

The Slices Collections

HEARTS



3 Tales of broken, dark and vengeful hearts

Stephen Crowley

The Slices Collections

Presents

Hearts

a blend of light and dark tales for all...

By

Stephen Crowley

'The heart was made to be broken.'

Oscar Wilde

Stephen Crowley

The Slices Collections: Hearts

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intent on ruining the day. Pity then that Janine visualised the trouble in a premonition and has a dark surprise to share - as nothing will ruin her day.

Foreword

Thank you for reading *Hearts*, the first collection in *The Slices Collections* series of themed tales. A blend of light and dark tales for all that starts with a light tale and gets darker with each one as you read the collection.

Is the story you read too tame? Try the next one. And so on...

You're craving for the darkest of tales will come.

Dark horror and romance appear in this initial collection of 5 tales and intends to grow over the months ahead.

I always set out to vary how the themes play out across the collections; affairs of the heart bring plenty of room for exposing our innate vulnerability when met with the void of a broken one.

The subtext deals with the consequences of shattered emotions, what we do in such circumstances, how far we would go for the person loved. No matter where madness takes us. Or how dark or severe the consequences.

This is not a series of extreme horror tales nor meant to exploit gore on a grand scale – though a little more comes with the narrative territory, piece by piece as you read through the tales as the darkness deepens.

Love to know your thoughts on the blog at <http://stephencrowleyauthor.com/> as the tales grow. Thanks in advance for taking the time.

Stephen Crowley

*'Unrest stirred my stillness with a pounding heart,
It pounded so hard to shatter my rest,
It beat and beat, yearning to rip from my chest,
Oh my God, is this a test?
Will I ever find peace?
I beg you, give me rest, save me from the pain,
rescue me from the lamenting,
the awful pain that is oh so unrelenting,
Someone, please,
Help me.'*

First, something to warm the heart and a little Christmas spirit...

The Last Dance

Sarah fluttered in a private dance of her own, a cute sway side to side as she bounced on tiptoes from one branch of the tree to the other. She strewed more tinsel across the sharp prodding branches. Her emotions somehow locked away for the night yet clear in her eyes - deep pools of hopeless grief unable to hide.

Candlelight danced along the whitewashed walls of the lounge. A smile on her face lit up her complexion; her eyes sparkled against the tree lights. She hummed to herself in synchrony with the iPad perched on the mantelpiece as it played Time After Time by Cyndi Lauper, a song from her time with Tom.

Their song. From that first night, they embraced at a dinner party here in Sarah's home.

She played the singer's music often on Christmas Day. Tom whistled various melodies while he waited for Sarah to stop her preoccupation with anything other than snuggling up to him.

A footstool dragged across the carpet to the sofa.

Sarah's eyes widened. She set her gaze upon Tom as he peered at her with thinning patience, feet on the footstool. His frown said it all; he wanted her to lie beside him now the fireplace glowed its warm dance.

Sarah turned her attention back to the tree, a red bauble here, a mosaic patterned bauble there. Tom gazed at her attention to detail, and at Sarah's black hair of wool bouncing as she placed tinsel. The longing in Tom's eyes, unbreakable. He wished so much to make

love to her, to bathe in his wife's caress and sensual sweat afterwards. How he missed Sarah's embrace.

To touch her ivory skin.

"Why don't you play our song later?" Tom asked as he stretched out his lanky self on the couch. He scratched a mound of dark curly hair on his scalp - somewhat of a knee jerk reaction that had stayed with him when frustrated.

"Too excited, dear. I spend a whole year waiting for this one evening."

Tom's smile grew into a broad grin. He sighed. "Okay. We have many hours yet."

"Kay and Roy will be here soon."

"Oh great," Tom said and rolled his eyes. "Guess I pretend I am not here again."

Sarah regarded Tom with narrow eyes, lips parted, her index finger stretched upwards. "One evening, Tom. Not too much to ask."

Tom hoisted himself from the couch. "It's getting tougher, Sarah, seeing Roy here. Anyway. Your wish is my command," he joked and bowed before a peek out the bay window into the cold Winter's night. Tom gazed up at the sheltered moon as murky clouds drifted. Not even the orange glow of road lights out here. Sarah loved the isolation. Tom got accustomed. Sheets of rain had washed away the white blanket laid down earlier. Tom wished the chill touched his body. "It's hard, you know."

Sarah dropped a small box of decorations. Her eyes now a determined gaze. "One night."

Tom faced Sarah and caressed her shoulders. "Yeah. Like last year, and the year before. It's how this makes you look."

Sarah's eyes became watery. "More than aware, it hurts you. You want to say something to Roy. But your better judgment tells you shouldn't. And, don't worry about me,

let's have our one special evening together," Sarah's voice brittle, "Looked like Mum loved the roast. Think Dad was eager to get back home and sink some booze."

"Your mother got a tad drunk."

Sarah chuckled. "Yep, same old Mum. They keep asking me to go to their place, but Christmas Day must be here. Anyway, they see me every year." She shook her head. "Lovely to see them here in a bit.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yep, it looked good. But you didn't. Spending Christmas Day by yourself, as usual."

"Except I am not by myself."

Sarah raised a hand to touch his ever unshaven stubble despite the knowledge that her finger tips continued to pass through a chilled wisp. Tom's shoulders drooped. His eyes moved away from her to a distant stare. Sarah's lips parted, steady eye contact. "Nothing will ever take this special day from us. Look at me, Tom."

Tom's eyes met Sarah's longing gaze.

"Nothing." Sarah released an appreciative sigh.

Tom's face lit up again with that happy complexion Sarah preferred. "Remember how cold outside, on our wedding day."

Sarah sniggered. "Just four years ago, I hope so."

"Yes, you were getting the shivers waiting."

"Waiting," Sarah interjected, "for ages, painfully awaiting your blasted car to show up. My mother was..."

"Fuming." Tom cut in chuckling. "And when I got there, those dagger eyes met mine; of course, I blamed Roy, his fault. Well, no, we both got hammered the night before and got up late."

Sarah pursed her lips and then she blurted, “Yup.”

“You were okay with it but your Mum, oh boy, I thought she may grab me by my earlobe and drag me into the church.”

Sarah laughed and bowed her head forward to Tom’s chest. “I really think having the wedding the day after your 30th birthday and your stag night all rolled into one, a bad idea.”

“Well, it turned out okay, even if I was hung over for the first hour.”

“And we are still married.” Sarah said, her face a radiant glow in the flickers of ambient light from the candles.

Tom’s complexion became a sullen one. He reached out a hand and slid his fingers down her cheek. Sarah closed her eyes and in her mind, felt the touch.

A mile away from the house, a crimson Honda Accord steered its way through wet country roads with cautious turns of the wheel. Sheets of rain coupled with dusk’s dying light blurred any chance of beautiful views, the splendour of the countryside hidden behind a grey veil of downpours; the rain hammered on the windscreen. Kay rubbed her arms. The car heating circumvented no warmth. She checked the nob position, all red bars.

“Glad we are there soon, between your car heating failing and this rain.” Kay sighed in her stiff seated posture, and her fingertips drummed the dashboard.

“Actually, the heating is on. I can never get used to this damn road, like driving blind. But, at least you’re frustrated with the weather this Christmas evening and not young Sarah, or the weekend, like me.” Roy said, disregarding Kay’s moan and a preference to concentrate hard on the road ahead as it climbed up through raged rainfall.

Kay threw dagger eyes at Roy. “I told you. This is the last time. I will deal with this in my own way this time. Or,” Kay paused for thought and rubbed a wrapped gift on her lap for her sister, “Well, I don’t really want the alternative.”

“We are here.”

Roy pulled off the country road onto the paving circles of a driveway. On a clear day, the valley beyond the house walls revealed a beauty impossible to ignore and not take in; thick slithering tendrils of mist coupled rain and a deeper dusk shrouded all the green pastures. Roy disembarked and gave the darkened view a moment of his time to appreciate nature, even if concealed, anything to delay.

“We should visit in the Summer from now on, you know.”

Kay slammed the door shut with her foot as she clutched the gift in her hands, a frozen smile on her face. A strong wind shuffled through the garden foliage and brushed trees hard. The wind and rain forced them towards the front door.

Before Roy could knock, it opened, and a cheery Sarah greeted him.

“Roy, come in.”

They hugged. Kay strolled past, the gift box tight to chest, and kissed Sarah on her cheek. Sarah shut the door against the howling wind and followed Kay and Roy into the lounge.

Kay placed the gift at the foot of the Christmas tree. For a moment, Kay, Roy and Sarah stood there as though time itself froze like the valley lake beyond Sarah’s house over the Winter period.

Roy unzipped the jacket off his portly torso and exhaled as the warmth of the fire struck his skin and spoke first. “So, how are you?”

“Great.” Sarah replied as she took his jacket followed by Kay’s damp padded coat and hung them on a corner coat rack. “Business is good. Seems my gift store raised eyes this year on Etsy.”

“Yes, well done, Sis. Told you your handmade stuff would do well,” said Kay with a feigned smile that hid the intended words this evening.

Sarah’s jewellery adorned a full cabinet opposite the fireplace. A mixture of bracelets, necklaces, and novelty rings. A plaque showed her acceptance of an award for ‘Entrepreneur of the Year’ at a convention in London, a different Sarah; one with a less strained smile, a content woman eager to make it big in this world.

Kay’s eyes moved across the room from the locked sitting-room door, past the burning fireplace, to the wrapped gifts next to the one she added at the tree’s foot. “I wonder, what could that be; a pendant, a necklace, a gem, the mind boggles,” she joked.

Sarah giggled and waved her hand. “Oh, you won’t guess. And you will love it.”

“So, did your dinner go well today?” Roy asked.

Kay, an opened mouth, about to fire the same question. Hope, too. Perhaps to hear Sarah clear on spending the day alone would suffice. Even the warmth of the fire did not soothe Roy as he forced some enthusiasm from a depleted well.

Sarah drew a smile as she locked her eyes on Roy. “Fine, lovely. Tom then sat here with me as I set the gifts down.” She paused. “And yours?”

A moment of silence froze the atmosphere, Roy and Kay glanced at each other. Roy babbled. “Oh yes, stuffed as usual, barely able to drive.” He chuckled and allowed the chuckle to die quick.

“Okay, drinks. Roy, still a lager I take it, Kay, Bacardi and lime.”

“No, I am driving,” Roy grumbled.

“That’s it.” Kay’s swift reply forced a more enthusiastic smile. Perhaps the alcohol would ease the swell of tension.

“Okay, wait here, and I will return.” Sarah scuttled off for the kitchen.

Kay hurried after her, eyes fixed on Roy. “Wait here.” Her tone stern; Roy knew this rough command tone. He sighed and slid warming hands into his pockets, and he knew the wife meant business.

Then he noticed something.

The door to the sitting room - now open, a quaint spare smaller room. For some time, it served as Tom’s private quarters so he and Roy could let Sarah watch television in peace while they indulged in card games over hours of beer swilling.

Roy winced, the open door, yet shut a minute ago. Hesitant at first, he approached for a sneaky peek through the doorway. He sought to avoid the place; too many memories, much pain to bubble to the surface.

And he reminisced.

This is where he used to play poker, kept Sarah awake all night with drunken roars of joy each time he beat Tom. The glossy beech wood poker table is still present, pride of place in the room centre. No change. Roy smiled and allowed a short giggle to emerge as he remembered all the times flicking cards across the surface.

Roy resisted an urge to enter the sitting room, swivelled on his heels and back into the lounge. The incandescent flickers of some tree lights are hypnotic but soothing; yet still, it cut deep. A friend too close missing from this home. He felt the weight in his steps as he strolled around, a heaviness in his heart.

“Hello, Roy.” Tom leant against the wall next to the lounge door.

Roy's eyes filled with water as he tapped a picture frame on the mantelpiece of him, Kay, Sarah and Tom, a snap of happy times while on holiday in France. It was a fortnight of the best fun.

The holiday, only days before.

Roy turned away from the photo and crept by the doorway, a difficult peer into the sitting room again.

Tom stood there.

Still and smiling.

Tom exhaled in frustration. As usual, Roy's eyes pierced through him. "Miss you mate. These annual visits don't add up. Can't see me but, should I let you." Tom sighed. "No, yes, no, maybe. Damn my vow. Okay, time to do the rattling chains thing then. Well, figure of speech, deal you a hand and..."

Tom trailed off as Roy nodded his head, almost as if for one moment, Roy could see.

Though, Roy reminisced; he remembered the fun evenings here. He and Tom drank till the orange rim of dawn's sun spilled light through the windows. Roy, with pace, forced through the veil, and strode back to the sitting-room door and closed it. The memories gnawed at him. He removed his hand from the handle as it clicked shut. Roy studied the furniture as though he'd never set eyes on the room before, allowing memories attached to the room to unfold. He pulled his hands out of his pockets, clenched his fists as he sniffled.

"Can't do this anymore." His words muffled, a tear rolled down one cheek.

In the kitchen, Kay, arms folded; she watched as Sarah milled back and forth between the oven-baked food, a myriad of hors d'oeuvres and the table. Kay hunched forward and placed her hands on a chair. Wide eyes probed Sarah for attention.

"Darling, we have to talk."

Sarah licked a finger as she tasted a chicken wing coated in a spicy sauce. “Sure, what’s up.”

Kay gripped her arm. “Please sit down.”

Sarah froze as her wide eyes stared ahead as she felt the pressure of Kay’s grip.

“Okay. This sounds bad. Can’t it wait till after we eat and...”

“I need to talk about Tommy, darling.” Kay’s voice cracked a little as she studied her sister’s reaction to his name.

Roy had returned to the lounge and flickering fireplace. He stomped up and down the carpet. “I’ll take that drink now, actually, screw it.” He called out, his voice drifted to the kitchen.

Something caught Roy’s eye. He swivelled to peer over his shoulder.

The sitting-room door ajar again.

“Useless door.” Roy approached it, a little haste.

The door slammed shut an inch from his nose.

Startled, Roy arched his neck backwards.

Then he could hear whispers beyond the doorway.

And the clatter of something too faint to determine.

Roy opened the door. He strode forward and then sauntered to the table. He gasped: the cards now laid out on the poker table and two towers of tokens. A hand of five cards fanned on one side where he used to sit; another next to where Tom buried his posterior for hours on his celeste armchair.

“Who’s here.” Then raised his voice. “Who is here!”

Tom drummed his temple with fidgety fingers. He stared at Roy from the armchair. He tilted his head upwards to the ceiling and then allowed a long sigh.

“I am under a vow here. I really want to allow myself to be seen by you, Roy boy. There is no-one here, only you and me. I chose to avoid you the past few years. Sarah’s request, our little secret. And not to scare or upset you or Kay. She wanted you to simply accept that I am here on Christmas Day, and that she is not losing it. Pretty sure if I, well, appeared in a flash, you won’t be seen by anyone either. Phew. I’ve abstained from any kind of sign, no moving of objects, no dealing cards but, now I am trying to reach you this Christmas. So, I’m doing the poltergeist thing. What can I do?”

Tom scratched his scalp as thoughts swirled.

“This is the last time I shall try to speak with you, buddy, c’mon, Sarah and Kay are about to argue and chat for a bit, time for a round. Tell you what, I will go first. Five-card draw. Try to keep an open mind, and nothing to fear.”

The hand of cards levitated, then they shuffled, raised by a chilled air, and Roy felt the icy edge of the presence.

Roy tried to squeal as he fell back into the armchair opposite where he perched himself on so many nights, so long ago it seemed. But words failed to surface.

“I am about to break my vow to Sarah, but this is the last time,” Tom trailed off again, “Before I go. So don’t be afraid, Roy. Can you hear me now?”

Roy nodded, Tom’s familiar voice like an echo in his skull. His grip on the armchair wood was so tight, it creaked.

“A quick game, and then some words old friend. Some final words, Roy. I don’t want to hurt Sarah or you anymore. She must move on with her life.”

Roy’s clammy hand still gripped the arm of the chair, breath then burst out and in again. “Shit, T-Tom.”

“Yes, I am here. You can hear me now, and I will allow you to see me. Anyway, do not be alarmed. Well, much. I know it’s of course, unsettling, but this is it tonight, Roy.”

“Don’t be alarmed! Do you know how terrifying this is?” Roy stuttered and felt rooted to the chair. He lowered his voice, a whisper slid by. “All true...Sarah has been...seeing you.” Roy’s fear diminished, a stiffness in his limbs replaced with a lightness as he grew a smile, the widest smile.

He could see Tom.

“You too see me now.” Tom rolled his eyes around. “Don’t really understand it, once I wish it, some see me, most never do as that is my choice. Guess those able to see are the closest ones to the heart. Hi mate.”

Roy expelled his breath, fear now replaced with a joy he had not felt for such a long time. He wept. “Tom...mate...”

“It’s okay. I have not allowed myself to be seen by you or Kay over the last few Christmas days mate, that was always to be between Sarah and myself, her special evening. And I’ve sort of broken a vow with Sarah. But my time has come. The powers that be tell me this is my last evening here. Now, I need you to listen carefully.”

Back in the kitchen, Kay and Sarah sniffled and wept. Kay rubbed Sarah’s hands.

“I understand how much you want to believe it, God knows, I want to, Roy wants to. But this bears down on us and mostly on you dear.”

Sarah withdrew her hands, wiped some tear streaks, and settled back in the chair, a cold glow on her face. “Tom is here Kay, every year...”

“No darling, he is not.” Kay cut in.

“Yes, every year, he comes to my house,” Sarah raised her voice a notch, “And we sit by the fireplace, and we talk, and then we dance.”

Kay's shoulders curled over her chest as she tried to find the words, and the cracked words came. "Darling, we listened to you last year, and the year before. And before that. It has been three years since we lost him, Sarah. He is gone. Over three years since that horrible Christmas night. Please don't let me bring up all that. You need to try to move on." Kay paused. "Glad you neglected to mention Tom's visits to Mum or Dad."

"No Kay, somehow I feel I don't need to. I only told you as I needed someone to understand. Yes, sister, not crazy, he died." Sarah's puffy face and running makeup craned towards Kay's red eyes. "I am not going crazy, I have not forgotten the police showing up at my door, the details, where his body was found. All it took, one drunk truck driver not seeing my love walking. But right now Kay, I am not making this all up."

