobiles in Finsbury Park wasn't difficult to find. I caught a taxi from the railway station. There was no time to lose. I hadn't taken my car in case Arthur returned and noticed it missing.

I paid the driver and stepped out into a deluge of persistent rain. The overflow had collected by the edge of the pavement and in my hurry, I missed my footing. Soon I was drenched from head-to-toe and rainwater had seeped through to my socks.

I hurried across the road and sheltered under the awning of a fish and chip shop next door to Handy Mobiles. 'Back in ten minutes' was scribbled on a scrap of paper which had been stuck to the front door of the phone shop. The lights were on inside but no one was about.

I checked my watch. It was already ten fifteen. I scanned the area for somewhere to wait. There was a kebab shop, an Asian fruit and vegetable store, and a row of cheap clothes shops. I finally spotted a small café, Berts, on the opposite side of the road.



I sat by the window, and used my coat sleeve to wipe away steam that had misted up the glass so I could see out. I was reluctant to take my coat off in case I had to move quickly. As I sipped my coffee, I started to panic when I realised Taylor would have circled the park at least once and would be well through the second lap. Arthur would still be stalking her unless, God forbid, he'd already worked out what was going on.

I kept checking the time. Fifteen minutes had passed and there was no sign of anyone opening up the phone shop. A group of builders arrived and distracted me for a few minutes with their merry small talk. The fat gaffer ordered fry-ups all round and told Bert to put it on his tab.

Across the road, someone suddenly appeared behind the counter of Handy Mobiles. I fumbled with change, paid my bill and rushed back out. The traffic roared by and twice I had to jump backwards as aggressive drivers tore past, steering through the puddles and soaking everyone in the way.



The doorbell jingled as I entered. An elderly couple were already moseying round the shelves, picking up and replacing all manner of cheap gadgets and I was forced to wait until they moved on so I could reach the counter. I glanced up into the corner, closing my eyes and offering up a silent prayer to some random deity. Perhaps Mitch was listening.

‘Can I help you, madam?’

The CCTV camera was pointed directly at the counter; Big Brother is watching you and I thanked God for the high crime rates in North London that instilled fear into local shopkeepers. The camera seemed to be working. There was a small red light flashing on and off at regular intervals. It wasn’t a fake deterrent.

The elderly lady had put up her umbrella inside the shop, before exiting.

‘That’s very bad luck, madam,’ the fat vendor chortled before he turned his attention back in my direction. ‘Are you looking for a new mobile phone? A case perhaps?’

Before I could answer, the salesman had extricated half a dozen cheap models from under the counter and spread them across the glass surface. I went to the front door and turned the *Open* sign to *Closed*.

‘I’ve no cash, madam. I banked it all yesterday. We have cameras everywhere.’ The owner pleaded while holding his hands in the air as if in some Western spoof.

‘I need your help,’ I said. I pulled out the receipt which I’d kept under lock and key since the night of the murder. It was the one I’d found down the side of the armchair in Mitch’s flat.

‘On this date,’ I pointed at the small piece of paper, headed up Handy Mobiles with the address clearly visible underneath, ‘you sold a phone, a pay as you go to a gentleman. You can see the make and model number here.’ My forefinger stabbed at the date.

I refused to let go of the piece of paper, which was mine, and Oliver’s, get-out-of-jail free card. The man in front of me was sweating. I could sense

his fear. He ran the back of his hand across his brow and wiped away the drips. It took a second before he answered.

‘Yes I remember very clearly that particular sale,’ he said, confident with his speedy retort. ‘A strange guy wearing a dark baseball cap. Paid in cash. Why do you want to know?’ If I was amazed at how certain he was, I didn’t comment. I stuck to my original plan.

‘CCTV. I need to see the footage. Now. It’s really important.’ The windows had steamed up and I went over and ran my hand across the centre pane. I flicked my eyes from side to side, up and down the street.

‘Shit.’ A bus stop was located right outside the front door and a bus pulled alongside, blocking my view.

‘I’m sorry, madam, but the gentleman who bought the phone came back a few days later and asked the very same thing. I gave him the tape,’ he announced. ‘For a small price.’ The man had lowered his arms from over his head, having decided that I wasn’t going to blast him with a sawn-off shotgun.

‘How much?’

‘Pardon? How much what?’

‘You know. How much did he pay you?’ I yelled. I hurried back to the front door and clicked the lock closed against a young female customer trying to get in.

‘I can’t remember,’ he continued, his hands now laid across the counter. He was trying to regain control but I sensed he was holding something back.

‘Was it a lot? How much? Tell me.’

‘Three hundred pounds,’ he whispered, looking round the shop, suspecting that a police officer might be lurking among the shelves.

‘I’ll give you another three hundred for a copy. Cash.’ I was right. The greedy bastard had taken several copies when he realised there was value attached. ‘There are conditions, however.’



As I boarded the bus outside the shop, a number eighty-three to Muswell Hill, the sky had brightened and the sun was trying to break through the clouds. Wet travellers were shaking umbrellas, and freeing their heads from hats and hoods.

Inside the double-decker, I climbed upstairs, clinging to the damp spiral handrail. I slid into a window seat near the front. The *Closed* sign in Handy

Mobiles was still facing outwards. I imagined the patron furtively counting out the healthy wad of banknotes.

As the bus pulled away from the kerb I spotted him. Arthur was frantically running towards the phone shop. As the bus snaked away to join the traffic, I watched him hammer on the door.

ARTHUR

It was the rain. It had blinded my vision. While it usually afforded me welcome camouflage, it made discernment well-nigh impossible. Rebecca was pounding faster than usual. That should have been a warning but the eagerness with which she accepted my marriage proposal a few days earlier had perhaps made me less vigilant.

