

## The Bones of Sumer



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—Anne Brooke



THE evening Paul *finally* rang him, it had been the last thing Craig expected. He'd spent a rough day out on a modeling shoot, trying to look sultry and continental in a boat on the Thames in the middle of December. The rain had been pissing down and the makeup girl had to redo him every five minutes.

He didn't complain though. It was hard enough getting a job at all, without screwing it so he didn't get hired again. Word soon got around in this town. Not like where he was brought up, where secrets could be hidden for a lifetime sometimes.

Anyway, the shoot dragged on because of the rain, and it was past eight by the time he got back. The phone was ringing when he walked into the shared hallway, tripping over the post and brushing the dampness from his hair, so he picked up the receiver before the answering machine clicked on. Craig never knew when it might be business.

It wasn't.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end said. "May I speak to Craig Robertson please?"

He knew who it was at once. His heart beat faster and his skin felt as if it was being stroked with feathers. His caller had had that effect on him the first time he'd seen him. The first time he'd kissed him. It had felt back then as if for a few moments everything and everyone else had slipped away.

"Y-yes. Speaking," Craig managed, and then, "Is that Paul?"

"Paul Maloney. Yes."

"Hi," he said, turning to the wall, though there was no one else around to hear. He couldn't stop smiling either.

"Hi."

And then there wasn't much else to be said. A couple of minutes later and Craig had arranged to meet him for a drink in an hour's time. Paul named a bar in Soho, not far from where they'd... met. He calculated that, even with a quick shower and change of clothes, he should be able to make it. A shave would have to wait though. He hoped Paul liked the stubbled look. It was what the Thames guys had wanted today.

Twenty minutes or so after he'd ended the call, he was out of the house again. He wasted another few seconds picking up the letters from the mat and dropping them on the hall table. He didn't have time to look through and sort them. Besides, the post was rarely for him.

Later, of course, he realized he should have checked, found the one from home. But actually he was glad he didn't.

CRAIG arrived ten minutes late, which was typical. Paul was sitting at the bar, nursing a designer beer. He looked even sexier than when he'd last seen him, if that were possible. In contrast to his own spiky dyedblond willowy look, Paul was medium build, with natural dark hair slicked back close to his skull. He carried that same animal intensity that had snared Craig before. Like a wolf, he thought for the first time. An injured one.

As he pushed his way through the Friday-night scrum, Craig wondered how to greet him. What was the form for a first date with a

bloke he'd already snogged, felt up, and given a hand job to, only a few streets away from here? They'd shaken pricks with each other, so what should he do for an encore? Shake hands?

In the end, he kissed him, not giving the other man time to speak. It turned into more than he'd bargained for. Paul's tongue snaked into Craig's mouth and he sucked greedily, feeling the echoing throb of his cock. Paul drew away first, and Craig had to steady himself against the bar, grabbing the nearest barstool and perching his arse on it. Trying to look casual

Paul leaned toward him. "I'd forgotten what a good kisser you are, Craig."

He had to shout to be heard over the music, but it still felt like the most romantic line Craig had heard for a while. A long while.

"Thanks!" he yelled back. "You're not so bad yourself."

Paul made a drinking sign with his hands, and Craig nodded, picking up the designer bottle to show he'd have the same. Really, he would have preferred a cider, but doubted they sold it here. And anyway it wouldn't look cool. It didn't take Paul long to attract the barman's attention. Not that Craig was surprised; the bloke serving them could hardly take his eyes off his date. Funny thing was that he didn't think Paul noticed

He reached for his wallet when the beer arrived, but Paul shook his head and paid before Craig could catch what he was up to.

"My treat," he said.

"You didn't have to, but thanks."

Paul frowned for a moment before catching the gist of what he'd said, and Craig took a long swig of the ice-cool liquid. It tasted like horse piss, but that was what he paid for in London. Real beer was one of the things he missed about the farm. Correction. The only thing. He stopped himself before he could think anything further. No point resurrecting the past; that wasn't what he was here for, was it?

He could see Paul was saying something else now, but the music had upped a notch and he couldn't hear him at all. This was ridiculous. On impulse, he put his hand on Paul's knee and leaned forward so his mouth was almost touching his ear.

"Can we go somewhere quieter?" he yelled.

"Sure," Paul mouthed back. "Where?"

"My place," he said.

THEY were back by ten. On the tube journey home, it took all Craig's self-control not to keep on touching his companion. He could tell Paul wasn't the sort to like it. Not in a public place. Or at least in a public place that wasn't a gay bar. He'd let Craig go far enough when they'd met before.

They talked a little on the way. Nothing serious. Just stuff about politics, books they'd read recently, that kind of thing. It gave Craig a buzz to find out they both liked the Bosch novels. The Andrew Taylor books too. The Class A hot smile Paul gave him when they found that out was worth the time it took to get home. Oh yes.

Outside the front door, Craig's hands shook so much that he had to have two or three goes before he managed to unlock it.

"Shared house?" Paul asked, and nodded when Craig told him the answer.

"Yeah. But the girls won't be back yet. Maddy and Julie. Way too early for a Friday. Do you want a drink?"

He switched the kettle on, but they never got to taste the coffee Paul asked for. Halfway through the frantic search for the NESCAFÉ, his date sauntered into the kitchen. Craig could smell the aftershave he wore. Something woody, masculine.

When he turned round, Paul ran one finger across Craig's jaw and he held his breath.

"It's... I was on a photo shoot today," he said. "They didn't want me to shave, and then by the time I got home...."

"It's okay," Paul said. "I like it."

Thank God for that, Craig thought. Could have been a disaster otherwise. But he'd better not forget Gay Rule Number One: At least find out a name and a job before you do the business. In this case, one he knew and the other he didn't.

"Hey," he said. "You know what I do for a living—it was on the card I gave you when we last met—but I don't know much about you. And here we are about to—"

"Have sex?"

He swallowed. "Yeah. Have sex. Again."

Paul laughed. "Okay. If you really want to know, I'm a private investigator. Mainly insurance cases. Some divorce work. And sometimes... other things. It gets me by."

"Really? I thought guys like you only existed in films. Or books."

"Sorry to disappoint, but I'm real enough."

"Good. And I'm not disappointed."

In the bedroom, between seriously hot kisses, Craig undid Paul's shirt and began licking his left nipple into hardness. He gasped and it made Craig smile. But when he got to the right nipple, he noticed that the skin there was scarred—not too long ago by the look of it—so he left it alone. Poor bugger. It must have been painful. He wanted to know how, but knew this wasn't the right time to ask.

"Listen," he said, as he worked his way down to Paul's waist and began undoing his belt. "I... don't... mind either way, honestly. But I prefer... being... the bloke. How about you?"

As Craig looked up at him, Paul gasped again when his fingers brushed against his prick.

"That's... that's good," he whispered. "Because I love being buggered."

He did too.

The first time, it was quick and urgent, as if they'd been storing up the need to do this together during the long weeks since they'd met. The second time... well, the second time, Craig had planned something easier and slower. More how he liked it. But he didn't last as long as he'd hoped he would—Paul must have thought he was barely out of his pram, but Craig just couldn't help it—and even then he had to close his eyes and think of something else before it was too late. Twice.

He was trying to slow himself down *again* when Paul gave a throaty chuckle and twisted around on the bed. The movement almost had Craig finishing there and then.

Paul grabbed his hand. "It's okay, Craig. Come if you want to. It's okay."

And he pushed himself back against him so Craig cried out. As he came, Paul kept hold of his hand and whispered his name again.

"Sorry," Craig said, when he could talk. "I don't always... I mean...."

"Hey there." Paul laughed, but without any hint of cruelty. "It was nice. I'm not complaining. But if you could just...."

He indicated his still-swollen cock and Craig shook himself. What the hell was he thinking anyway?

"Sure," he said. "No problem."

Still blushing—though he hoped Paul couldn't see this—he finished him off, using hands and mouth.

Later, their bodies curled around each other, they slept. And in the morning, Craig lay watching him until he woke up, astonished he hadn't left already.

While his date was blinking himself to consciousness, it struck Craig that Gay Rule—or rather *Question*—Number Two was about to take place: *Would Paul still like him the day after the night before?* Not that it was a specifically *gay* situation; he assumed it was the same for straights too, though he had no way of telling. He didn't want to be prejudiced.

Anyway, he certainly wanted to see Paul again. Sure, the sex hadn't been earth-shattering—more Craig's fault than his—but there was something about him that made him... what was the word? *Fizz*. Yes, Paul made him fizz.

"Hi," Paul said, and Craig smiled down at him.

"Hi"

Mmm. The morning sex was top-notch. Yes, Paul still liked him. Seeing as they were both naked on top of the bedcovers now, he took the opportunity to gaze at him; he hadn't had the time last night. Not properly anyhow. Paul's body was long and compact, dark chest hair leading down to his prick—nice-looking even when limp, as now—and muscular legs. Craig noticed too that a patch of the skin on his belly, just above his cock, was scarred and lighter than the rest. When he glanced up at Paul, he could see those intense green eyes were smiling at him.

"Like what you see?"

"What's not to like?" He ran his fingers over a faint line on Paul's right arm that he'd also only just noticed. "God, did you have a major accident or something?"

"Something like that. Somebody knifed me, but it was a long time ago. I was fine. Same with my stomach, and chest—though that one's taking a while to heal. I got into trouble and was burned."

"Jesus. You're a bit accident-prone, aren't you?"

Paul laughed and kissed him, but didn't say anything more. The subject, Craig realized, was closed. For the moment.

They showered and, at breakfast, he finally found the NESCAFÉ. It was in the cupboard under the sink. Next to a supply of Dr Stuart's teas and a half-eaten packet of muffins. No point in asking himself about the muffins. Those could only be Maddy's. The teas belonged to Julie. He refused Paul's offer of help and his date sat down at the rickety wooden table. While Craig located mugs, Paul cleared a space in front of him between yesterday's unwashed plates and a pile of what looked suspiciously like....

Bloody hell, it was.

Craig tried to snatch away Julie's laundry pile, but it was too late. Paul had already hooked out a suspender belt and was grinning at him.

"I take it these aren't yours?" he said.

"No." He felt himself blush. Again. "They're Julie's. I think. She must have forgotten to put them away."

"That's okay." Paul dropped the belt back onto the table. "It doesn't bother me, though I can't say I've tried it. Cross-dressing, I mean. But you didn't seem the type."

"I'm not."

He made Paul coffee—which he took with a dash of milk, no sugar—and put toast on. All the while, something niggled at his brain. Something he'd forgotten to do. But he couldn't place it. Never mind, he thought. It couldn't have been that important then. Could it?

Finding a bowl, he dropped the toast into it and took it to the table. Then he added margarine and the newest-looking jam and sat down opposite Paul. They are in silence for a while. It felt okay and Craig wondered if he was going to see him again. Or not.

When Paul had finished eating and was licking his fingers clean, Craig leaned back in his chair and asked what he'd been desperate to know since last night.

"So then," he began, in a vain attempt to sound cool, "why leave it so long? A few minutes earlier and you wouldn't have caught me at all."

"I know." Paul moved his mug in front of him, but didn't drink any. Instead, he gazed at Craig, his expression serious. "I know. It's been... nearly two months since we met in October. Things have been difficult. I've rung here four times this week, but I didn't leave a message. I thought I'd try one last time."

Craig shook his head. "So why not ring the mobile? I know you had the number."

"Yes, I did. But it seemed too... personal. I'm not... bloody hell, Craig, but I'm not too good at relationships, you know?"

His last few words were all but hissed out, as if he was trying to say something beyond the sentences themselves, and a shadow passed over his face. Craig took his hand and squeezed it.

"Bloody hell," he said, "but who is? I'm not exactly hot at them myself. But I know I'd like to see you again. If you want to, that is?"

Paul smiled, the darkness disappearing from his expression.

"Yeah, I'd like that," he said.

Craig smiled back at him. Like last night, he couldn't seem to stop. In fact they were still smiling at each other when the door burst open and Maddy appeared, her blonde hair frizzing outward from her head as if someone had just given her an electric shock. She was holding something in her hand.

"Hi, Craig," she yawned. "Post for you."

She dropped it on the table between the two of them. And it was then that everything changed.



SOMETIMES, life could turn on the tiny moments alone. And decisions could be made on an intake of breath. If Craig hadn't come back yesterday evening in time for Paul to ring.... If Paul hadn't rung at all.... If Craig had opened the post before going out to meet him... then everything might have been different.

As it was, that crisp December morning, with the frost framing the kitchen window, Maddy grinned at Paul, winked, and held out her hand.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Maddy Flannigan. And you are...?"

"Paul," he replied. "Paul Maloney. Nice to meet you, Maddy."

"Paul?" She gulped. "*The* Paul? Paul Maloney? We've heard nothing else from Craig for *weeks*. Oh God, sorry, me and my mouth. Forget I said that. Anyway, so good to meet you at last."

Before Paul could make any kind of response, Maddy was out of the kitchen and yelling up the stairs. "Julie! Julie? Wake up! Come down and meet Paul, won't you?"

All chances of looking remotely sophisticated now vanished forever, Craig groaned and put his head in his hands.

"As you can see," he mumbled, "Maddy gets a bit enthusiastic sometimes."

"That's okay," Paul said, but when he looked at him Craig could see he was still blushing. "It's nice to be popular. And, hey, I've been thinking about you too."

Craig raised his eyebrows at that.

"Chancer," he said. "Anyway, you haven't been the only topic of conversation. We have to eat sometimes."

By the time Julie appeared, her short dark hair already neatly brushed, and wearing something floaty from the Monsoon sale, Maddy had already asked all the usual questions. So Craig found out that Paul lived in Hackney, and he'd run his own one-man band investigations firm for six years. And yes, he'd had one serious relationship but that had ended. Really ended for a long time, but absolutely finally about a month ago. Maybe that explained the long lead-in to his phone call. Craig couldn't help but hope though that, before last night, he'd been the one to have sex with Paul most recently. Couldn't count on it though. And no way could he actually ask it. Some things in life were always private. Didn't Craig have enough of his own secrets?

Never mind that. What mattered, of course, was now.

While Maddy paused for breath, Craig glanced at the envelope on the table. The one for him. It looked handwritten. He supposed he should open it. Reaching out, he picked it up, just as Julie came in.

"Hello," she said. "You must be Paul?"

Paul smiled, stood up, and stretched out his hand. "You must be Julie"

Julie took it. The two of them shook hands and looked at each other as if sizing the other person up before deciding how to continue with their day. A second later, she smiled back.

"That's right," she said. "Nice to meet you, Paul."

Phew, Craig thought. Julie likes him. Of the three flatmates, Julie was the most responsible by far. As well as being the only detox and nettle tea drinker. Maddy tended to smile on whoever he brought back to the flat—though recently there had been no one—but Julie was more

cautious. If she didn't like the guy, it would make things so much more difficult in the future. Assuming there was a future, of course.

He opened the letter.

It was only one page. And on it, apart from the address which he knew so well, only a few words:

Dear Craig,

Sorry to trouble you and I'm sorry if this letter comes as a shock, but I do hope you get this. Please forgive me for not writing before—it was difficult. And please call me. Your father's gone missing.

With warmest wishes always,

Andrea

His skin grew hot, and he felt as if he were a hundred miles away. The chair, the table, the cupboards, Maddy, Julie, and even Paul all faded, and he was back in his childhood. As if he'd never left at all.

You have to be taught what is good and upright, and I am the one who will teach you.

"Craig? Craig? Are you okay?"

Maddy's voice brought Craig back to himself, and he was aware of the warmth of fingers on his arm. When he looked down, he could see the one touching him was Paul.

"Craig?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine." He shook off Paul's comfort and stood up, crumpling the letter in his hand. "I just need a glass of water, that's all."

He rested himself against the sink, feeling the cold enamel press against his belly through the thin T-shirt. Running the tap and filling the glass he found on the draining board took an age, but at last he had it. All the time, he was aware of the crackle of paper between his fingers and the strained silence behind him. He was also aware of Paul's presence at his side. He didn't come too close but he didn't back off either.

When Craig replaced the glass, he realized he was shaking.

"Sit down," Paul said. "Is it bad news?"

"Wh-what?" Doing as he was told, Craig sat down and glanced up at him. At the same time, Julie switched the kettle on, and Maddy settled herself in the chair next to him. She was frowning.

"The letter," Paul explained. "Was it something you read?"

"No"

Suddenly it was crucial that no one Craig knew saw what Andrea had written. He stood up, scraping the chair backward, and it fell sideways onto the floor with a clatter. Away from Paul. He caught Julie's startled look, but by then he was at the kitchen door, still clutching the letter. He knew it was stupid, dramatic even, but he had to get out. He needed air.

Still, some last vestige of politeness toward his date made him turn back.

"I-I'm sorry," Craig said, staring at Paul. "I have to go. I just need to... go. Can you see yourself out? Is that okay?"

He nodded. "Sure."

And, with a last impression of Maddy standing up, her hands hovering as if about to conduct something, he was gone.

CROUCH End Hill was its usual mix of Saturday-morning shoppers and groups coming home who'd never gone to sleep at all. Craig avoided eye contact with any of them. He didn't want to be an easy target. His feet carried him in their own direction, as they always did

when he wanted to walk and think. Northward, toward Alexandra Park. Even though he hadn't ever returned to the countryside once he'd left it, something in his blood always directed him back to that misplaced sense of space. Or what passed for space in London.

As he walked, dodging people and situations, his brain clicked shut and he was far away from the noise and pressure of the city. It was funny how he could think that everything was sorted, that he had it all worked out—was even managing to develop some kind of shaky career here where nobody could find him—and then one day something happened and everything turned around again. Changed to what it had been before. Or at least his feelings changed. Did people ever escape the past?

Stopping at the end of a street and leaning against the stone corner of a row of shops, he took out the letter and scanned it again.

Andrea. Craig hadn't seen her in seven years. Hadn't even heard from her. Even though he'd written to her two years ago when he'd first moved into the flat. He'd wanted to let her know where he was, but she'd not replied. In the end he'd realized that was for the best. The past was the past. Better left alone.

Why had his father gone missing though? Was it to do with the Fellowship—the church he went to? They'd always owned the largest part of his life. Or was he coming to find Craig? If so, why? On the other hand, it might be to do with Michael. *No.* Too many questions. He didn't want to visit those times again. He didn't want to....

A sudden tug on his arm snapped Craig out of his thought processes—such as they were—and into reality again.

"Hey, mate, got any spare change?"

Relaxing at once—only a tramp, nothing more sinister—he reached into his pocket and offered a handful of change. "Here. It's nearly all I've got."

The old man took it with a gnarled, filthy hand and breathed whisky fumes into his face. Then, nodding and smiling, he backed away, stroking the coins as if they were jewels. As he disappeared, the sound of the streets came back to Craig. People talking, shouting. The

noise of laughter and the screech of traffic. It felt as if he'd been set free from his own history. For a while.

Honestly, his head was so jazzed he was sounding as if he were up his own arse. And it wasn't even 10 a.m. More than anything, he needed a coffee. A strong one. He had just enough money left for it too.

It didn't take long to find a café. One of the advantages of London. He sat down at a table as far from the other customers as possible and facing away from the window. Taking the first sip, the fiery heat of the liquid exploded through the foam and into his mouth. Stretching backward in his seat, he sighed. At the same time, he was half-aware of the door to the café opening and shutting.

A moment or so's pause and then the chair opposite slid outward. When he looked up, Paul was standing behind it, a frown across his forehead. If Craig had known him better, he would have said he looked concerned.

"Craig," he said quickly. Perhaps before he could object, or walk off. "I'll leave now if you don't want me to be here—and I have to say your friend Maddy advised me against it. She said you liked to be on your own sometimes, to sort things out. But if you want company, I'm happy to stay."

Craig put down his drink, the heat of it still warming him. "How did you know where to find me? Did Maddy tell you?"

"No." Paul shook his head, half-smiling before maybe thinking better of it. "I followed you."

"I didn't hear you...," he began before the truth hit home. "Oh. Of course. It's your job, I suppose. This sort of thing."

"Yes. It's my job. So...?"

Craig shrugged, knowing he should try to be friendly but right now not knowing if he could manage it. "So, stay. If you can bear a miserable date who hasn't the first clue how to treat a bloke who stays over. Obviously."

Paul smiled briefly and sat down.

"Sounds ideal," he said. "So, what's wrong?"

Craig didn't look at him. Instead, he folded the paper away and stuffed it in his jeans pocket. "Are you asking me for professional or personal reasons?"

"Which would you rather?"

"I don't know yet."

"I see," he said. "In that case, it's just a question, and I'm only a friendly stranger to talk to. If you like."

Hesitating for a moment or two, Craig finally looked at him. His expression was calm. Not for the first time, he thought there was something in Paul's face that reminded him of someone else. He just couldn't think who. He looked away.

"It's family," he said, stuttering at first over the words and wondering how much of the truth he was really going to say. "My father. That's all. He's gone missing. He'll turn up, I'm sure. It's one of those things, that's all. Probably something to do with his church. He's very into that stuff. Everything's probably fine. I shouldn't have overreacted, but I wasn't expecting it. Not now."

When he stopped, Paul didn't say anything at first, as if he were waiting for Craig to say more. When this didn't happen, he sighed. And Craig wondered if Paul realized how little of the truth he'd told him. The real truth

"Why not now?" he asked.

"God, I don't know." Craig took his mug and twisted it around in his fingers before putting it to one side. "I suppose because everything seemed to be going okay. Yes, I know it's selfish but I... was doing all right. No problems. And my career—I'm just starting to get a little sniff at some work, maybe even repeat business. Hey, but I wouldn't want things to get boring, would I? I've never wanted an easy life."

He snorted with laughter, but Paul didn't join in. Instead he asked another question, when Craig was hoping to divert him.

"Your father," he said. "He's gone missing before, then?"

Only from his own head and only because he himself left first, Craig thought, but had the sense to realize that wasn't something he could say. Not to anyone, and certainly not to someone he'd just met. And liked. A lot. Nobody wanted to date a freak, did they?

"No, forget it," he said, standing up. "I'm overstating the case. Heck, you'll get used to that if you can bear to stick around. Come on. As you're here, why don't we lighten the mood and go for a walk instead? If you fancy it?"

Craig held out his hand and, after giving him a quizzical glance, Paul took it. They walked out into crisp December sunshine. Once in the street, Paul uncurled his fingers from Craig's—a gesture he'd halfexpected—and smiled.

"Where to then?"

"Ally Pally," he said. "Where else?"

Funny really, Craig thought, seeing as he'd spent so much of his recent life trying to forget where he'd come from, that he should see grass and hills as a kind of a refuge. But it was. Perhaps once a country boy, always a country boy. Not that he ever wanted to live there again. Not after what had happened. But still....

As Paul and he walked along, Craig caught himself hissing between his teeth—a habit he'd had as a child—and stopped it at once, wondering why it had revisited him now, after so long. He'd all but forgotten he used to do it anyway. Strange how it sometimes seemed that so much happened in the course of life—his life—that certain parts of it disappeared from view. Or were hidden where he couldn't access them. Was it like that for everyone? Or just him? There were things... almost-memories—not the one he refused to remember because it would be stupid to try; no not that one—but others... if he could just....

"You okay?"

Paul's question made him jump, but he covered it by laughing. "Hey. Miles away. You know how it is."

"You were—"

"Hissing. Yeah, I know. Bad habit. I won't do it again."

Paul shrugged and touched Craig's hand briefly. "It doesn't bother me."

As they passed through the entrance to the Paddock, Craig stole a quick glance at him and for a moment once again Paul reminded him of somebody else. But he still couldn't quite place who that somebody might be.

They wandered up past the great palace itself, through the car parks and toward the rose garden. Nothing now but bare twigs waiting for the summer. They talked little, but the silence wasn't strained. Hell, Craig thought, he *really* liked Paul. Even in spite of this morning's shock. He hoped to goodness all this hadn't put him off entirely. He was still here though, wasn't he? Gay Rule Number Three: *Don't stress stuff when you don't have to*. Sometimes, he simply had to trust his instincts. In some things anyway.