And she recalled the Christmas Eve night.

Sarah drifted from Kay as snapshots of the worst night of her life flooded through.

How some hours had passed while she waited for Tom.

He had popped out to gather mistletoe, cultivating a few miles away near an orchard. The sweet task set to change everything. A short walk to the location. It poured down as Tom walked. A truck driver, drunk and struggling in the sheets of rain, veered as he struggled to steer through the velvet night downpour. A skid, the truck, lost control, lurched as the rear fishtailed on a turn. Poor Tom strolled with his back to the oncoming hulk of metal. He never knew what hit him. When the police arrived at Sarah's, words lacked a requirement as their bowed, sorrow-stricken faces expressed the heart wrenching news. Sarah collapsed as the WPC tried to console her.

Tears streamed down Sarah's face as Kay waited for her to continue. "He comes here, he came that very night, and each Christmas Day since. We spend one night together before he has to go until next Christmas." Sarah pointed towards the lounge. "He is here, now,

hiding from you, he won't show himself to you or Roy. I asked him to keep it our secret.

Didn't want to upset you, or poor Roy. Tom does not want to hurt anyone."

"He's hurting you, I mean, your memory of him, this belief he visits you. And you say you see him." Kay sunk back into the chair. "You see him." Her tone was sharp at first, then it calmed. "You need help, Sarah, the kind that we can't give you. Unless you stop this..."

"Stop what, seeing my love." Sarah crossed her arms over her chest. "You know, it's so stupid. He popped out. I told him mistletoe grew nearby. And he wanted to bring some back so we could dance under it, so stupid." Her voice brittle.

Kay reached forward and gripped her arm. "No, he was a real romantic." Kay drew a deep breath. "So unlike Roy. Though he tries. But no honey, not stupid. Not at all. A horrible, tragic and swift act of fate, and nothing else. So, do not blame yourself."

"Anyway, he is here tonight. So, let us open our prezzies, a nice couple of hours before you and Roy head back." Sarah rose with haste and ushered Kay to follow her to the lounge.

Kay, stoic, still for a moment, a vacant stare. "Well, I tried," Kay muttered before she followed Sarah.

Sarah unwrapped her gift. Kay knelt to pick up her present.

"Roy darling." She shouted to the sitting room doorway.

Roy, seated, stunned, a struggle to acknowledge her.

"Here love, with you in a sec." A shell-shocked Roy spoke.

Kay strode forward into the sitting room and pressed a light kiss on Roy's cheek.

"Didn't think you would ever come in here again. Not sure this year is a step forward for all of us, though. She persists with her fantasies. I don't know what to do."

"It will be okay, love." Roy smiled, but his slumped shoulder told a different story.

“Thank you, sister,” Sarah called from the tree as she unwrapped a picture frame of her and Tom, one taken by Kay at their wedding, now framed in silver. Sarah smoothed the glass with her fingertips, and the picture offered a tactile touch that warmed.

Kay ambled back to the lounge, a feigned smile again, approached Sarah and hugged her. Roy followed, but stood in the doorway. “Kay, Sarah, I want you to listen for a sec.”

“Open your gift first, Roy, plenty of time for speeches,” Kay said as she handed him Sarah’s gift. Roy tried to hide a need to explain the events experienced. He clenched his jaw and unwrapped it quickly - Tom’s watch.

“That is lovely,” Tom said. He stood behind Roy as he regarded his loved Rolex.

“I was going to give it you last year, but I forgot, so...” Sarah stopped as she noticed Kay’s face had whitened a little.

“Did...anyone hear...that?” Kay said, her voice lowered to a whisper.

Sarah smiled as Tom walked over to her and wrapped an arm around her.

Roy could still see him. Kay’s jaw dropped, colour vanished from her cheeks. All could now see him. She had unwrapped Sarah’s gift; a pendant etched with the words *Roy and Kay forever* hung from shaky fingers, the pendant slipped from her grasp to the carpet.

Kay yelped. Roy grabbed her. “It is okay, Darling.”

“Yes, sorry, but I can’t time these things very well once you can hear me after I decide you can.” Tom raised his hand. “Hi, Kay. Yes, it is me.”

His name dragged out along a long breath from Kay as she hung off Roy’s embrace. “T--o--m...”

“It is okay Kay, little precious time here for Tom to say a few words.” Roy pleaded with Kay’s better nature not to freak out.

Sarah's eyes set on Tom as Roy spoke. She rubbed the heel of a palm on her temple.
"What does he mean, not much precious time?"

Tom kept a reassuring smile on Kay.

Roy closed his eyes for a moment, the realisation he had spoken out-of-turn as he tried to calm Kay.

Tears streamed down Kay's shaky face. "How...how...are you...here...?" She reached out a hand to touch Tom, but felt nothing; a cold spot next to Sarah.

Kay swooned, Roy held her up.

"We should go. You two need some time together." Roy said as he made his way out. He fixed a sad gaze on Tom for a moment, then with Kay over his arm, exited the room.

"No, stay, got food prepared. Kay will be fine soon, and," Sarah placed her palm on Tom's face, wishing for his warmth rather than cold vapour. "What does he mean?"

Outside, the wind howled as Roy eased Kay into the front seat. He entered the car and closed the door. For a moment, Roy glared at Sarah's lounge bay window. Through the window, he could see Sarah, her arms in an empty embrace. He allowed a tear to roll and started the engine. "Goodbye, buddy. Enjoy your time tonight. See you later."

The car pulled out of the drive and disappeared into the night.

Sarah pressed a button on the iPad, and the first tune of Cyndi Lauper's album played. Tom held a loving smile as Sarah turned to him. His hand gripped Sarah's. She gasped.

She felt his touch, and this time - warmth. The warm touch of flesh and bone, not the chilled wisp of his ethereal shell.

Sarah touched his face, chin. She ran her hand along his torso over the shirt he wore that night. Sarah's fingers slapped against her parted lips as the other hand stroked his face. Her eyes bulged. "I can feel you. I can..."

“Yes, for a few hours, Sarah. Christmas is about wishes coming true after all. My Christmas gift to you. Well, the powers that be gave me the gift, to give to you.”

“How...I don't care...just so yearned for this moment to arrive.”

Sarah dismissed any truth in Tom's spirit, some visiting entity, despite the shirt that clung to his form; an embodiment of the Tom she knew but for her, Tom felt as real as long ago. Sarah tried to slip her hand under his shirt lapels, but her hand glided over the lapel instead. His outer form and skin fused into a copy of his former self as on the night he died.

“I so want to touch you all over.” Sarah rested her head on his chest. She felt no beating heart but the love inside, all the warmth she needed.

The forlorn couple swayed side to side in a graceful dance as the fireplace crackled, gentle sways to the music. Time After Time played after some other songs. Tom kept his eyes closed as they swayed toe-to-toe, a tight hug. Tom squeezed Sarah's waist a little more, Sarah's arms snaked around his shoulders.

And the songs seemed to last an eternity. The looped album kept playing as the swaying continued without a moment away from each other's embrace. And some hours seemed like minutes to Sarah as she pressed her face against Tom's chest.

Tom lifted her face. “This is our last dance, Sarah.”

Sarah rocked her head. “No...No...”

“Our time must pass, you need to move on, I can't allow you to keep holding on like this. You must live your life without me.”

Sarah cried hard. “No, I can't do it.”

“Yes, you can. I've returned each year in answer to your wishes. But it's time to let you go. You must let me go. You will be strong. You will move on.”

Sarah clutched Tom so hard, he might have felt pain.

Then she held nothing but the warm air of the fire.

And she sank to her knees.

One year later.

Sarah's house teemed with guests, her parents, Kay's friends clinked glasses and laughed and talked about the past. Roy drank beer and played poker with some of his friends in the sitting room. The atmosphere, fresh and festive, full of joy and happiness unfelt by the home and each of them for some time.

At the end of the night, and the early hours of Boxing Day beckoned as Midnight approached, only Sarah, Roy and Kay remained. They stood together, each holding the other in front of the fireplace, a yearning focus on the picture of them and Tom.

"Ready, just once more, ready, one, two, three," Roy spoke.

Each sang the words in synchrony. "Merry Christmas, Tom."

A darker shade of lost love, another tale of a broken heart, a lost soul and a life of cheating death. Here is Luke's story...

Life After Luke

The wonder boy.

Luke's new name.

Luke believed invincibility exists. He reminded himself. I just won't die, Luke thought in the silence of his plush apartment. He'd moved out of his first L.A. home, unable to escape the pain of memories with Amy. The new place, many floors above ground, quiet and great for solitude but in no way soothing Luke's remorse that sedated him daily.

Despite escaping the clutches of Death's shadow, Luke felt far from happy as he failed to move a muscle, a sunken wreck on a sofa. Unanswered phone messages remained that way from the boss wondering where the hell Luke is. A need swelled, the need to move on from the city, seek a life elsewhere.

Somewhere incapable of reminding him - of her.

Sorry, can't come to work for a while, leaving Los Angeles, Luke thought, staring at the blinking number of unread messages on the voicemail machine next to a framed graduation photograph. All that effort, yearning for that pass on the photography major, now a faded memory. A prestigious city magazine publisher job offer eased Luke's escape from living with Mom and Dad after graduation a few years ago.

His private city apartment felt empty. Like the city outside, every corner of his abode, every shade, reminded him of Amy.

The New Year approached, soon another year starts and a fresh load of pain for Luke. Cheers and the joyous swell of laughter from parties in the apartment block drifted into Luke's apartment. The city erupted in celebration and festivities for most people.

Luke regarded a wall clock with a crushing sadness.

10.38pm

Soon, he would be alone for the midnight cheers that he so enjoyed spending with Amy.

He dwelled on happy times at the previous rental, the time spent making love next to the fireplace, the good times, the lost times; moments never able to blossom again.

Leaving the city, not enough.

His attention swayed to a Los Angeles Times paper, the headline: The Luckiest Man Alive. A book nearby on a coffee table captured his curiosity:

The Death Cheaters - Why Death Will Find Them in the End.

The book covered tales of many cheating death, flukes similar to Luke's recent escapades. Luke felt curious.

Why so lucky?

Two years from thirty, Luke wondered if the past five months belonged to him. He felt like a miracle. He just won't - die.

"Why do I survive each time?" Luke's unanswered and often repeated question echoed around the apartment.

Sombre thoughts filled with the horror of that day.

Why Amy?

The speeding Ferrari, Luke and Amy waiting at a red light, the smash into the rear sending Luke's car bursting forward, the flaming wreck of both cars, someone tugs at Luke to

free him from the vehicle, another trying to pull Amy from the car - in vain. The twisted metal sealed her fate.

Why not me? Why not me?

Luke lived. She died.

Since the car accident that failed to take Luke's life, as it did Amy according to medical reports on his injuries, life for Luke continues to be far from normal. The paramedics exposed their amazement: Luke's chances of survival were pretty much non-existent like Amy and the guy in the speeding Ferrari. Two weeks later in hospital, Luke's injuries healed up well. An incredible recovery, baffling doctors as he strode out of the ward.

Luke pondered. *Why were my severe injuries not life threatening?*

That sounds strange. Perhaps an insane dose of luck. *No way*, Luke thought. After the crash, things reached a whole new level of weird - escaping death, unbreakable.

He offered to help his Dad repair a leaky roof a month after the crash. Anything to take his mind off her. Luke's job, nail the new shingles.

And, whoops.

A slight error of judgment and Luke tumbled off the roof slates onto a hard-paved drive. His skull smashed like a melon into the asphalt, strike one. Next the nail gun he held in his hand went off as he hit the ground. One six-inch nail after another buried into his neck and skull missing the spinal cord and brain stem by a fraction.

Luke cheated death again.

He made it to surgery where doctors informed his folks of the miracle despite massive blood loss: Luke surviving fatal injuries. Again. A few weeks later, he walks out of hospital; no prolonged brain injury as his wounds and fractures healed, and once again, baffling the bejesus out of the doctors.

Healing powers that defied the clutches of the reaper.

I should be happy. Luke dwelled on an image of her in his mind, a snapshot from time, caressing each other on the sofa.

And, he felt brief warmth, before pain tore at the soothe. Someone special in an act of cruel fate plucked from his life. Luke grabbed a photograph of him and Amy - smiling, happy.

“Was I supposed to die with her, huh?” Luke yelled to the silence of his abode.

The last few words broke apart as Luke fell to the carpet clutching the photograph, pressed hard against the forehead. Attempts to sway teary eyes from Amy’s photograph in a trembling hand failed. Eyes fixed on her smile, her crystal eyes that captured a man’s attention, unable to even blink. He rubbed the glass as a question incapable of an answer floated on sombre breath.

“Was I supposed to die with you?”

He let the photograph drop to the carpet. Luke glanced at various corners of his lounge, cupped his mouth, eyes burnt red with remorse. He begged for something, anything, to fill him with gratitude. Though, true happiness had abandoned him.

Amy.

Above the fireplace, other frames showed snapshots of moments when a smile raised as easy as breathing. The pain of her loss still surged through his veins, the pain, the loss, failed to ease.

“I should not have left these photos here, time to go,” Luke muttered as he sprung from the carpet, one hard drunken swing of his arm, the photographs slid off the mantelpiece. Two frames missed the flame tendrils of the fireplace close to licking the glass by an inch. He continued muttering to himself, eyes closed. “I must move on, must move on.”

Luke ambled over to the balcony overlooking the city from the tenth floor as the clock chimed at 11pm. He clutched the railings, felt the cold autumnal winds picking up, brushing his face harder and harder. He peered at the overcast sky and shook his head.

The free fall. Now that promised a quick death two months ago.

As the wind picked up velocity against his face, he recalled the jump. Luke wanted to try something different, inject excitement back into his life. Dating failed. The minute a girl showed, Amy's face stared back.

Deep down, Luke wished for death to take him if he leapt, for the jump to kill him.

After a few practice jumps, the chance for a solo jump arrived. He pulled the cord. Nothing. Splat time beckoned. Nope. A farm haystack prevented him from forming a massive splotch of human parts pizza stains on the ground. Unconscious, he woke to doctors peering down at him musing over his injuries and plain mystified again. He spent a few weeks in traction at the hospital where doctors considered him a new medical project. Or perhaps even a medical wonder.

Someone leaked his death defying free fall to the press and within a week, Luke found his new name 'The Wonder Boy'. Doctors remained mystified over a sky jump resulting in a mere concoction of broken legs, skull fractures again, and broken vertebrae; injuries leaving Luke paralysed for less than a month. First the crash, then the fall and nails, next a leap out the side of an aircraft in the clouds with a failed chute - the consummate survivor. The Doctors left stunned only capable of further bewilderment as to how he survived each time.

Luke felt pain, oh yes, the pain as much a bite as for anyone else. Though, he recovered quick; he lived.

He defeated death yet again.

It became the highest free fall disaster survived leaving Luke and the entire medical profession only wondering - how?

Luke peered over the balcony.

Jump, try it, maybe I won't be so lucky, Luke thought, *unless I am blessed with nine lives so still have some knocks to take*. Luke wondered if he could leap off the balcony, drop many floors to the ground, and prove another reason to uphold his reputation as The Wonder Boy.

Luke's phone buzzed. He hit the answer button. "Hi Rick."

Rick, his best friend, and while handling it better, also still sore over Amy's passing.

"Luke, where the hell are you? Still at home? The boss has been wondering if you are coming back."

"Rick, look, I don't know..."

"Luke, don't think a day goes by, it doesn't. She meant the world to you. It needs more time. Let me pick you up in the morning. Your photography career is hanging by a thread dude. Hardly been here with all your accidents," he snorted, "not that, you are lucky to be here at all. So pick yourself up."

"Likely."

"You know what, you hit your head harder than you realised after that free fall to hell. Those nails that punctured your skull did some real permanent damage I reckon."

"Yep, so true Rick," Luke cut through Rick's quips, "maybe I was supposed to die, in fact, I am dead now and am yet to grasp it yet, sure feels that way."

Luke paced in and out of the apartment and the balcony. Icy winds blew and ruffled the curtains.

"I don't care, not anymore."

“What?”

“I can’t be here anymore, gotta run, sorry.”

“Huh,” Rick drew a long sigh, “I miss her too, Amy, a special person to me too, Luke. I’ll pick you up in the...”

Luke disconnected the call and tapped his mouth with the phone as he muttered to himself. “Why is she dead and not me? How can anyone survive what I walked from?”

He rested on the sofa, allowing his head to sink into the fabric. He closed weary eyes and hoped that sleep would take him into a new day soon.

A buzz. His intercom crackled.

Luke flinched, awoken from his short slumber by the constant gnawing buzz of the bell. He checked the time.

11.48pm

For a moment, Luke froze as he expected no visits so late in the evening. He ambled across to the intercom with tired heavy feet, dismayed at not sleeping past the midnight hour, and pressed the button.

“Hello.” His voice still croaky from a few hours of shouting painful reminiscence earlier.

Silence.

“Hello,” he repeated with a higher pitch.

“Luke.”

The muffled response, a female, something about the voice - familiar.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me. We should talk.”

Luke backed away from the intercom. The voice, her voice, he knew the voice.

He punched the button. “Who is this?”

“It is me, Luke we must talk, please let me in.”

Clarity hit Luke like a sledgehammer. Amy’s voice.

“No way, go away!”

Bang.

A sudden thump on the door sent Luke reeling backwards onto his posterior.

Luke stared at the handle as chest palpitations began.

Fear gripped. He quivered, too scared to dwell on how this person made it from beyond a locked apartment block front door and up several flights of stairs to his door in a flash.

“Let me in Luke. Invite me in. Don’t make me break in.”

The voice now outside the door.

“How...how did you get..here...go...away...”

“Guess I’ll come in, okay.”

A click on the door as it unlocked.

Luke froze, his lips and chin shook as the figure strode inside. He stared with disbelief. Tears streamed down a distraught face.

“Amy.” His voice a whimper.

She stood there, wearing the same attire as on the day she died. Her posture still as she moistened her lips, sandy hair flowed in waves alongside her porcelain-like skin. Her eyes, sparkling crystals, wide and bright - brightening Luke’s world again as he hoisted himself off the floor. Luke’s jaw dropped and he filled his mouth with a fist. The eyes on him were not dead ones but bright like springtime ferns.