I had reinstated the incident room in my flat and hung a corkboard over the newly painted walls. Amber's name was circled as the perpetrator of evil. Rebecca and I were proudly placed together again, back at the top, and the absence of the Target's face staring back at me felt triumphant. There was one down and one to go.

I couldn't be sure that if I hadn't delayed, toying with the characters on the wall, and not arrived outside Rebecca's flat ten minutes later than usual, things might have turned out differently. When the jogger reached the small bridge near the café, she stumbled. I watched from behind a tree, dragging on a cigarette. Cigarettes had become recent accessories to my wardrobe of disguises. A walker in the park, a jobless hooded yobbo would be expected to waste his lungs. While I relaxed behind the veil of cancerous smoke, I kidded myself it was part of the role. I had begun to relish the nicotine hit.

The rain had dulled the light. As I lit up, I shielded a match with my hand and saw Rebecca bend down and rub her ankle. Of course I was torn. No wife of mine would ever go out jogging on her own but in a few weeks' time I would more forcibly lay down the law. I'd even filled a small booklet with a list of wifely expectations that would follow on from our nuptials.

As I took a deep inhalation of smoke, having finally managed to light the cigarette, it twigged that something wasn't quite right. The jogger's hood had fallen loose, dragging the sodden baseball hat with it. I wasn't

following Rebecca. Someone else had come out of the flat and pulled me into their vortex.



The first time I saw red and felt the burning sensation linked to murderous fury had been when Mr Flynn had bashed my mother black and blue. Back then, measured patience had afforded me the only option as I waited for the right moment to return the red tie. There had been a smug satisfaction at the cunning nature of my actions but that hadn't wiped out the rage that flooded my body and which simmered for years.

This time my fury was uncontained. I chucked the cigarette into the lake and squelched back up the embankment towards my car. The wet mud cast me backwards a couple of times, and I slithered around trying to gain a foothold. My hands were soon covered in filthy slime where I'd tried to steady myself. It took a further few seconds of fumbling in my pockets to find the car key. When I managed to get inside, I bashed the dashboard furiously with both fists.

'Bitch, bitch, fucking bitch!' I screamed. I picked up my mobile and rang Rebecca's number. There was no reply. She had deliberately led me to the park.



I drove back up the hill, weaving recklessly in and out the bus lanes, and narrowly missing cyclists who careered up the inside. Once back at my flat, I ripped off my coat and gloves and tried to work out what was going on.

It could have been a comic ruse, a lover's game to test my sense of humour. I stared at the incident board and tried to make sense of it all. I moved Rebecca's picture to one side, slightly below my own cut-out image, and traced my finger down through the remaining players. My forefinger stopped at Oliver's hulking outline. A small photo of a mobile phone had been pinned underneath.

The SMS message to Oliver, from a pay-as-you-go mobile used by the Target, had provided proof for the police that the suspect had been expected at the flat around the time of the murder. Oliver had replied to the conciliatory and friendly message from his old rugby pal and texted back, agreeing to meet on the night in question. The communications were logged on the phone which the police had in their possession. It was vital evidence.

What was he missing? The police had indicted Oliver on the basis of this proof, not to mention the fact that he had been holding the baseball bat when they arrived on the scene. Rebecca had done the rest. She had put the final nail in his coffin, by assuring the investigating officer that she had reached the scene a few minutes after Oliver. She had been an unexpected guest arriving too late to save her ex-boyfriend.

I ransacked cupboards and wardrobes, checking the pockets of all my jeans and trousers unsure of what I'd been wearing when I'd bought the mobile. The receipt had to be somewhere. It had been pocketed with the phone. I tore my clothes off the rails and chucked out all the random contents from jackets and overcoats.

There wasn't time to replay the CCTV tape which might show me where I'd put the receipt. It now seemed imperative that I hide the tape somewhere secure. I lifted the set of stepladders by the sink and used them to climb up so I could reach the small ventilator shaft above the cooker. Carefully undoing the fastening screws, I removed the greased-up vent cover, and slid the tape well inside before re-covering the hole.



I grabbed a taxi from the rank near the Green Man pub.

'Finsbury Park!' I screamed at the driver, giving him the name and address of Handy Mobiles. 'And step on it. It's a matter of life and death.'

'Sure thing, mate. Hold on tight,' laughed the cabbie who'd heard it all before. 'Dreadful day. Wonder when the rain'll stop.'

My silence put paid to conversation as we weaved in and out through the London mayhem. I lit up another cigarette, inhaling deeply, before the driver slid open the panel and asked me not to smoke. Perhaps it was something in my manner that made him back off but as he pulled the glass back again, I heard him secure the door locks.

He watched me in his rear-view mirror as I chain-smoked.

REBECCA

The journey back to Muswell Hill seemed to take forever. The bus stopped every few minutes to allow sodden travellers on and off. When the bus finally arrived at the terminus on the roundabout, I was already standing with my face pinned against the exit door.

‘Someone’s in a hurry,’ griped an old man from behind, who pushed up hard against me in an effort to get to the front. He leered through rotting teeth.

‘Piss off,’ I muttered and jumped out onto the pavement.



NatWest Bank was located on the corner of Muswell Hill itself. A queue snaked back from the customer service desk and I was forced to stand in line. The CCTV tape and phone receipt were tucked tightly inside the pocket of my raincoat which was zipped up against the elements and prying eyes. I kept anxiously checking the door, certain Arthur would appear at any second.

Fifteen minutes later, I reached the front of the queue.

‘I’d like to put something in my safety deposit box,’ I said to a young female clerk who appeared to have no idea what I was talking about. ‘I’m in a hurry.’