"The view here is beautiful," Paul said suddenly. "Even in winter"

Craig nodded as Paul sat down on the nearest bench and gestured for him to join him. "Yes. I love it up here. I always end up here when I'm... thinking. It reminds me...."

"Reminds you of ...?"

"Nothing. I just like it. That's all."

That wasn't really true, of course. But he didn't want to tell Paul about home now. So when he asked Craig where he came from, he lied again.

"Oh, I'm a city boy, me. Grew up west London—Harrow way, though I was never one of the posh boys. I've lived here for always. Probably always will. How about you?"

Paul gave a short laugh, but the sound of it didn't ring true. For the first time, Craig wondered how truthful either of them was being.

"I'm from Surrey," he said. "Maybe one of your posh boys, though I left it a long time ago. Only go back now and again these days. To see... friends."

He paused. Craig noticed that neither of them had mentioned family. That suited him fine. As long as he lived, he didn't want to mention family again. At least, that's what he'd told himself right up until this morning. Now things were different. Not that he felt anything

at all toward his father. Hadn't for a long time even at home. Even before he left to come to London. After all, the man was a religious bigot, obsessed with doing the right thing, keeping to the narrow way, following the rules and regulations of the Lord, as filtered through the rules and regulations of the Jerusalem Pentecostal Fellowship, his beloved church. And forcing his son to do the same. He couldn't blame his mother for leaving all those years ago. Though he wished.... Never mind what he wished. It was all too late now. If he never saw either a church or a bible again, it would be a moment too soon for Craig. But still the letter worried him. He knew then that he would have to do something about it.

For a while, Paul and he chatted about work, his latest case—a divorce in North London—and Craig's shoot. Modeling work, when it turned up, was always okay money. Better than the occasional acting iob he did, anyway. He must have been the only person he knew who hadn't been in The Bill. Not that he ever would; he didn't have that kind of look. He was always more the younger brother with a few lines if he was lucky, or the male totty who got dumped before the main man walked in. Probably on a digital channel no one had ever heard of either. Though in one memorable episode of EastEnders, he'd actually been a gay male totty in the street. That had been a laugh.

"So," Craig said, putting his hand on Paul's where it lay on the bench. "Do you really work alone or have you secretly got a sultry assistant back in the office?"

Paul flinched and withdrew his hand, then shook himself and smiled as if to soften the rebuff. "Which do you think, Craig?"

"Alone. Yes, alone. I reckon you're a one-man band, you are." He'd meant to lighten the atmosphere but, as soon as he'd spoken, he thought how much of an idiot he sounded. "Hey, didn't mean that to come out the way it did. I didn't-"

"It's okay." He waved away Craig's apologies. Such as they were. "It's not your fault. The truth is I used to have an assistant, but I don't have one anymore. You're right. I'm on my own."

Craig smiled. "That makes two of us then."

Paul turned to face him. Glancing left and right, and seeing nobody nearby, he took Craig's head in his hands and kissed him. Not a full kiss, but with the promise of something to hope for later. He drew away before Craig did.

"Sorry," he said. "I've enjoyed being with you, but I've got to go. I have business I need to attend to this afternoon. I can't put it off anymore."

"On a Saturday?"

"Yes. On a Saturday. As I say, I work alone, and neither of us are exactly nine-to-five people, are we?"

Craig shook his head. "No, but damn. It would've been nice to—"

"Yeah. It would." Paul sighed. Then he reached out and stroked Craig's face before resting one hand on his shoulder. "It's still bothering you, isn't it?"

"What?"

"You know what. Whatever it was you read this morning. It's bothering you."

Craig turned away. "No. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

A short silence. Paul's face was unreadable. It felt as if any moment now, he might turn and stride away. And not come back. Heart beating fast, Craig grasped his arm.

"Look, what about meeting up sometime next week?" he said, the words tumbling from his mouth in an attempt to keep the other man there. "I mean, I still owe you a drink, don't I?"

For a long moment, Paul didn't reply. Then he took Craig's hand where it still lay on his elbow, and squeezed his fingers once before letting go.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like that. Just as long as there aren't as many half-truths as you've told me here today."



WITH Paul gone, Craig didn't stay long. It was becoming chilly with the breeze getting up. And the thought that Paul had seen through those half-truths of his didn't make him feel any warmer. The letter lay like a stone on his leg. For another moment, he stared across the bleak grass and slopes of Ally Pally, listening to the noise of the traffic, a distant shout and, nearer, the yells of children playing, and then....

Then a flash of summer sun on grass. No, it's spring because the air is cool. A woman laughing. The feel of the wind lifting his hair and

He sprang up from the bench and shook the picture away. He didn't like these reminders of his past life; they never told him much anyway. He'd been born in Devon, growing up there on his father's farm. They'd never got on. For a whole lot of reasons, which over the years had gotten worse. When Craig was seventeen, he'd come to London. Never gone back. The life he was living now was the one he wanted. The woman in the dream had been his mother. Laughing. So it must have been early on in his childhood, a time he couldn't rightly remember. In the time before she finally left, when he was six, he couldn't remember there being much laughter. His father, with his growing obsession with obeying the Lord, had made sure of that.

Honestly, he had to lighten up. He'd just had a great evening with a bloke he'd been desperate to see for weeks, and now—even in spite of the morning's ups and downs—Paul still wanted to see him again. Bloody hell, what could be better? He had to stop dwelling on stuff that really, truly no longer mattered. Father or no father.

He set his face for home, determined to make the most of the day just chilling and dreaming about Paul. Even the thought of him made Craig's blood tingle. He couldn't wait to see him again.

But with every step, he knew that he couldn't ignore the letter. Soon, he would have to ring the woman who sent it.

HE stared around his bedroom. He'd been sitting here for nearly two hours now and he still hadn't made that call. Not that there was much to stare at; he liked to travel light. And the room wasn't that big anyway. In fact it was the smallest in the house—with the exception of the loo, maybe—which made sense as he'd been the last one in after Maddy and Julie. They'd had the final say on him, so he was glad he'd passed the test.

Right now, all he could see was his collection of crime paperbacks, his *Friends* DVDs, and a couple of old T-shirts he hadn't gotten around to washing yet. Not much inspiration there. Or not the right kind of inspiration anyway.

Sighing, he flopped back onto the bed and keyed in the numbers on his mobile. All of them this time.

Then he canceled the call and threw the phone down.

Craig couldn't do it. All that life had been left behind seven years ago. It was impossible to do this now. It was funny how he could live his life the way he thought he wanted to—have fun, try to treat whatever happened as a laugh—but then with one moment everything could change. It could send him back to how it had been, back to what he'd run from.

More than anything right now, he longed for Paul, the need like a shaft of fire through his gut. But it was impossible to explain his life to

a man he'd only just gotten together with. How could he when he couldn't make sense of it himself?

Screw it. He should just bloody well ring. His father had vanished, hadn't he? Andrea was worried. It was up to him to do something then. Besides, he needed to keep track of his enemy, get to his father before his father got to him. Wasn't that what the bible said? Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Christ, where had that come from? He needed to get a grip. Stop being quite so dramatic.

He pressed redial and waited for the rings to start.

It took four rings for her to answer, and Craig found he was shaking.

"Hello, Andrea Trowbridge speaking."

"Mrs Trowbridge," he said, mind buzzing at hearing again the deep Devon accent of his father's elderly neighbor. An accent he'd worked so hard to lose. "Andrea... it's Daniel here. Daniel Clutton. Well, Craig Robertson now, I suppose. As you know."

The sound of his birth name felt strange on his tongue. As if it wasn't really him at all. Not anymore. She didn't ask anything about why he'd left and why he hadn't come back. Thank goodness. And Craig found he couldn't bring himself to say the words they both knew he wanted to. Even though that was the whole reason for his call. So, stupidly, they talked about the farm, the latest exploits of the villagers he used to know, and whether or not the Neighborhood Watch was worth it. She even fell into the role of the almost-aunt she'd once been and asked him about London. And his life. He told her about the one or two acting jobs he'd had and the recent modeling assignments. She laughed when she heard that, the warm burr of the sound making Craig smile too.

He didn't tell her about the men or about himself—at least not in that way. It was only when the conversation had slowed and he was beginning, even against his better judgment, to relax that she caught him off-guard.

"So then, you got my note," she said.

He closed his eyes and swallowed. "Yes."

"I didn't know what to do for the best," she said, the words tumbling into his ear as if in a bid to escape. "I'm sorry it was so short, but I couldn't decide what to say. Not after so long. I'm sorry too that I haven't contacted you before, especially after your letter. Things were difficult then and I wasn't really sure what to write. And then... but never mind that. Your father's never disappeared before, Daniel—I mean Craig. At least not like this, and he's always come back. I do understand how awkward things got between the two of you—I'm sorry you went away, you know. And that you never got to do your A Levels. You were always such a bright boy, it seems such a shame. I'm glad you're doing all right though—I knew you would. Sensible head on you, that's what I always said. But your father—this time he's been gone for longer. I've called the police, but they don't seem able to do much. And I didn't want to just leave it... so I thought of you. I've probably assumed to far, but...."

At last she took a breath, a long one as if she might be about to cry, and Craig knew he had to say something to stop her.

"It's okay, Andrea," he said, though he had no real idea if it was or not. "You've done the right thing. It's fine."

She began to cry in earnest then.

When he finally ended the call, he'd agreed to go to see her—something inside him couldn't say the words "go home"—on the following Monday. Two days' time. But what the hell was he going to do when he got there?

"IF it wasn't for work," Maddy said, "I'd come with you. You know that. We both would."

Craig grimaced at her and took a swig of beer. "Thanks. That's kind of you but you really don't want to get involved. Trust me on that one. You're better off in the office."

All three of them—Craig, Maddy, and Julie—were sitting in the kitchen just chilling. Their normal Sunday-night routine, even though only two of them could justify it by having normal jobs. Maddy worked

in the Advice Service at the University of Westminster and Julie in PR at the British Museum. A part of him envied their regularity of employment, though he knew he'd be hopeless at either job. Mind you, he always enjoyed the office stories they brought back, though Maddy swore blind he had an unfair share of the glamour. He wished. Right now she was on the red wine, Julie on the white, and he was sticking, as usual, to the London Pride. He thought that suited him now. In more ways than one.

"Are you sure?" Maddy put down her glass and frowned at him. "If you really feel you need us, one of us can pull a sickie, can't we, Julie? Or in the uni it might even come under compassionate leave? After all, your father's gone missing. It's family stuff."

"Well, I-," he began, but Julie-in typical fashion-got to the heart of things first.

"No," she said, causing Maddy to almost spit out her wine. Almost, but not quite. Still speaking, Julie softened her words by refilling Maddy's glass. "No, we won't. At least not unless Craig asks either of us directly, rather than being forced into acceptance by social politeness. Honestly, Maddy, you're way too much sometimes. Let the poor bloke think for himself."

Craig smiled to himself. Julie always said what she thought and what you least expected. She never went along with the crowd. Maybe that's what made her so good at PR. She made you think about things.

Maddy gave a rueful shrug. "Yeah, you're probably right, Jules, but what man has ever managed to think for himself, gay or otherwise? Anyway, it's a great chance of getting firsthand knowledge about Craig's secret past. Who could resist it?"

Craig snorted. "Nothing secretive about me. You know everything there is to know several times over, believe me."

Even to him, the lies seemed obvious. Maddy only laughed, but Julie pursed her lips and reached into the drawer for the Chinese menus.

"Before anyone makes any decisions about anything," she said, "we ought to eat. Do you want something different or the usual?"

They went for the usual. Even Julie had a combination she'd had before. For Craig, there was something about Sunday nights that made familiarity the best option. This Sunday night more than any of them—after all, didn't he have the strange journey "home" to face tomorrow? No, not home. It hadn't been home for a while. His home was... where? He no longer knew. He wasn't even sure he had one. No, this Sunday night he clung to anything that was normal with the strength of a small child clinging to a favorite toy.

So he had the seaweed, and the sweet and sour pork. Maddy went for prawn toasties and the lemon chicken, and Julie for the spring rolls and the Peking duck. They shared the special fried rice.

They were happy-drunk by eleven. Or rather Maddy was; she could never take her alcohol well, so he and Julie had to help her to bed at 11:30. Based on past experience, she'd be no worse for wear in the morning. The world of student advice would still be safe. For a while yet.

As Craig headed for his room, Julie tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned to face her, she was frowning.

"Look," she said. "I know you and Maddy think I can sometimes be the bitch queen of Crouch End, but if you wanted someone who won't take any crap to come with you tomorrow, I'm happy to be that person. Work can cope without me for once."

In the gloom of the landing light, Craig smiled. Without her, he was convinced the museum would fall apart. If anyone was destined for greatness and the Women's Institute circuit, it was surely Julie. Even though her offer had touched him, he shook his head.

"Thank you," he said. "That's kind of you, but I think I need to do this alone. And, really, you're no bitch queen."

She removed her hand, still resting on his shoulder, and stepped away. "Thanks, but to my mind going back is always scary. And I should know—it's something I do as little as possible. But if you want to keep things distant from the people you live with, why don't you take Paul? He might come in useful. Investigations are his job after all."

For a moment, Craig almost laughed. What she said seemed ridiculous. He'd only just met the bloke. Properly. Why put him off even more than he already had by taking him on some wild goose chase to where he'd grown up?

But, a moment later, the idea didn't seem quite so crazy after all.



HE rang Paul first thing that morning, skulking in the corner of his room with the mobile jammed to his ear, hoping the girls wouldn't wake up. Paul took two rings to answer. He sounded sleepy.

"Morning, Craig." He stifled a yawn. "It's early, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Eight-thirty a.m." He couldn't help it. In spite of the fact he might be about to piss Paul off again and break Gay Rule Number Four: *Don't upset a new boyfriend for at least the first three weeks, if you make it that far,* he couldn't stop the smile spreading over his face. Again. "But you said I could ring."

"Suppose that means it's my fault, eh? I should have specified a time frame. Funny, I'm usually good at that. You must have got me at a weak moment."

"You in bed?" He hadn't meant to say that. But the thought made him feel warm all over. Hard too. Not only that, but it took his mind off what he needed to ask.

"Yes," Paul replied after a moment's hesitation. Then, "You?"

"Yes. I mean no. Well, I'm in my bedroom, but I had a shower earlier. Got dressed."

"You have the advantage over me then," Paul whispered, his voice a low, enticing hum.

"You mean you're not...?"

"Dressed? No Not at all"

"Hell, Paul, but I don't think I can—"

"Do this?" Unexpectedly, he laughed. "No, me neither. I'd rather see you, though it might be fun this way too, I have to admit."

"Yeah. It might be."

They were silent together for a few seconds before Craig remembered what it was he'd rung for.

"Paul, can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure. Go ahead"

He took a deep breath. "I need to go back to Devon-where I really come from—to sort something out. And yes, I know that's not where I told you I came from, but... but I didn't know how. I'm sorry about that. Anyway, it's because of the letter I got yesterday. I wondered if you might like a trip out to the country. Get away from the city. I don't think the... business will take long and afterward we can... you know... just chill. Or something."

When he finally trailed off his so-called hard sell, even he didn't believe it. He closed his eyes. Paul said nothing.

"Okay," Craig continued after the silence had bled into his conscience. "That's the partial truth only. Again. Yes, it would be nice to have your company. But the real truth is that I'm feeling shaken about it, and I don't want to go alone. And I don't want to take Maddy or Julie, though they've both offered to come. They assume stuff about my background and I don't know if I'm prepared to be that open with them at the moment. But you, well, I like you. You don't assume anything. I don't think you'll judge me. Please, Paul, will you come with me?"

This time, when he finished, Craig found he was shaking, and he ran one hand through his hair, waiting for the obvious refusal. He'd just made a complete fool of himself, hadn't he? Paul was bound to say no.

He didn't even hesitate.

"Of course I'll come with you, Craig," he said. "I knew you weren't a London boy. It's obvious from your accent. I'll be happy to see Devon. When are you planning to go?"

"What? Oh, thanks. That's great. Thank you." Craig stumbled over his words as he slumped back against the wall. "Thank you. Yes, when? Um, actually, I was hoping you might be okay with today."

"Today?" Paul started to laugh. "Bloody hell, but you don't hang around, do you? I'd better get dressed then. Have you got transport, or do you want picking up too?"

"No, that's fine. Really. I'll drive. It's the least I can do."

He arranged to pick Paul up in an hour. That would leave plenty of time to get there by early afternoon and sort things out. Who knows, his father might even have turned up by then. Craig didn't care, just as long as he didn't have to meet him. That would be beyond impossible.

He was five minutes late. Not bad for him, he thought, but when Paul opened the door of his flat, he was frowning.

"Thought you wanted an early start," he said.

"I did," he replied. "I am early."

Then Craig kicked the door shut and kissed him. When they finally came up for air, the frown had gone and instead a half-smile played across Paul's face.

"Maybe you and I have a different timescale," he said. "In which case, do you want a coffee?"

Craig shook his head. "No thanks. But a pee would be nice."

On his way to the bathroom, he took the opportunity to have a quick look around. Gay Rule Number Five: Always check out where your boyfriend lives; it will give you a good idea whether he's a psycho or not. He came to the conclusion Paul wasn't. Probably not, anyway. The place seemed, at least from the hallway and bathroom, simply furnished, but neat and clean. The hall table had nothing on it but an old cigarette packet. And the bathroom cabinet, which Craig briefly opened before blushing and closing it again, was as tidy as if it had

only just been stocked. It made him smile to think of the mess he kept his own surroundings in, compared to the precision Paul brought to his. Not that he could really judge, not having been invited into the living room yet, of course.

He wondered how it would be if they ever... then shook the thought away. If he started thinking like that, they'd be finished before they'd even begun. He was probably breaking all the Gay Rules there'd ever been anyway.

When he came out of the bathroom, Paul was waiting in the hallway. He was clutching a bottle of water. He held it out toward Craig like an offering.

"Thought we might need this and—"

"And assumed I hadn't got any," he said with a shrug. "You'd be right about that. Thanks."

"I wasn't going to say that, but yeah."

In his clapped-out old Fiesta, Craig shoved the pile of crisp packets and old receipts off the passenger seat and into the back and watched as Paul sat down. Gingerly.

As he reached for the ignition, Paul put his hand on his arm.

"Look," he said. "I don't mean to be rude, but are you sure we're going to make it in this?"

"It's not too bad. It gets me most places."

"A four-hour trip to Devon?"

"Okay," Craig conceded. "I've not driven that far for a lifetime, but I'm sure it will be fine."

"I'm sure it will too. But what do you say to going in my car instead? It's bigger and more comfortable, I think. I just had it serviced last week too, so we won't have to worry."

"What about the driving? And anyway it's mean as I asked you, so you shouldn't have to put yourself out for me. No, really, I'll do it. I'11—"

Paul placed his fingers on Craig's lips for a second and the touch silenced him at once.

"What if I want to do it?" he said. "What if I want to put myself out for you, Craig? What do you say then?"

He swallowed and found himself gazing into Paul's eyes. He had no idea what to say, couldn't understand how this bloke could suddenly turn so intense, but yet Craig didn't feel like running. Normally, he liked to keep things light. He'd learned it was best that way. How he'd learned it.

"Sorry," Paul said, echoing Craig's thoughts. "Am I coming on too strong? I've been told in the past that's the case. I—"

This time it was Craig who interrupted him. By means of a kiss.

"Don't worry," he said. "I like it. In a weird kind of way. And the answer is yes. Thank you. We can take your car, but only if you let me pay for petrol and buy lunch. Deal?"

Paul smiled. "Deal."

Paul's car was a gray Vauxhall Estate. Not too new, not too old. Craig saw a few old newspapers scattered over the backseat, but the front was tidy enough. Comfortable too. The only odd feature was the tinted windows. Not too obvious so people would notice at a casual glance, but seeing in would be tricky.

"Is this the car you use for...?"

"For surveillance, yes. It's my only car, in fact. So it does everything. Including the shopping, the odd trip out, and occasional visits to Devon."

"Oh." Craig grinned, the sudden encounter with Paul's professional life jolting him into a sense of unreality.

"Yes, I know," Paul said as he turned the ignition and eased into first gear. "It's not your usual job. But it's the only thing I know, and I suppose I'd find your work strange too. How did you get into modeling and acting anyway? And...?"

"Have you seen me in anything recently? Apart from that EastEnders walk-on I told you about? No, not much. I'm strictly small-

time, but it gets me by. I get some stage work during the summer season too. Here and there. But as I said it's the modeling that really pays the bills. Even though it has the most waiting around. It's weird."

"You do better than me then," Paul said as London's houses and people began to flow past the car window. "My type of waiting around sometimes ends in nothing at all. Which irritates the hell out of me, I have to say. At least you get something for your trouble."

They were silent for a while after that, as Paul negotiated the traffic jams out of town onto an easier road. He switched the radio on and, to Craig's surprise, the distinctive tones and half-cut adverts of Classic FM filled the car. He only knew this because Maddy always had it on during Sundays; she said it reminded her of home. He laughed.

"What?" said Paul. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just that I didn't expect you to be a classical music lover. Not after our first meeting. You know, in the club, and... everything. You didn't strike me as the type."

Paul gave a wry grimace. "I don't know. I like all different types of music, I think. But no, it's not my favorite. It's just that my best friend used to love it. And when I hear it, I think of her."

It happened again at that moment. Paul's slight intake of breath, and the sense that he might have thought he'd said too much. Something he didn't want to tell Craig. Something it hurt him to remember

Reaching out, Craig put his hand gently on Paul's leg. In turn Paul laid his fingers on top of Craig's for a heartbeat or two before letting go again.

Craig kept his hand there until they hit the motorway. And he thought one day he would ask Paul about the pauses he lived in, if they lasted that long. Then he slept.

They ate lunch on the A303, at a small café by the side of the road. Paul had leek and parsley soup and a roll, washed down with J2O. Craig stuck to a cheese and lettuce sandwich and a Coke. He thought he might need the energy. At the table, they sat opposite, not talking much, but occasionally glancing at each other when they thought the other one might not be looking. At least that was what Craig was doing; he couldn't answer for Paul. Though God only knew why they were flirting now, when they'd already done more than enough of the sex stage. Every now and then, he'd look at Paul and want him. Right there, over the Formica table. Clothes off and no holds barred. Didn't care who might be looking and what they might think. Didn't care about his own exhaustion, or Paul's, and what he might have to face later today. He just wanted to *give* it to him, and in a way Paul wouldn't forget for a while. Maybe not ever. Hell, but he'd got it bad and so bloody soon too. He should really....

"Are you going to eat that sandwich, Craig, or just wave it at me?"

He gulped and dropped the bread he'd been clutching back onto the plate. His blush was already rising. Neither was it the only thing rising, and he crossed his legs as subtly as possible to try to calm down.

"Y-yeah," he stammered. "Miles away. I'll hurry up. You'll be wanting to make a quick getaway. Get this over with."

Paul smiled. A slow-burn smile that had Craig heating up all over again. "Actually, I've got all the time in the world. Nothing to get back for. Not in a hurry anyway."

Something about his expression told Craig he knew what he'd been thinking. Mind you, he supposed the lust in his eyes might as well have been a bloody beacon telling the whole world what he'd been thinking. If they'd chosen to look. He'd best be careful; down here, that kind of thing was likely to get him tarred and feathered or thrown in a ditch and left for dead. Devon wasn't exactly a gay clubber's paradise. Not that he'd ever been much into that scene. Or not as much as some.

Cool it, Craig, he thought. Gay Rule Number Six: Don't chase away the totty before you've at least had dinner with it.

"Come on," he said, tearing his eyes from Paul. "We'd best make a move."

They arrived in his home village—old home village—at about 3 p.m. The last few miles had been the hardest. He'd stared out of the window of Paul's Vauxhall, the classical music a low murmur to the wilder mix in his thoughts, and watched the hills become more rolling,

the grass richer and all-encompassing. Sometimes, he swore it, the countryside could be a web for those who didn't expect it. Only in the city had he been truly free. What would happen now?