“Can’t be, can’t...be you. I...saw...you buried.”

Amy, smiled. “That is right, I am back, to try to convince you to come with me.”

Luke’s facial muscles tightened, he felt rooted to the spot. “Who...what...are you, and why do you look like my Amy?”

“It’s me Luke. I wanted to be invited. Not break in. Come willingly with me. Both of us should have died. They sent me back to you, to bring you with me.”

“Go!” He shut his eyes. “I...am...losing my mind. No...I’ve lost my mind. I do not believe...”

Amy shuffled forward fast to within a few inches away from Luke. Words drifted along icy breath into his ear. “Open your eyes Luke.”

Luke flinched, sniffing, nervous wagging finger raised to her prying eyes.

“You can’t be...her,” he chortled, “You just look like her.”

She moved closer to Luke, her eyes now swirled with a vortex of green fire. “You are right, you died Luke, with me in that crash. Your fate. The crash, not supposed to take only me. But you can cheat death. You can also stop cheating death. Your time arrived, and mine, and this comes once, a one time call for your departure from here. You won’t die at any other time. For everyone, there is a time to die, but some like you, survive. There are many like you.”

“I am...lucky. And you...are not...her. All else fails, sure enough, old age will take me to a grave.” Luke edged backwards through the wide open balcony doors, the wind howled and rushed against him.

Amy floated along, her hair flowing madly in the air.

“You are not destined to die old and grey in your bed. Attempts to take your life failed and failed. So they sent me to ask you to join me, come with me into the dying light. I know

how you hurt Luke. But, you cheated. And if you come, you come with me, and we will be together, again and always.”

Luke felt the cold stone balcony wall. Teardrops fell down a puffy face. Happiness had deserted him, living without Amy an unthinkable life. He rubbed the heel of his palm against his chest, his wet eyes met the eyes of Amy. A flat, monotone and brittle voice emerged. “Is it...really...you?”

Amy stood in the sliding doorway. She stretched out her ashen white arm. “All you need to do is take my hand.”

Luke ran his shaky hands through damp hair. He flinched. A cold mist rested on the apartment floor like drifted snow. The smooth blanket of mist on the carpet crept up the walls and smothered the balcony, seeping over its edge in chilled wisps. Scattered powdered gloomy clouds above swirled into a stormy sky; the rumble of thunder overhead as the darkened clouds formed a twisting dance above them.

She floated forward. Luke raised a hand to her face. He caressed her cheek, felt warmth, not icy to the touch, felt her again. He clasped Amy’s hand, her grip tightened.

“Do not fear death.”

Luke embraced her. She wiped his teary eyes. “I fear nothing, you are what I want. Nothing else matters.”

As the mist engulfed them both, then cleared, the clock chimed into the New Year. Cheers of jubilation erupted from the city below and neighbouring apartments.

Then the sound of the clock chimes died as the room shaped and objects shrunk away as the cheers outside continued.

Both Luke and Amy, the furniture, the scattered photo memories, the wall clock - gone. The apartment was bare. No sign of Luke ever having lived there at all.

Luke's eyes snapped open.

Unable to move, wedged between shards of metal. Smoke filled his lungs as they wrenched the car door off. Amy lay still, their hands locked. A river of blood flowed from a deep head gash on Luke. Arms reached into the car and tried to pull Amy from the passenger seat.

Her lifeless eyes, a vacant stare. Gone.

Luke smiled, whispered, "See you soon, my Amy."

His chest stopped heaving - still.

Their hands, still locked together.

His time came.

And they found each other again.

Even otherworldly beings can gain a taste for human love, though it's definitely more complicated as Syd discovers...

Syd

Syd watched, yearned, all he could do. Time carried little weight. Weeks, months, no meaning.

Syd felt the quickening of a heartbeat for the first time.

No tingling nerves or dryness of the throat, like others.

Just plain - Love.

He gazed at the stride as she emerged from her place of work, a school amid a busy urban city centre. He soaked up every stride, every turn of her head. Syd moved closer to her car as she approached the school entrance gate. Since his gaze met her face just a few days ago, this obsession only grew stronger with each passing moment.

It felt too strong, too unfamiliar, overpowering. Syd never thought this feeling could ever surface. So many generations of wandering, and now, the flesh and blood of this woman captivated Syd and drowned every other ghoulish desire unlike within any previous mortal existence.

The deep feelings, as clear as the day he discovered a physical identity, a word taken from a tormented soul that once occupied the body. That body died as mortals do. And he kept the name, it felt right, his name - Syd. As a wandering entity, he'd never actually hung onto the body's name before. The nameless belong to a legion of beings granted no place on Earth, no life, without stealing the body of a mere mortal. No physical existence, no identity. Something rebellious swelled inside his ethereal shell that walked with his every step, a need to break free from the darkness.

A change as unfamiliar to Syd as being human.

Now a wandering distraught entity, dry of enthusiasm for acts of possession, a path of consumption that tired Syd. No, Syd wanted more. To stop the lonely strides through the ages and join the human species in a meaningful life. He wished to walk like a human, not shuffle around in a smoky silhouette, peering at oblivious people strolling past with sunken pits of blackness for eyes.

Seen. Noticed. To touch, and to feel - like a human.

Syd gazed at the flows of wavy blonde hair as it brushed her shoulder as she entered the car. A quick hum of the engine as it started, then she sped off to meet a busy traffic stream ahead. Syd kept focused on the car as it struggled along in the gridlock, a spectral glide as close to the vehicle as possible. Hundreds of people packed the street, some in an ambling gait, others dashing for the tube station, others walking at Syd, not knowing a demonic being passed them.

Syd gazed at the flows of wavy blonde hair as it brushed her shoulder as she entered the car. A quick hum of the engine as it started, then she sped off to meet a busy traffic stream ahead. Syd kept focused on the car as it struggled along in the gridlock, staying as close to the vehicle as possible. Hundreds of people packed the street, some in an ambling gait, others dashing for the tube station, others walking at Syd, not knowing a demonic being passed them.

He stared back at passersby with pinhole retinas that glowed like distant stars.

Syd wished for recognition, to be seen and loved.

He kept his attention on the car, on her.

Inside the car, she lit up a cigarette and punched a call button on a phone gripped by a holder. *'Calling Jake'* appeared then a voice.

“Jess. Where are you?”

“Hey,” Jess sucked up a lungful then exhaled as she continued, “left work a little later, sorry. More papers than usual to mark. And I didn’t want to bring them home unfinished as,” she smiled, “as soon as I return...”

“We head off for a weekend by ourselves for a change.” Jake cut in with a sigh of relief.

“That’s right. Kids ready.”

“Why don’t I take them to Molly’s now?”

“You just can’t wait to get rid of them, can you?” Jess said as she took a deep breath.

“C’mon. It’s been a while since we had a weekend to ourselves.” Jake’s voice, a little strained.

“Molly has offered to take them more often.”

“Your sister is cool.”

Jess stone-faced for a second in thought. “Yeah, suit you, doesn’t it?”

“Let’s not argue.”

“Why don’t you like the kids?” Jess asked as she maneuvered out of a busy roundabout.

Silence. Jake at a loss for words. Then he spoke. “I *am* still here. A few before me did not stick around...”

“Talk when I am back. Wait with the kids. We leave as soon as I get back.”

Jess blurted, then punched the end call button.

“Such an asshole at times,” she muttered.

Jess swiveled the rear-view mirror to check her rushed makeup before leaving the school; she swivelled it back to its original position.

In the reflection, Syd, on the back seat, a settled mass of blackened smoke unseen by her, at ease, his gaze on Jess's porcelain skin.

Syd studied Jess.

Craving. Waiting.

Jess stubbed out the cigarette. The phone blasted out Molly's ringtone. Jess rubbed her arm, the bite of a chill for a moment. She hit a button. "Hey Molly."

"Jess. Hmmm," Molly could be heard taking a few quick breaths, "You heading home."

Jess sensed something wrong, Molly's tone was off, a tone she knew of old. "Yeah, I am, you sound a little stressed."

A long awkward audible breath. "I'm sick Jess, flu, just bedridden today."

"Oh no. Well...Erm...how sick?" The question was irrelevant, Jess knew it.

"Sorry, the kids," rasping cough, "just can't be left here, sorry, make it up to you."

Jess craned her neck back in disappointment and almost forgot she steered a road vehicle. "Okay, no worries, we can go in two weeks maybe, whatever."

"Sorry, I was looking forward to taking them to school, playing hide and seek, all that."

"They were looking forward to their Aunt entertaining them. Anyway."

"Really sorry, let you down."

"No, no, it's okay." Jess said despite her tone lacking enthusiasm, "we...will do the usual. Will stop by tomorrow, maybe, if you are feeling better, okay?"

"See you."

Jess checked a road sign before a vacant stare through the windscreen. "No private time with Jake again." She muttered.

Syd, now in the passenger seat, a transfixed stare, yearning.

His razor-thin lips wanted to open and speak, but he knew the shock would terrify her. The swirling black smoke dissipated enough to reveal barely any flesh on a scrawny macerated skeletal physique; all that remained of the man taken, a rotting carcass hidden under torn rags. The decayed face of a long dead man wearing attire that once belonged to the living, from a guy called Syd.

And he liked the name.

The true name, not one that human lips could utter. Names attributed to phantoms from purgatory's depths. Instead, he found a name to adore. A real human name.

But the body. The decayed shell, how he wished to discard the rotten remains and find a new human life to take.

And keep forever. No more lonesome walks between worlds.

Syd stared at his reflection in the mirror. It disgusted him. Centuries of roaming around, picking out victims to torment, all of it just descended into boredom as he desired something else.

Her. To be with Jess.

As his dark eyes feasted on the frustrated lady talking to herself, it was tough to think straight. A lustful look from a hidden gaunt face, cheek bones pushed through thin pale decomposed skin.

The need to touch, just feel, if just for a moment.

He reached out. A bony perished hand clasped Jess's right hand on the wheel in the boldest move on the living ever attempted outside of possession.

She flinched and wrenched her hand from the steering.

Syd withdrew his hand with haste.

Jess felt something as cold as an eel rest on her skin. “What was that?” Jess shook her hand before resuming a tight grip on the wheel, unaware of the ghostly stalker craving for her in the adjacent seat.

She threw the empty passenger seat a curious glance.

For a moment, she felt Syd’s unseen presence.

Syd, still seated there, a rigid stance, black eyes never leaving her face.

A quick head shake, and Jess’s finger hovered over Jake’s number.

Syd’s gaze moved away from her to Jess’s driving license vibrating in the middle pocket between the front seats.

Eyes on the address.

Wandering aimlessly across a wooden floor, an impatient Jake stomped from one wall to another. Nothing impressed him anymore from the period fireplace to the lush sofa where he and Jess snuggled up to each other. Even those nights when Molly took the kids, and Jake soaked up the chance to share the one thing he wanted from Jess, now a diminished enthusiasm.

In a play room a few paces away, two kids played a game on their tablets, lost in their digital worlds. Locked in childhood fun, and oblivious to Jake throwing dagger eyes at them. Hate. A face that despised the little ones.

His phone buzzed and buzzed.

Jess Calling

“Hey,” Jake forced an enthused tone, ”you back soon?”

The voice of Jess. “Yeah, erm, look, weekend is cancelled.”

Jake’s thoughts elsewhere as he replied. “Okay, I see. And why?”

A brief silence as Jess expected anger. “Yes, my sister is ill. We can...do other stuff...Summer holidays are close and I, we, will have plenty of days for breaks away. You, me and the kids can head off for the weekend. Thought you might be quite pissed off.”

Jake covered his face with his hands and returned a muffled reply. “Okay, let’s do that. I...will...chat with you shortly.”

“Okay, you, not too miffed, I hope.”

“No, “ Jake hid a bitter smile, “um, see you shortly.”

A pause for thought from Jess. The call ended.

Jake tapped his mouth with the phone, thoughts, plans. He plunged the phone into his pocket and headed upstairs. His suitcase packed for the weekend just needed fastening. Attention moved to another empty suitcase, which he grabbed and hurled to the bed.

His phone rang.

Sarah calling.

“Hey there, babe.” Jake replied in a loud voice, a beaming smile.

“Don’t fucking babe me, have you left that bitch yet?”

“Told you, was finishing it this weekend, was gonna tell her while away and just not come back. Weekend away not happening now, but babe, don’t worry.”

“No need to hang about, just get outta there,” a sigh, ”honestly don’t know why you stuck with her, how much you hate kids for a start.”

“Yes, I am leaving right now.” Jake snapped.

Her voice cracked as sniffles started. “Sorry, just love you, you said you would leave her a few months ago. I can’t keep seeing you like this...”

“Babe, babe, I am leaving,” Jake tipped his head back, closed his eyes, “right now.”

He ended the call.

He paused for thought, then continued. Garment by garment, he filled the case, then shut it tight. Jake checked the window view of the driveway and empty street. The afternoon glare of the sun glinted off the window glass. He smiled. "I am doing the right thing. Time to go."

"Leaving her, are you?" A husky voice bellowed from behind Jake, startling him.

Jake spun on staggering heels, alarmed eyes searched the bedroom - empty. "Hello," he strode to the door, "kids, hey, who was that?"

The door slammed hard, almost splintering the architrave.

Jake flinched, then an angry grin.

"Kids, not funny, wise up with the games," his voice quieted, "Jake not playing anymore."

"Coward," the deep bellowing voice spoke again, "like so many. So undeserving of happiness and life."

Jake broke into a sprint for the door.

Something clutched his neck.

He rose a few feet off the floor.

He tried to shake himself free as his neck strained.

"AGGHHHHHH!" His muffled scream left his lips.

"Cheat. You were about to leave her, no words, just a sad excuse for a man."

The unseen grip on his throat lowered him down, his heels rested back on the carpet; still a tight throat clasp.

Then it showed itself, the form, a shape materialised.

Syd.

And Jake took it in. The blackest eyes, the pallid skin wrapped around a humanoid shaped cranium, the horrifying absence of flesh on the bone. Even Syd's skull twisted with rage.

"I came here just for a glimpse, before resigning to hopelessness. What do I find? A worthless man with a wonderful woman."

Jake burst into a hysterical fit, shaking violently. Screams leaked through Syd's grip.

"I had no idea we could be just like you. Be able to love. I wandered for generations, feeding off your kind. But now. I would rather live, she...has changed...me, in a way I thought no human could possibly do."

"What...what...are you?" Jake whimpered.

"The last thing you will ever see, feel, and remember."

Jake forced a squeal again.

Syd pulled Jake closer. "You are...an...empty...vessel."

Outside the door, curiosity, the two kids had crept up the stairs upon hearing Jake shout.

Silence.

One kid swallowed hard while controlling some quick breaths and let out a stutter.

"Ja-ke."

They froze, wide eyes on the door.

The door swung open.

The kids yelped.

A smiling Jake emerged, arms outstretched. "Kids, what is wrong," he rolled his eyes, "oops, the shouting, sorry, just got a little frustrated at the...Erm...packing as...we are not going to erm...Molly's."

“We are not going to Aunt Molly’s?” The elder kid spoke.

Jake crouched and beckoned the kids for a hug. Reluctant to this new unaccustomed warmth, they edged towards him. Jake never came across as the hugging type, not for the kids. He smoothed their heads and smiled at the new skin that touched their small heads; his face contorted by a wide Cheshire cat smile, eyes watery with delight.

The front door opened. In strode, Jess. She peered up at Jake and the kids seated on the top stair. Jake rose, strong eye contact with Jess, that longing look, barely a blink.

The kids leapt two stairs at a time towards Jess. “Jake says we are not going to Aunt Molly’s.”

Jess still eye to eye with Jake, his expression one that felt different, something pure and comforting in his smile. “So, you are not disappointed?”

Jake, one soft step after another, walked down to Jess. As he approached, rapid screen taps on a phone blocked Sarah’s number before slipping it into a back pocket.

I’ll deal with her soon.

He moved close to her face. He rubbed her arms softly. Words felt a struggle, rapture and the wonder of true happiness had sealed his tongue. Jess peered into his eyes and felt something - different.

Jake stroked her cheek. “Why don’t we do something, as a family, the four of us? Bring your sister, oh, she is sick.” Jake stumbled from one word to the next, unaware of his silly over-the-top gleeful grin and a nervous lip. Humanity blossomed within like a fresh flower breaking through to the world. No previous mortal woman stirred Syd’s insides this way in so many centuries.

Jess smirked, a flutter in her stomach as she appreciated this new Jake. “Well, was not expecting you to be so...great, got me relieved.”

Jake embraced Jess, euphoria, the pleasure of her touch and closeness no longer a nomadic dream. He whispered. "There are going to be a lot of changes, promise."

Jess smiled and headed off upstairs, ushering the kids to follow her. "C'mon, let's get ready, we are all off on holiday."

The kids leapt up with joy. "Where to?" The young one asked.

Jess, paused on the lower stairs, felt lost in Jake's eyes. "We will think of something shortly."

She headed upstairs.

Jake turned his head to a hallway mirror; he studied his new self, the birth of a physical existence. Not the usual possession. Here for a reason. A mortal life to cherish. He knew, one day, this body would die too and he would slip into the world between worlds again. But, for now, and many years, he will embrace the happiness of life. Stay mortal, as long as she lives. With raised prominent cheekbones from smiling, he spoke.

"My name is Jake. And I am happy."

It's Date Night, for Diane and Mike. Should be fun, get to know each other, don't get too drunk...and avoid the zombie apocalypse brewing outside.

Date With Death

Diane twirled the wineglass and stared into the blurry red-smeared world inside it. Nope, she thought, no answers there on Mike's whereabouts.

A busy evening ensued for the popular romantic Italian restaurant, no spare tables available. Most of the electric lights were off, leaving it to the candle lights to cast a warming ambience around the restaurant. The atmosphere set the stage for a perfect date.

Posh but affordable and ferociously good, Diane's apt description after a few visits, her failed dates.

She fidgeted at a window seat and sent a gaze towards the outside world, forgetting the glass frosted tint blurred her view. Attention changed direction to the table conversations that drifted around the interior.