‘Yes, madam. Just a minute and I’ll get my supervisor. Take a seat.’ She pointed towards an empty row of seats outside a glass-fronted meeting room. The bureaucratic cogs of industry carried on, everyone oblivious to my desperation.

After a couple of minutes I pushed my way back to the head of the queue and snapped at the woman who was dealing with another customer.

‘I need to sort this out at once. Not in ten minutes, not in twenty minutes but now. Get it?’ My voice railed against the manufactured calm efficiency.

Adele, whose name tag sat crookedly on the purple lapel of her jacket, blushed and excused herself from the agitated customer whose chequebook had been stolen.

‘Sorry, I’ll be back in a moment.’ She gestured me once again towards the row of vacant seats and turned her back while the elderly lady gave me an icy stare. The relief at being led away behind the frosted glass gave me a brief respite from the overwhelming panic. At least for a few minutes I’d be hidden from view.

‘Yes, how may I help?’ A senior manager finally arrived but already twenty-five minutes had elapsed since I’d got off the bus. It took a further twenty minutes before the tape and receipt were safely deposited at the bank.

REBECCA

The flat was eerily quiet when I returned.

I locked and bolted the front door, pulled across the curtains and blinds and checked all the window locks were securely fastened. I then unplugged the phone and turned off all the lights before I switched on the kettle.

Relief at the success of my trip was short-lived. It was quickly replaced by fear now I knew Arthur was on to me. Although Taylor's disguise had given me time to get to Finsbury Park and back, I couldn't be sure how Arthur had reacted to the subterfuge. The realisation that his obsession had led to Mitch's murder still seemed incomprehensible but then I'd never really paid Arthur that much attention. I only ever had eyes for Mitch. Arthur had been a stopgap, a distraction from real-life issues. Yet the flippant dismissal of his delusional intentions may have cost my lover his life.

I got out of my wet clothes and decided to give myself an hour or so to recover before going out again. A soak in a hot bath should help. As I drank the mug of sweet tea, I planned the impromptu visit I had to make before going to the police station.

I attached my headphones, carefully pushing the attachments into my ears, and slipped down into the warm foamy water, letting myself get lost in Chopin nocturnes. A small red candle flickered at the foot of the bath and as I let the music envelop me, I closed my eyes.

Soon the nightmare would be over.

ARTHUR

I parked a couple of streets away and walked slowly, tight to the hedge, and kept my head down. Sunglasses had been replaced by heavy black glasses with thick clear convex lenses.

From a vantage point across the road, I bent down and retied my shoelaces. I looked up at the second floor, watching for movement from within.

The lights had been on when I first arrived but now they were dimmed. I decided to hang around a while longer before I went in. I was in no hurry.



The bastard in the phone shop had acted as if he didn't recognise me.

'Good morning. How can I help? I'll only be a second.' The shopkeeper had been counting out a hefty pile of cash when I entered. He excused himself and headed out the back through a plastic curtain.

The CCTV camera was still pointing down at me but today I'd bulked up my shoulders with insertions of hand towels around my neck. I'd also been delighted with an unexpected find in the local charity shop of a pair of men's heeled shoes. Some ineffectual undersized egotist must have had them specially made because they added nearly an extra three inches to my height.

I had perfected a mincing walk which, when filmed along with my more substantial frame, should divert suspicion. As I caught sight of my image in the shop window, I was pleased with the reflection of my genius.

'Sorry. Business matters. How may I help?' The sweaty proprietor showed no recognition even as I faced him full on. Initial anger at not being recognised was soon replaced by the memory that I was in disguise and I laughed out loud at my forgetfulness.

‘I’m here on behalf of a colleague,’ I said. ‘He came here a week or so ago and paid you an obscenely large amount for some CCTV footage.’ I stared at the jerk and slammed both hands down hard on the counter. ‘He’s sent me to make sure that you wouldn’t have kept a copy and given it to anyone else.’

I wandered up and down the counter, fingering the key rings and phone cover displays. I was like a wolf closing in on my prey. A small handgun would have been a good accessory at this stage which I could have extracted for effect. Control is easily won with menace.

‘Well? Can I assure him that no one else has been interested in your footage?’ I smashed my fist, harder this time, against the glass and watched the fat little Indian jump.

‘Yes, sir. You can assure your friend that I wouldn’t do such a thing. No one has been asking to see our CCTV footage.’ Lies are easy to pick up. He had hesitated for a split second.

‘Was it a woman who came asking?’

‘No, sir. I can promise you that no one except your friend has been.’

‘Would another three hundred pounds tempt you to change your story?’ There it was again, a distinct flicker of interest that rendered the slimy bastard momentarily speechless.

‘I don’t understand. I’m not telling a lie.’ I grabbed him by the throat, squeezing air from his passageways and spat in his face.

‘If my friend hears that you’ve double-crossed him and kept copies of the tape he paid you well for, I’ll be back. You’ll have no fingers left to count out your filthy cash.’

I straightened my jacket and readjusted my glasses. Perhaps if I hadn’t been such an honourable upstanding citizen I might have turned my hand to petty crime; money with menaces.

I left the tremulous shopkeeper and exited back onto the street but my momentary lightness of mood evaporated. A woman had been at the shop recently and paid handsomely for a copy of the CCTV footage. His lies had told me the truth. Rebecca had got there before me.



I’d waited long enough. The time had come and I couldn’t put it off any longer. I had one last job to do.

Someone had pinned back the front door to the converted house using a brick as a doorstop. I was able to walk straight in off the street but I made

sure to kick away the brick in the process and let the door close behind me.

ARTHUR

I padded silently up to the second floor. My visits to the flat, the very same flat, which I visited and spied on all those years ago, had once filled me with such euphoria. Ted, who owned the flat, had made sure it was free for his daughter's return, but he hadn't paid much attention to the decor. Back then, I hadn't noticed the damp brown walls with their peeling paint nor the stained brown carpets.