As Paul responded to the last of his directions, heading left up the hill to Andrea Trowbridge's house, the ache in Craig's stomach shaped itself into a fist and struck out.

"Stop the car," he panted, scrabbling for the door handle. "Stop it. "

Paul slammed on the brakes, skidding to a halt into the roadside gravel. The black Smart car that had been trailing them since Exeter hooted twice and veered around, sailing off like a wasp in search of a picnic.

Pushing open the car door, Craig slid around, sat half in and half out of the seat, bent over and took several deep breaths. He thought he might be sick. He wasn't. The smells of winter grass and trees and the nearby river filled the car. After a while, he became aware of Paul's hand on his right shoulder. Lightly. As if poised to hold him back, should he suddenly decide to run, but giving him enough freedom to make that choice for himself. It felt as if his fingers had lain there for some time, but Craig hadn't noticed before.

"You okay?" Paul asked at last.

"Yeah. I thought.... Heck, I don't know what I thought. Whatever, I didn't know it would feel like this."

"Going back home is always difficult," Paul said. And then, "If you like, we can drive back to London. I don't mind."

"No." With a sigh, Craig twisted around to be inside the car again, though he left the door open, drinking in the air while he could. "No. I've come this far. Going back now would be stupid. I don't want you to think I'm taking the piss. At least, not any more than I already bloody have."

"I don't think that," Paul said, shortly, but with his hand still resting on Craig's shoulder like a promise. "Believe me, I've known worse."

Craig smiled at him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Anyway, in all this, don't you think you've forgotten the one important fact?"

"What's that then?"

"You're not going back home entirely alone. You're going back with me. I don't know you very well—not vet anyway—but I hope it'll make a difference "

It did. Andrea's house was set back from the road. Craig got Paul to take the long way around the village outskirts to it so they didn't have to drive past where he used to live. He and his father. Paul didn't seem to notice anything. Or didn't remark on it anyway. At last they parked in Andrea's driveway behind an old Metro. It didn't look familiar, but of course in the seven years since he'd been here everything would have moved on.

The house they were looking at was more a cottage than a house, though plainer than the tourist trade preferred. A simple two up, two down in Devon stone, with a slated roof. It had once been part of his father's farm but he'd sold the land on to Andrea's husband when Craig was still at primary school. The Trowbridges had both taken early retirement. They'd moved in during the summer but, from memory, Mr. Trowbridge had died a year or two later and then she'd stayed on. Thinking about it, Andrea must be nearly into her seventies by now.

"It's nice," Paul said. "Is this your old home?"

"No," Craig said, realizing from the question how little he'd explained on the journey down and wondering why Paul hadn't asked. "This is my neighbor. My old neighbor, I mean. Andrea Trowbridge. She was the one who sent me the letter "

By the time he'd got out of the car into the afternoon sunshine, they'd already been spotted.

A short, slight, gray-haired woman dressed in green appeared at the cottage door and gave a cry of what he took to be joy. She ran the four or five paces over the gravel and enveloped Craig in her arms. He could smell lemon and cooking on her skin.

"Daniel!" she exclaimed. "It's lovely to see you again."



DAMN. Of course, his old name. Paul wouldn't know that he'd changed it. But when Craig looked at him over the top of Andrea's head, only a slight flicker across his companion's expression gave away any confusion.

The woman he'd come to see let him go and stretched out her hand to Paul. "And you must be...?"

"Paul." Craig's boyfriend jolted himself into action as if he'd been a long way away. "Paul Maloney. A friend of... Daniel's. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Trowbridge."

"Please, call me Andrea," Craig's old neighbor said with a smile. "No one stands on ceremony here."

As Andrea led the way indoors, still talking, Craig mouthed "sorry" at Paul, but got no response. Great, he thought. Just great. He was really messing things up now. Before he'd even ruddy begun.

Inside the living room, the two men shed their jackets and sat down on the pale blue sofa, while Andrea sat opposite and poured tea. The cups and saucers were already laid out on the coffee table, together with a plate of chocolate digestives and Garibaldis. Craig gazed around the room, aware more than anything of Paul's proximity on the sofa,

but trying to work out when he'd last been here. The only items he recognized were the bookshelves from floor to ceiling—although the ceiling wasn't that high anyway—and the framed photographs of Andrea's son

He frowned, and then the name came to him. "John. It's John, isn't it? Is he still living in...?"

"Australia? Yes. I'm afraid so, though at least I get to go over there for a long break at Christmas, which is lovely. He's got two children, you know. I'm a grandmother now."

"Congratulations," he said. "I'm pleased for you. Apart from the books, I think John was the only thing I recognized."

Andrea nodded. "Yes, I've redecorated. Twice. And I'm afraid also that John is the reason I didn't respond to your letter. There were... family problems and I was in Australia when you wrote."

"I'm sorry," Craig began to say, but Andrea shook her head.

"It's all right," she said. "Things are sorted now. They're fine. Marriages seem to be under so much pressure these days, but they're fine. As far as I know. Anyway, when I got back, I read your letter. It was lovely to hear from you and I'd intended to reply, but your father.... Well, your father discovered it and took it away."

"Oh," Craig said, aware now more than ever of Paul's still frame next to him. "Didn't you ask for it back? I sent it to you, not him."

"Yes, of course," she replied. "But you remember what your father is like. He got upset, said you were his son, his business, not mine. He wouldn't even give me your address when I asked him. I thought then he might have contacted you, but I assume he didn't, or you didn't reply?"

"No." Craig found he was digging his nails into the palms of his hands and sat back, folding his arms instead. "No, he didn't get in touch. And I'm not sure what I would have done if he had, to be honest. We didn't part on the best of terms. But now... well, he's gone missing. What happened, Andrea?"

The air around her seemed to pause, as if waiting for her answer. From nowhere, Craig felt Paul's fingers touch his arm.

"I don't know," she said. "Not for sure. But I haven't really seen him for two weeks. So I let myself in with the spare key. I worried that he might have done something foolish but, after I'd searched, the only thing I found that was different was your letter. On the kitchen table. After all that time, he still had it. I'm afraid he'd torn it up, but the address was readable. Just. He's never been gone this long before. One or two days, and a few times as long as a week, usually with that church of his on one of their retreats, but he's always come back. This time I don't know where he might be. And the police can't find him either. Anyway, I don't think they're interested. Not if a crime hasn't been committed. And of course there's no reason to think there has. Why should there be?"

"You said you were worried? Was there anything in Mr. Robertson's behavior before he left that was particularly unusual?"

Paul's question made Craig jump, and Andrea blinked at him for a few moments

"Mr. Robertson?" she said, with a frown.

"Um, m-my father," Craig muttered, unfolding his arms and staring down at the patterned carpet. "Paul means my father. Hismy—surname is Clutton, Paul."

"Of course!" Andrea's frown disappeared. "I should have remembered. After all, I did use your new name when I wrote to you."

Paul removed his fingers from Craig's shirt sleeve and coughed. "I see. In that case, did you think Mr. Clutton was behaving strangely before he vanished?"

"The police asked me the same question but it came to nothing." All I could tell them was that two of the church elders had come to the farm a day or so before he left. They'd quarreled with your father. I heard shouting, but I couldn't make out what they were saying and I didn't like to interfere. Not with things to do with his religion. He was so involved in it. After that he'd been quiet. But then again, James was often quiet. Preoccupied."

"Preoccupied?" Paul said, leaning forward. "With what, exactly?"

This time, Andrea smiled. "Apart from his faith, you mean? Well, the usual things that preoccupy people who live in this area, Paul, and

who make their living from the land. How the farming year has gone, whether the machinery Craig's father used could be updated without going any further into the red, if the tourist trade might be better next year. And so on and so on. I was never a farmer's wife myself, but if you live here for long enough, you soon pick up on the concerns people have. It's a question of survival, you see."

"I see," said Paul, slowly. And then, unexpectedly, he smiled. "Well, I don't see. Not really. I know nothing about farmers. But thank you for trying to explain it to me. I probably have a lot to learn. I'm afraid you might have to be patient."

Andrea nodded. As if something Craig hadn't heard had passed between them and she was satisfied with it.

"Good," she said, and turned to him. "Now, do you still have the key to your house, Craig? Or will you need me to let you in?"

WITH Andrea's spare key in his hand, he and Paul stood outside his old home. Andrea herself had turned down the chance to keep them company, and Craig wondered if she was being tactful about his return to where he used to live. He wouldn't have minded. The memories such as they were—he held of that time weren't precious. At least not as far as his father was concerned. His mother... best not to think of that though. He had to keep his wits about him.

Now it was funny how small everything looked. Even just from the outside. In Craig's head over the years, the dimensions of where he'd been brought up, where in the end he'd run from, had taken on almost mythic proportions. Now all he could see was a simple white exterior, black wooden windows scattered higgledy-piggedly across the frontage, and a not very well-kept roof. Some of the tiles were missing. He shook his head. Had his father let things go or had he been planning to mend them over Christmas? After all, they were only a couple of weeks or so away from the big event. Not that it meant that much to him. Not anymore. And it never would again.

Next to him. Paul hunkered down. He reached out and scrabbled for a second near the larger of the two rocks framing the threshold.

"What is it?" Craig asked.

Paul stood up, stretched out his hand, palm open, toward Craig. Something he was holding glittered in the last faint rays of the winter sun.

"Glass?" he said.

Paul nodded. "Broken too. Just a few fragments. I caught them in the corner of my eye."

Craig shrugged. "My father probably dropped something. Didn't have time to clear it up."

Paul didn't reply. So Craig smiled his bravest, most carefree smile at him to show he wasn't fazed by any of these events—that in fact going back to a home he'd run from and a life he'd abandoned several years ago was something he did every week, if not every day—and unlocked the door

The hall smelled musty, as if someone had left a long time ago and never been back. It didn't feel as if there'd been anyone living here only recently. The moment he stepped inside, parts of his childhood came racing back. As if they'd been waiting for him for seven years.

His first day at school. The smell of burning stubble on the land. How frightened he was of next door's Labrador. And how cross that had made his father. Let mankind rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. How he'd always hated Labradors ever since. Then the long bus ride to secondary school. Playing football on the school pitch. How he'd pined over one of the boys in the class above him for months. What was his name? Oh yes, Gary. Gary Weston.

All these images came spinning through. Like so many jigsaw pieces Craig couldn't ever fit together or whose picture he couldn't begin to imagine. Over as soon as he'd thought it.

"Welcome to where I grew up," he said to Paul, waving him in.

The first thing he saw was the sheer number of crosses, interspersed with religious texts, nailed to the walls on each side of the hallway. There were far more of them than he'd expected; he was sure

there hadn't been quite so many when he left. What had happened to his father over the years? Surely he couldn't have got any more obsessive about his faith? Paul stopped and blinked, his gaze drifting across the scene.

"He's certainly a religious man, your father," he said.

"Yes." Craig's heart was beating fast. This was a topic he didn't much want to discuss, and he was glad when his boyfriend's next comment took them elsewhere.

"And you don't think of it as *home*?"

"No. I don't."

"I can understand that Mine isn't either"

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other. Then, unsure what to do with the gift Paul seemed to be offering him, Craig took a deep breath.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go and *search for clues*. My father can't be far away. It's just a matter of working out where he is. And then getting out."

He led the way down the hall, past the crosses, trying not to look at them, and to the left. Best to get the worst over soonest. So, first stop: his father's office. Somewhere he'd tried his hardest to keep out of when he was living here. It had always been his father's private domain. He and his mother had stayed in the living room. They were happier there. Now he could see layers of dust on the desk, along with more religious artifacts, two bibles, a prayer book, some old buff files, and scattered paperwork.

Paul gestured at the files. "May I?"

"Go ahead. You're the professional. If you find out he's been fiddling his taxes and done a runner, let me know how much and let's... spend it."

Damn it. He'd been going to say *let's book a holiday*, but had had the sense to stop just in time. Gay Rule Number Seven: *Don't discuss holidays until at least after the first row; you'll both need one then.* 

Luckily, Paul didn't seem to notice. He simply raised one eyebrow, sat down and began flicking through the papers. While he did so, Craig ran his hand along the bookshelves, finding more dust and the same old books and magazines there had always been: Farmers' Weekly, the newest editions still in their wrapping; Agatha Christie paperbacks; a set of Rudyard Kipling novels. Some of them, he thought, were handed down from his grandfather. And, of course, row upon row of religious books and tracts. Again, memories pecked at his head

"Your father isn't a great lover of admin, is he?" Paul's voice startled him and Craig almost knocked over a small photograph frame resting at the end of the shelf. When he picked it up, it showed his parents in front of the house.

"No. No, I suppose he isn't. But, to be honest, I never had much to do with the running of the farm. He gave up on me as son and heir in that respect a long time ago. Though I wasn't bad with the machinery."

Paul grinned. "Bet you looked cute in your overalls under a tractor."

"More than cute. Stunning. If you stick around long enough, you might be lucky and find out."

Thinking he might have gone too far, Craig blushed, but Paul just laughed. "Can't wait. But in the meantime, tell me more about the farm. I'd thought it would be cows, sheep, that kind of thing, but it's not, is it?"

"Not on the whole. We did have a herd of cows when I was very young—on the land farther east of here. I can remember helping a cow to calf once or twice, though I don't think my father would have classed it as 'helping.' But it wasn't worth it. Not in the end. The land round here, round the house, is purely crops. Wheat; barley; rapeseed of course. That kind of thing. Oh, and there's one apple orchard. Put down to Cox's Orange Pippin and Russets, if you're interested."

"Russets? An acquired taste, aren't they?"

"Yeah. Can't stand them myself, but I remember my mother used to love them."

"Used to?"

"Yes. She left us. I was very young. I don't remember much about it. She probably got fed up of church three times a week and twice-daily prayers or something. Though of course she was religious too. That's where she met my father."

Feeling the splinters of the past once more in his blood, Craig turned away. There was silence for a few moments before Paul spoke.

"I don't think there's anything too drastic in these accounts," he said, his voice gentle. "But I'll need to have a thorough look through them to be sure. It's easy to miss something at first glance. I could do it now if you like, but it'll take a little time."

Craig hesitated. He didn't know how much he wanted Paul to be here giving expert advice or here as support. Finally he nodded.

"Would you be okay with that?"

"Sure. Why don't we have a quick look round the rest of the house first, see if there's obviously anything out of place? I'm sure the police have already covered all the bases but there's no harm in checking. Then you can give me a hand with the accounts if you like. Or do you feel happier with searching the house more thoroughly?"

"Searching?"

"Yes." Paul looked up at him and his expression was serious. "That is what we're doing here, Craig, isn't it? Looking for something, though neither of us is sure what it is?"

"Yes. No. I... I suppose so. I hadn't thought of it like that."

Paul continued to gaze at him for another moment or two before getting up. When he reached him, he ran his fingers down Craig's face before resting them on his shoulder. Craig could feel the edges of the shelf behind digging into his back.

"I can see this isn't easy for you," Paul whispered. "I know I'm acting like an idiot. If you like, I can stop doing a job and simply be vour friend instead."

As he spoke Paul planted small kisses on his throat and neck and Craig could sense the heat rising between them. Even here.

"You are my friend," he said after a while. "And I'm more than grateful for what you're trying to do, Paul. You're right though. Much as I want to... you're right. We should have a look round the house, see if we can find out what my father's been up to."

Holding hands, they walked out of the office. Craig decided the living room would be a sensible place to start. Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door and entered.

It was the same as it had always been. Except for the musty smell, as if it hadn't been used for a while, and one missing item, which he noticed at once. Not surprising, as it was the first place he'd looked after all. A habit which seven years away hadn't destroyed. Feeling his muscles tense up, Craig let go of Paul's hand and made a slow spin around the room. Everything looked the same. Of course it did. Why should he have thought it would be any different? His father had never been the redecorating kind. Not like Andrea. His attentions were fixed on the farm, his livelihood. But, most of all, on God. Anything beyond that had always been second best.

Here, now, he could see what he'd always seen: light orange-andblue-patterned carpet, plain beige walls. A blue fabric sofa, two matching chairs. Somehow it seemed smaller. Was that what being away could do? Next to the small wooden cross and unlit candle, a scattering of local papers covered the coffee table and Craig picked one up, leafing through it. Same old news as there'd always been then. Nothing ever happened in Devon.

Paul wandered round the room, looking at the pictures. Not that there were that many of them. Just a couple of religious scenes on the wall opposite the window—one featuring St. Paul and one St. Andrew—and near the television an aerial view of the farm. Nothing here then. No great clues as to where the hell his father was and no goodbye notes either. Not that he'd expected any. Just as he was about to move on, Paul grunted and leaned over, behind one of the chairs.

"What is it?" Craig asked.

"I'm not sure. I.... Got it." With a frown, he straightened up, holding something slim and curled in his fingers. "It's a photograph. Of you, I think? It's...."

He trailed off and something in his voice made Craig reach out and snatch the photograph from his hand. Staring down at it, he felt the muscles in his stomach clench. It was a picture of him when he was about twelve or thirteen, his blond hair brushed carefully back and his school uniform on. Nothing strange about that, except for the red pen marks which had been slashed and scribbled across his face.

Without thinking, he glanced toward the mantelpiece. Paul caught the movement at once.

"Is that where it used to be?" he asked, taking two or three strides until he reached the empty space above the sealed-in fireplace. "Your photograph?"

Craig nodded. "Yes. It used to be in a frame though. I don't know where that's gone."

"Glass?"

"Yes"

"Hmm. Might be part of the fragments we found on the doorstep then. Though it's hard to be sure."

He swallowed and just stared at Paul. He stared back.

At last, Craig spoke. "I suppose we ought to continue our search then. See what else we can find."

Which was what they did. Of course the kitchen and bathroom held no surprises, though he noticed that the old chair that used to lurk in the corner of the kitchen had disappeared. The one he'd always used. He wondered how long it had been after he'd left before his father had ditched it, and then shook the thought away. He had to stop thinking about his father as the devil incarnate. Sometimes it had seemed like it, however, especially when he had been filled with the Spirit and determined to make Craig see sense about some religious point or other. That side of him had definitely worsened in Craig's teenage years. The chair had needed to go; there was nothing more to it than that. Probably.

"Nothing odd here?" Paul asked.

"No. Let's go upstairs."

The stairs from the living room took them onto the landing that again seemed smaller than Craig remembered it. The first room on the right was his old room. When he switched on the light, he took a sharp intake of breath

"Bloody hell."

"What is it? What's wrong?" Paul pushed past him and stared around the room as if poised to fend off any attacker he might find there. If he'd been feeling more normal—or if today had been a normal day at all so far-Craig might even have laughed, but he couldn't summon the will for it.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing's wrong. It's just that...."

"What?"

"It looks just how it did when I left it. I think. Nothing's changed."

It was true. His A-level notes were still spread out across the end of his unmade bed, his old trainers abandoned next to the window, with a couple of old school shirts hanging over the chair.

"God," he said. "He didn't even bother to come in after I'd gone. The *bastard* didn't even...."

"Hey." Paul touched him on the shoulder and the touch turned into a hug. "Hey there. It's okay."

Craig hugged him back once before letting go and running his hand through his spiked-up hair. "Yeah, I know. I'm being stupid, but I thought he'd at least... you know...."

"Tidy up after you?"

"No." He laughed this time. "He never did that, thank God. But I thought he might at least come in and see where his only son had got to. I didn't exactly leave on good terms."

Paul smiled. "Yes, so you said. But just because he didn't change your room doesn't necessarily mean he didn't come in, Craig."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Are you being the voice of reason here?"

"I don't have the credentials for that. Not when it comes to family," he said and then bent down and picked up a couple of sheets of paper from the bed. "These your notes then?"

Craig nodded, filing the sudden change of subject for pondering on later. "Yeah. History, I think. One of my A levels."

"Good for you. What else did you do?"

"French and Art. Never took them though. I'd left before then. Come on. Let's look at the rest of the rooms and then if you want to go through my father's accounts, I can look at the loft. You never know what the old bugger might have stored up there after all."

Thinking that Paul wasn't the only expert in changing the subject, Craig led the way out of his old room and away from his old memories.

The spare room and his father's room held no surprises. He barely gave them a glance, in fact, although Paul took more time, picking up a couple of photos—of Craig's mother—before briefly checking through the religious books and opening the drawers. Craig didn't stop him; there didn't seem much point. His brain was thrumming with the fact of his unchanged bedroom. Had his father ever gone in at all? Why ever not? Was it because of...? No. No need to go there. That part of his life was over. It wouldn't come again. All he had to do now was make a quick search of the house, if only for appearances' sake, then leave. If his father came back, all well and good. For him. And if he didn't... well, Craig would have to go to the police and say he was still missing and that would be that. Either way, he never wanted to see him again.

Finally, in the landing, he paused. His head was beginning to ache and his feet were itching to leave. It was dark outside and he could hear the rain on the roof.

"Craig?"

"Hmm?" He opened his eyes. He hadn't realized he'd closed them. Paul was standing in front of him, green eyes looking dark with the landing light behind. God, Craig thought, he's beautiful. He felt so bloody lucky and he could only hope it would last.

"I can have a closer look at those accounts now. And you were going to check the loft...?"

Craig nodded and gripped Paul's shoulder, feeling the warmth of him through his shirt. Wanting him. Even then.

"Yes," he said. "That's probably best. I have trouble understanding the accounts my agent makes me look at, let alone anything else. Though I doubt there's that much up there. My father was never one for keeping things."

Paul smiled, touched his check for a moment, and then padded downstairs.

It was in the loft that Craig found what he didn't even know he'd been looking for. Hidden away in a corner, in a Sainsbury's carrier bag. A light green jacket, faded and old, and a man's watch. Engraved on the back with: To Michael, with my love always, Peter.

It was only then that the defenses he'd so carefully built up for seven long years collapsed at last.



"I'LL put the kettle on," were Andrea's first words when she saw them.

"No." Paul shook his head as he eased Craig into the nearest chair. "Have you got anything stronger?"

"Brandy?"

"Yes. That'll be good. We can have tea afterwards. If that's okay?"

"Of course."

A shadow crossed in front of Craig and he heard the sound of his former neighbor's drinks cabinet being opened. He took a deep breath, tried to stop the shaking, but found it was impossible.

A few seconds later, something cold bumped against his lower lip. A glass. He would have reached upward to hold it but his hands were still clutching the jacket and watch he'd taken from his father's attic. He didn't honestly know how he'd got down from there at all.

"Drink this," Paul said, hunkered down in front of him. "Just a few sips. Okay, Craig? Then sit back if you can. You're doing fine."

Fire filled his mouth and burnt its way down his throat to his stomach. He coughed. Took another sip. Felt better. Obeying Paul's instruction, he leaned back, still clutching his meager trophies.

"More?" Paul asked

Aware of Andrea's figure hovering in the background and not wanting her to be more concerned than she probably already was, Craig shook his head. "No, thanks. That's fine."

"Do you want me to take those things for you, dear?"

"No, no, it's okay, please." He hugged the jacket and watch to his chest as Andrea leaned over him. "Th-thanks, but I'm okay."

"All right. As you wish. I'll go and put the kettle on now then."

"Thank you," Paul said. "That would be lovely. I'll have mine with a dash of milk only. And Craig's will be...?"

He swallowed. "Milk, please. More than a dash. But no sugar. Thanks."

"Oh yes," Andrea said. "I remember."

The sound of the door opening and shutting, and then Paul and Craig were alone.

He blinked at Paul. He was hoping he wouldn't need to say how sorry he was about what had happened. When he'd stumbled, shaking and crying, down from the loft and to his father's office and Paul had come out to see what was happening, Craig had shouted and cursed at him when he'd tried to help. He hadn't been thinking straight. Not sure he was now either. Still Paul wasn't a mind-reader and, so far, this was turning out not to be the best date in the world.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean—"

"That's okay," Paul cut him off, waving away the words. "You were in shock. Forget it. Are... are those your father's?"