One aspect stood out like a sore thumb.

Diane, alone.

A few couples stared into each other's eyes, the exchange of loving glances and intimacy she had hoped for herself. After fifty minutes of sunken solitude, the so-called date felt like a disaster.

Diane gazed around, wishing she felt different. Sandy blonde hair fell across her face. She blew upwards ruffling twists of hair so they spread away from her vision. In her hopeful mind, an image of a slender dark-haired guy perched at the entrance, about 34 or so, watched and waited. That also meant no age gap for Diane; Prince Charming here to rescue her from date hell.

Hold on, Mike has brown hair, burly though, Diane thought as she shook her head.

Angry words almost slipped out. *Where the hell is my date?*

A yell from outside caused Stefano, one waiter, to scamper over and swing the slim-profile doors open.

What was that?

He halted in the doorway, waved his hand dismissively, closed them again and fastened the bolt on the door.

“You go now,” Stefano’s stern command traversed the interior turning a few heads.

“No more guests Stefano, we are fully booked.” Ricardo, a portly waiter nearby called.

“Yes Ricardo, full house, actually that was idiot, drunk idiot,” Stefano rubbed the back of his neck as a gaze bounced around the dinner tables - a final confirmation that no spare tables were available anyway in tonight’s booked restaurant.

Thud!

Someone pressed against the glass window by Diane, startled the heck out of her. Her sharp yelp caught Stefano’s attention and in a few brisk strides, he slapped the window.

“Away now, you go, I call the police, go now.”

The shadowy outline through the frosty window film slid away.

Then another slapped a hand on the glass.

“Sorry, you cannot come in here! Last time I warn you, I call the police now.” Stefano shouted, a sharp Italian tongue coupled with a wagging finger which the person outside could not catch through the frosted tint. The figure seemed to slide off the window before waddling off.

Stefano turned and smiled at his patrons. “Apologies, ladies and gentlemen.”

Diane observed the other restaurant windows as dim outlines of a growing line of people shambled along the frosty glass. Diane smiled for a moment at the slow shuffling folks outside. They may be out of it but at least those drunks are having a good time. She almost spoke. The longest drawn-out sigh of disbelief ensued.

Her anxious, twitchy hand knocked the wine glass.

It tumbled over, a river of crimson wine split into streams and forked near the table edge.

“Shit, shit.”

Stefano, a waiter on top form tonight as the watchdog, approached. “No problem, Madam, I will get that for you.”

He smiled, withdrawing a cloth from Ricardo who noticed the accident with a half baked scornful smile as he regarded her thinking, what a stupid clumsy fool.

“Thank you...sorry,” Diane said as a flush crept across her cheeks.

“No problem, Madam. I will get you a fresh cloth and glass. I will take your order when I return.”

Stefano removed the glass, cutlery, menus, sodden table cloth and headed off to the cloakroom. Ricardo wiped the table surface. “Would you like to move from the table?”

Diane rolled her eyes, a tad drunk. No food ordered yet, just several glasses of fine Pio Cesare Barbaresco wine.

“No, that’s fine, all fine.” She flapped her hands, thought little about the spillage and more on her absent date.

She gazed at her phone. A call to Mike would resolve this. This outing exceeded the disappointment of the previous date some weeks ago: A middle-aged lawyer, his slow caressing of her knuckles while ordering, insisting on a little conversation, just the need for a

sharp exit to his love pad apartment in Central London - Diane telling him to *Piss Off* outside the restaurant.

At least that controlling womaniser showed up. Nuts, she thought. Why was this date late?

Yet to meet face to face with her next date up until this evening, just a dating site portfolio of photos to go on until tonight. She and Mike shared conversation so well on the dating site message boards before the first phone call. They exchanged some jokes about their rambling attempts to find love, found an attraction in each other's photos and conversation. So, the next move sparked up: arrange a date on the phone.

So, what happened? Diane felt plain confused.

She wanted to call but that nagging spite just told her don't bother. She closed her eyes for a moment as Stefano returned to lay a fresh table cloth, perch some menus and spread out shining cutlery. Diane rested her head on a fist.

"Sorry, but, sorry, your name," she slurred.

"Stefano, Madam."

"Well, Steff-ano...I think I need to ask for...the bill."

"Very well, Madam," Stefano's mouth curled as he turned away. No tip for him tonight.

Diane overheard a conversation at the entrance.

"Hello Sir, do you have a reservation? I'm afraid we are full tonight." Another waiter had allowed a gentleman to enter the restaurant: dishevelled with one shirt tail hung over the waist, brown hair ruffled and sweaty, nervous shaky fingers ran through his unkempt strands of hair.

Diane's face brightened. Her intoxicated self wanted to run and embrace him.

Mike showed up.

Then that prodding spite started again. She stopped a smile capable of showing satisfaction from growing, tuned but faint sober thoughts felt far from it. Mike pointed at Diane, a tired raising of the arm. The waiter bolted the door at the base and ushered him to the table. He staggered a little as he walked.

“Oh boy, looks like I am not the only one drunk on the first date,” Diane mumbled.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Mike said to the ushering waiter as his eyes met Diane’s glazed pupils. He gave the almost empty bottle of wine a quick glance and then sent her a sheepish gaze. “So sorry, I was...er...held up on the way. A lot of nutters out tonight...ermm...May I sit?”

Diane pressed a hand to her temple. “What happened? I was on my way to getting absolutely legless here, and about to leave, staggering out like some drunken whore...”

Mike raised a twitching hand as he cut in. “Really, really sorry...awful evening...I don’t know what is happening out there but...folks are running around...drunks or something...and erm...I had just left...the tube station...” Mike stood up as though he had parked his butt on a staple pin. “I need to visit the boys room for a moment, please be here when I return, I promise...I will make it up to you.”

Diane just blinked. Her level of disbelief made her question if she should bother. Mike, same sheepish face, staggered off to the gentlemen’s toilets. Diane closed her eyes, sighed, then muttered. “What the fuuuuuuuck.”

Mike fell through the men’s room mahogany door sending the hardwood crashing against the tiled wall. He slapped his hands on the china sink top and peered into the mirror. His eyes searched the room, all the urinals unoccupied. His face, pale, gaunt, cold.

“Am I sick?” He whispered, a gaze into his paling complexion.

Mike smoothed stubbled cheeks, feeling an unusual cold sweat on his skin. He turned on the tap and threw the cool water into his face. Some deep breaths followed before he gazed at his pale complexion again. Mike outstretched his trembling but well manicured pale hands. He felt that same cold sweat forming like a layer of thin glue on his palms.

He growled. “Damn it, nothing...is going to...ruin my date...been waiting too long for this evening to happen...so screw it.”

Mike raised a leg onto the sink and pulled up his trousers. A bandage wrapped tight around the lower calf showed a red wound stain trying to seep through.

“Where the hell did he come from, bastard?”

With careful peeling, he removed the bandage.

His face lit up with repulsion.

A bite mark, deep, revealed the outlines of human teeth.

Then something odd startled him. The gash; his wound had stopped bleeding. The edges of the teeth marks blackened like the veins that streaked from the sallow skin around the bite marks. Mike flinched in disgust at the rotten smell drifting from the wound. Also, it had stopped – the pain. No more pain. A minute ago, it hurt like a bitch. Mike wrapped the bandage over the wound, rolled down his trousers and headed out of the men’s room.

Diane watched him stroll back to the table, this time with no stagger, more of a shuffle.

Mike sank into the chair, poured himself a glass of wine. Stefano spotted him and came to his pouring aid.

“Allow me, Sir.”

Mike’s eyes bulged with streaky blood vessels that matched the wine’s crimson flow colour.

“Would Sir and Madam care to order?”

Mike just nodded. Diane gave a sigh of relief having felt her stomach rumble for almost an hour. “Absolutely, now we are staying, I would like the number 24, Pasta with Pro...sit...oo”

“Pro-shoo-toe Madam.”

“Thank you, and Lettuce and...actually...what about number 3...calzone,” Diane on her way to feeling worse for wear slid her finger across the word as drunken indecision kicked in. “Calzone,” she looked up, watery eyes focused on Stefano’s patient grin. “What is a calzone?”

“A pizza dish Madam, filled with cheese and pepperoni, folded over, a very nice dish.”

“Okay, that, and the pasta with...ermm,” Diane struggled to recall the order just a minute ago.

“Prosciutto and Lettuce Madam, yes, number 24. And you want number 3 also?”

Diane giggled. “Sorry Stefano. Just the number 3, don’t think I can stomach all that, silly. This your restaurant Stefano?”

“No, Madam.”

“So, who is in charge?” Diane rested her chin, an inquisitive grin.

“I am tonight, the boss is away this evening. Any reason, Madam?”

Diane smirked and released an appreciative smile. “I just wanted to tell him...that he has a fine restaurant and even finer waiters, Stefano.”

“Well, thank you Madam,” Stefano switched his rigid grin from Diane’s glassy alluring eyes to Mike. “And Sir?”

Mike wavered in the chair, his face more pallid, breath coarse.

Diane prodded Stefano's shoulder, distracting his attention again; her wide smile somewhere between cute and just too much. "And, another wine please."

"One more bottle for the...lady." He almost stumbled on the final word as Diane wobbled a little, each raising of the wine glass headed to her lips in a misguided trajectory before making contact.

Then Mike tried to speak. "Wow, that is...a lot of wine. I will have ermmm," Mike tried to read the menu, but the words blurred out, smeared across the page, then zoomed in and out of the page. "What she is having...thank you."

He handed the menu to Stefano, who nodded and strolled off.

"Oh yes, so, Mike. What an evening?" Diane said twirling the wine glass. "First, I got lost on the way here, then a commotion at Charing Cross with queues of people rushing up the stairs the wrong way almost knocked me over, and then when I get here," she leaned forward, "my date is not here. What seems like an eternity goes by and still no sign of him."

Mike hunched forward, his paler complexion streaked with purple veins.

"Yes...yes...that is where I was getting to..."

"Mike, you okay, you look sick."

"Yes, no, yes, yes, I am okay but please listen."

"Oh great, he gets here later than late and he is sick too." Diane poured the rest of the wine, filling the glass to the brim as she relaxed into her brazen moment. She took a long swig, cleared about half the glass. Her staggered lowering of the glass almost spilled the wine again as it rested on the table.

Mike closed his eyes for a moment, he lacked the energy to respond, something clouded his grey matter.

Diane continued as she swigged more wine. “I loved our conversations on the site and on Facebook and then you called me, we talked for ages, I was so looking forward to meeting you. I thought a bad date neared again.” Diane snorted like a pig. “But, then you showed, and great, so let’s have a nice meal, continue that chat from two nights ago.”

Mike rested his full weight on one elbow while the other hand gripped the table. “I am really sorry I was late. Terrible, on the way here, just after I came out of the tube station, there were...freaks...running around and chasing other folks. Then a few police cars showed up...arrested some of them...”

Shadowy figures darted past the restaurant windows, one sprung past the window by Diane. One by one, the shapes clung to the glass. A slap on the glass close to Diane and Mike caused a yelp to erupt from a patron. The frosted glass dimmed the figures to shimmers of blurred silhouettes as their palms slithered along. Stefano rushed to a windowpane and thumped it a few times, fed up enough to be the surly waiter. “Away now or I call the police.”

Patrons happily eating, uneasy occasional glances at the blurred people gathered outside. A line of diffused human shapes shuffled and groaned.

Some patrons stood up. Stefano and Ricardo regarded the silhouettes with confusion. Who are they? What do they want?

Mike continued, progressively limp as Diane kept listening with eyes that moved back and forth between the moaning sounds through the glass and pallid Mike explaining himself.

“The police blocked off the quicker way here, so I took...a left down Whitehall. Bit of a mistake. I saw this guy crawling on the road. I went to help him...bastard swung around and sank his damn teeth into...my leg...”

Groans from outside became louder.

“Jesus!” Diane huffed at the growing outside rabble as she rubbed his clammy hands. “Sorry, Mike. Who the hell was that? And why did he bite...” Diane’s attention swayed to some couples, others at their tables noticed the growing commotion outside and approached the windows.

Mike continued his apologetic attempt to explain lateness; Diane, now distracted, focused on the ominous shadowed people as they moved their hands again and again, up and down the glass outside.

Stefano picked up a phone and dialled, at the end of his tether with the rabble.

Mike clutched Diane’s arms to get her attention.

She swung to face him.

His pupil rims as red as the wine, purple vein streaks stretched across his face. “I kicked him away...and headed off...dipped into a pub...the wound bled badly...the nice...pub landlady gave me a bandage...then I came here...Diane as nothing...nothing...was coming between you...and me...tonight.”

Mike fell forward.

His head smashed through the wine glass, arms swinging by the table side.

Eyes open but just a vacant empty stare.

Stefano like many others heard the glass smash. He handed the phone to Ricardo and hurried to the table. Oblivious to the collapsed patron, Ricardo and the other two waiters approached the entrance door ready to swing the door open and yell blue murder at the people pressed against the windows.

Diane gasped, her mouth gaped open. She wanted to scream. Yes, a very shrill yell and an expletive like: screw dating, it sucks.

“Mike...Mike,” She shook his arm and head, “have you...I do not believe this shit,” a raised voice alerted many patrons, some prepared to leave.

Stefano pulled Mike backwards till he slouched upright but his head just fell back. Spattered bloody glass cuts across his face seeped thin rivers of blood. Glassy murky eyes stared at the ceiling.

“He’s passed out.” Diane pushed her chair to one side, a prompt shove; his facial cuts had ceased to bleed after just a few droplets fell to the floor. She reached her hand over to Mike’s limp arm and shook it. “Mike, Mike, wake up, call an ambulance for God’s sake.”

“Yes Madam, my colleague Ricardo is doing just that now...Ricardo,” Stefano called over to him as Ricardo spoke to someone, “We need an ambulance now, this is serious here, never mind police.”

“Okay, one second Stefano...hello...yes but I need an ambulance too...yes, I know I ask for Police but...we have a sick and injured patron here...no, don’t transfer me...wait...ok, I wait,” Ricardo gripped the phone, worried as the mob now almost broke through the doors as the frames creaked under the pressure of their bodies. He passed details of Mike’s injured state as he clicked fingers at another waiter to ward off the people pressed against the glass.

Some other patrons in the restaurant had congregated around Diane’s table.

“Is he okay?” Someone asked but no responses to silly questions likely at present.

“Hey waiter, what the hell is wrong with those people?” Another shouted.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please return to your seats,” Stefano asserted. His face twitched with frustration, the last word a whisper as he felt Mike’s pulse. His panic-stricken face stared at Diane. “Madam, this man...is dead.”

Diane frowned. Then she cackled. “I thought I was drunk...look, he’s come to now...”

Stefano flinched.

Mike's vacant stare just glanced around for a moment, his eyes egg white, ashen complexion. An undying moan slipped into a gurgle, emotionless eyeballs swivelled as though taking in the dawn of a new world.

"He's definitely not okay." A portly business suit dressed American man said as he stared in awe, wife clutching his arm.

Ricardo approached. "Okay, police come soon." He gawked at Mike. "What's wrong with this asshole?" He shook Mike's shoulder. "Hey you." Ricardo stooped to move closer to Mike's throaty groans. "Drunk boy, time to go, hey."

"Look at his eyes," said Stefano as he released Mike's clammy hand and stood back; Mike's eyes now still in a vacant and lost stare.

"Mike," Diane whimpered, she trembled and covered her mouth, a need to shriek swelling.

Ricardo, oblivious to the situation, slapped Mike's face. "Hey, drunk boy, time to go now."

"That's a very strange looking drunk dude," the American said, backing off.

Mike's eyes shut for a moment.

They snapped open, angry, bloodshot in a sunken malice driven face.

Diane stepped away a few inches from her date's ravenous grin, one of mindless hunger.

A shrill snarl, face contorted by pure malevolence.

Mike lunged forward with incredible speed at Ricardo, tossing the table, the cutlery scattered across the floor. He sank his teeth into Ricardo's neck and wrenched a bite-sized portion of flesh away. The bloody wound spurted dark geyser sprays. Ricardo fell backwards into Stefano's arms as blood oozed and showered his chest and face.

Diane and a few others screamed and backed off from the toppled table.

“Holy Shit!” The American yelled.

Mike lunged for Ricardo again, a hunger for another slice of him hanging off Stefano’s arms. Stefano flinched and dropped Ricardo to the floor and skipped back a few feet. “Holy Mary,” he shouted.

Some made for the doors, the American yelled at them. “No, stay here, look at those folks out there, they are like him, don’t open those doors!”

The two other waiters idle by the doors frowned at the scene unfolding, threw each other a scared face and sped off for the back of the restaurant.

Mike just fed, ripping mounds of flesh from Ricardo as he tried in vain to slither away. Flesh hung from his glistening lips like pieces of tattered bloody cloth with each tear. Diane collapsed to the floor, releasing a series of whimpers. Fear held a tight grasp on her as the horrible chaos unfolded.

The American picked up a chair. “Help him for God’s sake!” He crashed it down on Mike’s back, the wood shattered.

Stefano continued to back off, unabashed and slow. Fear had its firm tight grip. Everyone just seemed too afraid to approach Mike and help Ricardo as each ravenous bite after bite tore more flesh away.

Mike stood up, entrails hung from his mouth, pieces of bloody viscera smeared his chest with thick red goo. His eyes swivelled again, regarding his surroundings, then focused—attention now on Diane.

She froze there, too terrified to move.

Mike allowed the long strands of flesh to drop from his mouth and just glared at Diane, almost like the longing for her still swirled inside whatever remained human. Then

the contortions across his snarling face grew as nothing but unadulterated hungered malice stared at Diane.

He charged at her, arms outstretched, curled fingers.

Diane yelled.

The American and another patron clasped Mike but found themselves overcome by Mike's strength for a moment then tossed Mike to one side. He rolled over before resuming a snarling stance. His interest is still on Diane.

Patrons bolted toward the retreating waiters.

Stefano yelled No Stop as several others opened the doors and sprinted outside. Their screams emerged, then silence. He hoisted himself away from a frozen seated position of fear, closing and locking the doors behind them as snarling shapes battered the glass.