Everything would have worked out in the end if it hadn't been for that bastard, Mitch Dawson. I gripped the banister as I crept upstairs aware of my thumping heart. My anger and impotence were evaporating as the excitement of anticipated action infused my body. I felt exhilarated and couldn't wait to begin. I rapped gently on the door.

The converted building contained four flats. Two were on the ground floor, one on the first and one at the top. Once I'd reached the second floor, I felt safe. If anyone exited from either of the lower apartments I'd be out of sight.

When there was no answer I rapped again, louder this time and listened for sounds of movement from within by pushing an ear hard up against the wood. A faint light which had seeped from under the door frame had gone out. But I knew she was in there.

She wouldn't know it was me and that I wasn't going to go away. Someone down below opened a door and yelled back inside, 'See you later. I won't be late. Don't stay up.' The door slammed and I heard the jingle of keys and a steady click of high heels across the floorboards towards the front entrance. Then there was silence once again.

Ten minutes later, she finally gave in and opened the door. She peered out from behind the chain before tentatively pulling it back.

‘Arthur,’ she said as she stared in bewilderment through the gap. She was wearing her pink dressing gown and her hair was wet, or perhaps unwashed as it hung down greasily over her face.

‘Can I come in?’ I spoke quietly, both to muffle the noise and to negate any unease she might have had at letting me into her flat.

‘I was in the bath and really want to be alone. Now’s not a good time, Arthur.’ A slight hesitation was enough encouragement to spur me on. It wasn’t yet time to bash the door down.

‘I only wanted to see if you were okay. I know what an awful time you’ve been having,’ I said. ‘Just a cup of tea. I won’t stay long, I promise. We can catch up properly another time.’ I painted on a smile.

My heart skipped a beat when she unlatched the chain. She stepped back and said, ‘Okay. A quick cup of tea. I’ll put on the kettle.’

She drew her dressing gown tight around her as she wandered through to the kitchen. She wasn’t wearing slippers and I remembered the first time I’d noticed the bunions on my mother’s feet. The high heels, she explained. It coincided with the first time I’d questioned her flawless beauty. ‘Beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder,’ I exclaimed. She looked round.

‘Pardon? What was that?’ she asked.

My mind was drawn back to the present. Her second toe was abnormally long and poked out alongside her big toe. There was an angry red bump where a premature bunion was indeed making an appearance. The illusory beauty which had haunted my dreams had already faded.

I was filled with renewed determination to get a move on and rid the world of one more incidental person. I sat down on the sofa, guessing correctly that she wouldn’t sit beside me but instead settled in the armchair opposite.

‘Do you mind if I use the bathroom? I’ll not be a moment.’ I gently placed my mug on the coffee table.

Inside the bathroom I extracted the paring knife, testing its sharpness and efficiency against my forefinger. It drew blood with a silky movement across the tip and with no effort at all. I then took out the thick black electrical tape and cut off a six-inch strand which I would attach across the gaping hole that was her mouth. Finally, I checked that I had the lengths of string in my pocket which would secure her ankles to the chair while she slit her own wrists.

‘I’ve decided to go to Italy,’ she announced in a slightly raised voice, assuming I was still in the bathroom.

‘That sounds nice. Following in your dead boyfriend’s footsteps?’ I whispered in her ear.

‘Jesus, Arthur. You made me jump.’ Her dressing gown gaped as I grabbed her round the neck and tried to attach the tape across her mouth. Her eyes popped wide open and her terror was a joy to behold. She kicked and flailed with her arms as she tried to stand.

‘Sit still. I won’t hurt you. I need to talk and you need to listen,’ I lied. Fear, rather than belief in my statement, made her body still. I watched her bony frame present itself through the flimsy covering.

The harlot was only wearing briefs but no bra, and her breasts, once a defining feature, sagged sadly before my eyes. I tied her ankles to the legs of the chair as she sat, compliant and silent.

It was a pleasure to work without the distraction of a woman’s nagging tones. She even helped me, using her hands, to fasten the knots. Her hands would have to be free of bondage marks so I told her to keep them by her side for now and not to move them.

The string around her ankles was secured over a couple of tea towels so that no marks would be traceable after I’d gone. I’d remove them later and put them back in the kitchen drawer once I was done. My flimsy gloves were difficult to work with but I’d been practising for such an eventuality. Gloves would leave no trace.

‘You see. I don’t like being made a fool of,’ I began. I sat on the sofa and watched her eyes as I continued. ‘Telling the police that you and that arrogant bastard were a couple, in love, was your big mistake. I mean, look at you. Do you really think you were believed? When I met you, you were such a beauty. You were so self-assured, such fun. We did have fun, didn’t we? Remember we talked about emigrating. We even mentioned Italy once. You showed me photographs of places you’d like to see. Were you intending to go there alone?’

My hatred spurred me on. I wanted to be done.

‘The problem is that once a woman loses her beauty, she loses control. She turns around and all the men who once chased her have gone. No one is chasing anymore.’ I got up and wandered round the room talking to myself rather than to her. ‘Whereas us men, we maintain our looks, our charisma. The world is our oyster.’

She squirmed in the chair while I toyed with the knife.

‘Stop it.’ I moved in closer, breathing hard in her face. When she appeared to gag, I knew it was time.

‘Stop moving. Sit still. This is what we’re going to do.’ I extracted the small knife, ran it across my finger again and before continuing I went to the door and made sure it was locked, the catch down. ‘You are going to commit suicide.’