Craig looked down at what he was holding.

"No," he said. "They're not. And he shouldn't have had them at all."

"Why not?"

That would be hard to explain and Craig didn't see how on earth he'd even be able to try. He wasn't sure he understood it himself. And what he suspected was beyond the telling. He thought about lying but realized Paul might see through it. After all, he had before.

"I don't think I can talk about this right now," he said, looking Paul in the eyes for the first time since they'd stumbled back into Andrea's house. "I know that makes me sound like a bad American soap star, but it's the truth."

"Fair enough." Paul's lips twitched but he didn't smile. "Nothing wrong with bad American soap stars."

He looked like he might be about to say more, but at that moment the door opened and Andrea came back in, carrying enough tea—and cake—for the whole Roman army, should they have decided to visit. Craig almost smiled to himself; typical Andrea to counteract every problem with the offering of food, though who was to say that wasn't right? Not him, for sure. And he must be recovering from this faster than he'd expected even to be thinking in that way. Good. He would need to have his senses in full working order when he tried to work it out. But not yet. His mind couldn't cope with this yet.

They drank tea and ate cake. Craig didn't say much, but listened as the other two talked about the weather and as Paul fielded polite questions about his job with equally polite answers. All the time, Craig hugged the green jacket to his chest and kept glancing down at the watch.

Michael had told Craig once about Peter, hadn't he? Though he'd never said the name. He'd said it was over, but there'd been no time for questions then, had there? No time at all.

"Craig?"

"What?"

"Your tea." Andrea leaned over from her position opposite and set his cup to rights, her eyes questioning, concerned. "You were about to spill it."

"Oh, thanks. Actually, I think I've had enough anyway. And perhaps it's time we went." He glanced outside. "It's dark. I don't think we can do much more now and I don't want to impose on you further.

I'm sorry I haven't been much help. I'm sure... I'm sure my father will turn up. In his own good time."

"I hope so. But it was lovely to see you again. Both of you, of course "

Paul nodded his thanks as another thought occurred to Craig. "Paul, I can drive back if you like. If you're okay with that?"

"I don't mind...," his boyfriend began to say, but Andrea cut in across him

"I should have said before, but you're very welcome to stay. It's such a long drive back to London and, as you've said, it's already dark. Craig, you can't possibly drive all that way; you've had a shock. And Paul won't want to be doing the return journey tonight, will he? Why don't you both stay here and drive back tomorrow? It will be no trouble at all "

Craig was about to protest and say that he really had to get back and traveling wasn't a problem when he realized that none of that was true. His hands were still shaking slightly and he could barely keep his eyes open. And on the practical side, he didn't have any assignments tomorrow. He could just as easily stay here as drive home.

"Thank you," he said slowly. "Thank you. I think... Paul, how do you feel? Do you mind staying tonight? Or have you got stuff you need to get back for?"

He shook his head. "No. Nothing pressing 'til the end of the week. Just paperwork. It's very kind of you, Mrs.... Andrea. But are you sure about...? I mean, we—I—can just as easily find a B&B, I'm sure"

Craig's former neighbor raised both eyebrows at him and gave a wry smile. "I do have more than one spare room, Paul. But I must admit I was assuming you'd just need the one. I know we may be buried in the depths of the country here, but we're not entirely cut off from modern life, you know."

Paul reddened.

"Sorry, Andrea," he said. "I'm too shut off in the city. I stand corrected "

One room it was. The two of them helped Andrea make up the bed and Craig opened the window to let the sharp night air come in. While they were hunting for pillows, he folded Michael's jacket and placed it and the watch on the side of the bed nearest the window. Away from the door.

Afterward, he helped Andrea cook pasta while Paul made some kind of stew. He looked at ease in the kitchen and Craig found himself admiring the way he seemed to know which herbs to ask for and how much to add. Craig was never confident about serious cooking.

At one stage, Paul caught him looking and smiled. "Don't be fooled. Most of the time, I rely on meals for one. This is actually the only thing I know how to do. I copied this from... a friend."

And then that closed expression came over his face again and Craig knew the moment was lost.

Before they ate, he rang Maddy. She seemed pleased to hear from him, but preoccupied with a bloke she'd met at the university pre-Christmas party. Good for her then. She was glad he was staying the night too, but he got the impression she thought he was actually in his own home. He didn't bother to explain. He was simply glad Andrea hadn't suggested that. It would have been entirely beyond him.

Strange though to be sleeping in the same bed as Paul in someone else's house. Almost as if they were a real couple, rather than a couple of chancers who happened to fancy each other like crazy and had just started to shag for real. Still, he'd come down here with Craig, hadn't he? Even though they'd only just been together for two minutes. That had to count for something. Hell, he hoped it did.

Craig didn't remember much about the meal, how it tasted or what they talked about. The whole evening felt as if time had stopped from the moment he caught sight of that jacket in the loft and he was simply waiting for it to begin again. Waiting to know what to do. And how to feel. He hoped Andrea didn't think he was rude. He hoped he acted as an old friend and good company that night, but he wasn't convinced.

When the meal was over, he and Paul made Andrea sit down in the living room and brought her coffee. Then they washed up. She didn't have a dishwasher, but it felt good to be doing something simple. Something real. While Craig washed, Paul stood next to him, the warmth of his body brushing against Craig's, and dried. They tried their best to put everything away in the right place, but he wasn't sure it was completely as his old neighbor would have it.

After Paul had folded his dish towel over the radiator rail, he kissed Craig. A slow kiss. Not passionate, but with something like affection in it. He tasted of wine and spices. It made Craig want to cry. Paul stroked his throat and kissed him again.

"Bed," he whispered.

"God, that sounds good," Craig murmured into his shoulder. "But it's only—"

"Ten-thirty. Yes, I know. But people always go to sleep early in the country, don't they? Isn't it to do with all that fresh air?"

Sleep wasn't what Craig had been thinking of, but he didn't argue. By the time another half-hour had gone by, all three of them were on their way to bed. Maybe there was something in what Paul had said, after all. That would, he supposed, explain the lack of nightclubs in darkest Devon

They let Andrea use the bathroom first. She didn't take long. Then Craig sat and stared out of the window while Paul took the towels and spare toothbrush that Andrea had left out for them.

"You okay sharing this with me?" he asked.

"Sure. I don't have any communicable diseases."

He smiled. "Me neither. Actually, I was asking the question the other way round, but thanks anyway."

While he was in the bathroom, it struck Craig that all the tiredness of earlier had gone. It was as if he'd woken up again but in a time and space where the new day wasn't yet here. He hoped Paul felt the same.

Because, for Craig, it felt as if tonight they'd both left their real lives behind. The ups and downs of the day they'd just had was history and tomorrow was way beyond imagining. Tonight was, he hoped, just for them. And so it proved. Because when he came back from the bathroom, Paul was already lying on top of the bed, naked.

Craig shut the door, turned the key in the lock, and stripped off in front of him. Taking it slow. Watching how Paul's cock stiffened and grew as he gazed at him. Watching how he made no move to hide himself. He wasn't the only one either. Craig was so hard by the time he got down to his underpants that he had trouble getting them off. When Craig slid onto the bed next to him, Paul reached for the condoms but Craig stopped him.

"Not yet," he whispered. "We won't be needing them for a while "

He kissed a slow journey down from Paul's mouth, over his throat and Adam's apple, along the line of his shoulders and across his chest. Craig used his lips and tongue, sometimes nibbling with his teeth in places where Paul wasn't scarred or where it wouldn't hurt him. All the while Paul panted, gasping and, once, letting out a soft cry that he cut off almost as soon as it started.

"Hush," Craig murmured. "Try to be quiet. We don't want to wake Andrea."

Paul nodded, and Craig could see his boyfriend's sweat and his own saliva glistening on his body. He eased his tongue down Paul's belly, remembering as he did so the last man he'd been with here in Devon. Michael. Michael. Funny how that memory didn't seem to matter as much tonight. Funny too how Craig had only allowed it back into his mind today.

Trying not to think too much, he ran his tongue around Paul's belly button and then buried his mouth into the wiry depths and darkness of his pubic hair. Paul gasped again, and Craig could feel the urgency of his cock rubbing against his face.

"Please," Paul whispered, raising himself from the bed. "Please...."

"Soon," Craig murmured. "When I'm ready. And only then."

Then he took Paul's cock into his mouth. After a while, Craig eased him sideways, laying down so Paul could take his swollen cock into his mouth too. Which he did eagerly and with a groan of pleasure. Craig almost lost it then, but managed somehow to hold on to his spunk. For at least a little longer.

Finally, the salty punch of him filled Craig's mouth, just as he came in Paul's. When neither of them had anything left to swallow, for the moment, they lay trembling and sweating, hot and dirty, next to each other. Paul was whispering words of thanks, words of love, and Craig smiled to hear them.

They continued to lie there for a while, staring up at the beams on the ceiling. Without warning, Craig started to laugh and then stifled the sound at once before Andrea could hear it.

"What is it?" Paul whispered, his breath warm now against Craig's face. "Go on; share the joke."

"It's nothing," he whispered back. "It's just that I've never felt so at ease with someone so soon as I do with you. God, Paul, but you're so hot."

Another snort of laughter escaped him, and Paul started to laugh as well, the two of them pressing their hands to their mouths and holding each other.

A sudden sound from along the landing stopped their fit. A door clicked open and footfalls creaked on wood. Another door opened.

"It's okay," Craig mouthed. "She's just using the bathroom again. That's all."

They waited, gazing at each other, the sweat still shining on their skin. At last the toilet was flushed and Andrea safely installed in her room once more.

"She must have seen our light on," Paul said. "Under the door."

Craig shook his head. "Maybe not. Her eyesight was never that good. And she's older now."

After a while he began to make love to Paul again. This time, he needed a condom and made Paul lie on his back, legs raised, so Craig could see his eyes when he entered him. He loved the way that pleasure and wanting chased themselves over Paul's face, the way he pressed himself up against Craig until he was deeper inside Paul than he'd been in any man, and the way he gasped when Craig rubbed his cock to greater hardness. Most of all though, he loved the look Paul wore when he came: as if a door had been opened and he might see everything the

other man was if he chose to. Craig spread the spunk over his own chest and a moment later he came too.

A while after that, just before he fell asleep, Paul murmured his name once. As if committing it to memory. "Craig."

Their lovemaking had been explosive. Honest too, in a way he'd never known. The kind of feeling Craig had never experienced before—or only once—and which he knew he wanted again. With him. He knew also that soon he'd have to tell Paul the truth.

But before that he needed to be again in the place where he'd last seen Michael.



IT was still dark by the time Craig got there, and twice he'd stumbled on the walk up to the woods from the farm. He'd left Paul sleeping. Thinking about waking him, telling him where he was going, Craig hadn't known what to say. So he'd said nothing at all. Now it was cold and he wished he'd remembered his sweater. It was December after all. He should have known better.

Rubbing his arms against his body to try to keep out the icy air, he came to the edge of the wood and turned to gaze over the valley. Nothing to look at of course. Not yet. But if it had been the full light of day, he would have seen patchwork farmland spreading as far as the eye could see, a scattering of cows in the distance perhaps, and the rolling hills all the way to Exeter. Before that, of course, the neighboring cornfields and the river. As a boy, he'd always found peace here, in the times when things grew bad or when his father, with all his religious demands, became impossible to be with. Sometimes Craig imagined he might have been here with his mother, which was perhaps the reason why he loved the place so much, but of course he couldn't be sure of that. She'd left them so long ago. And she'd never come back.

He shook his head to clear his mind of that bad memory and found his fists were clenched together. She hadn't come back because of his father, he told himself. Somehow he'd made it impossible for her. All his church ideals—they were enough to drive anyone away. It was nothing to do with Craig. Anyway, he shouldn't be thinking of this now. He was really here to think about Michael. This was where they'd been together.

Craig's first time. It seemed like centuries ago, but also as if any moment now he'd hear the soft rustle of footsteps on dried wood, turn, and he'd be there, he'd....

"Craig?"

The voice, though not much more than a whisper, caught him by surprise. "Jesus. Who on earth...? Paul. Paul, is that you?"

"Yes. I didn't mean to startle you." A dark shadow rose up from the darkness already around Craig and steadied itself into the shape of a man. A man he knew from the present, not from the past. "I heard you get up."

"You followed me?" His voice sounded more accusing than he'd meant it to but Paul didn't answer. Not directly.

"I thought you might need this." As he spoke, Craig felt something warm and soft pushed against his chest. The sweater he'd left behind. "It was easy enough to track you, but I won't stay. Not if you don't want me to."

Craig was silent for a moment. Then he made his decision. "No. Stay. I'd like you to. And thanks for the sweater."

"You're welcome. Couldn't you sleep?"

"No. Not that. I just wanted to... see this place again."

He put on the sweater and leaned back against the gnarled oak. Its rough wood rubbed against his body. Paul moved to stand next to him.

"Bad memories or good?" he asked.

Honestly, it was so hard to tell sometimes. His memories were rarely so easy to label.

"Both, I think," he said slowly and then stopped.

Paul took hold of his hand. His fingers felt warm.

"Tell me," he said. "I've had enough of men who tell me nothing about their lives. I don't want it to be like that with you, Craig. Or would you rather I called you Daniel?"

"No, please. Craig is who I am now. Daniel is what I left behind. Please believe me. I didn't mean to start off with a lie. When I left here, everything changed."

"Then tell me," Paul said again.

"Craig is my middle name," he said, shutting his eyes but still holding Paul's hand. "And Robertson was my mother's maiden name. When I left home, I changed it."

Paul made a small sound, somewhere between a groan and a laugh.

"I see," he said. "Funny, but you're not the first man I've known to have told me that."

"You mean your ex?" Craig asked. He might even have been angling for a change of subject, but Paul wouldn't allow it. Not for the first time, he wondered at the balance between them—the way Paul seemed to be in charge out of bed, whereas he was in charge in it.

"Yes," Paul said. "My ex. But that's not important now. Tell me why you left home. Why you changed your name."

Craig allowed his back to slide down the rough bark of the tree until he was sitting. Paul followed suit. Then Craig told him what he wanted to know.

DANIEL watched the man for four evenings. At 6 p.m., he always left the cottage, walked to the top of the hill and sat down. Sometimes he stared out across the fields toward the river. At other times he cried. Daniel didn't want him to know he was watching. The man wouldn't be happy if he knew he was here. He might tell his dad and then there would be trouble. Spying was a sin.

Daniel shouldn't have been watching him but he couldn't help it.

He was an ordinary bloke. Medium height, medium build, brown hair, brown eyes. Quiet-looking. Even when he was booking the cottage from Dad that first day, he didn't say much. He'd turned up on the off-chance, he said, wanting somewhere to take stock for a couple of weeks. Dad made no comment. Brought him into the kitchen where Daniel was lounging half-asleep in his old chair, and made up the paperwork. He was glad to take the money, he said, and the bloke smiled.

That's when Daniel noticed him first. As a person, rather than yet another holiday-maker. When the man smiled, his face softened, as if an inner light had been switched on from somewhere. Daniel couldn't help it; he smiled in response, and the man glanced over at him, brown eyes widening for an instant.

"Hello," he said. "I didn't see you there."

Daniel shrugged, feeling the swift familiar burning of his face. He got his reddish-blond hair and pale skin from his mother. "Hi."

The sound of his voice made Dad stop counting for a moment. "What? Oh yes, my son Daniel. This is Mr....?"

"Harris. Michael Harris," the stranger said, but kept his eyes on Daniel. "Pleased to meet you, Daniel."

He mumbled something in return, and a couple of seconds later the business was done. As Dad led the way out of the kitchen, jingling the cottage keys in his hands, Daniel heard him say, "Sorry about that, Mr. Harris. My son's very shy. The teenage years, you know? They're a difficult age...."

He didn't hear Mr Harris's reply.

The next day, Daniel worked outside, in the allotment and near the outhouses, though he didn't get much done. He wanted to be within sight of the cottage. Mr. Harris went out twice in the car, the first time for groceries, but the second time he was gone for two hours. When he returned, the tires were caked with mud and grass. Maybe he'd been sightseeing at one of the nearby working farm museums. There were a lot of those in Devon. He smiled at Daniel when he got out, but Daniel looked away, skin prickling, and by the time he looked back Mr. Harris had already gone inside.

At 6 p.m., when he was trying to mend the steering on Dad's tractor, Mr. Harris walked out of the cottage, stood for a moment on the threshold with the warm evening sun lightening his hair, and took the path around the side, toward the hill.

A minute ticked by. Then, leaving the toolbox next to the tractor to make it look as if he'd just gone for a moment, Daniel followed him. It seemed the right thing to do. Mr. Harris walked through the trees, over the stile, and up the hill. The air smelled of leaves on the turn, the end of summer. At the top, he sat down and Daniel waited behind him, secretly, in the wood and watched. This was the first time he saw Mr. Harris cry. When he returned the way he'd come, Daniel hid and waited ten minutes before going home. His heart was beating fast. That night his father, wrapped up in a special time of prayer and fasting, said nothing about his lateness—maybe he didn't even notice it—and so for the next three evenings he did the same.

Now it was the fourth time and Mr. Harris was crying again. Daniel could see the shake in his shoulders. Behind, unseen, he crouched against a tree, trembling. He didn't know what to do. Suddenly, from nowhere, a flock of swallows rose, swooping and dancing against an orange sky, and then he knew.

Getting to his feet, Daniel walked across grass and moss toward him, away from the wood and out into the open. Each step felt as if it were miles. Mr. Harris must have heard him but still he didn't move. When Daniel reached him, he said nothing, but sat down, one arm brushing the top of Mr. Harris's shoulder.

Mr. Harris wiped his eyes.

"You know, I thought you'd never show yourself," he said. Then he touched Daniel.

Later, Daniel lay next to him. Mr. Harris's—Michael's—arm was underneath his shoulders and he could feel the warmth of breath on his cheek. Above them, the sky was darkening and he could smell rain in the air, though it hadn't vet fallen. From somewhere in the bracken and trees, there was a small animal rustling, maybe a fox or a badger. Even though he was full of words he wouldn't be able to say, he was enjoying the silence between the two of them.

It was Michael who spoke first.

"Will it be all right with your father? He won't suspect?"

"No," Daniel shook his head, feeling the rub of Michael's arm against his hair. "He'll think I'm off in the fields somewhere, or out on the bike. Not that he'll worry anyway. He's too wrapped up in God and stuff to worry at the moment. Anyway, nothing different happens around here."

"Indeed."

They kissed for a while. Michael tasted musky, like the earth. It was nice. Not the sudden rush of crimson, which happened before and which made Daniel want to look at him, *touch* him. No, it was gentler now. A soft shade of brown, like his eyes.

They left when it was almost dark, making their separate ways home.

All the next day, Daniel was smiling. Even Dad noticed. Over a lunch of cold meats and pickle washed down with tap water, he coughed and when Daniel looked at him he was frowning.

"Something up with you?"

"No, sir." He shrugged. "Should it be?"

His frown deepened. "Remember to show respect, Daniel. It's the Lord's command that a boy respect his father. Don't ever forget that."

"No. I won't." Daniel thought he would never be allowed to forget it. He also knew that if he didn't come up with some kind of reason for his happiness, his father might be inclined to dig deeper. He couldn't allow that. "I... I've been reading my bible more recently. The Book of James. It's... good."

After a tense few seconds, his father sat back, his frown gone. He closed his eyes and began to mutter under his breath in tongues. Daniel swallowed and tried to ignore the gabbling. He knew enough not to say anything though, to wait until his father was finished. When he had, he opened his eyes again and gave his son a rare and brief smile.

"That's good to hear," he said. "The Lord is at work in your life, Daniel. You must allow Him to have his way. Perhaps we can pray together later. I've work to do now, but I'll see you this evening. We can talk then "

When he was gone, closing the kitchen door carefully behind him, Daniel stared at the congealing food, and tried not to think about God. Instead, he thought of Michael.

For the next five evenings, they met at the hill and spent an hour, maybe two, together. It was always good and always different. The fifth time it rained on them, a summer squall, and they laughed and used their clothes to wipe grass smears from their skin. Sheltering in the trees, arms wrapped around each other, they watched a rabbit running for cover.

"How old are you, Michael?" Daniel asked when the rain eased.

"Does it matter?"

"No. I want to know, that's all."

He smiled. "I'm thirty-one. I live and work in London. I'm an insurance consultant, a job I dislike, and I have never owned a pet. Of any kind. I enjoy opera. And you're—"

"Seventeen"

"Yes, I know. I asked your father yesterday."

"About me?"

"Yes"

Michael said nothing else, but his answer made Daniel shiver. Still he continued. "Okay. I'm seventeen. I live in Devon. I'm taking A levels in History, French, and Art, but I don't know what I want to do. My mother left us when I was six and I've never seen an opera. I like walking, and... and you. Michael, why were you crying before, here on the hill?"

For an answer, he drew Daniel close and kissed him.

"Daniel," he said, as if tasting the name. Then he looked away, into the trees, and Daniel waited. He didn't know what else to do.

After a while, Michael spoke again.

"Someone hurt me," he said. "Someone I'd been with for a long time. Someone I loved. I needed to get away, stop the darkness inside. So I came here for a holiday. I came here, and I met you."

Daniel's throat was dry and his eyes burning. "And what do you feel now?"

"Different." He smiled at him. "Happier."

"Then there's no need to cry. Please." He shook Michael's arm and forced him to look at him. "Please, don't leave at the end of this week. We can be together, can't we? *Somehow*?"

"Daniel, I—"

"Daniel?"

When he swung around, eyes blinking back tears, he already knew who it was. His father stood, framed by leaves, his face in shadow

After that there was a quarrel. So much anger. He'd tried to reason with his father, but it had done no good. His father had slammed him back against the tree. In return Daniel had lashed out and there'd been a fight. He thought Michael might have tried to stop them, but he couldn't remember properly. Didn't want to. He must have been knocked out.

When he woke in his own bed the next day, chest and face bruised, and stumbled to the front door, brushing his father aside as if he were air, the cottage was empty and the car gone. The following week Daniel left home. He never went back

And he never saw Michael Harris again.

WHEN, in the here and now, Craig stopped talking, his childhood seemed to be all around him. Hidden in the trees and in the mist covering the valley. He wished he could see the river but it was still too dark

Paul coughed. "Did you try to ring Michael at all? Or see him? After you left, I mean. That is, if you went to London first after you left here."

"Yeah. I went to London. I didn't know how to find him. I had no number or anything. Anyway, I thought... well, I thought my father must have scared him off or he'd had second thoughts about me or something. Either way, he wouldn't want to see a boy from the sticks again, would he? I was just a holiday fling. He probably thought I was too young, and I suppose he'd be right." He took a small branch from where they were sitting and stabbed it into the earth around him a few times before dropping it.

"Maybe. Though age isn't the be-all and end-all when it comes to relationships, you know." Paul gave a short laugh. "Though I shouldn't be the one to say that."

Craig caught his frown, even in the still-dim light. "Why not?"

Paul swallowed and folded his arms, as if holding in memories. Or words.

"Tell me," Craig pursued, glad of the change in focus away from his own past. "Bloody hell, Paul, I can't be the only one spilling my guts this morning. It's your turn. Officially. Go on."

"Okay," he said, rewarding Craig with a brief smile. "Okay, but it's difficult."

"Hev. So what isn't?"

Paul took a deep breath, stared straight ahead, swallowed again and then finally spoke. "When I was nineteen, I had an affair—a few weeks only-with someone who was fifteen. His name was David. He lived next door and I thought I loved him. I didn't. I was just very lonely. It was stupid and very wrong."

He stopped abruptly, as if what he'd said had surprised him so much that he didn't know what else to say.

Craig reached out, touched his leg. He kept his hand there. "What happened?"

"Nothing much. And everything, I suppose. We were found out, of course. David and his family moved, and my father was the angriest I'd ever seen him. I dropped out of uni and never went back. Even now I sometimes wonder how David is doing, hope he's okay. *God*, but I suppose we all have unfinished business."