Stefano checked the door then leapt behind the bar out of sight.

Mike lunged at Diane again from a feral poise as the American booted his face with a crack that should drop anyone.

Diane grabbed a knife off the floor as Mike brushed past the force of the kick and fell on her. She lashed out with her stiletto heel, the heel buried into Mike's right eye as a young twenty something guy and his date dragged her away.

A spurt of deep red blood streamed down an angered stained face.

Diane, having found her inner strength, readied the knife, about to lunge.

Bang, bang.

Gunshots fired, each struck Mike's head twice on the temple, blood seeped down a shell shocked murky reddened face. He staggered somewhat then collapsed to the floor beside Diane—still and silent.

Stefano just stood there, arm and smoking gun shook, his face glistened with sweat and Ricardo's blood.

"Holy crap," someone said.

"Watch out!" The American shouted.

Ricardo had risen, the same malicious intent in his pale contorted face. He snarled. Stefano swung the gun in Ricardo's direction just as he growled then lunged at him.

Boom.

The gun shot hit Ricardo square on the forehead sending him to the floor. Stefano stared at his dead buddy, smoking gun at the ready in case.

Diane hoisted herself up. Her face tarnished with tears, voice brittle. "What the hell is going on? What happened to Mike...and him?"

"Thank God for weapons," the American man said as his distressed partner hung whimpering off an arm. Abject horror lit up the faces of the patrons, couples held each other as some wept. Some regarded the doors knowing any chance of belting outside was foolhardy.

"Thought my stiletto would do it." Diane mumbled.

Stefano licked his dry lips and smiled. He raised the gun, so it pointed at the ceiling. He nodded to Diane and the American. "Fucking zombies, eh? Ricardo turned quick, ay, some take a while, others turn in minutes. It depends on the wound, how badly you are infected. Fat Ricardo here, did not have long. Oh yes, your heel sweetheart can't have struck deep enough but a bullet, no fail, you shoot in the head, put them down for good, eh. I saw Dawn Of The Dead, fifteen times, so I knew what to do."

"Zack Snyder or George Romero?" Another patron asked and got thumped by his provoked weeping partner, "Is that relevant?"

“You have,” Diane struggled to speak and think amid chaos, “a gun.”

“Boss had a gun here for a long while, taped to the underside of the bar counter.”

Stefano dropped his head. “For defence I think, never asked. Think he was in trouble with some people round here. Never thought I would be the one to use it.”

“Well fucking ay to you fella,” the American gasped as he shuffled closer to the two cadavers on the floor, dragging his feet. “Looks like they are down, for good.”

Stefano looked at the door where a bunch of people still pressed against the glass, “Now we have to deal with them.”

“Don’t you have a back door?” Another patron asked, “Saw your waiters and some folks here run off, where are the staff?”

“Wait here, I go check it okay.” Stefano noticed his other loyal work colleagues vacated the restaurant with haste. He headed off to the kitchens at the back of the premises.

Diane plonked herself on a chair reminiscing on the one date night she could never forget. How worse could it get? Should never have wondered she thought peering down at Mike’s body, now still, dead.

“Probably my last date too.” Diane muttered to herself.

Some patrons stepped around in aimless fashion, shocked, for a few minutes. A few couples headed for the door. Despite pulls on the arm from his partner, one reached for the door sliding locks to just get the hell out of this place, in vain.

The American man noticed again. “Hey, hey. Leave it. We can’t open those doors, gonna be more of these bastards out there. Those others, the ones running out outside, they are finished if those people out there are, like them on the floor. Use your damn head fool.” He took off his suit jacket and covered Mike and then used a tablecloth to cover Ricardo.

One patron continued eating his dinner, in oblivious ignorance.

Two gunshots from the kitchens.

Anyone sitting down just bolted off their seats. The guy munching on his pasta almost choked on a mouthful.

Stefano moseyed back from the far door leading to the kitchens with a beaten expression. As he neared the dining area and disturbed faces of the night's customers, the fear was all too clear. He strolled towards the group, one foot slid after another.

"Well, is it safe, we need to get the hell out?" The same patron who quizzed Stefano about using the back door asked.

Stefano shook his head. "They are there also...no way out, right now. We must be ready to fight our way, in case they break down these doors or windows."

A young girl gripped her phone and tapped. The audio was too low, so the others heard faint digital mutterings. "News flashes, oh my God, not just here in London, there is chaos across the country." Then a scream from the phone, the newscaster.

"My God," another patron stammered as a video played on his phone, "News vids starting to emerge. There was a BBC broadcast just minutes ago. The lady got up and ran, now nothing. Trying another news channel app. Yes. Listen."

The voice of a newsreader spelled out the tale of the outside chaos.

"...and as it is unclear as to the cause, we can only help by broadcasting what we know. To repeat, we are getting many reports of savage attacks growing in intensity across the UK. We will issue another newsflash as more reports come in. The advice at the moment: stay indoors."

Some snuffles emerged from the gathering.

The patron turned off the phone.

Silence. A stunned audience for the unbelievable news report.

Diane gazed at her very dead date and wept. She tried to collect herself while wiping the tears from her eyes.

The moans outside joined in a monotone mix of hisses, gurgling, grunts and growls, all louder every few minutes. Since the gun shots, many more now clambered around outside. The doors creaked under pressure.

“We can try if less that way, how many are there?” The same patron asked.

“Sir...my two other waiters and cooks tried. I had to...they went out the back door in the kitchen and had no chance...I barely closed and locked the door before they ran at me.” Stefano moved his eyes from Diane to the quizzical patron and to the American. “There is no way out, we have to sit it out.”

“Why are they still there?” Diane panted. A media circus of groaning shapes continued to stroke the glass windows and doors.

“They can smell us and have heard us.” Stefano leaned against the bar counter.

Gunshots.

From outside.

A series of screams followed from the trapped patrons.

The things at the doors and windows dispersed, loud and coarse growls moved away from the restaurant.

They scattered upon seeing something else to bite.

Gunshots continued, a flurry of cracks in the distance. Bang, bang, bang.

Then silence.

A few moments passed.

A knock on the door.

“Hello, anyone in there?”

Diane thrust herself off the chair, her mouth open in exhilaration.

Stefano rushed for the door. “One moment.” He released the bolts and opened the door. The rest of the group inside edged towards the entrance.

Then he stood there.

Diane’s eyes fixed on the fine gentleman standing in the doorway. Blood spatters showed on his white poly-cotton shirt. Her eyes widened, her dreamboat guy looked around—and then at Diane. He stroked his chiselled face and stubble as he regarded the group. “Is this everyone, we need to go, I have a coach outside, it’s clear of those things for now, come on. Now,” his emphasis on the last word was clear, “Let’s go.”

Everyone shuffled towards the doors, many far too hurried, some glanced at the horrific bloody mess of the bodies as they departed in haste.

“Get on the coach there.”

Stefano sighed. “Bless you Sir, thank you for coming for us.”

“I heard gunshots coming from this direction as I helped get people onto my coach. We are doing what we can to check around for anyone trapped or in trouble out here.”

The American approached, a trembling jaw. “How bad is it? We just listened to a report on the news. Seems to be some kind of pandemic.”

The gentleman nodded. “It happened fast. Within an hour or two, we lost most of London to these things. Whatever is spreading has happened across the country,” he shrugged, noticing the downed bodies face down in goo and blood, “maybe the world.”

Diane made her way for the door. “So how fucked is the city?”

“I drive that coach out there. Several other coaches are checking out streets and picking up anyone alive and not bitten,” He placed an emphasis on those last three words as his eyes scanned the room, “We heard a gun firing then as we came by, saw those things on

your windows, figured guys must be trapped here. If you have weapons, your dinner knives, whatever, anything, bring something. We have a few guns we picked up but low on ammo.”

“I have a gun, some rounds left.” Stefano held up his boss’s sidearm.

Patrons grabbed table knives.

“People are leaving the city, those things are everywhere, we have no time, whatever it is, it’s spreading fast, we are heading out now.” He motioned the rest of the group to the door, examining them somewhat for signs of bites. “Anyone bit? What happened, this place got infected?” He pointed at the bodies on the floor.

“They are very dead. Stefano here shot them in the head. None of us bitten,” Diane whispered.

In that moment, despite the horror of the evening, Diane thought about surrendering to this knight here to rescue them from flesh munching dead folks. Something about his smile in her direction nourished her soul. She yearned to soak up how they exchanged the piercing of eyes in what felt like a crystallised minute of rapture. She wanted to slip further into his eyes and...

Oi bitch, snap out of it, Diane thought with an inner resonating yell.

“You weren’t too bad with stiletto Diane.” Stefano then faced the burly guy who had captured Diane’s full attention. “I am Stefano. Your coach there,” he pointed outside.

“Rick. Used to be my job, now it’s our way outta here.”

They shook hands.

“Zombies...hey” Stefano said.

Rick returned a slight head nod. “Go on.” He ushered Stefano forward.

Everyone had vacated the restaurant—except Diane.

She approached Rick, ambling. No hurry at all.

“Miss, we need to go.” He extended his arm.

Diane beamed, faced with a burgeoning apocalypse. She still held a twinkle in a wide eye. She gripped his hand, feeling the warmth of a manicured touch, the calm of level headed charisma. She felt safe.

“Diane.”

“Rick, Hi.”

They stared at each other for a moment and almost held each other’s eyes as though the crumbling world around them for a few seconds faded into obscurity; any sense of urgency just drifted.

What I had to go through to meet you, Diane thought. Then she turned on her heels and dismissed her drunk ignorance as she pondered on the bloody turn of events this terrible evening. With a longing gaze, Diane’s sudden emotions glistening with an intimate delight slipped into sadness.

Mike. Dead and lying there in his own putrid fluids.

Her lips pressed into a slight grimace. Mike could have filled that empty place in her heart. A big part of her still wished it.

Rick pressed Diane as she dithered, “Let’s go.”

Diane responded with a wavering smile, a stooped posture wearing a pensive expression that would not vanish as she resumed her gaze on Mike’s body.

With a tearful soft voice, she muttered. “Okay, Rick.”

She slammed on the foot brakes. “Shit, my phone, may need it.”

“Wait for you on the bus but come right now okay.” Rick departed and pushed the door enough so it stayed open.

Diane fed her way around the tables to the date spot, where love could have blossomed. A phone rested there, droplets of wine smeared the cover. Diane wiped them with a swift rub of a hand. She smiled and spun around.

“So sorry Mike, wish...”

Mike wavered there, just a few feet away, an inhuman snarl bellowed as turbid clumps of bloody flesh still hung from dripping lips. Stefano’s failed attempt to slay a zombie now stared with utter maliciousness at a frozen Diane in a last desperate effort to finish off a meal.

An angry growl.

Diane’s final scream filled the restaurant.

Silence.

Several minutes had passed. Rick asked Stefano to grab Diane and stop loitering.

Rick’s anxiety hit a sore point as he tapped the wheel waiting for Stefano to return. He peered out at the sky. Tendrils of smoke rose from numerous places in the city to hang in an obscuring haze against the night sky. Screams, muffled, in all directions, then nothing.

People sprinted by. Queues of vehicles sped by, heading out of the city. From a nearby underground entrance, scores of panicked folks forced past each other as one queue tried to head to the trains while others bolted from the entrance. Some tried to warn anyone belting for the tunnels.

Not that way, too many of them.

London - a thriving capital destined to stand like a skeleton as the richness of capitalism and technology rots from its bones to leave a derelict shell.

Stefano leapt into the coach, out of breath.

“Where is she?” Rick asked as he started the engine.

Stefano’s sullen expression conveyed enough of an answer.

“No more shooting for me, today. Let’s go.”

Rick smirked and shut the coach doors and drove onward, no destination in mind, just away from the city.

The end came fast.

For the survivors, a new beginning.

The next day, all quiet across the metropolis.

A light breeze blew through empty streets. Whitehall, Westminster, Buckingham Palace, either side of Tower Bridge - no bustle of human activity. The air heavy with the rancid decaying smell of half eaten cadavers after the night’s breath of hell. Only scattered moans as groups of the dead jerked and stumbled here and there: pale skinned decomposing remnants of something human. They staggered across roads with tilted heads, diseased maniacal eyes with no purpose to focus on, just to keep moving, an aimless walk.

Along a desolate one-way street, they shuffled along.

Mike and Diane, hands gripped each other as though some longing for each other still swelled in their rotting brains. With the occasional low growling moan, they edged onward, entwined yet damned to the decaying world. Diane’s moans showed blood stained teeth as snake-like intestines flowed down her bloody dress and dragged behind. A missing piece of Mike’s fractured skull on the top had oozed a thin stream, now just a wavering line of dry blood from explosive gunshot damage. A souvenir from Stefano, nothing more.

And they moved on in a sloppy gait. The city belonged to them. They had found each other, a thirst for each other’s embrace and affection quenched.

Their time to be together at last.

The wedding was a beautiful ceremony for Andy and Janine. Now, they and guests drink and have fun at the hotel reception. Fine food, finer wines, the speeches, but also...an unexpected torn guest from Andy's past and a much darker family secret, threatens to destroy the day...

The Speech

Those eyes, bloodshot with grief, told a painful story.

Andy.

It's all Danny thought of. Those years they spent together- laughing, loving. The mirror sent back a face that Danny struggled to meet face to face as droplets of water fell from narrow streams to mingle with tears.

The shearing pain stemming from the deed he swore to carry out today since the only option left on the table no matter what, was losing Andy anyway.

Danny filled shaky hands with more water and splashed his face again. Fingers twitched, pressed, eyesight covered. Hope that the day, the time, did not exist now faded as he pulled shaky hands away to face the deflated man looking back in the mirror.

He flinched as the facilities door opened and one guest raced for a urinal, gasping as he relieved himself.

For a moment, Danny absorbed the back of the whistling guy in the reflection.

The man swivelled his head, a peek at the sore eyes on his rear. "Enjoying the wedding day."

Danny collected himself, a quick exhale to vent out the stress building. "Fabulous."

"You, ah, no, yes, no, have we met?" The man shook himself and headed over to the sink next to Danny.

Danny shook an unconcerned face. “No. But I believe...you are the bride’s brother, ermm, Ken?”

Ken extended a hand. A silver bracelet with a strange etched glyph reflected the facilities ceiling light for a moment. Danny glanced at it then grinned at Ken. They clasped, and a tentative handshake ensued. “That’s right. The day came. Me seeing my little sister get hitched. You...okay, mate? You look like you’re upset.”

Danny bore no desire to make friends today. He wore a feigned smile. It was clear that something was off with Danny. He slapped Ken’s shoulder and made his way out, wearing the same false smile. “All fine, just happy and toppling with glee Ken, catch you later.”

As the heavy doors creaked shut, Ken sent the doorway a confused glare before cleaning his hands.

Danny sent darting glances in every direction as he waited for Andy’s attention from a corner in the hallway alongside the banquet hall entrance. Beyond the doors brimmed chatty relatives and busy waitresses. A crowded single file of guests shuffled into the hall past the open wide solid oak doors which glistened after a recent re-oil. The newlyweds approached, stepping forward behind family members. Andy approached with his wife.

Janine.

Aesthetically, the essence of eye candy in her dress to several male guests. The youthful buxom blonde that men dream of. Her ivory gown dragged behind her. Something surrounded her, a sort of soothing and almost rapturous karma even stirred attraction in Danny as he watched her approach. In another life, Danny might have rushed over with showers of compliments. Danny could only allow a sullen face to emerge as he witnessed this auroral moment in Andy’s life.

Ken emerged from the toilets and joined some gentlemen strolling alongside the family. Andy snapped to a strained look on Danny as he neared the dining room doors. Two guys, dapper in their fine tuxedos, muttered in Ken's ear who then swung on his heels to send Danny an angered stare. Danny heard him utter.

"That guy, here to be a twat, why?"

Janine crunched slim eyebrows as her brother spoke. "What was that? Did I miss something?"

"Head in honey, I need to have a quick chat with a late arrival."

"Who is that?" Janine swivelled her head around to stare at Danny.

Andy nodded at Danny. A grin that hid a dark plan stayed wide as Janine curiously checked him out.

"Okay, I want to meet this late one though, see you there shortly." Janine pecked Andy's cheek and strode into the dining hall with a chatty mother repeating questions like: Glad to be married, are you? What do you think of Andy's suit? Like your dress? Janine allowed an excited Mother to usher her along to the dining hall.

Andy caught a savage glint in Jacob's eye. He raised a hand as his brother started to lunge at Danny. Andy knew he could not allow that. The groom cursed himself inside.

Secrets, damn my skeletons, damn me for that life.

"So, why is he here to cause trouble? What's going on?" Ken asked Jacob.

"You don't need to know. Just be ready to throw him out when we say, right?" Jacob, a lofty chap kept wide angry eyes on Danny as he loitered, leaning against a wall, wearing a grin that spoke of hate and sadness.

Arms folded, Danny waited for Andy to acknowledge him, perhaps even a wink or grin.

A confused Ken stroked his balding scalp and nodded, feeling unconnected with the history of the new in-laws.

Andy strode past Danny gesturing him to follow to a deserted area, quiet as most guests had made their way into the dining hall. He pointed along a hallway near carpeted stairs to the hotel rooms as a still grinning Danny followed.

The two stood there for a few seconds searching each other's faces, digging eyes that waited for the first words.

"Hi Andy, great to see you bud, shame I missed the vows and..."

"Cut the crap Danny. Why are you here?"

Danny chuckled and stroked his chin. "You knew...hah...knew I was coming. Noticed the lack of shock in your face when you saw me. Knew I couldn't trust that snake Mike."

Andy closed the gap, almost touching Danny's chest. "Why? You're not invited."

"What's up. Trying to kiss me Andy."

Andy swung around and sighed, hands on hips then faced Danny again. "Tell me why I shouldn't just have you thrown out now."

"You know why, or you would have done it already. Good thing about untrusting Mike, is his delivery of information. You know exactly why you won't throw me out. You don't invite me? And you speak to me now. But don't worry. I just wanted to be sure that you were going through with this." Danny's voice cracked over the last few words, a tremor from the past that hurt like a stab.

Andy rubbed his face with a slow pull, a worried gesture that wanted to scrub the reality of this man from the past, away.