Her sunken black-ringed eyes expunged wet tears which slid silently down her cheeks. ‘You’re going to pull this small knife across your wrists, like this.’ I laughed and extracted tiny blood splatters on my own wrists. ‘But you’ll need to go deeper. Here have a go,’ I offered. ‘But I should warn you, any funny business, I’ll stick the knife straight through the jugular and it’ll all be over. I always have a plan B. Be assured of that.’

I held my breath, wondering if she might dare to hurl the knife across the room in my direction. The fear of missing her target, I suspected, caused hesitation with such an obvious course of action.

‘Go on. Practise. Remember I’m giving the grieving girlfriend a way out. If you thought you couldn’t live without him, why don’t you prove it?’ I spat.

I got up to stretch my legs and circled the room, opening and closing drawers and cupboards as I went. I really did wonder at my former obsession with this woman. All the mysterious allure had vanished.

‘Go on. Deeper. Or I’ll be forced to do it for you. You have five minutes or I’m coming over.’ I lifted the mantle clock and set it in front of her. It was three thirty. ‘Start counting.’



At first I couldn’t work out where the knocking was coming from. It seemed a long way off. I was browsing through a woman’s magazine, waiting for the deed to be done, when the banging got louder. A woman’s voice, from the other side of the door, broke the silence. It was a voice I knew so well.

Without hesitation, I went and unlocked the door and threw it wide open. ‘Come in.’ I smiled. ‘Come in. I assume you’ve come to help,’ I said and proceeded to lock us all inside.

REBECCA

Although I had all the evidence I needed to put Arthur away for life and clear my name, as well as Oliver's, there were a few loose ends to tie up. Ten years of heartache had left scars, and although Mitch and I had intended to move forward, together, in a joint endeavour to heal the wounds, there were a lot of questions which still hadn't been answered.

Amber would help me join up the dots. Any previous trepidation I felt in facing her in person had been driven out by the turn of events and I didn't have much time to lay old ghosts to rest. Also, I had something I wanted to share with my former love rival.

A long soak in the bath revitalised me. Fear that Arthur might come knocking urged me not to linger. As the minutes ticked by, I knew it was time to get away from the flat.



The drive to Finchley from Muswell Hill normally took me ten or fifteen minutes at the most but today the incessant rain had left its mark on the journey. Cyclists weaved in and out of the puddles, slowing traffic down and roadworks, halfway up Friern Barnet Lane, added an extra ten minutes to the journey. Temporary traffic lights had sprung up and drivers were forced to a crawl.

As I sat in the queue, I kept checking round for signs of Arthur's beat-up black Fiesta and, as horns honked and tempers frayed, a sense of foreboding took hold. A man drew up beside me in a darkened saloon and rolled down the passenger window.

'Hey beautiful,' he smirked. 'Bloody traffic is taking forever. You going far?'

I rolled up my window, which was cracked to let fresh air through, and averted my eyes. I thrashed at the steering wheel, thrumming my fingers, and willed the lights to change. The traffic snaked forward, inch by inch. The man in the saloon blasted his horn as he overtook at the next road junction and veered off in the opposite direction.

Half an hour later I pulled up outside Amber's flat but then something warned me to move it some distance away and out of obvious sight. I backed up, did a three-point turn and retreated back down the cul-de-sac the way I'd come and rejoined the High Road. The next road had a no entry sign. By the time I managed to find a space, several roads up, time had ticked by.

As I locked the car, checking all around me, I noticed it. Three spaces down from my car, a black battered vehicle was squeezed between two white vans. I recognised it immediately from the personalised letters, ARB, on the number plate. I assumed Arthur had transferred the registration from his old maroon estate, and it looked even more out of place on his latest rusty model. I fumbled with my keys and got back in my car, scrabbling round in my bag for the phone. I made the call which I should have done earlier. I then got out and walked the short distance back to Amber's flat.

'Glad the rain's gone.' A small Asian lady with a dog smiled. She looked away from the animal, holding loosely on to its lead, as it fouled the footpath. Life carried on as normal. As I hurried past, I wondered briefly at normality in all its guises. Where did the boundary between normality and madness become hazy and indistinguishable? I hadn't seen it with Arthur but then perhaps I'd been too self-absorbed to pay attention. He had been an incidental companion.



I stood outside the converted house, a 1940s building with cream stucco cladding and a red slate roof. I checked the address which I'd keyed into my phone and noticed that the curtains on the second floor were drawn. I would have been wiser to wait for the police but instead carried on towards the front door. Although it looked closed, a slight push and it opened without resistance. I tiptoed inside and on up the stairs.

The building was spookily silent. Peeling paper and faded paintwork screamed neglect. On the second floor landing I paused and listened. There was no noise. I took off my shoes and crept to the flat in my bare feet. I put

my ear to the door. There was a muffled sound coming from within and I was able to make out Arthur's voice. He was talking, very quietly, to someone. Of course I should have waited but when I couldn't hear Amber's voice, I rapped; tentatively at first and then more deliberately.

When there was still no reply after half a dozen attempts, I spoke out.

'Amber, it's me. Rebecca. Are you there? Please let me in.'

REBECCA

Arthur pulled me in and closed the door. I felt a cold fear. What if the police didn't come? Had I given them the right address? Perhaps they thought I was a crank caller.

Arthur was wearing a purple tie, tightly knotted round his neck, and it hung askew over a white T-shirt. His hair was uncombed, sticking out at weird angles from his head and his eyes bulged.

'Rebecca, my darling. I wondered if you'd come.' He leant in to kiss me while wildly brandishing a knife around in his hand. 'This will be so much easier with your help. You've met Amber before, I think?' He pointed towards Amber whose head was lolling over her chin and I wondered fleetingly if she was already dead.