Craig let the silence hang between them for a while before speaking. He found it wasn't uncomfortable.

"True," he said at last. "The past can be pretty scary. Thank God we're here now. There is one thing though."

"Which is?"

"I wish I'd been David. Lucky bastard." Then he kissed Paul.

They are breakfast at Andrea's. Afterward, while they were cleaning up, Paul surprised him again.

"Can I make a suggestion?" he said, the question aimed at them both.

"Please do," Andrea replied as Craig simply nodded.

"You said, Andrea, that Mr. Clutton quarreled with his church before he vanished. The police will have already questioned them, of course, but, as I always say, there's never any harm in going over the same ground. Would either of you mind if I asked them a few questions as well? On an informal basis. Sometimes you can get more out of people if you don't have any official status. What do you think?"



CRAIG'S instinctive answer was yes. Even though it meant facing the Fellowship again. Andrea was more uncertain, not wanting Paul to put himself out or for the neighbors to be disturbed.

"It's okay," Paul reassured her. "I can be subtle. It's my job. Besides, as Craig is down here already, trying to find out where his father is, then it's the most natural thing in the world to ask them."

She could do nothing but agree with that. Ten minutes later, Paul and Craig were in Paul's car heading to a farm on the other side of the village. Andrea thought that Reggie Birt, the church leader, was more than likely to be at home or in one of the outlying fields. Craig noticed that Paul hadn't suggested they ring first. Perhaps he was hoping for the element of surprise.

In the car it was Paul who spoke first.

"Tell me about this church then," he said. "What's so different about it?"

Craig took a breath. And the memories came rushing back. The Jerusalem Pentecostal Fellowship had been a major part of his childhood and teenage years. It was where his mother and father had met, although, looking back, he realized his mother's commitment to it

had waned before she'd left them. Part of the reason for her going, he supposed. Still, without the Fellowship, he wouldn't have been born, would he? They were a small, charismatic church based only in this part of Devon. The founder had been Reggie Birt's father, but of course Craig couldn't remember him. Reggie himself must be in his seventies by now. What Craig could remember were the three-times-a-week prayer meetings, the two-hours long—at least—services on Sundays, all of these in a house that had been converted for the purpose. As a boy, he'd grown to hate the hard wooden chairs made to fit the grownups, the rambling prayers, the chorus-singing, the speaking in tongues, the interminable bible readings and, worse of all, the talks from Reggie Birt. When he was twelve, his father had asked him to start baptism classes, but for the first time in his life he'd refused and kept on refusing. In spite of being prayed over in meetings, in spite of the lash of his father's tongue, and hand. In spite of long conversations, or rather monologues, with Reggie and all the guilt for sin he'd been made to feel. Andrea had helped him during all this; he wouldn't forget that. Ever. She'd said, even to his father's face, that Craig's—or Daniel as he was then—choice should be respected and they should let him be. He'd been glad to have someone to talk to who wasn't part of the whole church structure. If he hadn't had that, he might have given in to them in the end. And finally, after what seemed like months, they had let him alone. Not just let him alone either. They had cast him out of the church, asked him officially to leave them, and they'd never spoken with him again. If he saw any of the Fellowship in the street or at the shops or even, once, at school, they'd simply turn their backs on him and walk away. If they said anything at all, they quoted Matthew Chapter 18 at him: If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault.... If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Even now he could remember the words. They'd obeyed them too. His own father had only begun speaking to him again after two more months. And that barely. Almost too much for a young boy to cope with, and he was surprised he'd survived at all. Now Craig wondered how much his rebellion had affected his father's relationship with the Fellowship. At home, things had certainly never been the same afterward. Telling Paul this, as briefly as he could, he wondered too if any outsider could ever really understand what it had been like.

As they turned into Reggie Birt's farmhouse driveway, Paul glanced at him, frowning. "God, that must have been pretty bloody. I used to know... a Baptist but I've never come across a fundamentalist sect. And tongues too. What's that sort of church called again?"

"Charismatic," Craig replied. "Never something I did though. It always terrified me."

"I'm not surprised." As he put the handbrake on, Paul leaned over and squeezed Craig's hand. "Come on then; let's see if the charismatic fundamentalist Mr Birt is in "

The thick-set young man with the receding hairline who opened the front door wasn't anyone Craig recognized. Neither was he someone who used words much. When Paul asked for Mr. Birt, the only answer was a shake of the head. When Craig followed this up by asking if he knew where he was, the young man nodded and only then did he speak.

"He's on the West Field," he said with a Devon accent almost impossible to understand. "Where I just come from. Mending fences."

Craig didn't need to ask where that was and a few moments later they were on their way. "It might be muddy," he said. "We should have brought boots."

Paul shrugged. "Never mind. We'll have to manage."

Not only was the West Field muddy, but it was bitterly cold too. The wind from the north roared through and by the time they reached Reggie Birt's distant figure, Craig was shivering inside his jacket.

As they approached, Reggie Birt straightened up. He hadn't changed much in the years since Craig had last seen him. He was a tall, gaunt man with gray hair and gnarled hands. This morning, he was wearing dirty overalls and mud-encrusted boots. Around his neck hung a large wooden cross. It was the cleanest thing on him.

Reggie shaded his eyes with his hands and blinked at them. Like the farm laborer in his home, he said nothing, and it was up to Paul to break the impasse. Craig was glad of it; the sight of the man had felt like a punch in the gut and it would have been beyond him to think of what to say.

"Good morning, Mr. Birt," Paul said. "My name is Paul Maloney. I've come down from London today with my friend, Craig Robertson, and—"

"I know who you are," Reggie Birt interrupted, staring at Craig, his hand reaching for the cross at his neck. "I recognize Daniel. You don't need to tell me things I already know."

Craig swallowed. "My name's not Daniel anymore, Mr. Birt. I changed it. I'm Craig now."

The old man shook his head. "You can't change what God has given you. Daniel's a good name, a biblical name. Denying it is like denying the Lord. It's a sin."

"That may or may not be the case, Mr. Birt," Paul cut in, his voice calm. "We certainly have no wish to offend you. But as you may know, Craig's father, James Clutton, has gone missing and we're trying to find out what might have happened to him, where he might be now."

"The police have already asked me those questions. I could tell them nothing. I don't know where James is. The Fellowship is praying for his safe return."

"I understand that, but Craig is worried about his father. He thought you could help."

Reggie Birt's eyes widened and he muttered something under his breath that might have been a prayer, or a curse, before replying. "Daniel should be worried about many things. He is on the road to hell and must take care he doesn't fall into the devil's clutches."

"So should we all, indeed," Paul began but Craig had had enough.

"Look, Mr. Birt," he said. "I know we've had our quarrels in the past but, please, I'm just here to find out about my father. I won't interfere with your church or in my father's life. I don't want to do either. I understand you might not want to say anything to the police or to Andrea, but I used to be a member of the Fellowship. If my father's gone away, on retreat or something, then you can speak to me. Once I know where he is, I'll be out of your life and you won't have to see me again. That's a promise."

Mr. Birt drew himself up to his full height and shook his head. "You were never a member of our church, Daniel. You rejected the right path and now you must reap the consequences. Your father too is stained with your sin. He brought you up to wickedness and has done nothing to make you right with the Lord. Before he left us, he confessed the sin you'd committed with the sodomite all those years ago. He'd kept it from us, lied to us all for so long. I told him that meant both of you were under the judgment of the Lord. Now it is up to him to put things right."

"Is that when he left?" Craig took two paces back, glanced wildly around as if his father might appear from nowhere to confront him. "Why? What was he going to do?"

"Pray. And then do what the Lord wills," the elder said. "That is what we should all do. You also, Daniel. You should pray. Come, we can pray together now. Though the Fellowship has agreed it is wrong for me even to be talking to you, yet God is merciful. Kneel with me here and God can forgive your uncleanness and your sodomy. He can heal you and set you on the right path again."

A long silence filled only with the moaning of the wind and the distant harshness of crows. Craig could sense Paul's eyes on him. Finally Craig spoke.

"No," he said quietly. So quietly that Reggie had to lean forward to hear him. "No. There's nothing wrong with the way I am or with what I do. If I believe nothing else, then I believe that. It's the one good thing I've learnt, the one thing you never taught me."

When he finished speaking, he reached out and took hold of Paul's hand. He squeezed it and held on.

Reggie Birt's reaction was instant. His face closed in and he lifted his cross, aiming it at them like a weapon. Or a defense against attack.

"Sinners," he hissed. "You are both mired in sin and like dogs you cannot leave it alone. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, you will burn in hell and the fires will never go out. Now, leave me. I have no wish to consort with such as you. I must be clean."

He closed his eyes then and began to speak in tongues, swaying backward and forward, as he had used to do in the Sunday services. Paul gripped Craig to him.

"Our pleasure, Mr. Birt," Paul said, his voice as grim as his expression. "We won't disturb your peace anymore. Thank you for your time."

As they walked back across the fields to the car, Craig found he was trembling.

"Sorry," he said once they were on the way back to Andrea's. "I should have warned you, but it's hard to think what to say. It's just what they're *like*, you know?"

"It's okay," Paul said. "It's not your fault."

When Craig's former neighbor opened the door to them both, she took one look at their faces and ushered them into the living room—where hot sweet tea and biscuits were swiftly provided.

After they'd told her what had happened, she sighed. "Religion. I swear it's the cause of all the evils in this world. I'm sorry you both had to go through that. Reggie has very strong opinions. He's always been that way."

"I know." Craig leaned forward and patted Andrea on the leg. "I remember. I wouldn't have got through my teenage years without you, you know. I never thanked you for that, but I'm thanking you now. I'm truly grateful."

Andrea reddened and brushed the compliment aside. "Nonsense. It was a pleasure to see you knowing your own mind. I enjoyed your company. I think your mother would be proud of you, you know. If she knew. I just wish she'd felt she could have come back to see you, even once. I would never have told your father."

Then she stopped as if she'd said too much. Craig swallowed.

"I know," he said. "But—"

"Yes, your father.... Like Reggie, he has strong opinions about marriage."

They were silent for a moment or two before Andrea spoke again.

"Well," she said, as if drawing them both back from a path neither wanted to travel on. "It's a shame that it's been a wasted journey for you today. In terms of what you wanted to find out anyway."

"That's not entirely true," Paul said. "We've learnt one thing. It looks like Craig's father left of his own accord, and for religious reasons has gone to ground for a while. I imagine he'll reappear again when he's ready. I don't think the church has got anything to do with it, though they might have been a catalyst."

"Good," Craig said, glad they were back on less-dangerous ground. "I was beginning to wonder if they might have kidnapped him for not having a suitable son and were holding him until I repented. Honestly, I wouldn't put it past them."

Both Paul and Andrea laughed and, after a moment or so, he joined in. It felt like the first perspective he'd had on his years growing up since... well, since forever.

Half an hour later, they said their goodbyes, with promises of staying in touch that he hoped he'd keep. And not just because of his father.

Craig drove back. It was fair, after all. It was only when they'd hit the outskirts of London that he said what he'd been mulling over since they left Devon.

"Paul, I think you're right about my father. He'll resurface when he's good and ready. There's not much I can do about that. But, still, being back to where I grew up has made me think. About what went on. About what I can do about it. So I'm going to try to find Michael. There are things I need to find out."



## "SUCH as?"

A fair enough question, Craig supposed, seeing as Michael was his first lover and Paul his current one. If he'd been in Paul's position, he would have wanted to know what the heck he was doing as well. The most surprising thing, however, was that Paul hadn't asked the question until now. *Now* being nearly three weeks later and the beginning of January. Though in the meantime they'd had Christmas, separately, seen each other every couple of days or so, and had sex a hell of a lot. On top of all that, Paul had had a case he'd needed to wrap up and Craig had been doing a series of photo shoots for a fashion mag. They'd wanted to have the English winter look. Too bad that they'd had to make their own snow. Maybe Paul simply hadn't found time to ask the question then. Christmas was a bugger really.

Right now, they were sitting in Craig's kitchen. Maddy was cooking rice and one of her strange homemade sauces. He hoped it wouldn't taste like the last one. He and Julie had been forced to rinse it down the sink when she'd been out of the room for a few moments. Paul had just opened the wine he'd brought and was pouring it into three glasses. Julie was still at her parents' place; Christmas lasted longer in Pinner. Craig was slumped at the table, trying to cope with the

start of a whole new year and wondering when his father might deign to reappear again. What was he on? Another secret religious pilgrimage? Or was his first thought of some strange ritualistic kidnapping by the Fellowship the right one after all? God only knew.

It was then that Craig repeated what he'd told Paul on the drive back to London. It was then that Paul finally asked his question.

Craig frowned and took a slurp of the wine. Really, he needed it. "Don't worry. It's not what-might-have-been stuff. That doesn't matter. I just need to know what happened. At the time, I mean. When I left home, everything was very confused. I didn't get my head together for a while so I couldn't cope with anything. Not for a few months really. Seeing as I can't do much about my father, let's see if I can go back and clear that part of my life up at least. And anyway, I need to know what happened to Michael afterwards."

Paul stared at him. "And once you've found him?"

"Nothing," he said slowly. "It'll be enough just to know... what he's doing now. I don't want to talk to him or anything. I mean, what's the bloody point of that? I don't need to revisit love's young dream or all that. That's what you're for, isn't it?"

He grinned at Paul and Paul grinned back, even though Craig's heart was beating fast, and there were memories at the edge of his mind that he couldn't quite acknowledge. Didn't know if he wanted to.

"I like to think so," Paul said.

"I don't mean to be boring," Maggie's voice burst into the sudden intimacy of the conversation and Craig blinked, "but who the hell is Michael?"

It took a while to explain. While he was trying to tell his best friend enough to keep her happy but not so much to make her ask more questions he wasn't prepared to answer, Paul looked after the rice. Craig couldn't help hoping that might mean the sauce would be edible too.

When at last he'd finished, Maddy rocked back on the chair and let out a low whistle. "Wow! You certainly like a bit of drama in your life, don't you?"

"It wasn't like—"

"Oh, come *on*. A mysterious stranger sweeps you off your feet, has his wicked way, and then vanishes. What's not dramatic about that?"

Craig laughed. "Actually, it was me that vanished rather than him. I imagine he just went home. Which puts a damper on your version, doesn't it?"

"Maybe." Maddy shrugged. "Still a great story though. And now you want to find this guy again?"

"Find *out* about him," he corrected her, noticing the sideways glance she'd given Paul as she'd spoken. "There's a difference."

Maddy opened her mouth to speak, but Paul chose that moment to grab the plates from the side and start spooning out the rice onto them.

"Difference or not," he said, "this is about ready and I suggest we eat."

They did. It was delicious. Well, okay, maybe not delicious, but a damn sight better than anything Maddy—or even Julie—had ever produced. So Craig for one wasn't complaining.

But there was still something he needed to know.

"Paul?" he ventured as they were scraping their plates. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"If I want to find out where Michael is now, how do I go about it? I'm not asking you to do anything. God knows you've got other stuff going on, and this is something I want to do for myself. But I need some tips. Please?"

Paul put down his fork, tore off a slice of kitchen towel, and wiped his mouth with it.

"The last time I agreed to help out a boyfriend in more than a casual way," he said, his eyes hooking Craig's and not letting go, "I ended up being set up, shot at, and tortured. And I lost someone very close to me. It wasn't pleasant."

He stopped speaking and Craig saw him swallow. Deeply, as if once more swallowing down other words he wouldn't allow himself to say. The atmosphere in the small kitchen was so thick as to be almost unbreakable. Maddy stared at him, her eyes wide.

Craig took Paul's hand and kept holding his gaze. "I'm truly sorry."

"It's not your fault," he whispered. "Anyway, I've taken you to Devon, so I suppose I'm already involved... in something. And the boyfriend in question was an ex. The ex."

"I promise I won't ever set you up," Craig said. "I don't have a gun. And I'm not your ex."

Another moment of silence.

Then Paul said, "Okay. I'll help you. Have you got a computer?" "Of course," Maddy replied. "No problem."

IT took them just a week. Not that they were doing that all the time. After all, they had lives to lead and the beginnings of a relationship to look after. But watching Paul carry out his business fascinated Craig. Paul was a good teacher too, allowing him to take the lead, ask questions, letting the net gradually close in on what he found he was thinking of as his prey. Craig came to see how being a private investigator could take you over and be an all-consuming part of life. It made him wonder what Paul would think of his modeling/acting career if he ever had the chance to watch him in return. Strangely, it also made him feel in charge of his past for the first time. Or at least the first time he could remember. Looking back, it seemed as if he'd been running all his life, certainly in the past seven years, reacting to shadows, halfmemories, fears he could only glimpse, never grasp. Now, with this decision, he was doing something about it. And because he wanted to. Not because somebody else had forced him into it.

The shadows, however, grew darker. Several nights that week, Craig woke up, nightmares tearing at the edges of sleep. Pictures of his mother slipping away. A dripping tap. The color red. Danger. The fourth night, it was so bad that he surfaced groaning, clutching at the pillows and managing to wake Paul, who'd spent the night with him.

"What...? What's happening?"

"Nothing," he mumbled, heart racing so much he could hardly catch his breath. "Nightmare, I think. That's all."

"Bugger. Come here." Paul pulled Craig to him. Then, "God, you can hardly breathe. And you're so cold."

"F-felt real"

"Hush." He wound his legs around Craig's and pulled him even closer, so he was wrapped in his boyfriend's body. Paul held him until his breathing had steadied and he felt warmer again.

"Thanks," Craig whispered after a while.

"'S'okay," he said. "Do you get a lot of nightmares?"

Craig snuggled against him and felt the beat of his heart. "Used to. Not so much recently though. Not 'til this week anyway."

"I see. Do you think it's to do with this mission we're on? To find Michael?"

Craig couldn't help his laughter. "Are you asking with your PI hat on, or are you just being nice?"

"Cheeky bugger, I'm always nice. I don't have to *be* it. Look, I'll show you. I can take your mind off it."

"Mind?" Craig murmured as Paul's fingers touched his prick, which was already stiff. "What mind?"

Later, they slept again. And this time, the nightmares didn't come back. Not that night anyway.

They found Michael one frosty afternoon toward the end of that January week. Or rather they didn't find him. Maddy and Julie were both at work, and he and Paul were busy on their laptops in the kitchen. It was the only room with a decent enough table. Craig had been trawling through the various London council records Paul had managed to get into. He had no idea how—and he didn't ask. He was simply grateful. And, over the top of the screen, he could see a frown of

concentration wrinkling Paul's forehead. He was about to take a break, ask Paul if he wanted a drink, when his boyfriend suddenly sighed, sat back, and cocked his head at the screen.

"What've you found?" Craig asked. "Anything worth a look?"

He waited for the answer. He'd discovered, since starting this mission, that if Paul found something, he liked to think—find his words, maybe—before Craig got involved. On the other hand, the moment Craig thought he'd hit on something, he'd want Paul to see at once. The difference between men and men, he supposed. Though sometimes he wondered if setting his mind on finding out about someone he hadn't seen for seven years—and even then only for a few days—was doing nothing else but covering up the parts of himself he wasn't sharing with Paul. This wasn't something he wanted to think about in any depth; it wasn't anything he could handle.

"I'm not sure," Paul said, jolting Craig out of his train of thought. "Come and see"

Leaning over him, Craig stared at the screen he was looking at. It wasn't what he expected at all.

"Missing persons?" he queried. "I thought you were looking at Hackney Council records."

"I was. But I thought I'd go off on a tangent. It sometimes works in this game, and God knows we need all the help we can get. So what do you think of it?"

Hunkering down, Craig ran his eye over the screen. Then he read it again. He felt himself grow hot, then cold. Then hot again. This was no longer a stupid fantasy.

It was Michael. Describing him perfectly. Medium build, brown hair, brown eyes. An insurance consultant from London. In fact, all the very ordinariness of him that had first caught Craig, though it didn't mention his smile. And the grainy photo they'd added to his description didn't show him smiling either. Still, the shock of seeing him after all this time, even just by means of a picture, and a bad one at that, made Craig shiver. But what really gripped him were the facts of his disappearance and those who'd wanted him found: Last known whereabouts: probable holiday to Devon, August/September 1998. Any news please contact Mrs. E. Langley (sister). It gave a number too, which Craig imagined wasn't the sister's but the contact for the people running the Web site.

"Is that him?" Paul asked and Craig realized for the first time that Paul was now standing and that his boyfriend's hand was resting on his shoulder.

He swallowed. "Yes. Yes it is. He never told me he had a sister. But what does it mean *missing*? Devon, 1998: that was when we met. He was with me. But he went back to London afterwards. I... I know he did."

"Know...? Are you sure? You said you never contacted him when you arrived here."

"No," he said, slowly. "No, that's right. I didn't. But I don't understand why that should mean he's missing."

"No. Me neither. That's something we'll have to find out for ourselves. If you're ready for it, Craig?"

"Yes. Of course I'm ready." But he wasn't. Not by a long, long way. Not anymore. "How should we start?"

Paul smiled at him. "At last. Something I *can* answer. It's simple; we start with Mrs. E. Langley."

## 10

GAY Rule Number Eight: *Never assume that what you've been planning for will happen at once. Or if it does, don't trust it.* Or maybe that was just a rule for everyone. It was hard to tell. The fact remained that the moment Craig and Paul—or rather Paul—had found the address of Mrs. E. Langley, they had no time for anything much beyond work. Apart from breathing, eating, and having sex, that is.

Which explained why right now Craig was sitting in one of the south London studios he'd worked for a couple of years ago and halfway through a fashion shoot. At least he hoped it was halfway. He was hoping to be in bed, asleep, before the next day began. Though even that wasn't looking good.

"Come on, Trace, more pouting. Look to the left more. No, more. Yes, that's it, great. Hold it, hold it... and done. Thank you."

Trace—or, to use her full name, Miss Tracey-Anne Wilkinson—was only just eighteen but had been picked up by Storm a couple of years ago and had done three quite well-known shoots last year. Craig had worked with her before; they were about the same height and frame and tended to look good together on assignments where the money was low mid-range. If the clients could afford more, they wouldn't have been picked, of course, but still the two of them did okay.

He liked her too. Maybe that was why the shots tended to come out well. It made a difference. Though he didn't think he'd be working with her for long; she was on the rise for sure. Whereas he... well, he'd just about reached his peak. Unless he got *really* lucky.

"Craig? You ready to go?" The director waved him in just as one of the girls was altering the line of Trace's hair. In his mid-fifties, he was rock-solid and knew exactly what he was about. Gave clear instructions too, which was more than could be said about some of the people Craig had worked for. Not that there'd been that many.

"Sure," he said, taking up his position next to Trace, and for the following half-hour or so they worked the scenarios the director wanted against the current backdrop he'd—or rather the client—had chosen. Which was basically hot young couple dressed up for the youth market with just a hint of danger. Hard to convey all that with a smile or a sultry look, but he and Trace did their best.

After that, another hour and three changes of clothes went by before they could grab a coffee, and that was only because the team were arguing about the lighting for the next stage of the assignment.

"Hey, Craig. How are you doing?" Trace plumped herself down next to him and gave him a big grin. "Getting any?"

"Always," Craig shot back. "Why? You jealous?"

"Yeah, but only because you've got the time."

He took Trace's coffee as the makeup bloke started touching up her face. "That's because I'm not doing my A levels. I have time for a life."

"Ha ha. Mind you, you might be right. But, really, any action?"

To his surprise Craig felt his skin grow hot. "Yeah, some. Just started out really. Seeing how it goes."

Paying no attention to the needs of the makeup man, Trace whistled and punched Craig on the arm. "A *boyfriend*. Fab! Tell all then"

An impossible task when they were in the middle of a job that took every iota of concentration they had and some, but he did his best during the two-minute slots they were allocated for changing clothes once the lighting guy was happy.

Toward the end of the working day—which turned out to be 2:30 a.m. the following morning—Trace shrugged on a jacket and turned to wait for him to button his jeans.