Danny sighed. "Don't you miss me, you know, a little."

"Please go. Let's talk later, if that suits you."

Danny straightened Andy's lapels, as though required. "Lighten up, this is your big day."

"Yes, I know. My best man found a way to anger me before today, but he was honest. And if like he says and you say now, that after today, we don't see each other again, that works too. Get it. After the meal and speeches, I want your ass out of here. I want no trouble today and seeing my brothers have to grapple you and throw you out will just raise hell here. So, please, a quiet exit, after the meal. Stay if you wish until then. But be gone after the speeches."

Danny chortled with increased intensity into a tight fist. "Oh, did you just say you...want my ass," Danny raised a hand, "Just kidding. I assure you," his eyes cold, empty in a moment, on Andy's heavy breathing flared nostrils, "once the speeches are over, I'm outta here."

Danny buttoned his jacket and walked away to the dining hall, leaving a stunned Andy staring at the carpet. Ken and Jacob rush over.

"You look upset. Not having it." Jacob was grabbed by Andy as he tried to follow Danny.

"Jacob, no issues. Ken, just a prick from my past, let him gate crash my wedding for now. We have to wait till he leaves. No way is he screwing this up."

Ken flung his arms up. "Okay, fine. Let's send him on his way. Whatever he did that you guys won't fill me in on. So, allow me to escort him away. Not a problem."

Andy rested a hand on Ken's shoulder. "I will tell you."

A direct and confused gaze popped out of Jacob as if saying: Really?

"Not today though. Just...make sure he stays out of trouble. He is not staying long. Just for the meal and speeches and then he goes. Keep an eye on him, that's all I ask."

Ken nodded with apprehension and headed for the dining hall.

Jacob stared at Andy's stressed face. "You know, just a click of a finger, and he won't bother you again. You have joined a powerful family, all of us have now."

"I will signal you when to make a move if he tries to disrupt the day. But only then."

Jacob huffed.

"Only then, Jake." Andy pointed a shaky finger at Jacob as his lips narrowed.

"I get it Andy. But it doesn't matter about how it was between you and him, that's in the past. He is in the past. Your love for him is in the past. It's all about Janine now," Jacob lifted up Andy's chin as it dropped, "it is all about Janine, yes?"

"Of course, shit." Andy glared at Jacob, a hooded look to his eyes.

Janine, smiling and with a brisk pace, neared the lads, her gown drifting behind her, too bothered by what secrecy lurked in the halls to stay at her table.

"Okay, no more quiet corners talk." Janine pecked Andy on the cheek. "Why are you two skulking in the hall? Come on. I need my husband and new family members. I can't wait for the first speech from my Dad later, let's go."

Jacob winked at Andy as Janine led them to the dining hall. Jacob strolled over to his table. Andy and Janine joined their parents tables at the head of the majestic room. Danny, relaxed and silent next to Michael, the best man.

He took in the splendour while knowing the day's plan promised something less than benign.

"So lovely here," Michael gushed in amazement as he peered up at the crystal chandeliers.

"I really like those," Danny pointed at the double-height mirrors.

"Suits your vanity eh, Dan. Love one in your home?"

“Are you not supposed to be seated over there?” Danny pointed at an empty chair next to Janine at the top table.

“Yes. And I am heading over there shortly before my speech. Saying that, I have a better view of the bridesmaids from here. Noooo. Actually, I am keeping an eye on you.”

“Afraid I’ll say more to the guests than wanted? Told you, all fine now I am here. You got me invited and now Andy need not worry. But on the stay silent thing, could tell Andy expected me. Couldn’t stay quiet could you?” Danny whispered in Michael’s direction.

Michael started to murmur in Danny’s direction, Danny leant forward, a clenched fist pressed on the table cloth. Michael hoped the words emerged susurrated enough to not reach other ears around the table. “Be glad I told you about the wedding and offered to invite you at all. But had to say you were coming. I did it on the condition that you say nothing to Janine about your time with him, you leave Andy alone and stay out of his life, that’s why you’re here, so don’t forget it.”

Danny squirmed, trying to avoid eye contact with Janine’s table but hoping Andy caught his gaze.

Michael continued. “That you’d say nothing to Janine of you and Andy, nor the families, and I expect you to keep your word. I know you do, so hope this is no exception. But doesn’t mean I trust you. No. I arranged for you to sit here next to me until the best man’s job is needed. Keep to your words. That you accept that he no longer wants you, that he’s married, he loves Janine. End of.”

“You worry too much Mike.” Danny’s voice tinged with glee, a carefree facade to hide his intentions.

“Just be careful what you say while you are here or I and Jacob will throw you out regardless of your petty threats to spill all. And Jacob is simply needing no excuse to rough

you up. He wanted to sit here away from his missus just to torture you with threats all day. But I intervened. I will not fall out with Andy on his wedding day on account of you, and,” Michael took a gulp of his beer as he dwelled on Andy and Danny’s past relationship, “your past with the groom. I have a job to do, and it is not playing your game. You promised to stay away from him and say nothing ever if you were allowed in here today, job done, later, it is your turn.”

Danny snorted. “Nothing to worry about then. Go sit at your place at the top table. Look. On Andy. I just want to say a few words again, hear the speeches and leave. Andy needs to hear more, then I am gone.”

Michael, cold eyes. “Is it not enough that you are sitting here? Seen with your own jealous eyes that he has moved on. Mind those words, I will intervene.”

Danny’s grin, limited to his narrow lips, expressed a fake response, one he cared little about.

I will rip Andy’s day apart before I leave his life, soil his entire day and ruin his precious wife’s big day.

For an uncomfortable moment, Andy and Danny’s eyes met across the distance between the tables. Andy averted a concerned gaze fast. Janine scratched Andy’s cheek. “Who is that fella? The guy that has stolen the best man from the table. Better company, is he?”

Andy blew out a frustrated breath. “No, they go way back. Mike will be seated here later, I promise for the speeches. Just an old...friend. Forgot about him. Not a problem?”

Danny sprung from his seat as though responding to a crisis as he pulled out his phone and lightly kicked the chair to one side.

“You off? Don’t want the entrée?” Michael grinned as he hoped for Danny’s exit.

“Sorry to disappoint you Mike, but just nipping out to make sure my brother is picking me up soon, then,” he leant towards Michael’s sullen face, “back for some grub then the speech from Andy, a few words, then I am outta here, don’t you worry.”

“Why don’t you leave now?” a muffled mutter in Danny’s ear direction, to avoid other table guests hearing his bitter words. At the moment, only the lads and two couples settled at the table. They chatted amongst themselves, relatives of Andy’s. There was no reason to laden the guests with knowledge of a feudal relationship and steps in place to avoid further discordant conflicts. “Why bother interrupting Andy? You’ve made your point. Can’t you stay silent and out of his life?”

Danny winked, a slow arrogant close and open of an eyelid, straightened his jacket and headed for the hallway beyond the dining room. His exit attracted Andy’s attention as he craned his neck, hoping he’d left the premises.

Michael sniggered. “Okay, your choice.”

Ken, with curious eyes, regarded Michael for a moment. He acknowledged Ken with a raised wine glass.

Andy paused on the next gulp of his pint as Danny strode past the doors.

“Yeah, just keep going,” Andy whispered, but not so silent that Janine could not pick up on the words.

“Talking to thyself,” Janine asked. “What’s going on with the uninvited man? Is he trouble?”

Andy’s inner eyebrows rose and lips puckered. “No. Nothing like that.”

“What is it with that guy? Your brother keeps sending hateful stares at him. Michael hasn’t been too calm since he arrived. Am I reading into it too much? You are on edge.”

“Janine, I am on edge and muttering as I am...a little stressed. Lovely day. Beautiful. We have done it. But addressing all these people, well.” Andy coughed into a fist, content that he’d sidestepped the issue.

“Concerned about your speech? Don’t worry. Only nice people and family here. Say what you like. I actually can’t wait. Are you bothered about that or the day, something else?”

Andy with a slight flinch, shook his head. “Just getting drunk. No way will I be sober when the best man starts talking and then, after that flow of wisdom, I need to talk. Not a big public speaker, not really me, but like you say, just family and friends. No need to be nervous.” The last few words cracked under a chuckle as he tried to calm his nerves.

Danny wandered outside in the blazing blue sky. The sun beat down on his scalp as he squinted a little. He punched a number.

“Hey...it’s me...no, not yet, at the wedding now...nope, you can’t, passed that, breached, I am here to ruin his day and that is it. All you need do is get me to the lodge quickly, we will need to leave in a hurry, as if that is not obvious...”

A few of the guests emerged from the hotel entrance for a smoke and chat. Danny huffed and walked a few steps further away.

“...yes...let’s stop in Hawkeshead, check the news, I’ll be wearing my lovely fake beard and a cap, should be fine...thank you for this bro, once the long trip to the lakes is over and I am in the lodge where I will spend my days, shot of this city of cretins, your involvement ends...remote enough to stay hidden from the world, no tourists in that part, just a lonesome lodge for a lonesome guy...that is why I bought it...”

Unbeknownst to Danny, the guests behind him at the hotel entrance switched their attention to his words. They ceased to chat, the gaze of the stoic gentlemen focused on Danny's back to them.

“An opportunity I can't miss. Without Michael's invite, never would have known. Still, preferred if he hadn't opened his mouth but guess that was expected. Devoted Mickey to Andy...Just stick to your story, you are visiting your bird in Hawkeshead, which is true anyway, your little Tinder bird, nobody will see me...or you and me together, yes, that's right, when you get here, park around the back outside the pub, The Sparrow, yes, I'll run to you there...no-one will chase me and those that do will see my gun, get scared off, actually simple getaway...I'm aware that the police will try to hunt me down but what will they charge me with, waving a gun at people, ruining a wedding. Last time I checked, not a criminal offence to ruin a wedding day...”

Two of the curious guests walked in a calm step-by-step towards Danny's back. A gaited saunter towards him, unnoticed.

“Bro, the gun will be silent, just a big scare, one he will never forget, my final stab. Or perhaps I should kill him, can't say it hasn't crossed my mind...I am not shooting him, just stirring up a hornet's nest, ruin the day and leave. I want to see the fear in his eyes, want him to know what pain he caused me...as far his sibling is concerned and trusting friend Mike, they know the consequences of me not being allowed here today...oh yeah, I will tell Janine and her family all about her homo husband and our years of sexual adventures...”

Danny regarded the dining hall windows, wondering if he could see Andy through the glass from the outside courtyard as he dwelled on his brother's words. The glass opaque design prevented any views from outside, which he knew was a good thing. The following guests had ceased to approach Danny and resumed chatting to each other.

“You still want to ask me why I can’t walk away. Leave now, I mean, yeah, my just being here has disrupted the day a lot. But I want to scare the hell out of everyone...You don’t understand bro, find love, the true kind, and then lose it, then you’ll understand what drives a man to do what I am doing today...okay, chill, the risk is all mine, no gunshots, just terrified faces and a horrible wedding day for the bride and groom to remember. See you soon.”

Danny overheard a reference to Andy from the chatting guests behind him. He swivelled on grinding heels in the gravel garden next to the car park.

A mutter, but not too silent from one guest at the hotel entrance, flicking a cigarette butt.

“What do you think of the latest member of the circle?”

One of the other guests responded as they strolled inside. “She has found a man I hope like us is worthy of the Lord, one that will contribute to the everlasting growth of our families. My wife brought her picture of Baphomet here so we can all pray later before it for the happy couple.”

Danny frowned. “What was that?”

Hands on hips, puzzled by the latest arrival, he relaxed a wrinkled forehead, slipped the phone into a pocket and headed back in.

Inside the dining hall, Jacob had strode across to join Michael with a perplexed face. Michael sipped on wine as Jacob’s eyes almost burst with anxiety.

“What’s that prick saying?”

“He is leaving soon, Jacob, he will wait for the speeches then he is off.” Michael’s voice started to slur as the wine flowed down his throat, refilling the glass after a few gulps.

“You seem on edge to me, Mike. Have been since we got here. He got to us, the bastard got to you and then hatched his little plan. Don’t trust him, he plans something. He won’t just leave. I am ready to take the prick down. Glad you told us he was coming. Right of you? Remains to be seen. But if his little invite stops that prick telling Janine and her family all about him and Andy, and he is gone after today for good, all the better. But, here it is. I want him out sooner rather than later.”

Michael wiped a sweaty forehead as Jacob ranted in his ear.

“Yep. What did he say? What’s his game?”

Michael slapped a cheek as though trying to stay awake. “Anything less than benign, and I would tell you, you know that. And I am ready to punch his lights out if he so much as stirs during the speeches. You’re far too right. We had to allow this.”

“Doubt the in-laws would appreciate knowing about their glory romance days,” Jacob probed Michael’s reddened face with curious eyes, “What’s his plan? Is he really going to just...leave after Andy’s speech? You have to spill his little plan if he...”

“Don’t worry Jake, as far as Janine is concerned and the in-laws, Danny is a friend from years ago, I invited to take her place, nothing complicated,” Michael threw another glass down his gullet, “He is leaving after that, he has promised. We had no choice. This silences Danny, and yeah, out of his life for good. After today, neither you nor I or Andy and definitely not Janine or her family...”

Michael moved a stern face closer to Jacob’s.

“...will ever see that idiot again.”

Jacob, widened eyes, tapped the table. “Not convincing me. He has a plan. How do we know he won’t tell the families, anyway?”

Michael sighed. “She understood. She knows Danny, knows about him and the groom. She knows allowing this will eject him from Andy’s life. And on that weasel, he is a prick, a haughty little nut job, but not a liar. I’ll say that. He gives his word and keeps it, known him longer than you. He will just disappear when the speeches are over. He won’t say anything. Besides, he would have told her already and her family. He could have spilled all anyway by now and possibly ruined their relationship, and this wedding before it happened. Nobody is too hard to find on social media these days and this is a small city, hardly unlikely to bump into her at some point. But he just wants to be here for a bit then fuck off.”

Jacob struggled to bury his anger as he puffed. “He probably hopes to see Andy again one day.”

“Andy is not, gay.” Michael pointed at Janine with a wavering alcoholic finger, “Look, he is marrying a woman. He has made his choice, and his bed. Even if they do meet at some point, so what?”

“Not gonna happen.” Jacob croaked.

Michael slurred a little more. “Just believe me, he is gone after today, gone. You know, they kept their relationship hidden for years. Any idea how hard that must have been...for Andy.”

Andy sent curious glances at Michael and Jacob; Janine spoke with her mother.

Jacob tapped the table with drumming fingers, restless, anxious. “Anyway, got an idea to speed his exit up a little. You’re doing your speech before dinner.”

“What?” Michael’s voice almost quaking with dread and growing intoxication. “Besides, I haven’t had the entrees yet.”

“Your fucking hors d’oeuvres are coming, don’t get too drunk. He’s off when the speeches end, right? Well, let’s get there. I want to keep them from talking to each other for

the rest of the day. As much as we can. Just off now to let Andy know it's a good idea, so get ready as soon you've scoffed your lobster and crap, best man."

Jacob approached Andy and Janine, sending leering grins at the bridesmaids on route. He slapped Andy's arm.

"Hey bro, let's chat. Got an idea on...the speeches."

Andy could not ignore Jacob's eyes as they bore into him. "Okay, a few mins Janine."

They stepped away from the tables close to the doors and chatted. Janine looked on with a rising curiosity as to what tale brewed in the background, the worried faces, and thoughts drifted to the wedding day visitor.

Michael hurled more wine down his throat and refilled it to the brim. Andy exchanged words with Jacob in a corner. Janine peered at Michael with a curiosity that wanted to know more about Andy's mysterious guest.

The wine flowed, chatter filled the great hall.

Danny scaled the winding stairway to the first floor a few steps at a time.

"Hey, prick."

A name-calling and angered tone from behind, Jacob, steely eyes followed Danny as he headed up. Jacob blocked his escalation with an extended arm and used his burly stature to intimidate Danny as he thrust his chest out.

"Talking to you."

"Yeah, heard your friendly voice." Danny, a wisp of a frown.

"Let's be straight here..."

Danny started chuckling. "Was that a joke?"

Jacob closed on him, nose to nose, checking no-one was watching. "I want you out of here, very soon. You've been allowed to visit, that is done, seen for yourself, my brother is hitched. With someone else. So, do the pleasant thing," Jacob clasped Danny's shirt, crunching it into a fist, "And fuck off."

Danny chuckled further. "Oh, come on Jakey. You know I won't do that, yet. And yeah, I've seen them. Great couple."

"So it's time to go."

"Not quite. I want my meal, hear the speeches, a quick word with Andy."

"That is not happening," Jacob twisted his shirt tighter.

"Oh, just a few words."

"You leave right after the speeches, is that clear? No chats with Andy, you piss off."

Danny remained calm, in fact, a grin stretched that provoked Jacob further. "You're afraid aren't you? Afraid I will tell his newly beloved all about his previous relationship. All about us."

"Would you like me to bounce you off these walls and out of the venue?" Jacob's eyes glared and burst with malice.

"Oh, you won't do that, Jakey. You know I will let Janine know all about us. She'll get to know all the wonderful moments myself and Andy shared, what we did on weekends away, what we did during the five years together," Danny's arrogance grew with a smile, "What we did in the bedroom."

Jacob let go of his crumpled shirt and started huffing. "That's your plan? So that is why you are here, I take it. Selfish cunt."

"Kinda knew Mike would tell you I was coming. Asked him to keep it a secret until I got here but, loyal to Andy he is."

“What do you expect, asshole? That the best man, that Andy’s best friend would let you come here, just like that. You’ve been allowed to take a chair, but you are gone, soon. ”

“Nice invite. Subtle.”

“Except for you, they are all invited, strange as some of them are,” Jacob rolled his eyes, “but you do not get a free pass. You get to stay for a bit, then you go.”

Jacob headed back down the stairs.

“See to that personally will you?” Jacob straightened his shirt.

Jacob sighed. “Put it this way, if you are not gone by the end of the speeches, I will no longer care if you talk about you and my brother to Janine. I’ll simply beat the living shit out of you, and drag you by your heels out that door,” Jacob pointed a stern finger, “Test me on that, if you want.”