'What are you doing, Arthur?' I heard my voice, soft and calm. 'What have you done to her?' I didn't dare move. He was waving the knife, demonstrating how to self-harm, sliding the blade backwards and forwards along his forearm. He had drawn his own blood and offered the knife to me, willing me to practise the cutting action.

'I'm only doing this for you, Rebecca. Amber was going to derail our plans. She's still pretending that she and Mitch were in love. An item. Her jealousy of you, my beauty, has put you firmly in the frame for murder. She has schemed with Oliver to tell the police that you were jealous and that she and Mitch were to be married. Oliver, I believe, has told the investigators that Mitch would never have had you back after you slept with him. Quite the harlot, Rebecca.' At this point, Arthur hesitated and turned the blade in my direction. He seemed confused.

'I'm going to slit Amber's wrists. I hoped she'd do it herself but she's much too slow. I intend to make a nice criss-cross pattern to match the scars

already there.’ He grinned then hunched over Amber who had lifted her head and was pleading at me with wild eyes. She flung her arms out and hit Arthur on the head. He momentarily reeled backwards.

‘Arthur, you can’t get away with this. Your blood is all over the place. Give me the knife. Remember we’re to be married.’ I held out my left hand and showed him the ring and extended my right hand to take the knife.

‘Oh, I’m not going to be getting away with anything. Remember, you were here first. You were at the scene wielding the knife before I arrived. You’re not as clever as you are beautiful, my Rebecca. That ploy worked in your favour with Oliver. It’ll work if necessary in mine this time,’ he gloated. At this point, Arthur hunkered down in front of Amber and made a faint cut across her right wrist. Blood trickled from the wound. He made another slit to match on her left wrist.

‘Right. Rebecca, your turn now. Make it deep and meaningful,’ he leered as he handed me the knife.



The police arrived a second after I’d plunged the blade into Arthur’s shoulder. Garbled protestations about his arrival after me at the scene of the crime were the rantings of a mad man. Arthur forgot that Amber wasn’t dead. As he was led away, agonisingly grasping at his shoulder, he turned back.

‘Rebecca, wait for me. It won’t be long. I’m a very patient man. We’ll be together soon. Together forever, remember? I love you, Rebecca Carrington.’

REBECCA

‘You saved my life, Rebecca. I can’t begin to thank...’ Amber lay back on the hospital bed, a ghostly apparition, small and frail under crisp white bed linen. The overhead strip lighting blinked uncomfortably and seemed to magnify her paleness.

I’d gone in the ambulance with her, accompanied by two police officers. When Amber had corroborated my story, my handcuffs were removed but I’d been cautioned that there were questions to answer. For now I was allowed to sit with Amber.

‘Why did you come to my flat?’ Her small sunken eyes were questioning.

‘I needed to see you, talk to you about Mitch. I wanted to clear the air and to hear the truth. Your truth,’ I explained. I waited.

She closed her eyes as if recalling some distant memories to share with me.

‘He was always yours, Rebecca. I fell in love with him the first time we met. Oliver introduced us and he used me to give Mitch a way out. Mitch was wanted by the police for some drugs issue. I’m not sure what he was involved in but I didn’t care. I wanted to be with him.’ She lifted a glass of water from the bedside cabinet and I noticed her hand shook as water dribbled down her chin. There was a sad resignation on her face as she recounted details of those lost ten years.

‘Mitch and I went to Italy together. My father has a small flat in Umbria, on the shores of Lake Trasimeno, and I dreamed of setting up home with Mitch. I set out to make him love me.’ Her eyes misted over.

‘Did he ever mention me?’ I asked.

‘Within a week of arriving in Italy he told me, one evening over wine and pizzas, that he was in love with someone else. He intended going back to England once the police were off his back. In the meantime he wanted to travel and would only return to England once Oliver gave him the all-clear. Oliver’s father, as you know, was head of the drugs squad and led the investigation.’ Amber drew breath. Images of Mitch on his own, killing time until we could be together, would haunt me forever. I didn’t say anything.

‘Then something happened. He didn’t say what. It had something to do with Oliver, I think. Anyway, I came down one morning to find Mitch writing me a note with his rucksack already on his back. That was the last I saw of him until shortly before we all met up that night at the cinema. He phoned me the week before, asking if I fancied meeting up. I’d waited ten years for that call and hoped, naively, that he might be ready to settle down.’

‘Why did you tell the police you were to be married?’ I needed to hear everything, to find closure to the love affair that would forever define my life.

‘Jealousy, I suppose. It eats you up. I’d forgotten about you, and believed that after ten years he might have too. True love never really dies though,’ she said, smiling weakly with a sad acceptance. ‘I also knew that Oliver wouldn’t have murdered Mitch. He doesn’t have it in him. I was furious that you put him in the frame.’

‘Oliver raped me after Mitch left. Oliver sent photographs to Mitch of us together; photographs which he took after using date rape drugs to sedate me.’

I asked if I could have a sip of her water. It was cathartic to say it out loud. I refilled the glass from the jug and offered it back to Amber. ‘I was only too happy to get my revenge.’

Amber let me carry on.

‘I’ve now got evidence that will lock Arthur away for life for Mitch’s murder. Arthur knew Mitch and I were going out again. Problem was, I never really noticed him, Arthur. He turned up at a time I needed friendship. He seemed so normal. He was easy company, a loyal friend. Or so I thought.’

We laughed at this point, and Amber sat up while I propped the pillows more comfortably behind her head.

Before I left, I told her about the mobile phone Arthur had bought, pretending that it had belonged to Mitch; how he had texted Oliver from the phone asking him to come round and clear the air. Oliver had replied that he'd be there.

I told Amber that Arthur knew Oliver and that he had somehow learnt that we'd shared an unsavoury history together. Oliver was the perfect person to put in the frame for the murder of his love rival. The CCTV footage and phone receipt were safely locked away and I would be handing them over to the police when I left the hospital.