"Come on," she said. "Don't keep the boys waiting, Craig. Your new boyfriend must be slowing you down. Was that him I saw earlier on? Didn't recognize him anyway and he was certainly staring at you."

Not being able to help it, he glanced around the barrier and scanned the area they were working in. No Paul. He hadn't expected it though; he was on an assignment of his own and, if it had finished by now, well, he'd be asleep.

"Doubt it," Craig replied. "He's got a thousand better things to do than watch us at work for hours on end at this unearthly time. Anyway. he's not that type."

"Not a romantic? Shame."

"No." He shook his head. "Not that. Just not the pushy type."

Trace sighed. "Lucky you. Still, come to think of it, I think the bloke I saw was older, though I only got a glance. Nice to have an admirer though."

The final shoot of the night was done before they knew it, and everything began to be packed up. No matter how many times Craig worked as a model, it always seemed a shame that they couldn't keep at least some of the clothes But that was real life—it was never like the films

At the door to the outside world, Trace flipped open her mobile and punched her speed-dial.

"Hey, do you want to share a taxi?" she started to say and then giggled and nudged him. "Look; that's him. The guy giving you the onceover inside."

Following her gaze down to the corner of the road, Craig could see a figure just crossing the arc of a streetlamp. Walking away. For a second or two, everything in his head was silent, and then he was off. The man vanished. He heard Trace shout after him, but he kept on running. Just as he got to the corner where the man had been only a moment ago, his foot caught on a broken slab on the pavement and he fell headlong to the ground.

By the time he'd got up and Trace had finished fussing, the man was nowhere to be seen. Disappeared down any of half a dozen side streets radiating outward from where they stood. There would have been no point in trying and, besides, Craig didn't want to leave Trace alone. Not in the middle of London at the end of a winter night. It would have been stupid.

But he wished he hadn't fallen. He wished he'd reached the end of the road and seen where the stranger had gone. He wished he could have been sure it had been his father.

"ARE you sure?" Paul asked him.

It was the next day. Not too damn early as, hell, he still had to sleep. No matter if missing, estranged members of his family were wandering around London staring at him. Or something.

"Yes. No. I don't know. I suppose if I was sure, then I'd be ringing the police. Or Andrea. Or both. But I'm not, am I?"

All this came out as rather more confrontational than he'd planned and Paul took a couple of paces away, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I was only asking."

"Yeah, I know," he apologized. "I'm trying to get it straight in my own mind, that's all. I swear, for that one second I saw him under the light, I was sure. But now I think back, try to replay it, everything's much more hazy."

"That's natural. My advice is don't try to pin things down. Sometimes first instincts are best, and you should go with them. It's one of my laws."

Despite himself, Craig felt a flicker of interest in his head and looked up at Paul. "You have laws?"

"Yeah." Paul blushed and thrust his hands into his jeans pockets. They weren't branded, Craig noticed. Not only that but the action had reminded him of someone else. That elusive person who came to mind when he thought of Paul. Now, who was it? As Paul continued speaking, he shook the thought away.

"Used to have laws anyway," Paul said. "A stupid ongoing thing I used to do with... a friend. Private Investigator Laws, I called them. Just a joke. It kept me going when work was tough, or there wasn't any."

Craig nodded. "Makes sense to me. I have Gay Rules. Which I suppose are more wide-ranging than PI Laws, but probably amount to the same sort of thing."

"Maybe." His boyfriend grinned. "Nice to know there are two stressed-out lunatics in the world anyway."

"And in the same room too."

They smiled at each other. Then Craig remembered what had happened and sighed. Paul moved to sit next to him on the sofa. He put an arm around Craig's shoulders.

"About your father...," he said.

"Yes?"

"I've been having another think about those accounts you let me see, and I'd like to ask you if I can look online too. At anything that might be happening now. I think it might be helpful but I didn't want to forge ahead without asking. After all, he's your father, Craig."

"Sure. Of course you can. Go for it. Let's see if we can track the bugger down, eh. Then I'll see if I was right about last night or not. At least if it is him, then he's not being held captive by the Fellowship somewhere and screaming for mercy after all."

"You think that's still an option?" Paul smiled. "I'd best get on with it then. Mind you, I can't promise anything I can do online will actually track him down. I'm a PI, not a miracle worker, but I'll do my best. And, seeing as we're talking about work, sort of, why don't you tell me about the shoot last night? Give me a taste of glamour."

Craig couldn't help but snort at his boyfriend's concept of what he did, but he was glad of the change of subject. He needed to let the thoughts in his head settle down before he could make any sense of them. So he began to tell Paul what the fashion industry was really like. The heat, the sweat, the exhaustion, the demands, the long nights and the terrible, terrible coffee. That and the camaraderie too. Not to mention the thrill of looking good. Who could resist that? And, best of all, the excitement of seeing a picture of himself in a magazine or in a newspaper supplement. That never changed. Oh, and the money too. He couldn't forget that. Yes, he'd always wanted to be an actor, but he knew he was never going to make it big. Bit-part Johnnie. That was Craig. But modeling was a nice second best. He wasn't complaining. As long as he got to do *some* acting, then life was cool. For now.

After he'd finished, Craig reached up to kiss Paul and said, "Okay then. Your turn. How was your stakeout?"

Paul laughed. "You've been watching too many American films. Really, it's not that dramatic. In fact, the bloke I was supposed to be watching for never turned up, so I gave up just after three. Came back and got some well-deserved sleep. There's no point pushing it. There'll be other nights."

"And if it had worked?" Craig asked, unwilling to let it go. "What would it have been like?"

"Dull," said Paul. "Nobody ever gets that. But it's true. You wait for hours sometimes and you have to keep glancing around just in case anyone's clocked you or on the off-chance something might be happening. You have to have something to keep you awake too. I avoid coffee—it makes me want to piss. Usually, I take a novel. Keep reading, keep glancing. That's the trick. Then when whatever you want to happen does happen—if it does—then you get the buzz. Instinct kicks in. You get on with the job and get out as soon as you can. Unharmed if possible. And knowing that if you did well, then it's money in the bank and the satisfaction of a good result."

"Hey, a lot like modeling then. And acting too."

"Yes, you might be right. When's your next assignment anyway?"

"I'll have to call the agency to check it out later, but I think it's not 'til next week. And there might be a one-off acting job coming up too. If I'm lucky. What about you?"

"All paperwork 'til the finale this week," Paul said with a sigh. "I'll try the stake-out again next week, depending on what the client says. The subject's very regular. Usually."

Craig closed his eyes.

"Good," he said. "In that case, I'll have to ring Mrs. E. Langley. See if she's willing to meet up."

IT took him three attempts to make the call. He waited until everyone was out of the house as the thought of someone listening in to what he was saying was simply too much. The things he was thinking were too personal; never mind the things he'd be saying. He even hid in the bedroom. Bloody hell, he was such a wimp. The first time, he punched two of the digits Paul had given him before swearing and slamming the phone down on the bed.

He lay back and thought for a while. It came to him that his life if he went through with this—might be about to change. Big time. Did he want it to? He was happy enough as he was: scraping a living with modeling work and the occasional acting job; ignoring enough of his past to enable him to have a present and maybe even a future; he had friends who accepted him for who he was now; and, most miraculous of all, he appeared to be at the beginning of a relationship with someone he fancied like crazy. Liked too. A lot. Why should he want to change things?

Taking a deep breath, Paul's face came into his mind. Craig didn't know a great deal about him-yet-but he knew enough to understand that if Paul had a problem he was the type to worry at it until he'd solved it. Something to do with his profession, yes, but something more to do with him.

As for Craig, for too long now he'd drifted. Taking things as they came, making the best out of them if they were bad and laughing at

them if they were good. He felt that everything he'd done had been a reaction to something else. Or an attempt to avoid the past. Surely it was time to make a decision for himself. By himself. Even his father whatever he was doing out there, damn him—was managing to make him jump in directions he hadn't chosen to. Bloody hell, at least it was Craig's choice—his—to search for Michael.

The second time Craig dialed Mrs. Langley's number, he reached the last digit before cutting the connection. It was like trying to ring Andrea all over again. Coward, coward, coward, he called himself and was about to go on saying it when he realized the voice in his head was his father's

No.

When, this final time, the phone began to ring, he wondered where Mrs. Langley's phone was and even if she was there at all. At that number. He found himself hoping hard that it wouldn't go to an answering machine. That would be unbearable, and he'd be even shakier if he had to ring off and think of what message to leave before he rang again. Please God, don't let it happen, please God.

The sudden silence in his ear almost made him drop the mobile again but then he heard a woman's voice. A voice that took him deeper into the puzzle he was only just beginning:

"Good afternoon. Eva Langley speaking. May I help you?"

Funny how when things went according to plan, he never really expected it. Craig opened his mouth to speak, but the only thing that came out was a tiny gulping noise. Hell, she was never going to want to speak to him—not when he couldn't even talk.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"H-hello," he managed to reply, heart beating wildly. "Is that Mrs. Langley?"

Stupid, stupid. Of course it was. She'd just said so, hadn't she? But it gave him time to try to think what to do. And he needed that.

"Yes, speaking. Can I help?"

He shut his eyes. "Yes. I hope so. My name is... is Craig Robertson. I knew your brother, Michael, Michael Harris, years back. I

was hoping to get in contact with him again, and wondered if you knew where he might be?"

Hell, that was good. Even he was impressed. He hadn't had any idea beforehand what he might say to this woman. He half-wished now that he'd had an audience after all so they could have applauded his genius. Only half-wished though.

Mrs. Langley didn't reply at once. Of course she wouldn't though; he was being an idiot still, in spite of his delusions of genius. Michael was missing. Craig already knew this. He was only making things worse for her. Which was, though he knew it didn't look like it, the last thing he'd wanted.

"I'm sorry," he began to say, but she was already talking.

"I think you should go. I don't know anyone called Craig Robertson. I know the names of all his friends. Michael never mentioned you. Please get off the line and don't call again."

"But I...." He tried to think of what to say that would make her listen. Something that would stop her from disconnecting the call. He knew he had only seconds before she would be gone, and he didn't know if he could find the courage to ring her again. "Please. You have to hear me out. I—"

"No. That's enough. I'm not listening to any more of this. If you call me again, I'll ring the police and—"

"Please," he whispered, and God alone knew where the inspiration came from, but come it did. "I used to be called Daniel Clutton when Michael knew me. Seven years ago. He would have known me as Daniel. Please...."

A sharp sound in his ear. Somewhere between a gasp and a cry.

"Daniel," she said.

"Yes." And then it was as if the conversation they were having was not in the words at all.

"Then you'd better come and see us," she whispered.



SHE lived in Muswell Hill. Craig couldn't believe it. All this time, she'd been so close and he'd never known it. When he first moved to London, he'd looked at a hostel in Muswell Hill. Considered it even, before opting for one farther south. Later, when he was looking for flats, he'd wandered around here often enough, and where he lived now in Crouch End was almost next door. Maybe he'd even seen her, bumped into her, Michael's sister, and not known it.

It made him feel sick.

And still he couldn't acknowledge why. There was something else going on inside him and he couldn't acknowledge it. Not yet. He wanted to know that Michael was all right. He *needed* to know it. For a variety of reasons, none of which he could put into words. Least of all to himself. Craig wanted to help find Michael if he was still missing. If he could. After all, way too many people in his life were still missing and he didn't like it. Wasn't that after all Gay Rule Number Nine? *Always know where those you've loved end up or you might not know what's lurking ahead of you*. Or maybe that, like others of his rules, was for everyone now. These days the boundaries were merging.

The only thing he truly understood was that if he could see Michael now—have him stand before him and be there so that it

couldn't be denied—then he'd be happy. He'd be happy and walk away. That would be enough. Because Craig didn't want to be with him again. No. Not in that way. In that way, he wanted to be with Paul. He hoped in the middle of all this, Paul realized that. He'd been generous with his time so far, but Craig had no guarantee how long that generosity would last. Neither could he blame Paul if it didn't.

For that reason, and for that reason alone, he was standing on his own in front of Mrs. Eva Langley's house in Muswell Hill-or, more accurately, lurking—and trying to scrape up the courage to ring the bell. It was Monday morning, the third week in January. He was bloody freezing.

He couldn't stay here forever or he'd die of frostbite at this rate, and he couldn't go back. The need to finish this wouldn't let him. So, cursing under his breath, he rang the bell.

Almost at once—as if the person he was ringing for had been waiting—the intercom crackled before a woman's voice drifted into the chilly air. The same voice as on the phone. Trying not to think too much, Craig gave his name—his old name—then mentioned the phone call and waited

A silence as if Mrs. Langley was still making up her mind about him, and then the door catch was released.

"Come upstairs," she said. "It's Flat Two."

He found it on the first floor. The staircase up was wide and the cream walls hung with brightly colored prints. He recognized a Vettriano but that was all. And only then because it had been used as a backdrop to an advert he'd done years ago. Already, the place felt cared for in a way his Crouch End flat would never be.

The door was open when he arrived there, and a glance inside showed him a large bright living room strewn with toys and board games. Children, he thought. She has children. Then: Michael's an uncle

The next moment, a woman stood in front of him. At the door. Behind her lurked a tall blond man, his expression grim. The woman was holding something in her hand he couldn't quite see. For a moment, Craig felt as if he were looking at Michael himself. Dark hair,

brown eyes. The same face shape. But slighter than Michael had been, and with a feminine slant to everything that he had never had. He almost said Michael's name, then took a step backward before recovering himself.

Something of this must have shown in his eyes as Mrs. Langley's lips tightened. She stared at him for a long moment. Then finally she lifted her chin and spoke. Her words weren't what Craig was expecting at all.

"Did you kill him then?" she said. "Did you kill my brother?"

Craig blinked. He took a step back and swallowed. His skin felt hot and for a heartbeat or two the world around him faded out and back again.

"No," he whispered, glancing downward. "No, I didn't."

Another silence. Finally, she lowered whatever it was she was pointing at him and gestured him indoors. The blond man frowned but allowed him to enter. Walking past her, Craig caught a faint smell of oranges. He saw that the object in her hand was a bottle of Mace and he realized he was shaking. Once inside, she didn't close the door but left it half-open.

"It's all right, Jack," she said to the man, who had to be her husband. "It's all right. I can deal with this now. It'll be fine."

A moment of unreality passed as Craig and Jack shook hands.

"I'll be in the office," Jack said. "Call if you need me."

Eva Langley waited while her husband strode through the living room and disappeared through a door in the corner. Then she stared at Craig.

"You're very beautiful," she said, "and so very young. I'm not sure I expected that. I used to think you might be a murderer, but my husband told me I shouldn't think in that way. He said it was pointless."

Craig had no idea how to reply but she seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"I didn't know he has a sister," he said.

For another long moment, there was silence, and he wondered where her children might be before realizing that of course they would be at school or being looked after by someone. She would want them out of the house for this meeting.

Then, to Craig's surprise, she smiled. But it was brief and vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "No, he was never much of one for talking. And anyway I suppose you had other things to say."

"You know about me then?" he asked.

"Yes. My brother sent a couple of postcards from his holiday all those years ago. He might not have been one for talking but he did like to write. He mentioned you. Both times, the second time in more... enthusiastic terms."

"I see." He nodded. Though he didn't. Not really.

"You think I look like him, don't you?"

Her question came from nowhere and Craig was going to deny it, but something forced the truth out of him. "Yes."

She nodded. "Everyone always said that. Michael used to groan when he heard it. People don't say it now of course. They haven't said it for a long time. Would you like a drink?"

He was having trouble keeping up with her sudden changes of subject and he wondered if she was in fact as nervous as he was, and this was why she was talking so much and so disjointedly. And why he himself was saying nothing.

"Water's fine. Just from the tap, thanks."

While she disappeared, presumably to get the drink from the kitchen, Craig stood in the middle of the living room, not daring to sit. The toys he'd already spotted from the shared hallway were only part of what they had; a huge box of them dominated the wall near the television. It didn't look as if you could get much more in there. Not only that, but a rocking horse stood at the edge of the large picture window and he felt a twinge of jealousy. He'd always wanted one, but it had never happened. His father had told him rocking horses were for girls and not only that but they took a young boy's attention away from praying to the Lord, and that had been the end of it. Craig

head and looked away, nearly stumbling over the coffee table. It was strewn with papers and files, and when he picked one up he saw it was something to do with student recruitment and retention figures. It was branded with the University of London logo. Same business as Maddy then, though a different university.

"Your water, Daniel."

The sound of her voice made him jump and he dropped the paper he'd been holding. It slid off the table and he bent to retrieve it. "I was just... I didn't mean to...."

When she didn't say anything, he trailed off and took the glass she handed him. Maybe it was best if he simply shut up. Already they seemed to have moved way beyond any meaningless social niceties. But there was so much Craig wanted to know and he had no idea how or where to start. This was impossible. Maybe he should never have come. Heart beating fast, he sipped at the water. A single lemon slice floated at the top and bumped his nose. He wanted to sneeze, but managed to hold it back.

"Why don't you sit down?" she said, waving her hand at the sofa. It was covered with a deep brown throw that contrasted with her pale carpet. With children, he imagined that must be hard to keep clean. But, hell, what did he know? He sat, unsaid words crowding his throat.

He couldn't keep them inside anymore.

"Michael's missing then?" he said, clutching the glass of water until his fingers ached and staring at Mrs. Langley's carpet. "I didn't know that. I saw it on the computer. He's been missing since... since I knew him? I don't understand. I thought he'd come back to London. After he left Devon. There was nothing else he could have done. I don't understand where he could have gone. Why he would want to even. I don't understand"

With his last sentence, Craig thumped the glass down on the table, sat back on the sofa and, breathing quickly, lifted his eyes to stare at his companion.

She was crying. Sitting, ramrod-straight in the chair opposite, with her hands folded together in her lap, and crying. She made no effort to cover up her tears, which were sliding one by one down her cheeks. It was almost as if she didn't realize this was happening or that, even after so many years, crying was so familiar that she no longer made an effort to wipe the tears away.

Craig grabbed a tissue from the box under the table and offered it to her. She took it but didn't use it to wipe her face, simply crushing it over and over in her hands

"Please," he said. "Please, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. It was stupid. And I shouldn't have said what I did. It's not... it's not my story really, is it? Not anymore. He's your brother. You've known him for a lifetime. All I had was a week. Seven years back. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'll go."

"No, don't." With unexpected strength she grabbed Craig's wrist. "Don't go. I don't want you to. I want you to stay and listen. Will you?"

Wordless now, he nodded. As she spoke, he stayed kneeling at her side, still imprisoned in her grip.

"I loved him, my brother," she said. "We weren't always close, not when we were growing up, even though he was only two years younger than me. But later, when we'd both left home and were working, things were a lot easier. I always knew he was gay. Though he never said. It didn't matter. I just wanted him to be happy. Then when he met Peter, things were good for a while. I liked Peter. We got on fine, the four of us. Michael and Peter, Jack-my husband-and I. Sometimes we'd even go to the opera together, even though Jack's not that keen."

"Michael loves the opera," he interrupted, forgetting her command to listen. "He told me. It was one of the things he mentioned."

Mrs. Langley nodded and her face softened. "Yes. He did love it. The most of all four of us. Mozart was his favorite."

Craig hadn't known that. It felt as if he was being given a small treasure. Something to cling to. "Go on."

Her face darkened. He thought she might cry again, but she didn't.

"Things became difficult with Peter," she said. "I could see it. It got worse over a period of time, and then when the split finally came, it devastated Michael. He wanted to leave everything. Give up his job, his house, move away from London. Everything. I tried to persuade him not to, but he wouldn't listen. I mean, what did he think he would do? He loved the city; his job was a good one. I didn't see why just because he'd lost his partner, it had to mean that he'd give up everything he'd worked for. I went on talking to him, trying to make him see sense. And in the end he said he needed a holiday, time to think. That was the last time I saw him—the night before he left. He came round. We argued. Some of his holiday was unpaid leave and I didn't like the sound of that. I thought he was being stupid and I told him so, and we argued. Then he left. A week later, the two cards arrived. The ones with your name on. And then, nothing. Perhaps I wasn't sympathetic enough, I don't know. Perhaps that was why he went missing. Why he disappeared. And all these years. It's been... I... I couldn't help hoping that you might have seen him after the holiday, that you might know something else, Daniel. But you don't, do you? I can see it in your eyes. You don't know anything."

Craig had nothing to say to that. She was right. He knew nothing. He'd come here hoping for answers to some of the puzzle of his past, but all he'd done was stir up trouble for someone else. Someone he didn't even know and hadn't heard of until now. As Mrs. Langley continued to sit there, intent on her own memories, he eased himself from her grip and headed in the direction of what he assumed to be the kitchen. She didn't appear to notice. He turned out to be right. It was the kitchen. Pretty big too. You could probably have put the whole of his own flat in it. And still have room for the luggage. Honestly, he really had to stop cracking jokes in his head when things were tough. One day, he'd say something aloud and be in real trouble. Still, it bloody well got him by, didn't it? So maybe he shouldn't be knocking it.

Back in the real world, Craig had to open a couple of cupboards before he found a glass, which he filled with water and took back to Mrs. Langley. She drank it in two gulps and then blinked up at him, as if not quite sure who he was or what he might be doing here.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm not being the best hostess, am I?"

He shrugged and sat down once more opposite her. "I'm not sure the usual rules apply here, do they? I turn up asking about your brother when he disappeared seven years ago, and you have no real idea who I am. I'm not expecting the red-carpet treatment. I'm just glad you let me in at all "

She smiled. "When you said who you were on the phone, I had to see you. I imagined... well, you know what I imagined. I was being stupid. And then when I saw you, I could tell what you were thinking, about how alike Michael and I are. I could tell you'd known him. All these years and we've never been able to track down a Daniel Clutton. Not the one we wanted to anyway. And we did try. After the police gave up, we hired a private detective. He went all over Devon, asking questions, but nothing ever came of it. I was pregnant by then too, with my eldest, and that didn't help either."

"I'd changed my name," Craig said. "I suppose it made things difficult"

Though in his heart he thought that Paul could have found him. He wasn't the sort who easily let anything go.

"I suppose so," Mrs. Langley replied. "So why did you change it then?"

Hesitating, Craig wondered how much to tell her of what had happened, but then thought that she probably deserved as much of it as would be relevant. So he told her what he'd told Paul. About how he'd met Michael. Their short-lived relationship. And how it had ended and he'd left home. Of course he didn't tell her exactly the same facts as he'd told Paul, but only those she'd want to know about. Gay Rule Number Ten: Remember that other people's boundaries aren't the same as yours, especially if they're not gay themselves. This time, he made sure he stuck to it.

When he'd finished, she gazed at him. "How old were you then, when you met my brother?"

Craig felt his face redden again. "Seventeen. I was taking A levels, but I never got to finish them."

"I see. And Michael was—"

"Thirty-one," he finished the sentence for her. "I know. But please, Mrs. Langley, it wasn't like that. I wanted him to... well... be with me. The age difference didn't seem to matter and he never... he never took advantage. If anything, it was the other way round, I swear it."

Realizing how young and naïve he sounded even in saying those words, Craig stumbled to a halt. But Mrs. Langley leaned over and patted him on the knee.

"It's all right," she said. "I understand. And, by the way, why don't you call me Eva?"

They talked for a while after that. About Michael's friends. His lifestyle. Why he might have decided to disappear. Craig couldn't credit that it would simply be because of a quarrel with his sister and after his father's discovery of what the two of them had been up to. It wasn't the action of the man he'd known. And he told Mrs. Langley— Eva—as much. After about half an hour, he heard the noise of the front door opening, and the next moment the living room was full of the noise of screaming children launched from the arms of an older woman who was obviously, even at first glance, Jack's mother.

Eva stood up just before being overwhelmed by the onslaught of her children. The keepers of the toys. When they'd been persuaded to calm down—a process that took at least five minutes and that required the firm hand of their father—Craig realized that there were in fact only two of them. Though, to him, it seemed more like twenty-two. One a small boy with dark hair and a ready smile, and the other a taller, blonde girl. The image of her father. The girl was called Ruth, age six. And the boy Michael. He was only three. Craig blinked when Eva told him this and couldn't help his response.