He continued strolling back to the dining hall.

Danny smirked, lips curled, a broad facial display of glee, a mutter. “Hah, Fuck you Jacob. You can’t stop what’s happening today.”

He curled into a corridor to his room. Intentions for the day preyed on his mind. He failed to stop the hate, the pain.

Only a threat, gun in their faces, make my hate and pain clear, then I leave and never see them again...never...see him again...

A middle aged man approached Danny with his wife, wrapped around his waist, as Danny inserted his key card into the door.

“Hello there.” the aged balding well-dressed man extended a hand.

“Hello,” Danny replied.

As he reached out to clasp the man’s hand, Danny noticed an object. Wrapped around the man’s wrist, a silver bracelet with the obscure sigil engraved into it; the same bracelet and

markings viewed on Ken's wrist earlier. His wife, too. She wore a similar bracelet, the same sigil engraving though attached to a beaded bracelet.

Danny gripped the man's hand.

The man grew a smile that contoured all facial skin. "What a great wedding. Heading down soon? Entrees being served now probably. Can't wait for the speeches. See you, son."

The couple headed off, a few giggles over something as the wife swayed her head back for a quick glance at Danny as he entered his room muttering.

"Yeah, great, fuckers."

Inside the decorated room, Danny pulls out a mahogany drawer. Inside, a white cloth wrapped around an object. He withdrew the wrapped item, discarded the cloth and weighed a Glock on a sweaty palm. The glistening steel heightened Danny's anxiety a little, it offered a natural ability, an extension to his hate. He withdrew a photo, a small frame, of him and Andy in a photo booth, cuddling and beaming with happiness.

A time long past.

He tossed the frame back into the drawer and closed it.

Perhaps I should shoot him, and his wife.

Danny slipped the Glock into his shirt and buttoned up his jacket. He stepped into the corridor, clicked the door shut and headed for the stairs. Murmurs and chats seeped out past an open door as he neared it.

Danny paused by the open hotel room door, treading with caution on the carpet, a little curious, sure he heard his name mentioned.

A few couples clinked glasses in the suite. Rays of watery light bled through the slight opening in the curtains, not enough to make out all their faces. A huge painting hung on a

wall, one surely not part of the hotel attire: a hybrid being with the head of a goat, the breasts of a woman, and the wings of an angel.

They ceased chatting, in a snap, and in synch with each other.

As though distracted.

Their heads swivelled in a slow and ominous turn to Danny standing at the room entrance.

Danny cleared his throat.

As he stepped away from the room entrance, he flinched.

A young lady, a perplexed grin on her porcelain face, humming to herself only a few inches from his surprised face. No tune recognised by Danny as he stood aghast at the lady staring into his eyes. Mercury-red hair tumbled down her shoulders. A wordless tune hummed through honey-sweet lips. She raised her slender eyebrows and pouted her lips as she smoothed Danny's forehead with small fingers.

Danny flinched again and batted away her arm. "Don't do that."

Her expression fell. "Such darkness in you."

She slipped by Danny, resuming her humming and entered the room, the door shut.

"Fucking weird people."

Danny caressed his forehead as if removing dirt and made a swift stroll onwards to the stairs.

He strode back into the dining hall and resumed his seat next to Michael, wishing he'd taken the opportunity to piss off. Danny smooths over his jacket where the Glock bulge showed a little. He relaxed himself, rejoining the table and the day's proceedings as though here for the wedding - and nothing else. Barely noticed the steamed lobster and potatoes bristling his nasal hairs. Nothing mattered. Calm, nerves at rest, he now waited.

A relaxed grin that spoke of an agenda, hidden and waiting.

“Your entrees are waiting for you, Dan.” Michael, slurs somewhat more clear, peered at Danny wishing he’d go away.

Waitresses had placed entrees on all tables. The succulence of the visual gastric delights were not enough to silence Andy’s worries. For a moment, he stopped munching and sent vacant stares at the lobster, his favourite entrée dish. Janine continued to dig into the mashed potatoes and couscous salad, and twisted off the final lobster claw, and down and away as her ravenous stomach demanded food right now. She requested a second entrée dish for guests, the filet mignon with green beans steaming alongside the lobster dish.

Andy just stared, then realised he was fixating and rubbed his eyes and tore at the lobster, a slow eating process hampered by worry, by the past - by this man from his past. He paused as Jacob strode across to Michael and started conversing, noticed Michael’s drunk face and the distress in his complexion. At the same time, relief that the best man lived up to being a best friend too and informed him of Danny’s plan to gatecrash the reception.

“I think Mike may be more worried about his speech than I am.”

Janine sniggered as Michael threw a glass of wine down his throat. “He looks a little concerned, but oh, I am looking forward to hearing his words,” She spread her lips in a sly smile unnoticed by Andy as he gazed at a worried Michael.

They exchanged whispers, Jacob and Michael as an inquisitive Danny looked on. Though sure, he heard: Okay, Andy, fine with it. Right after your entrée.

Jacob and Danny exchanged hateful glares for a few ticks. There was no escaping the disposition in those bloodshot eyes leaning towards hostility upon a glance at Danny. Jacob rose from his seat.

“You don’t seem too pleased to see me Jakey.” Danny’s wry smile raised more displeasure in Jacob.

He patted Michael’s shoulder and ignored Danny en route to his table.

Janine regarded Danny further, wondering when her new husband would make the introduction.

“And how is the lovely daughter doing?”

Janine flinched and pressed a hand to her chest. “Dad, sneaking on me.”

“Jumpy today. And what a day!” Her father, Harrison, raised a greyed fluffy moustache as he smiled adding copious more wrinkles to his face. Grey-white hair fell down his forehead. He swiped it back over a balding scalp.

“Wonderful, Dad.”

“And who is the new face in the crowd?”

Janine sent a darting scrutinising gaze again at Danny as he sifted through his phone messages. “No idea who he is. Only that he’s an old friend, and that is it.”

Conversations flowed, and a joyous atmosphere filled the hall as chatter and laughter sprouted from tables in bursts. The day of a grand celebration for the families. A pleasant bustle of friends and family and children here to celebrate the flowering of a new couple. Yet, for Michael and Andy and Jacob, the awareness of trouble, of a threat to the joy of the day kept them alert.

Janine continued to observe Danny, a sense of wonder, or dread, so fascinated. Jacob approached the head waiter and began signalling at the tables and his watch. Andy, smiled at Janine, and rubbed her shoulders. Janine moved her scrutiny from Danny to Jacob as he fed instructions to the waiter. He then meandered to the parents of the families and muttered

some words. Waitstaff cleared the entrée dishes and instead of bringing steaming chicken dinners to the tables, departed and closed the hall doors.

Andy sighed somewhat. “Jacob and I are making a slight change to the timing of the best man’s and my speech.”

Janine, knitted brow, eyes wandering between Andy and Jacob a little, hunched at the words. “Why? Let’s have our dinner first then...”

“Believe me, it’s best. Just to speed things up a bit.” Andy’s voice tinged with tremors served only to raise Janine’s curiosity further.

She glanced at the waiters scurrying around. “So, we skip dinner?”

“No. We’ve asked the waiters to wait about half an hour or so then we can resume our meal, and the day.”

Her brow crumpled. “What’s going on, husband?”

“Trust me. We want to get through the speeches quicker, as....as...Mike...and me, actually, get more and more nervous as the time for speeches approaches and we...we...want to get it over with.” Andy nodded his head with a less than reassuring smile.

“Okay, fine, public speeches and you don’t coexist. Let’s get it done. But don’t worry,” She sent Michael a warm smile, he raised a glass to acknowledge her, “Don’t sweat the speech. Besides, I really want to hear what Michael spills on you,” a gasp, she covered her mouth and started to snigger, “You,” she prodded Andy’s chest as his chin dropped, “you really are worried about what looks like a drunk Michael is going to say if he drinks more wine before his speech. So, what is it? Huh, big secret? No wonder he too looks a little off.”

“B-i-g secret,” Andy’s troubled face no longer disquieted Janine’s, “No, no, no, errm, secret.”

“Is that your big secret?” She pointed at Danny as he sent a coy smile at a waiter collecting his used crockery.

Andy’s colour drained. “Big...secret, no, he, look, he’s a friend from the past, thought we’d lost contact, that’s all.”

Janine, no longer able to remain still, a puzzle needed solving. “No, but I am yet to meet him, come introduce me.”

Andy’s complexion wanted to melt. He steadied his breath to calm an impending panic attack. Janine rose from her seat pulling on Andy’s shaky hand.

“Come on.”

Colour drained from Andy’s face as they snaked around tables to Danny and Michael sharing a few words. Michael’s heart raced as a troubled Andy neared with an excited Janine yanking on his arm, and he yearned for the speeches and day - to be over.

“Hello. Danny is it?”

Danny nudged his chair back and feigned his ‘stand-up’ guy appearance: happy, glad to be here, joy for the couple.

“Lovely to meet you. Heard lots about you.” A monotone voice failed to fool himself or Michael.

“Well, who is this charming friend? Why was he not officially invited?”

Andy froze.

Danny stepped in with a haste that soothed Andy, a little. “Oh, just missed me. Years ago, not seen each other for a long time.”

Janine extended her silky white hand. As did Danny.

Hands - clasped.

She choked a little.

Darkness.

Not the blackness endured with shut eyelids but one that surrounded her, engulfed her and separated Janine from the moment.

She exhaled.

Janine held a palm to her temple and swayed a little. She stepped back onto Andy's shoe, he gripped her as she continued to sway.

"Honey, you okay, Janine."

Janine straightened her posture and darted a few glances around the room at Danny's perplexed grin as she weakened, at Michael with concern written all over his face and to Dad - a fixed glare for a few moments then he resumed chats with the groom's father.

Michael hands her a glass of water. Danny's grin widened again.

Janine throws the water down her throat. "Thank you. A bit dehydrated it seems."

"Had several drinks already. Long day you know still ahead." Michael chortled as he spoke.

"Sit down." Andy insisted.

"Quite alright, all fine. Let's go back."

Danny's attention fell on the same beaded bracelet viewed earlier on the aged woman's wrist.

"What's that around your wrist?" Danny asked as the beaded bracelet came into sight from under her sleeve as she caressed her temple. The question grew wide eyes on Michael.

Jacob had approached, seething, grinding his teeth.

Danny reached out to touch it. "Noticed a few other guests wearing it. Some sort of club, a new trend?"

“Oh, this, well...” Janine smoothed over the beads and the glyph engraved silver piece with circular grooves and curved symbols, “something from my many interests. Love all things mystical.”

Danny smiled at her. “How wonderfully wiccan?”

Jacob and Michael exchanged worried glances as she spoke.

“We’ll talk soon,” Andy said as he led Janine back to their seats, casting a malicious over-the-shoulder pair of widened eyes at Danny.

The newlyweds resumed their seats. Janine wiped a sweaty forehead as Andy rubbed her arm hoping the day would continue without error.

Andy’s father rose to address the guests. “One moment of your time folks. We are moving the speeches a little forward before we have our dinners. The Dads here wish to say a few words, then the best man and the groom, and we look forward to their words, so in a few minutes, over to Harrison.”

Conversations resumed and people rushed about for a last minute visit to the lavatory. As all patrons resumed their seats. Harrison exchanged a few hush words with his wife then pushed his portly stature off the chair. He tapped his glass with a silver spoon.

Clink. Clink.

A wide smile raised a fluffy greyed moustache. Guests focused their attention. Harrison sent the guests a bushy grin as they ceased all conversations and waited for his words. Andy held Janine’s hand, and they exchanged loving glances before facing her father. Danny knew it as he caught their glances, those short deep stares spoke of feelings no longer shared with him, an intimacy once owned that a watching Danny only cherished but knew for him - was long gone. Andy wiped any knowledge of the guy from his past to one side as a sparkle lit up his face again, a beaming smile from Janine.

Danny thought of his plan today.

For a few moments, the proud father raised a wine glass to the guests, and all raised theirs. Danny, a little slower, as he averted a gaze on the happy couple.

“This is a toast to the wedding of my daughter, and the inclusion of a son-in-law who I know will be everything my daughter wants throughout their lives.”

He sipped on the glass as did the guests. The father gazed at Janine, glowing with that same sparkle but of a love for a daughter he cherished.

“I stand here, beside my beautiful daughter and bride of Andrew Lovett, and now,” he bowed a little at Janine, “at Mr and Mrs Lovett.”

A few claps and cheers sprung up. Michael whistled as Danny held a stoic complexion, slow claps, eyes on Andy.

“I really do reflect on how Janine made it to this point in her life. Still very young, and everything ahead of her. I along with my wife, Marie, have watched her grow into the beautiful woman you see today.”

Janine held back a tear and caressed her father’s hand.

“Janine, you are the true treasure of this family, my sun ray, and so much more to me and I know also to your husband, Andy.”

Andy kissed Janine’s cheek, a blush swelled up as some guests emitted an Awww as he did.

Father continued after a quick swig of wine. “I know she has married a wonderful man, a fine gent and hardy husband with some real guts I add for marrying my daughter.” He chuckled.

Many guests snorted and laughed for a few moments.

Father regarded Andy with stern eyes. "I hope you know what you are married into. My daughter is not easy."

A few more guests laughed.

Andy nodded emphatically. "Oh yeah, Mr Green, I know, and got years of practice ahead."

More chuckles and Harrison sniggered somewhat. "I know that you are both on a fantastic journey and that love and happiness," he paused to regard the guests and Andy's parents on the chairs next to him with a strong deep emphasis on the word to follow, "and wealth. The journey ahead will be one of paradise for the proud man and happy wife, and even prouder Dad right here."

He raised his glass again.

"I ask you all to join me in congratulating the bride and groom and wishing them a long and fulfilling life as husband and wife."

Andy's father followed a signal from Janine and rose up to deliver a speech. After some heartwarming words to Andy and a blessing to the marriage, he resumed his seat.

Jacob clapped and scrutinised Danny's table. Andy raised a glass to Jacob, he returned with a thumbs up and a long swig of beer and nodded at Andy. As Andy's protective brother, he was ready to pounce on Danny if trouble stirred. Danny regarded Jacob as cold eyes met his: alerted himself to Andy's sentry guard. Janine scrutinised the exchange of glances and the thumbs up signal.

She wondered, why?

Danny, a cold glare at Janine, as he pulled out his phone, sifted through messages.

Janine picked up that glare like a finely tuned radar system and shot a look in Danny's direction, one missed as his attention stayed on the phone screen.

What's your game mysterious guest? Janine pondered despite futile in effort while she knew little about this guy. And that darkness. What was that? A glimpse?

She dismissed the thoughts and switched attention to Andy, unaware of her selective hearing, a focus swayed by being none the wiser on the uninvited guest.

Janine scrutinised Andy and interrupted him as he wittered. "Honey, shame Michael's wife is so ill today, that she couldn't make it. But why invite Danny here? Mike does not seem too chatty with him, despite sharing a table. Jacob, gloomy when near him. Am I going to know more about him?"

"Honey," Andy nodded, blissfully ignoring her query, "Not sure you listened there, the speeches, looking forward?"

Janine snapped to a reassuring smile. "Oh yes, I want to hear what the best man has to say about my husband's past, little secrets, you know."

Andy blocked a gulp. "Secrets...hah...yep...that's Mike, sure to embarrass me." Andy, wide bulging eyes, he drank about half his pint swiftly.

Harrison nodded at Michael. Time for the best man's speech.

Janine eager to hear the speeches coming, content with this fresh new leaf in her life. Happiness had soaked through her and she clung to the feeling. Yet, she wondered. Thoughts on this Danny, why nobody uttered a word of him before the wedding.

Michael pushed himself up off sweaty shaky palms; a feigned smile hid a more than tipsy gent. Claps started and faded. He regarded Danny for a moment; Danny acknowledged Michael with a smile.

Michael inched off his chair.

Danny sprung up.

He tapped a saucer with a spoon then a wine glass, knocking it over. A river of red ran a stream to the table edge and dripped to the floor.

Jacob stood to attention like a military soldier, a stone face fixed on Danny.

Andy, stunned. His lower jaw had dropped.

Harrison folded his arms, quizzically nodding at Jacob and Ken, muttering “What are you doing young man?”

Ken was on his feet too now. Andy, chest thumping, strained to take in whatever Danny planned to say.

Danny started tapping the saucer over and over, it raised anxiety in the room as guest heads twisted and shoulders shrugged.

Michael froze, a bewildered face, a dropped jaw. A whisper emerged. “Sit the fuck down Danny, no, don’t.”

Janine refused to be silent any longer. “What do you want? Someone want to bloody tell me who this guy is?”

“What’s this about?” Ken shouted at Danny.

Jacob made a move on Danny.

Danny pulled out the shiny Glock and trained it on him.

Gasps and shrieks began across the dining hall.

“Oh, it’s armed, Jakey boy. Back to your seat like a good member of the family.”

Danny’s finger pressure on the trigger increased as he stretched his arm out, Glock sights on Jacob’s head.

“What the fuck do you want you fucking loon?”

A disturbed and quivering Andy embraced Janine. “Sorry, my love.”

Janine, shaken, eyes darkened and focused on Danny’s enraged face.

“Oh come on Andy. Are you kidding? You do not love her. You know it. Deep down in that confused brain of yours, you just know it.” Danny cleared his throat. “Do sit down Michael.”

“Did you know he would do this Mike?” Jacob yelled at a trembling Michael. “Got to you. Did you help plan to screw up the day?”

“Are you mad? Course not, this cretin just butt in like...” Michael’s voice quivered.

Danny cut him off. “I was pretty sure that devoted Mike here was not going to keep his mouth shut, saw it on your faces when I arrived. I’d hoped to breeze in unannounced and surprise Andy here. I know he loves to see me. But you do know why I am here, and why you really cannot send me away. Since Mike here told you all I was coming so don’t rattle on him Jakey. He had nothing to do with it. All my handy work. Mike, in fact, sat here and not at the top table with you...” just to keep an eye on me.” Danny rolled his eyes. “Well, except for the ‘wife is ill’ part, and that’s why I took her place, but that is it, as you know, Mike knew nothing of my plan.”