Amber and I said goodbye and amicably shook hands.

Ten years had been a long time but there was no going back. Mitch had been the first love for us both and the deepest cut either of us would ever experience.

It was time to move on.

SUMMER 2015

*Replacement love pretends just that.
An oxymoron teases with illusion that something second can usurp the
place of something first; that which gave a fleeting hint of paradise.
Yet all at once a new more powerful
love appears as if by magic;
unexpected and unreal.
No second fiddle to first love lost,
a new more potent instrument plays to fill the void.
A child is born.*

REBECCA

Although the summer sun poked through the fluffy clouds with quiet insistence, the north wind was biting. He ran along the beach, blindly tumbling over the pebbled sand, turning every few seconds to wave back at me. The castle ruins, sitting majestically on the remote headland, beckoned with their ghostly secrets.

‘Hurry up!’ he screamed, impatient to get there. His short legs ran and ran, propelling him further away from me and at that moment I recalled my father telling me to hold on loosely. Hold the grains of sand lightly in your hand and they will stay forever. Squeeze tightly and they’ll slip through your fingers. The sands of time.

I bent down and picked up a handful of dry grains and kissed them, remembering my father. How quietly he had spoken and shared his careworn wisdom. He used to say that one day I’d understand as he patted me on the head. Perhaps it was the sea breeze that squeezed the nostalgic tears from my eyes but, looking up and watching as the gulls coasted around the headland, I felt at peace with the world.

We climbed up to the ruins, Mitch clinging to my hand as he gasped in wonder at the great twin-towered keep.

‘Dunstanburgh Castle,’ I announced. ‘How would you like to live here?’

‘No thanks. We might get invaded by pirates.’ He screamed, wielding an imaginary sword in my direction. I stared out to sea and watched as the waves crashed along the shoreline and wondered at the beauty of it all.

Ten years had passed in the blink of an eye.



I never told Amber I was pregnant. After she admitted that Mitch had never loved her, except as a friend, I didn’t see the point. It would have

been rubbing salt in the wound. I've often wondered in the intervening years what might have happened if I hadn't saved her life and she had survived regardless. Perhaps her vitriol and jealousy might have lingered on, endeavouring to keep me in the frame for murder. *What ifs* and *maybes* no longer mattered. Arthur was incarcerated in a mental institution and Oliver had been released.



'Mum, do you believe in ghosts?' Mitch had run back, grasping my hand again with a worried look scrunching up his perfect face.

'I believe that people we love go up to heaven and live on. They're all around us,' I said, hugging him close.

'Is my daddy around us?' Anxious eyes stared at me; your eyes, so dark and full of life.

'Yes. He's everywhere. You're a little piece of Daddy who stayed behind just for me.'

We strolled away from the castle and headed back along the beach, dipping our toes in and out of the water.



Oliver had called round and finally apologised. I had been packing up to leave London and head back up north when one morning there was a gentle knock at the door.

'Rebecca, may I come in?' I was no longer afraid of him. He seemed to have shrunk both physically and mentally.

'Tea or coffee?' I asked. We sat down and he told me how his life had fallen apart.

'My wife left me after I was released. She'd already packed her bags and waited until I got home before telling me. It had all been too much for her.'

If he was expecting sympathy he would have a long wait.

He continued. 'I told her about us.'

I got up as he spoke, lifted the empty mugs and returned them to the sink.

'I told her how I'd been eaten up with jealousy when you went off with Mitch. I explained how you had been my first real love.' He dropped his head in his hands and for a moment I thought he was crying. His shrunken hulk seemed to shake as I watched. What seemed like an eternity, perhaps

no more than five minutes, elapsed before he finally said what I'd been waiting to hear for the past decade.

'I'm sorry,' was all he said. It was enough. He knew what he'd done and was paying the price. He would pay for the rest of his life.



Mitch had taken all his clothes off, throwing them in the sand about fifty yards up the beach from where I was sitting.

'Come swimming, Mum. Aaaggggh it's soooo cold!' he screamed. I jumped up, rolled my trousers tightly around my knees and raced down to meet him. As we took tentative small steps into the freezing ocean, hand in hand, we laughed till we cried.

Mitch is our perfect boy.

ARTHUR

My dear Rebecca

This is my last letter to you and although I suspect this might come as a shock, I have some very important news to impart and hope you won't take it the wrong way.

Patience has always been my virtue and I've spent many silent hours in solitary confinement meticulously planning our future together. I genuinely meant to wait forever. However, something very significant has happened and I need you to understand.

About six months ago a lady called Whitney wrote to me requesting my friendship. She has taken an avid interest in my situation and came a few weeks ago for a first visit. She is petite, unlike you, with soft brown curls. She is only twenty-five and very beautiful. At first I pinned the small photograph she gave me on the incident board in my cell, below yours initially, until I knew where its rightful place should be.

Long restless nights followed until I realised that I needed to move her to the top of the board, next to my picture. I have, somewhat reluctantly, moved you slightly farther down.

Perhaps if you had visited me in my new home, things might have worked out differently but my therapist tells me constantly that I need to be more honest with myself. You see, Rebecca, I prefer younger women. I know you will always be beautiful but the freshness of Whitney's skin and unblemished youthful looks have taken me somewhat by surprise. We are to be married, you see, very soon.

I will have to be patient a while longer, however. There is an old boyfriend in the background. His name is Justin. He is twenty-eight and won't quite move aside. He is placed at the bottom of my crime scene board.

I have made a cardboard cut-out of Friar Tuck to represent this 'no mark' as Whitney has told me he likes to eat and is grossly overweight. I am coming up with a few ideas to help Whitney get rid of him and am again enjoying such gainful occupation in this regard.