"Is that because...?"

"Yes." It was Jack who answered, before Craig could finish his sentence and in a voice that told him this particular conversation was already over. "It is."

He didn't stay long after that. He'd probably stirred up enough issues for one day. For all of them. It was time to leave.

At the door, however, and after exchanging business cards with Eva and promises of keeping in touch if either of them thought of another avenue to explore, Craig paused. The light-colored hallway in front of him danced a little brighter before settling down to what it should be.

"Eva?" he whispered, lowering his voice so her family couldn't hear.

"Yes?"

"You've never stopped talking about Michael in the past tense, all this time. You still think he's dead, don't you?"



"WHAT do you think?" asked Paul.

Craig didn't answer. He didn't know how. This was the first time he'd been to Paul's offices and, so far, his boyfriend wasn't making him exactly welcome. He'd come straight here after leaving Eva's and the bus had taken forever. He could have done with a drink. Paul wasn't offering. In fact, when he'd opened the door to Craig, for a moment a shadow had passed over his face and Craig had wondered if he'd even let him in at all. He was here under sufferance and he knew it.

So instead of answering, he gazed around, taking in the cabinets piled high with papers and the layer of dust on the spare desk. Didn't Paul ever tidy up in here? Not that the kitchen had seemed any better from the one glance he'd been allowed to take before Paul shut the door: unwashed mugs and an overflowing trashcan had been the impression.

"Is this where you see clients?" Craig asked.

He shrugged. "Sometimes. When the cleaner's been. Most times I take them to the café on the corner. It's quiet enough there. I'm a oneman band only, Craig."

"Looks like you could do with some secretarial help though," he joked, nodding toward those heaving cabinets.

He'd been aiming to lighten the mood, but it categorically didn't work. Paul sprang up, shot him a look of unmistakeable dark distaste, and took two or three strides to the window where he leaned his head on the glass and gazed out. His hands gripped the ledge, and Craig could see he was breathing heavily. The silence stretched between them.

Slowly, so slowly that Craig himself barely knew he was moving, he got up and padded toward Paul. Reaching out to touch him, he thought better of it, and brought his arm back down to his side again. His heart was beating fast.

"Look," he whispered. "Whatever I've said that's upset you, I'm sorry for it. I didn't mean to get at you. I was trying to be funny. Sometimes I do that when I shouldn't. Maybe that's why I'm a better model than I am an actor. I'm okay if I just keep my mouth shut."

There. He was bloody well doing it *again*. But this time, Paul gave a half-smile, turning back toward Craig as he did so. He'd been crying. Craig hadn't expected that. He thought his boyfriend had been angry. This time he reached out and touched Paul's face. His fingers came away wet.

"I love you," Craig said.

God alone knew where *that* had come from, but it was true. Paul blinked at him, his eyelashes still wet. Bloody hell, Craig wasn't surprised he'd blinked. If Craig had been Paul, he'd right now be running down Mare Street, screaming like a child on a roller coaster. It was way too soon. Gay Rule Number Eleven: *Don't say the "L" word for at least the first six months. More if you can hang on for longer.* Why the hell was he ignoring it now?

Paul didn't bolt though. He took a step forward, took Craig's head in his hands, and gazed at him.

"Look," Craig began to say, but Paul laid his thumb against Craig's lips for a moment to stop him talking.

"Craig," he said. In the way he'd said it before, when they'd first met at the club. As if he liked the sound of it and wanted it to feel more familiar. It made Craig shiver.

Then Paul kissed him.

It was a long kiss. An answer of sorts, maybe. He didn't know. Didn't like to guess. Afterward, Paul let him go and gazed at him again, as if weighing him up in the balance.

"Would you like a coffee?" he asked.

Still unable to speak, Craig nodded.

"Good. Me too. And while we're drinking it, you can tell me whether you think Michael's alive or not."

There was always a catch, wasn't there? He let Paul make the coffee and place the mug into his hands before he even thought of what he might say.

What came out wasn't what Craig had intended at all.

"No," he said. "Michael is dead."

"Why?" Paul answered at once. As if he'd been expecting that.

Craig broke his gaze. Stared into the murky depths of the coffee instead. But what he was seeing now wasn't his drink at all: flashes of a woman laughing, his mother of course; the way Michael had looked when he'd come, that first time; the rustle of the leaves above where they'd lain; the feel of the earth on his back.

"Because if he'd been alive, I'd have found him by now," he whispered instead. "And he would never have left his sister like this for so long. With no word."

"Okay," Paul said and Craig had the sense that he'd moved closer, though he didn't look up. "Did you know this before you started looking? Or now, when you've thought about it?"

"For God's sake." Craig slammed his mug onto the table, all but breaking it, and sprang up, backing away from Paul. "For God's sake, how the hell am I supposed to know that? I'm only trying to do what I thought might be the right thing. I don't know what all the answers to the bloody questions are."

Paul held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Neither do I. That's why I'm asking them."

"Then maybe you should stop asking me and start asking someone else then."

Paul's eyes darkened and it was almost as if Craig could feel him slipping away. A moment ago they'd been so close. And now this. His own fault entirely though. His fault.

"Maybe I should. Though if you want to know the truth...." Paul hesitated and Craig took a step toward him once more.

"Go on."

"If you want to know the truth as I see it, I think you already know that we'll find nothing. You're not doing this because you want to see Michael again. Why should you? He's your *history*. If you'd wanted him, you would have done this before now. No, you're doing this because of you. Something's changed and it's screwing you up inside, whatever it is. Your father, or Michael, I don't know. But *something*. And don't try to say I'm wrong. For God's sake, Craig, I've been in this business too long to believe you. You've been lying to me in all sorts of ways ever since we met, and the only reason I don't walk away is because I don't think it's me you're trying to deceive. Anyway, if you were trying to deceive me, I think you'd at least make the effort to be a damn sight better at it. I think you're actually trying to fool yourself. God alone knows what about."

He looked as if he were about to say something else, but Craig had had enough. "So what gives you the right to sit in judgment and be so bloody patronizing? If you say you know what I'm supposed to be thinking, why all the mystery? Why don't you simply tell me what it is? And, anyway, what makes you think you're so bloody perfect and never wrong anyway? Just because you're older than me doesn't mean *piss-all*. You don't know anything. And you're not so great either; just look at what happened at the club when we met. Just look...."

He trailed off, but Paul was up and facing him, a frown disfiguring his forehead and hands clenched into fists. "What do you mean? What happened at the club?"

Craig swallowed, but the words wouldn't go away. It felt that if he let them go, then he might be lighter. Freer. Maybe even safe.

"You," he whispered, but he could tell Paul could hear him perfectly. "You were desperate, weren't you? I mean, I don't go clubbing much, not anymore, but even I could tell you were desperate. Taking whatever was on offer from the moment you walked in. People—the barman even—were laughing about it. It's not that you're not good-looking, because Christ knows you are. But God, you were so fucking lonely you might as well have been wearing a banner with it on."

As Craig stared at Paul, his face spasmed as if he'd slapped him. He had no idea what Paul would do next and with all his heart he wished he'd never spoken.

"It's true," Paul said quietly. "That night I met you, I was the loneliest I've ever been. And the most alone. I would have taken anything, Craig. Any sex that came my way. I did too. You weren't the only man I had sex with that night. And hey, maybe it's true what they say, that like calls to like. Because I wasn't the only screwed-up, desperate bastard out hunting in the club. Was I?"

"You had sex with someone else?" His other words slipped Craig by, though he knew he'd worry over them later. "Who?"

"A whore. I paid him."

"When?"

He blinked and half-shrugged. "Oh for God's sake, what does it matter? I...."

"When?" Without thinking, Craig pushed him back against the wall. "You fucking well tell me when."

A moment's silence and then Paul smiled. With his mouth only.

"After you," he said. "In the morning, after you'd gone, I went back into the club. I still needed to come properly, didn't I? And I...."

Before he could finish whatever *bastard* things he might have been about to say, Craig had raised his hand. Aimed a slap at his bloody, *bloody* mouth. But Paul was too quick for him.

Grabbing his arm, Paul twisted it so he gasped and, at the same time, kicked Craig's legs out from under him. He fell heavily but brought Paul down with him too, tearing at his hair and his face with his free hand. Paul swore softly and rolled him over until he was halfkneeling across Craig's body, forcing him to be still. For a while Craig struggled against him, but it didn't do any good—the more he struggled, the more it hurt. Paul was stronger and had the advantage of being on top. To his shame, Craig realized he was crying. When he stopped fighting Paul, he eased back a little.

"Fuck it," Paul whispered, his hands still holding Craig down but now no longer hurting him. "I'm sorry. I lied to you; it was before you. I did the whore at the club before you. I'm telling the truth now. Or rather he did me. He sucked me off. I didn't touch him anywhere. Not the way I touched you. I needed it. I can't explain now, but I needed it. It won't happen again. I haven't been with anyone apart from you since you at the club. Haven't wanted to either. Even the times we're quick, it's been good."

By now Craig couldn't see him properly for the crying but he managed to nod. He felt two more of Paul's breaths on his cheek and then his boyfriend rolled off him. For a while they lay together panting, hands still touching.

It was Paul who spoke first.

"For God's sake anyway," he whispered. "How the hell did we get here? I'm not a violent man, I swear it, but please, Craig, why don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

Craig took a shuddering breath of his own. His head was packed with crimson and his thoughts were no longer those he could handle. When he spoke, he didn't recognize himself.

"I think I killed him," he said. "I must have done. I killed Michael."

## 13

CONFESSION was never good for the soul, no matter what his father said. But feeling the words slipping off his tongue after seven years of ignoring them made something come free; Craig found he couldn't stop.

"I killed him," he said again. "I must have done. I lied to Eva. What else could I do? One moment Michael was there, like I told you before. The next he wasn't and I was gone. That's not everything though. There's something I didn't tell you. I don't like to think about it. My father was carrying something when he surprised us. God knows what, something from one of the tractors, I think. Whatever, it was long and hard. He hit me on the shoulder with it. He was going to do it again but I punched him, managed to get it off him, tried to hit him back. Michael got in the way. After that, everything's hazy. I must have hit Michael and then got knocked out somehow. I don't know. Whatever. Michael's dead and I'm a fucking murderer. My father must have hidden the body afterwards. I must have just lost it, just for a second, and now Michael's dead. I hoped he might be alive, but he's not, he's not. And now my father's coming after me, and maybe it's not because I'm gay. Maybe it's because of what I did, and what he did to cover it up. God knows, Paul, I've tried to forget it over the years, but I can't. Not anymore, not after Eva. Not after what she said."

He stopped then, even though he thought he wouldn't. He thought he would go on forever and ever, talking and talking until there were no words left and the whole world was still. But he was panting too hard now to speak at all. Thank goodness he was simply staring up at the ceiling, not facing anyone, certainly not Paul. He took a strange kind of comfort from the dirty white paintwork, the swirl of the brushstrokes leading to the corner where one lone spider lurked in its web. Safe. For that moment, Craig envied it.

Paul's fingers closed more firmly over his own.

"You don't know that for sure," he said. "You can't."

"Maybe not, but I remember Michael's face just in front of mine and then there was blood. I had whatever my father had brought with him in *my* hand and a second later there was blood. What the hell else am I supposed to think? What do *you* think, I mean *really* think?" Craig sat up. Stared at Paul. He couldn't read his boyfriend's expression.

Paul withdrew his hand and sighed. "I don't know. But it's important not to jump to conclusions. We have a row—our first—, you lose your temper, aim a not very good slap at me and then you tell me you're capable of killing someone? Someone you loved? It's hard to know what to say, Craig."

"Everyone's capable of killing, aren't they? Isn't that what you people say?"

Paul shrugged. "Well, *sort* of. You shouldn't believe everything you read in the Sundays. Or even what you see on TV. Because, trust me, when it actually comes to it, murder isn't as easy as you imagine."

"Why not?"

"Look, let's sit down first. Let's talk like normal people about it. Okay?"

Craig nodded and Paul dragged one of the two comfy chairs over to his desk. When he motioned Craig to sit, he obeyed. Then Paul perched himself on the desk edge.

"From what you're telling me," he said, "you remember it like this: Your father tried to hit you with this weapon, whatever it was. You got hold of it and you tried to hit him. Am I right so far?" Craig nodded. He was unable to speak at all.

"Okay. Then while you're doing that, you remember seeing Michael and then there's blood. After that you remember...?"

"Nothing," Craig whispered. "Between that and waking up in my bed, like I told you, I don't remember anything."

"So you must have been knocked out. Or knocked yourself out somehow."

"Yes, I suppose so."

A short silence. Then Paul folded his arms, looked down at the floor. He was frowning.

"There are always other explanations, Craig," he said. "I don't think you should discount them."

"Such as...?"

"I don't know yet," was the reply. "But I think you owe it to yourself and to me to find out."

AT home in the flat that night, Craig thought about what Paul had said. Thought about him too, and was glad he'd seen his boyfriend's office. It seemed to matter somehow. He hoped he'd see Paul's flat soon too, if he allowed it. When they'd parted Paul had been cagey, even distant. Not that Craig could blame him, not after the fear he'd confessed to, the act he might have done.

Craig promised himself he'd think about that later though. Right now he had Maddy to deal with. It was time to be truthful.

After his explanation, which wasn't exactly brief, she cupped her chin in her hands on the table and gazed at him.

"So," she said, "you think you murdered your lover, even if accidentally, and ran away, leaving your father to face the consequences. Then you changed your name and dodged the long arm of the law for seven years?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

Maddy's eyes widened. "God, Craig, I think we both need a drink."

He took the beer she offered and gulped it down. She did the same with her wine.

"But if that's the case," Maddy continued, "if that's the case and your father buried Michael's body under the patio or whatever, why the hell go searching for him again anyway?"

Craig drew in a deep breath and tried to explain. "I thought if I found Michael was alive after all, then I wouldn't need to worry about it anymore. Since my father's been missing, it's like something inside me has changed. I want to find out what the hell went on, if what I was imagining was real. Or just some terrible nightmare that's been following me around all these years. If Michael was alive, then everything would be fine and I'd be free of it."

"But now you can't find him? What happens now?"

"I don't know, Maddy. Paul seems to have some idea about what to do next, but I simply don't know."

His best friend was saved from any follow-up from this by the sound of the front door opening. Julie was back.

"Hello, people." Julie swept into the kitchen, all pressed maroon suit, pinned-up hair, and high-heeled shoes. "What's happening tonight then?"

Unsure how the hell to answer that, Craig stared blankly at Julie. "God. Pass. I'll let Maddy deal with that one."

Maddy gave herself a little shake and took a deep breath. "Well, it's like this, Julie: Craig thinks he might have accidentally killed that boyfriend he had when he was seventeen and has been hoping to find him alive and well and living in Muswell Hill so he could prove that he was wrong. However, with Michael still missing, that's not so easy. On the other hand, Paul believes that's not the only explanation, so they're going to find out what might have happened. Somehow. And I'm hoping to God that my best friend hasn't got himself into some serious mess. Though honestly if you have, Craig, I'll stand by you. You know that, don't you?"

With that, Maddy turned back to him, her face crumpled with concern, and Craig hugged her. She smelled of soap and wine.

"Thanks," he whispered.

Julie sat down. Suddenly. She pursed her lips and gazed at Craig, raising one eyebrow, almost as if she were assessing him. Then she glanced at Maddy.

"Tell me everything again," she said. "But in a minute. I need a nettle tea after that. Though on second thoughts, how about Chinese? Then we can talk."

That sounded like the best idea yet today, and Maddy already had the menu out of the drawer before Craig could finish his offer of picking up the tab for them all. Half an hour or so later, when they'd phoned through their order and after Craig had filled Julie in properly with an overview of just what the hell was going on, he slipped on his jacket and headed out into downtown Crouch End.

"Are you going to be all right?" Julie called after him. "Do you want company? Or one of us can go?"

"No, it's fine. Honestly I think I need to clear my head."

She nodded. "That's understandable. I know this is going to sound crass, but try not to worry about it too much. Between the four of us, we'll find out what went on and we'll deal with whatever it was. All right?"

"All right." He smiled his thanks as he clicked shut the door. "I won't be long."

Outside, turning his collar up to keep warm, Craig stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked past the gaggle of shops and top flats and people. The smell of curry wafted out of the Indian restaurant on the corner, mixing with the petrol fumes. Groups of teenagers lurked under the streetlights, giggling and texting each other. The beginning of the night.

In the Chinese restaurant, he sat waiting for a few moments for their order to be found. The tiny woman behind the counter looked harassed and her hair was coming down. Leaving her be while she sorted herself out, Craig gazed around the waiting area. Not that there was much to look at: red and gold walls, a paper lantern, three copies of the local rag. Nothing he hadn't already seen.

So he stared out of the window instead, trying to take some of the takeaway restaurant's warmth inside his bones to last him the journey home.

After a few seconds of seeing yet more of the Crouch End *it's the start of the night so let's go out and be in it* zone activity, he felt his jaw clench and his skin turn cold. For a second or two outside time, he wasn't in the Chinese place, in Crouch End or in London at all. But at another place, hundreds of miles away.

"Meester Robertson?"

The voice of the counter girl pierced his senses and Craig stepped back from the window. He didn't drop his gaze though, didn't turn around to her.

"Meester Robertson, your order."

"Wait, wait," he panted. "Give me a moment."

And then he was out of the door. The chill and sounds of the night cut into his head and London wrapped itself around him once again. The man he was watching—the man he'd spotted from the window of the restaurant—wasn't looking at Craig. He was trying to light a cigarette and fending off a passing tramp, the same tramp who had pulled the man's hood off as Craig stood looking out at him. The man's hair was gray and he was balding, his forehead clearly visible under the streetlights. Square chin and a long thin nose. If Craig was able to get close enough, he would see brown eyes—the same color as his own—and an old faded scar on his cheek from a long-distant farming accident.

Because he knew without a doubt this time. He knew it was his father.



CROUCHING back against the corner of the wall, Craig peered out at him. His father was definitely alive, then, and he could stop wondering about how far the Jerusalem Pentecostal Fellowship was prepared to go in their mission to save the world. In truth, he thought, he shouldn't have to be doing this. He was a bloody model, a bit-part actor, not a detective. This was Paul's job. Where was the friendly neighbourhood PI when he really, *really* needed him?

Still he watched to see what his father would do. Craig knew he would follow him. Whatever he ended up doing. Screw the Chinese. It could wait.

After a few moments, his father got rid of the tramp. Craig felt sorry for the homeless old man for a heartbeat or two and then he pressed himself against the wall so his father wouldn't see him. There were no streetlights here so he was likely to be safe. What would his father do when he realized his son wasn't in the restaurant anymore?

After ten minutes, he found out.

His father looked at his watch, glanced around, then down at his watch again. A second later, he strode across the road, heedless of the

cars that slammed to a halt and roared their disapproval at him, and disappeared into the bright lights and spices of the Red Sun.

Craig held his breath. This was stupid, he told himself again. They weren't in some weird 1950s film; he should simply go and confront him, ask his father what the hell he was playing at. That would be the sensible thing to do. It was what other sons would do, without even questioning it. But he just couldn't do it; something shifting at the edges of his thought wouldn't let him. This was his father. The religious obsessive, the man who'd lived by prayer and God's word for his whole life and had forced his son to do the same for as long as possible. Craig would have to be careful. He couldn't trust him.

He couldn't trust him. There it was: a given in his life and the key to so many doors Craig found impossible to open. Because if he did, then he... no, couldn't think that way. No time for that now.

His father came out of the Chinese restaurant. As the door opened, Craig gained the impression of anger, something in the tension of the older man's body and the dismissive gesture he made with his hand. Bloody hell, how Craig recognized those.

He headed off in the direction of Craig's flat, his head moving from side to side. Searching for someone, searching for his son. Craig set off after him, keeping far enough behind so if his father turned around, he wouldn't see him, amongst the crowds drifting through Crouch End tonight. At least that was what he hoped he was doing, but it was bloody hard to say. How did people do this stuff? He needed help.

Feet focused on keeping up with his quarry and eyes fixed on the distant back of his father's head, Craig flipped his mobile open and keyed in Paul's number. He answered at once.

"Craig? Hello. I was just—"

He cut him off. "Paul, hello back. No time to chat. I'm following someone. What should I be doing?"

"What? Who are you following?"

"My father," he hissed into the phone as he kept on walking, though he didn't know why he thought anyone near him might care enough to hear. "He's alive. I'm in Crouch End, at the Chinese. Well,

not at it now, really. I saw him. I slipped out of the restaurant while he wasn't looking and now I'm following to see where he ends up. If it isn't at mine. The thing is: I'm not good at this stuff. Have you got any tips?"

From the other end of the line came a muffled snort. "What do you want? Ten easy ways to keep your victim in sight? How to avoid looking suspicious while tracking your man?"

"No." Craig sighed and would have raised his eyes skyward if he'd dared look anywhere but at the man he was determined not to lose. Not this time and not if he could help it. "No, but one or two pointers might be nice."

"Okay." A pause. Then, "Do you want me to come and help?"

"No. Thanks but I need to do this on my own, Paul."

From nowhere, the conversation had suddenly taken an extra step to a place Craig hadn't anticipated. So it echoed the rest of his evening then. But still he was glad Paul hadn't asked why he was doing this.

"As you wish," Paul said, his voice more formal now. "In that case, keep an eye on him, anticipate where he might go—though be prepared in case he doesn't do what you think—and don't be tempted to get too close. Even if there are lots of people around. Apart from that, it's not really that difficult, especially if he doesn't expect to be followed."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Oh, and Craig?"

"Yes?"

"Ring me wherever he ends up, or if you lose him. Okay?"

"Okay."

By the time he'd broken the connection, his father and he were passing the flat. Or rather he was pausing opposite it and Craig was trying to look inconspicuous near some trashcans. Honestly, but this trailing people job was weird. He wondered how Paul felt when he did it. They stayed there for ten minutes or so. He must have thought Craig had left the Chinese restaurant while he was dealing with the tramp and

was now indoors enjoying the fruit of his hard-earned cash with Maddy and Julie. Actually, he wished he was. The cold was beginning to get to him, in spite of the jacket, and his stomach was rumbling. He was surprised the old bastard couldn't hear it, even from this distance.

He also wondered what his friends were thinking about where he'd got to, and at that very moment the phone began to vibrate in his jeans pocket. Thank goodness he usually kept it on silent mode. He never liked to hear it ring. He eased it out and glanced at the screen. Yes, it was Maddy. Craig was debating whether or not to answer it, bearing in mind that there were fewer people around here so he was more exposed when his father pushed himself away from the wall he'd been leaning against and headed off toward the main road.

Switching the phone off completely and hoping Maddy would forgive him, one day, Craig slipped it back into his pocket and followed him. At the same time it started to drizzle and he pulled his collar up to protect his neck.

Reaching the main road, the two of them turned right toward Hornsey Rise and continued walking, with Craig dodging people and dog shit as best he could. He found himself having to close the gap between them, in spite of the risk. He didn't want to lose his father. He might be heading to wherever he was staying and Craig needed to know where that was. That would, he knew, give him the advantage in whatever weird game they were playing. Bloody hell. Families. Was anyone's normal?

No time for philosophy here though. Just as he'd gotten used to the challenge of following his father along the Rise, he turned sharp right into one of the side streets and disappeared. Heart beating fast, Craig pushed through a group of women, an act of bravery that gained him a stream of abuse and one or two piercing catcalls, and reached the corner where he'd vanished. Here, the streetlights were minimal and the shadows deeper.

For a few moments, Craig hesitated between the need not to lose his father and the need not to be seen. If he plunged into the unknown, his father had a better chance of spotting him. He glanced from side to side. Nobody back on the main street was looking at him. Any decision he made was utterly irrelevant to their lives. Just do it, Craig. Why the

hell was he so afraid of his father anyway? He was an adult now. There should be nothing to fear.