Janine and Harrison scowled at Michael. Andy’s father had risen, a shaky hand outstretched in Danny’s direction. “No idea what this is about, but let’s chat outside about this. Don’t ruin this. Must be a way past this.”

Danny laughed, the Glock wavered in front of the guests. “No way, Daddy. Your son has a big reason to know that can’t happen. Don’t be hard on the best man. He actually put you guys first. Knew he would. He did it, to prevent me from opening my mouth, and can still go that way.”

Michael lowered himself to the chair somewhat glad that Danny eased his guilt.

Danny swayed the gun in Andy’s direction.

Harrison clenched his fists, tighter, tighter, a menacing set of eyes on the gunman.

“And more importantly, Andy here knows why I had to come today, why I was uninvited, why I have been allowed to stay?” Danny adjusted his posture, swaying the gun around as a few guests poised on their seat edges appeared to threaten him. “And it can stay that way. Your lovely wife need never know. I can spare her that pain. But...”

Jacob slid a silver knife off the table and clutched the handle, eyes flaming with fury. “You shoot at anyone, and you are dead, do you hear me?”

Ken repeated, he grabbed a knife but rather than hide it, pointed the quivering silver at Danny.

“Oh come on guys, I have a gun, what? I will shoot you both dead before you get near me, and I will...shoot you.”

Michael placed some thought on a knife only inches away.

“Okay, fuck it, let’s spill all. Respect left the building with fucking Decency.” Danny tossed a chair to one side as he moved close to Andy and Janine. A few guests had called 999 on their phones flickering under table cloths. “I’ll be quick. No doubt, some of you are going to call the police on your mobiles so here it is. Janine, your hubby and I go way, way, back. And we shared something for years, a connection that you will never have with him, I promise you that.”

Danny’s eyes welled up, and he snivelled. Janine swivelled her head to Andy in a slow turn, her jaw dropping an inch every few seconds of clarity. Andy’s father, pained expression as his wife gripped her mouth to prevent a gasp of horror at the revelation unfolding.

“Dan, let’s talk about this? My fault,” Andy stood up, “I should have talked to you. I should have been clearer.”

“Clearer. You told me to get out of your life. Pretty fucking clear to me.” Danny’s brittle voice, laced with bitterness, croaked with misery.

Jacob hissed, a growing desire to lunge at the gunman.

“He said nothing of harming anyone.” Michael thumped the table repeatedly as he yelled at Jacob and Andy. “He threatened to spill on you Andy if I prevented him being here. I told you he’d be here, and then he would go, he promised, but,” he raised an angry voice, “the prick lied, he’s doing it anyway, you fucking liar, Danny. Thought you were better than this. Just couldn’t let it go. could you? Selfish prick.”

Danny, a quaking Glock still pointed at a shaken Andy. Guests frozen, lost in weeping or too stunned and scared to move an inch. The staff outside, oblivious on the other side of the closed hall doors.

“He said he would just say a few words, not about you and him, and then leave. You promised Danny, promised you’d keep your mouth shut about you and Andy.”

Michael sent teary eyes to Andy and Janine. A series of rasping breaths from her as she searched Andy’s face, the terrified face of a husband with a cross to bear. Andy covered his eyes for a moment as rapid expulsions of air left him, trying to stop a complete breakdown.

“But I told you Andy, he was coming, warned you guys, was not going to allow this scumbag to ruin your day, or your life, anymore. Just leave Danny, you’ve done your dirty work, leave.”

Danny moved closer to Andy, the nozzle only inches away. “I love you Andy. It’s...quite simple.”

He cried, and with it, the sound of grief, of a pain enduring; a deep lamentation that had haunted him for months and months. “My sorrow; cannot be expressed in words or cries.

And I can't, just cannot do it, I'll...leave now...I'll go...I won't ever see you again...I cannot...cannot...do it. Life without you is...unthinkable...but you seem...to actually have moved on. I really was not going to kill you. I just had to do this so you could feel my pain. Thought of it but no, never would. Or her. But...never you."

The gun shook as his hand trembled, rivers of tears forked down Danny's cheeks.

Jacob breathed in and out hard and hoped he would leave.

Andy tried to speak, but a squeak left his lips, soft tone. "I am sorry Dan, I am sorry."

"You're a fucking loser Danny, just won't get on with your life," Michael bolted forward, knife in one hand. "You are just a sad fag and a selfish asshole, you are fucking..."

Danny's complexion changed, to a burning disdain, the gun swayed at Michael.

Bang. Bang.

Michael fell, two smoking holes in his face.

Screams erupted as guests scattered, overturning tables as some hid behind collapsing legs. Some parents pulled yelling kids to their embrace.

A chance, moments, Jacob lunged at Danny.

Harrison spread protective arms over his wife, shielding back to the chaos.

The gun went off but missed.

Danny squealed as Jacob's knife buried into his upper abdomen.

"Stop, stop, now." Andy glanced over and cried at the sight of dead Michael on the carpet and pounced on Jacob and Danny.

Jacob grappled with Danny trying to force the gun out of his hand.

Andy clung onto Danny's arm and tried to shake the gun free.

Janine rose, quick. "Stop this!"

Bang.

A shot fired.

The gun fell to the carpet.

Danny, a face of horror.

Andy cried out as Janine quivered.

Blood seeped from a hole in her chest.

“Andy.” Janine’s voice muffled to a dying breath.

She wavered for a moment, then collapsed forward onto the table.

Janine snapped out of a day dream.

The dining hall blurred and flashes of light filled her retinae.

She realised Danny gripped her hand.

“Steady,” Danny remarked as she wobbled.

Janine exhaled a few hard breaths. She held a palm to her temple and felt discomfort as she teetered on fainting and stepped onto Andy’s shoe.

“Honey, you okay, Janine?” Andy’s voice distorted with worry at his passing out newly wed.

She started to straighten herself before it hit her.

This happened.

At least, in my vision.

She glanced around the hall as a few guests sent her concerned faces. Danny’s grin, satisfied, like he enjoyed her pain. Michael poured a glass of water from a jug and handed it to her.

“Drink this, a bit dizzy, hey.”

“Thank you. A bit dehy...”

Janine recalled the words, repeats of a conversation only she knew of.

“Had several drinks already. Long day you know still ahead.” Michael chortled as he spoke, again for Janine.

“Si...” Andy tried to manoeuvre Janine to a seat.

She cut in. “I don’t need to sit down, just some fresh air, I...”

Danny, as before, scrutinised her silver bracelet. “What’s that around your wrist?”

Danny asked as the beaded bracelet came into sight from under her sleeve, again.

Janine gave Andy a long hard look. “I need...I need to go outside, grab some air, then I’ll be back.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, Andy, Stay here. Some time, and I will return, all is fine. A little too much of the champagne, maybe. Perhaps. Hah.” Janine feigned a laugh as she dwelled on what the vision had shown her. “Back soon.”

She twisted on a heel and faced Danny, she strode into his arms and hugged him.

“Good to meet you, Danny.”

Surprise or shock, Andy really failed to choose one, perhaps both - as did Danny with a perplexed face.

Janine skipped out of the hall and to the hotel exit.

Jacob with a brisk pace approached Andy. “Hey, Janine. Where is she going? About to kick the speeches off.”

A bewildered Andy kept a silence as he wished for a smooth day. Danny, narrow eyes on Andy for a few moments, wandered back to his chair.

“She needs some air, delay the proceedings for a little, Jacob.” Michael rubbed a blushed complexion.

The sunlight beat down on the car park by the hotel entrance. Janine stood there, alone. A pondering woman in her silky white dress, rising at the fringes as bouts of wind blew across the hotel exterior.

Thoughts.

Decisions.

Janine stared into nothingness, a long empty glare at the concrete ground. She adjusted her posture to a stiff upright position and took in a gallon of air into her lungs and exhaled. With haste, she made her way back inside where an anxious Daddy, a disturbed Harrison waited in the foyer.

“Darling, what is up? Why did you leave in a hurry? Waiting for you.”

Janine caressed her father’s hands. “There is a man in there I just married. But it could...all go wrong. I had a vision of a bad day if I didn't do something. I discovered something else in that vision.” Janine pondered on her next words. “Something I need to deal with personally. We need to get rid of Danny.”

“What, my dear? Danny. That gatecrasher. And what is this, matter, personal one you refer to?”

“Something, nothing for your concern Dad, in time, but first, we have a problem with Danny, I need the family’s help. Here is what we do.”

As they chatted, Andy hovered in the dining hall doorway. Janine and Harrison exchanged what appeared an argument and then Janine calmed her father with affectionate shoulder rubs. She lightly kissed her father’s cheek and headed up the stairway as Harrison withdrew a phone.

A curious Danny observed Andy at the doorway from his table seat. On trying to unfasten his jacket, puzzlement filled his face. A button, missing. Danny rummaged around, peered under the table. No sign of it. A sour look on his face as he searched the carpet. He shrugged and dismissed it, resuming drinking a beer. He caressed his shirt for the Glock, a reassurance that it stayed hidden away, confirmed.

Janine closed her hotel room door behind her. She paused, reflecting on the past, the good times with Andy - not the vision, not that, not what words drifted from Danny's mouth. Her gaze met the neat double poster bed. A less than warm sensation filled her as she thought of the wedding night ahead. A temperature raced over her forehead. She wondered if it was the ventilation or lack of temperature control but she knew the origin of that flushed face staring back at her in a table mirror.

Does he really love me? Or him?

A phone buzz. Messages. From a concerned husband.

Janine laid the phone on the shiny table. She allowed her head to loll backwards over the chair. Her eyes fixed on the swirling artex ceiling patterns, she pulled out an item from a dress pocket and placed it on the table.

The missing button from Danny's jacket.

A knock on the door.

"Darling, can I come in? Sorry to rush you honey but the speeches need to start soon."

"Okay. Return to the guests, down in a minute."

A frustrated Andy hovered then departed.

Janine watched the door for a few moments, a need for certainty on knowing no-one dared wait outside. Then, sluggishly, rose to her feet, head bowed forward.

Her fingernails clawed at the table vanish, cutting thin streaks of thin and shallow scratches.

She lifted the button to the mirror.

Her index finger and thumb flipped the button over and over.

She chanted a series of melodic phrases in Latin and squeezed the button. Cries of lament began to seep from her lips as she chanted with varying pitches, small white hands hammering on the table wood.

“Incantare. Incantare.”

Whatever Janine tapped into started to move the room. The bed and table shook, the mirror warped as though close to cracking. She thrust the button high in the air, clutching it so tight to squeeze the blood from the tips of her fingers. Her feet hovered a few inches above the carpet as the esoteric chants roared at the button. Her facial skin stretched, a long thin ashen chin that should shatter the bone morphed into a hideous distorted oval shape. Eyes, pits of blackness. Beautiful Janine, now a malevolent screeching phantom, devoid of divinity, face contorted by a soulless force. Her skin paled to a translucent white.

It seemed, all that once breathed as a human had departed this body.

She uttered croaky words at the button, clutching it with an intense fury. ‘Sylphs of Air, I conjure thee, I curse the wearer, make his air leave him, I invoke thee!’

Impatience spread like a wave of discontent across the family tables. Jacob strutted back and forth, sending messages to Janine. Andy feigned an ‘at ease’ face for the guests while shrivelling up inside as his wife delayed the proceedings. Harrison and a few others from the bride’s side of the family, also not returned to the tables.

“Oh, for God’s sake, where is she?” Michael blew out exasperation in a series of puffs and swilled down half a pint of beer.

Danny, eyes with interest on an obviously panicked Andy, and the empty seat of his wife next door. “Perhaps, she has given this some thought after all.”

Michael slapped the table. “Oh, you’d like that wouldn’t you?”

“Just saying, no sign of her and I bet if...”

Danny coughed, then raised a hand to a heaving chest. Then another stab.

“Ooooh, argghh.”

Nobody noticed Danny’s pain as his eyes shut and he pressed against a pressure in his chest.

The pressure squeezed further.

“Aghh, fuck, burning.” Danny’s voice broke.

Michael, and some guests, swung their attention on a pained Danny as he hoisted himself off the chair. He clasped his arm as sheer pain shot to a trembling hand.

“You okay, Danny?” A new concerned Michael asked as worry grew on Andy’s complexion as he studied a staggering Danny.

“Yeah...heading off for a few minutes.”

Visibly in pain as he pressed a hand to a throbbing chest, Danny made for the doors and the hallway. As Danny approached the hotel entrance, Harrison blocked his exit.

Three stoic faces of the in-laws stood rigid and ready behind Danny.

They gripped his shoulders as Harrison reached into Danny’s shirt. Danny, too ridden with chest pain to react could only watch as Harrison withdrew the Glock. He passed the unused sidearm to one of the in-laws, tightening a grip on Danny.

Harrison, no trace of care for Danny, hard stare, brutal eyes.

“Leave now, and I will say nothing of this. You have no more time here. Leave and stay gone.”

Danny, writhing in pain, brushed past Harrison and through the swing doors. He collapsed on the gravel drive outside and pulled the phone out.

“Bro...bro...it’s fucked, come get me...you at the pub...round the corner...okay, right now, we leave early...I’ll explain...get here now.”

A sharp pain sent him reeling to the rough ground, yelps and cries.

A car drove fast into the car park, the driver close to not seeing Danny curling in pain. A stocky bald guy in a shell suit disembarked. Bro arrived, and his jaw dropped.

“Danny...Danny...”

“Shit bro, having a heart attack...get me...get me to a hospital...”

Arm wrapped around an agonised Danny, the brother carried him to the back seats. He slammed the door shut, leapt back to the driving seat and sped for the main road.

Cries and whimpers from Danny blocked any responses to a terrified brother trying to focus on a busy road.

“Danny, hold on. You brought too much stress on yourself. Told you to let this go. There’s a hospital only a mile away, focus on your breathing.”

Danny’s eyelids flickered. Chest numb, breathing shallow.

Darkness surrounded. Danny only able to hear faint whimpers he uttered, like distant echoes, as though floating in a black empty void.

And from the dark, a face.

The chanting yelling face of Janine’s whitened banshee head and sunken black eyes appeared.

“No...more...pain...” Her words shrill in Danny’s mind.

Huge breaths left his body as he heaved one more time.

Then still.

Eyes locked in a vacuous glare.

The car screeched to a stop and mounted a kerb.

The brother, distressed by the look on Danny's still face in the rear-view mirror.

Death had taken him.

Back in the dining hall, exuberation and relief as the charmed face and bright smile of the bride returned. Janine nodded, hands hugging each other to the guests as though requesting forgiveness for her lateness. A beaming smile stayed on Andy. Claps and cheers as she resumed her seat next to a relieved Andy. Michael, now moved over to his seat at the top table next to Janine, relaxed, gleeful at the sight of Danny's absence - yet unaware of why.

"Great and phew," Andy kissed her cheek.

"All better, lots of water cured all ails," She kissed his lips.

Harrison nodded at Jacob and Michael, waiting for his speech and the rest to start, acknowledging he was about ready.

Andy blew out another sigh of relief.

Janine grinned, a half serious, half admiration smirk. 'I know about you and Danny.'

The words hit Andy like a freight train; his jaw fell to a frozen gasp.

"And it's okay. He won't ever see you again. I have a lot to tell you about my family and why yours will be wealthy for life, and our generations. Not just a wedding, husband, not just a bond for us, but for all our families. That is how our order works. I have a secret too. You are not the only one keeping secrets from your spouse. I'll tell you more. It's what our lord wants. More souls in exchange for prosperity. I wished to keep it from you until we

married. I believe in you. The last few bolted away when I asked them to pledge themselves to our lord before I married. Pity for them. So, I married you first. No more runaways. No more betrayals. That won't come from you. You belong to me, your soul to our lord, wealth will be yours. I'll tell you all about the ritual we perform annually to secure our wealth and power, with great thanks to the most sovereign of lords. We will chat about all that later. All are beautiful and I love you. But if you ever cheat on me or refuse to swear loyalty to me or our lord, I will cut out your fucking heart and make you swallow it as you draw your final breath...okay, husband."

She raised a champagne glass and clinked Andy's beer which rested on the table cloth. Andy, too petrified to reach for the glass. Words dried up, a swelling in his stomach worsened at the insane spouse warning, a wife with knowledge - and power. And a secret of her own, one yet for Andy to understand.

"Make sure your speech is good, darling." The corners of Janine's mouth stretched into an over-the-top smile.

Andy, a slackened face, forced a weak smile, a posture that melted by the second as he slumped into his seat.

Janine's mother whispered to Harrison as he smiled at the happy face of his daughter across the table top. She kept her words quiet, slight nods at Andy and to his parents seated happily next to Harrison. "When should we make them aware of their new God, the one they must worship?"

"Soon, my darling."

Janine's mother studied Andy's worried face as she spoke. "I only hope this Andy respects our covenant."

The guests muttered to each other, waiting for the speeches.

Harrison sighed. "Let's hope her marriage goes well. That Andy, will still want to be a part of the family."

"Baphomet will not appear to us otherwise. It concerns me."

"Yes my dear, you have made that clear before today. We cannot be sure that he and perhaps his family will want to join us. The marriage is done. We respected Janine's wishes to not avail him of our coven. To leave it to her to tell him when she wished. All Andy need do is swear an oath to LaVey and rest a hand on his bible and swear to our Lord, when Janine decides he should, then as usual, the ritual can start, Baphomet appears and the wealth of our families continues as he gains another soul. I know. One disbeliever, and the ritual fails. Janine will get Andy on side. Much to gain. He has a prosperous future ahead of him. Worth the cost."

Harrison's wife, a face of doubt, peered at the groom as he twirled a glass with a vacuous stare, eyes pained with fear and the shock of a day beyond belief while a chilled Janine chatted to a now relaxed Michael.

"Andy looks scared. Think Janine has mentioned our faith and his expected commitment to remain a member of our family."

"Soon enough, today likely or perhaps tomorrow, another six months before we carry out the ritual," Harrison then pushed his chair back and stood up.

"And if he refuses to devote himself to Satan?"

Harrison sent his happy faced daughter a quick glance. Then quiet words to his wife.

"Janine will take care of him...just like her previous men who refused to stay true to her."

He lifted a spoon to a wine glass.

Clink. Clink.

The End

for now...