Thank you for all the years we have shared together. I'll miss you but time is of the essence and I must now be moving on.

Yours as always

Arthur

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing is frequently a solitary, lonely task but it is the people along the way who keep you going with their unwavering encouragement and belief.

I would like to thank all my friends and family who offered support and survival tips. Firstly, thanks to my sister, Linda Pigott, who has always believed in me and pushed me to persevere when things got tough. Thanks to Susan McCarthy, Lindsay McQuillan and Gloria Green for their enthusiastic feedback on all my work and to Jane Badrock who encouraged me to contact Bloodhound Books, which turned out to be the best home for this novel. To Margaret Fitzpatrick who took the time to read early drafts and to the many other people who ask me every day how things are progressing.

I am so grateful to all at Bloodhound Books, especially to Betsy Reavley who believed in the manuscript on first reading and to her wonderful staff who have worked tirelessly to get it ready for publication. Morgen Bailey has been the most amazing editor with her sharp and focused attention to detail. Thanks also to Tara Lyons, whose prompt response to so many questions marks her out as a true professional.

Finally, biggest thanks of all to Neil and James, the two men in my life. Neil for giving me the time and support to get on with the job and James for promising that one day he might get around to reading my books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Wilkinson graduated from Durham University with a degree in geography then after a short spell in teaching, spent most of her working life in the business of tennis development. A former Irish international player, Diana finally stepped off the tennis court to become a full-time writer.

The inspiration for much of her work has come from the ladies she coached over the years and from confidences shared over coffee. *You Are Mine* is Diana's second crime novel.

Born and bred in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during the height of the civil unrest, she now lives in Hertfordshire, England, with her husband Neil and son James.

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER



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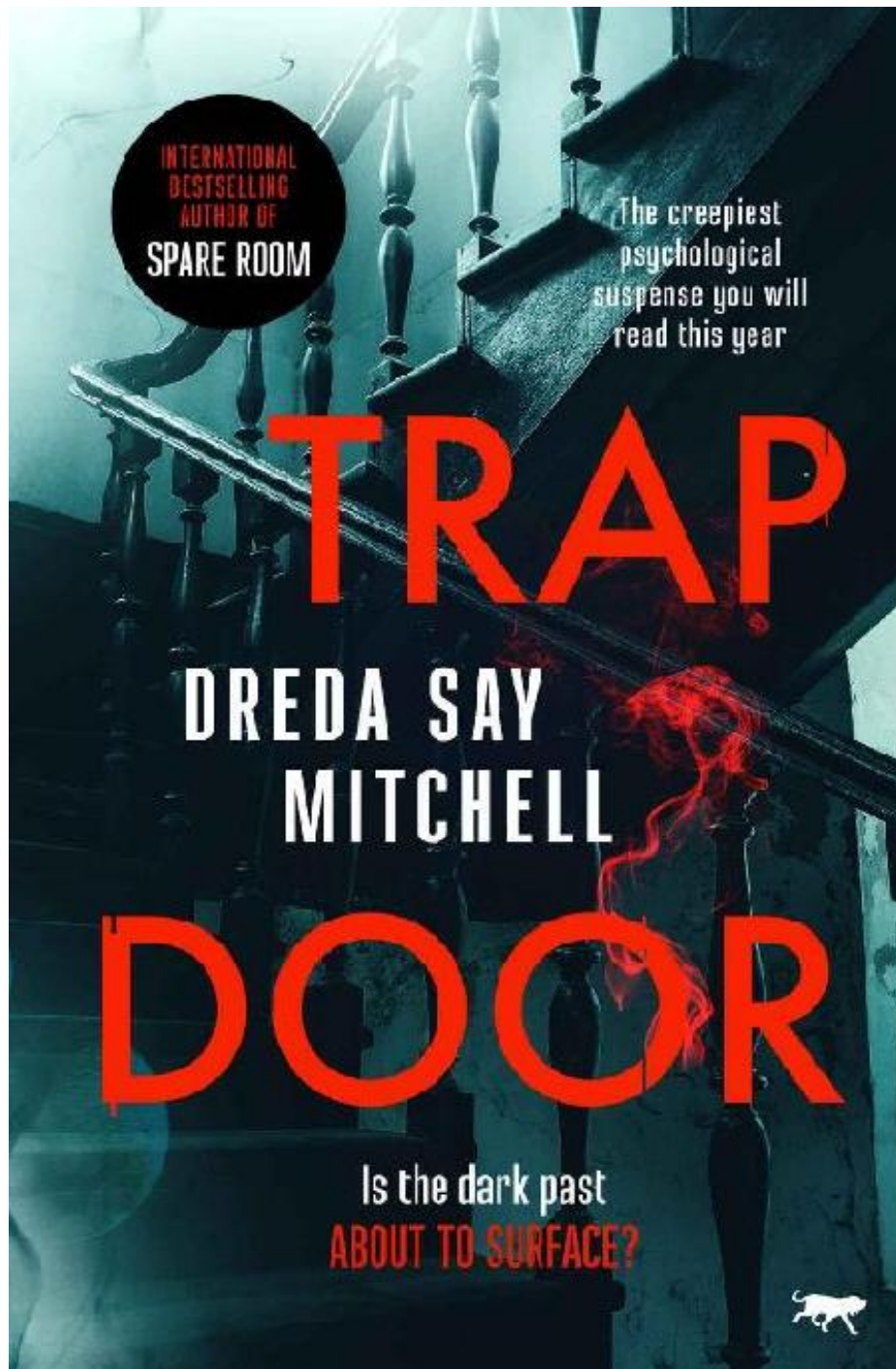
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