But even as he tried to reassure himself that those words were true, he knew he didn't believe it. *Vital not to lose him then*. The advantage he had was so very slight.

He stepped into the comparative darkness. Behind him the noise of the street, the cars, the people, even the smell and sweat of the city seemed to drift away. In front, he could see only a few scatterings of groups here and there, none of them obviously containing his father. He could have gone inside any of the flats here; he could be hiding, having spotted Craig after all. He could....

And then Craig saw him. The right height, dark jacket, hood pulled up, shoulders hunched against the rain that was now coming down in earnest. More than all that, the steady walk of a farmer. Something Craig never saw in London. Or rarely. At the end of the street they were in, his father headed left.

Craig half-ran after him, nearly slipping on something on the pavement he didn't like to name. No time to worry about the noise his shoes might make. With any luck, the rain would deaden the sound.

As he turned the corner in his father's wake, Craig could see he was bearing right where the road divided. *Archway*, he thought, *he's going to Archway*. Was he living there? That was too damn close. Or maybe he was going to pick up the Tube and go hell knows where? Craig hoped not. It would be much more difficult to track him on the Tube. Surely his father would see him there. Then what would happen? He didn't like to think.

So he followed him down St. John's Way toward the dirt and despair of Archway. His quarry didn't head for the Underground though, and Craig felt the tightness in his shoulder muscles ease a little. But not enough. Instead, his father strode across the main road, once again not minding the cars and buses, and Craig had to run after him. A cyclist nearly hit him and waved his fist in Craig's direction. In spite of the noise, Craig didn't dare shout an apology. He simply kept his eyes fixed as much as possible on his father.

A few twistings and turnings later down yet more side streets and their strange journey came to an end. His father hesitated outside a rundown newsagent's that seemed, even in the darkness, as if it hadn't been open for years, and glanced about him. At once Craig turned away and tried to look as if he were searching for a key, praying that his father wouldn't see him and confront him.

When he looked back, his father had gone. He took a deep breath and blinked away rain, which was easing off at last. Where the hell had he disappeared to? The newsagent's was most definitely shut and he hadn't had time to go anywhere else. Craig hurried across the road and stared in at the windows. Nothing to see, of course, and no hint of movement. Trying the door didn't help either. It was padlocked and though the lock was rusty it held when he tugged it.

What now then? He should have asked Paul what he did when he lost a trail, rather than worry too much about how to do the damn job. Still cursing under his breath, he turned around to scan the street behind again just in case, and that was when he saw it.

A side passage, almost hidden by shrubs, separated the shop in front from the next building along. He slipped along it, trying to tread as carefully as possible, though at first glance it looked to be empty. On the left, a line of light framed a doorway, and he heard a woman's high-pitched laughter, followed by a burst of conversation he couldn't catch.

One of the voices was his father's.

His father's voice. Craig hadn't heard him speak in seven years. Part of him had hoped he'd never hear him speak again. But now here his father was in the middle of London, on a rainy night, talking to a woman Craig didn't know. He found he was trembling and had to remind himself to breathe. He pressed closer to the door. It was half-open. He needed to see his father. Properly. In the light. Whoever it was in there with him would realize soon how cold it was and then shut the door so his chance would be gone. Fists clenched, he eased the door open a little wider.

"... so how much then?" This from his father, his gruff Devon accent wrenching Craig back to his childhood as if he'd never left it. "Don't try to haggle with your price. You're a sinner, worthless in the

eyes of the Lord. Damned to hell. I show you mercy when I pay you anything at all."

As he spoke, he stepped backward where Craig could see him clearly. For a moment, he was seventeen again, desperate to leave but with nowhere to go. Until Michael and whatever had happened to him changed it all. Now Craig could see how much his father had aged—the Devon sun and the life he led had wrinkled his skin as if someone had scored line marks across his face. He looked dirty, unshaven. He probably smelled too.

As Craig took in his father's appearance, the woman he'd been talking with moved into his sightline. A bottle blonde, mid-forties, with a short leather skirt and a red satin top that barely covered her breasts. She stretched out her hand as Craig's father reached for his wallet.

"Hey, bloody cold in here, ain't it?" she said.

Before he escaped into the darkness and toward home, Craig wondered how long his father had been paying for it like this and whether that had added to the reasons for his mother's departure.

## 15

"THESE things happen, Craig. Even to the best of us. At least he's alive. And you can't know for sure whether he'd have been doing the same when your mother was living with you." Paul flashed Craig a smile that was at most uncertain as he poured the beer the waiter at Pizza Hut had just handed him. Hey, never say they weren't the last of the big spenders here in downtown north London. Craig ran one hand through his hair. Thinking like that, of course, meant he needn't think about what was going through Paul's mind at the moment. His boyfriend had earlier implied that what Craig had remembered didn't necessarily mean he'd killed someone, but was he just saying this now about his father only in order to make him feel better? Craig couldn't be sure.

"No," he admitted, "but it felt like a scene I'd been part of before. Well, not the actual scene, just the sense of it. Don't ask me how. I don't know. It's just that sometimes I get...."

It was hard to describe what it was that he "got." All his life, jumbled pictures had filled his brain, most often when he was tired or under pressure. He'd long since given up trying to interpret them. In fact he'd managed most of the time to ignore them. He didn't know whether they were real or simply dreams. Things he'd picked up from

other people or from the atmosphere in the house he grew up in. Something edgy, strange, that didn't quite fit. Though of course most of that could simply be the religious obsession his father had had, and the way Craig had never felt comfortable with it.

"You get a feeling of déjà vu?" Paul finished the sentence as he leaned back in his chair and gazed at Craig. He was beginning to learn that was a habit with Paul.

Craig shook his head. "Not quite, but near that. Sometimes I think I remember things but they don't make sense. When I'm waking up or dozing off, I'll get some kind of flashback in my head, but it's so jumbled that I can't work out whether whatever it is happened once, in the past, or if it's a mixture of memories. Or even if they're memories at all. It might be things other people have said. My own imagination even. I don't know. Of course that might be nothing at all to do with my father's double life. Who can tell? But it pisses me off, you know. All that bloody religion forced down my throat ever since I can remember, and all the time he's... well, he's doing God knows what."

Finding the need to swallow, he stopped. He'd never told anyone that much before, not even Maddy. He hadn't thought he'd been going to say it at all but he had. For a moment, the whitewashed walls around him with their modern prints vanished away and he was alone, in a world of his own making.

A subtle pressure on his hand brought him back. Paul's fingers on his. Craig blinked at him. He thought it might be the first time his boyfriend had touched him since his "confession." It felt good.

"It's okay," Paul said, leaning forward so the scent of his aftershave drifted over Craig. "We can't change our parents, though God knows at times we all wish we could. It's not your fault. And as for the memory blanks, sometimes things happen. When we're young. Difficult stuff. And we remember it in different ways. It's normal. Part of life."

Taking courage, Craig turned over Paul's hand where it lay under his, felt the warmth of Paul's flesh on his palm. He wanted to kiss him, but was afraid to, here, in the restaurant. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass his boyfriend, especially with things being tricky right now, or get them chucked out. Lord only knew what the sexual equality opinions of Pizza Hut were, and now wasn't the time to ask. Stop it, Craig. Be serious about stuff, for God's sake.

"Thank you," he said. And then, suddenly, something like revelation swept over him. "Do you have that too, Paul? Bad memories of things from when you were young?"

After Craig had spoken, he thought Paul might withdraw his hand but in the end he didn't.

"Sometimes," he said at last, glancing up before staring down at Craig's arm again. "Sometimes. You see, I...."

When he trailed off, Craig waited for a moment before saying, "Yes? What is it?"

He saw Paul swallow before speaking. "When I was young, I lost my sister. I still miss her even now. She was snatched by someone. I was six and she was nine. She was never found. The family was never the same afterwards. Well, you can imagine. Sometimes I get flashbacks, things which might have happened then but I can't be sure about. I saw a counselor for a while, though I've stopped seeing him now. He helped me work out that the things I think I know might not be fact, but just stuff I hoped for and wanted to happen. It's hard to tell truth from what our minds make up, that's all."

Breaking Craig's hold on him, Paul looked away and Craig saw his jaw working as he tried not to cry. The waiter chose that moment to bring them their order—salad for Craig as he'd eaten too much lately and needed to be careful, and a four cheese pizza for Paul. They waited in silence for the man to deliver the food and leave. It seemed to take forever but at last they were alone again.

"What was your sister's name?" Craig asked him. He couldn't think of what else to say.

"Teresa," Paul replied, with a quick smile that vanished almost before it was there.

"Tell me about her"

Over the next hour or so, while they toyed with their main courses, ordered desserts and didn't eat those either, he did. As he was talking, the pieces of the jigsaw that appeared whenever Craig thought about him—the way he looked, whoever it was Paul reminded him of, the story he was now telling in fact—came together and he realized what he should have realized a long time ago.

Paul was the son of Jonathan Maloney, the judge everyone had heard of—even Craig had heard of him, for goodness sake—and the man the media seemed to call on whenever any kind of legal issue needed a sound bite and someone to say it. Bloody hell, Craig had even caught a glimpse of him on TV recently and still hadn't made the connection. He was the darling of the BBC and had hosted a series early last year on the law and the people. It had been a hit. As he looked at his boyfriend now, Craig could see how like his father he was: same hooded eyes, same thin wolfish face. Really, it was obvious. He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid as to miss it.

And the story Paul was telling him—slowly, and with several stops and starts—was one that most people knew of, though Judge Maloney never talked about it. The missing daughter, the estranged son. A family privacy guarded. Fiercely. And he, Paul, the man Craig was beginning to love, was part of it all. And still feeling the aftermath.

Paul finished his story. Pushing their plates to one side, Craig took hold of both his hands. He didn't care what the restaurant might think

"I'm sorry about your sister," he said. "It's a stupid, pointless thing to say, but I am. I'm also sorry about... telling you what I'm afraid might have happened seven years ago. God, that can't be making your life any easier either."

Paul smiled, took a long breath in, as if gathering his strength again. "Thank you. That means something. But I'm glad you told me, Craig, about Michael and... everything. You're right: it makes things difficult. And to be honest I'm not sure what to think, but I want to help you find out, if we can, and whatever the result might be. Now we can locate your father and see what he knows, the truth will be a whole lot easier to get to. If the truth is something you think you can deal with, that is."

A long silence followed. This is real, Craig thought, real in a way he hadn't had to consider before. His head was full of haziness. Finally he nodded

"All right," Paul said. "Let's leave it there for now. Though, speaking of fathers, I also see it's suddenly dawned on you who my father is. You've got that look."

"Which is...?" Craig asked, relieved for the lighter turn in a conversation that had suddenly grown in intensity.

"A strange combination of confusion, followed by disbelief, followed by a sudden readjustment. Don't worry. I'm not blaming you, but I get it all the time and—"

"And you're amazed at how long it's taken this airhead model to get to that point of realization?"

Paul laughed, squeezed Craig's hands before letting go. "You're not an airhead. Don't put yourself down. And anyway, it's been refreshing. You like me for me, never mind whose son I am. That's nice "

Craig shrugged, understanding the subject of Paul's sister was now closed. "Glad to be of service, in some way."

"Always. But, God, what an evening for revelation it's being. What the hell are we going to do for an encore?"

"Easy. Let's go clubbing."

They ended up not going to the club where they'd first met, but another one a couple of streets along. The music was just as cheesy though and the beer nearly as bad. This time, Craig bought. Heck, the money his agent owed him had come through only last week. It was about time he spent the ruddy stuff. On a weekday night, the crowd wasn't large, not so early in the evening, and it was easy to grab a table. Even better, one more secluded than the others—but whether that was because of a style decision or because they'd forgotten to change the light bulb it was hard to say. The moment they'd downed most of the first bottle, he grabbed Paul's arm and gestured to the dance floor. It wasn't empty and there was no point talking. Neither of them wanted to and, in any case, the music made it impossible.

A couple of seconds later and Paul was under the flashing lights and in his arms. Craig could smell that aftershave he always wore, wondered if he wore it for him now. He'd told Paul often enough how much he liked it. The heat of him made Craig's skin tingle and he rested his head on Paul's shoulder, kissed his neck. Through the jeans, Craig felt him grow hard. His own prick was already rubbing against his zip. He didn't want to rush anything though, not now. He wanted to treasure each second, just as long as he knew that he'd get to be with Paul at the end of the night.

They moved together to the beat of the music and Paul ran his fingers through Craig's hair before lifting his face up and opening his lips with his tongue. His boyfriend tasted of beer and warmth. Craig pulled him closer and they continued to dance, still kissing.

When—or if—the music changed, Craig didn't hear it. The dance floor got more crowded, the bar became more slippery each time they renewed their drinks, but he kept Paul's body as close to his own as possible, feeling as much of him as he could get to without actually having him here and now. In full view of whichever bugger might choose to look and not caring who knew it. Just how it was before, just how they'd first had sex. Honestly, sometimes Paul made him feel as if nothing else mattered.

It was past midnight when Craig reached breaking point. Early days to leave a nightclub but this time he knew he didn't want to have Paul somewhere public. It mattered too much. So, extricating himself from his grip as much as he could bear, Craig danced him through the bodies surrounding them and eased him toward where he remembered the exit to be

Paul came with him willingly, dropping their two bottles onto a nearby table as they passed it and laughing at the three blokes sitting there. One of them wearing a scarlet shirt slashed to the waist raised his fist and gave them a thumbs-up sign. Craig hoped he didn't need it.

At the door, near the bouncer, Paul whispered in his ear, "What do you want then, Craig? Do you want to talk to me?"

"No," he said, taking Paul's head and turning to face him, looking into his eyes. "No. I want to fuck you. Hard enough for you to remember and slow enough for you to not want it to end. I don't know if I can do that for you, Paul, but I want to try."

He'd spoken slowly and clearly and hadn't whispered. Even though the music was still buzzing in his ears and in his head, Craig knew the bouncer would have heard. And not only him but the blokes trailing through into the club from the outdoors; he could see no one going in the other direction but themselves. They would have heard too. Craig didn't care and he wanted his boyfriend to know it.

Paul released him. He could hear someone snort, say something mocking that Craig imagined the bouncer quelled, but all that was irrelevant. He simply kept on looking at Paul and watched the teasing leave his eyes. To be replaced with something he couldn't interpret. Confusion? Uncertainty? Maybe even respect somewhere in that. If he was lucky.

"Okay," Paul said when Craig had almost got to the point when he thought he might have lost him and the two of them would be standing there forever until the end of bloody time. "Okay. That sounds like a plan to me. After tonight, I think we both need it. So let's do it then"

Then Paul smiled, the bouncer laughed, and time began moving again. Outside, it was bloody *freezing* but Paul opened his fleece, pulled Craig inside it so they were bundled up together, and rubbed his hands until they were warm again.

"I don't know," he said. "Bloody *models*. So busy making a killing with the way they look that they can't even choose something decent to wear in winter. Have you not heard of coats?"

"D-don't suit me," Craig shivered. "Anyway, I don't model for coats. The p-people I work for like a bit of flesh on show."

"Yeah. Well. They're not the only ones. Talking of which, whatever happened to the leathers and chains you were wearing when I first met you? I've never seen them since."

"I rented them," Craig replied. "Thought it was a fetish night at the club that night. It wasn't though, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

They began laughing and the fleece all but fell off, but Paul caught it in time. Even the cold wasn't stopping Craig from feeling as horny as hell, and he hoped that was true for Paul too.

"Tube and walk to mine then?" he said, but Paul shook his head.

"No. Bus and mine. It's time you stayed over with me."

STEPPING inside Paul's Hackney flat felt as if Craig was crossing a border. They hadn't spoken much on the bus ride to his home. He worried that if he said anything, Paul might change his mind. Craig's erection was still rubbing against his jeans—stupid choice really for a night of clubbing, but he hadn't intended to go—and he hoped he could last out for the promises he'd made. When Paul's hand had brushed against his leg, either by accident or design, Craig had almost jumped. Really, in spite of all his brave words, he could look like an idiot sometimes. Why couldn't he ever be suave and sophisticated when this bloke was around?

Now, as Paul let him in and switched on the light, Craig found his heart was beating fast and his head was buzzing. Probably the aftermath of the club, but it still felt right. Even though his hard-on had subsided a little. Paul showed him into his living room, clutching the fleece. Craig stared around, took in the dark cream sofa with its pale blue throw, the glass coffee table, the scattering of newspapers sliding off it onto the carpet. Beyond all this stood a fireplace and mantelpiece with a pair of Staffordshire dogs. And Craig only knew that because he'd watched some antiques program with the girls last week. It didn't seem very like the Paul he was coming to know, so he took a closer look

"Yes." Paul gave him an embarrassed grin. "They are Staffordshire dogs. And yes I know it's maybe not what you expected, but they were a present from my mother."

"I didn't mean—"

"It's okay. Everyone notices them when they come here." As he spoke, his face darkened and he turned away.

Craig wanted nothing more then but to hold him. But he sensed Paul couldn't handle that just now.

"I'm not everyone," he said instead. "I'm not whoever's been here before, done stuff to you. I'm not your past, Paul, though I

suppose I'm probably the product of mine. For better or worse. Anyway, I'm me. The dogs are fine. I like surprises."

A couple of seconds later, Paul's groin was thrusting into his, bringing his erection up to full strength again, and Craig's tongue was halfway down Paul's throat. He still tasted of beer. How Craig loved beer. The weight of him slammed Craig back into the mantelpiece and he thanked God the ruddy fire wasn't on. At the same time, he felt something cold and hard fall onto his shoulder. With a moan and still kissing Paul as if his life depended on it, Craig let go of his hair where he'd been stroking it and reached back, trying to grasp at whatever it was. The dog, it was one of the dogs, he realized. He pushed it back, praying it wouldn't break.

Paul broke away, murmuring, "Leave it. It's fine. Don't worry."

"But I—"

"Just fuck me," he said. "Like you said. Please."

With a glance to see that the wretched dog was safe—it was—he steered Paul over toward the door, pushing him backward with his legs. "Where's your bedroom?"

"No time. Now. I can't wait."

As he spoke, Paul pulled his shirt upward and off and flung it away. Burying his head at the curve of his boyfriend's shoulder and running his hands down his spine, Craig pushed him onto the floor. They narrowly missed the coffee table. Turning him around and easing the condoms from his back pocket, he struggled with Paul's belt while undoing his own zipper.

"I-I can't...," Craig stammered, cursing when he couldn't unhook him quickly enough.

"I'll do it." Paul released himself in seconds, and they both pulled his trousers down. Somehow he must have slipped off his shoes when Craig wasn't paying attention. Finally Craig's zipper was free. At once his cock sprung upward, tip already glistening.

Hands trembling and still cursing his own slowness, Craig managed to get the condom on at last. Then, in the absence of anything else, he spat on his fingers, wiped the spit over himself, and pushed inside Paul.

He'd thought this would be a quick one, everything over in seconds so they could do it more slowly the second time. And maybe on a bed too. Paul's carpet wasn't the most comfortable place he'd ever had sex, and Craig couldn't imagine it was any better for him. He'd thought it would be quick. He was wrong.

Once he was inside him, Paul grabbed his hand, which had just closed around his cock, and forced Craig to be still.

"No, not yet," he whispered. "Lie with me for a bit instead before you see to me. Will you? Just lie with me."

"Okay."

Everything stopped then, or at least slowed down. He lay with Paul, right arm pressed against the floor, cock quivering inside his boyfriend as every now and then Paul clenched his arse, left leg draped over his. Through his T-shirt, Craig could feel every part of Paul's back against his chest, could smell the faint herbal scent of his hair, could taste that aftershave of his when he kissed his neck. He wasn't sure how long he could hold on without coming or why his boyfriend had suddenly changed the mood of what they were doing, but he realized he liked it. He liked being here with Paul now. No, it was more than that. As he'd told him already. He loved being here with him now. Whatever happened after. Words Craig wanted to say filled his mouth but he swallowed them down. They wouldn't make sense anyway and, besides, being here was enough.

Gradually, other things drifted into his consciousness: the slow ticking of a clock; the gurgle of a radiator; the distant hum of what might have been a night bus passing in the street. And as always, the sensations flowing in deep waves over his body as he lay poised between enjoyment and release.

At last, though he couldn't tell how long they'd lain there in silence, Paul spoke. His voice was husky. It vibrated through him, as sexy as hell.

"Making love," he whispered. "Sometimes it's nicer than fucking, isn't it?"

As he spoke, his arse tightened, and he pushed back against Craig. Without warning or even the realization that it *could* happen like this, he was coming, his whole body—not just his cock—gripped in a current he could no longer control. As if from a great distance, he heard himself crying out, a high-pitched long moan that dissolved into sobs and almost-laughter. At the same time, Paul began pumping his own cock with Craig's hand and a moment later he felt hot spunk sliding through his fingers.

Craig swore softly in delight and collapsed behind him. He lay there, panting, unable to speak while Paul dealt with the condom, removing it from him, tying it safe and dropping it on a page of the newspaper on the carpet. Unable to take the smile from his face, the only thing Craig could do was watch him.

All the time, his mind was singing with the fact that what he'd thought would be a quick fuck hadn't been that at all. It had been something he'd never experienced before. Not even with... no, not now; he couldn't think of that now.

Paul stood up. He was naked and the long line of his body, even with its scars—the history of what he'd been through—made Craig swallow. Hard. He of course was still fully clothed, only his fly undone. Paul gazed down at him and stretched out his hand.

"Come to bed with me," he said.

His bedroom was small, comfortable. Light green walls and a large bed covered with a deep green duvet. It hadn't been made. Next to it, the bedside table was piled high with papers and one or two novels. Craig's gaze skittered over them, not resting for long on anything until he looked at Paul again.

"You're the first man who's been in here," Paul said, "since... since...."

"That bloke you split up with?" Craig's voice sounded strange, as if he'd been running for a long time. "The one who hurt you so much?"

Paul nodded, took a breath as if he might be going to say something else. Craig could see the tears in his eyes, and the way he was trying to hide them too.

"Well, I'm here now," he said softly. "And I know that what's been happening hasn't been easy, but please believe that, no matter what I might or might not have done in the past, I don't want to hurt you, Paul."

As he spoke, Craig reached up and stroked his face.

"Thank you," Paul said.

With that, he pushed Craig gently backward so the two of them fell, gasping, onto his duvet. Craig eased his shoes off, but when he started to grapple with the T-shirt, Paul shook his head, stopped him, and began kissing and licking the line of his stomach as he rolled the shirt up. He groaned and heard Paul chuckle. He continued to kiss Craig, drawing a line with his tongue from the belly button up toward the chest. It felt like fire on his skin.

By the time Paul reached his nipples, they were already hard and when he took the left one into his mouth, teeth grazing him, Craig groaned again. "God, Paul, I want—"

"Hush, I know. But wait for me. Can you do that? Can you wait for me?"

"Yes." The affirmation escaped his lips as he ran his fingers through Paul's hair, feeling the softness of it. In truth, he wasn't that sure. He *hoped* he could wait, but with *this man* sometimes any control he might have was shot to pieces. Even now Craig's cock was pressing against him. "I don't know. I *think* so."

This honesty brought another smile to Paul's lips as he glanced up. "Don't worry. It'll be okay. Trust me."

Still murmuring words of reassurance, he slipped Craig's T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Before he could bring his arms down again, Paul took hold of both his wrists, pinioning them together. Craig gasped and Paul's tongue met his, driving a path deep within his mouth. With his free hand, he stroked Craig's arms, shoulders, and neck. By now Paul was straddling his body, cock pushing against him. But all Craig could concentrate on was their lips, the way their mouths felt together. The slow suck of saliva, the occasional clash of teeth. When at last they stopped kissing, Craig's

chin and the sides of his mouth were wet and he was gasping for air. And for more of him.

"Do you like that?" Paul whispered, tongue now teasing his ear. "Do you like that, Craig?"

"Yes."

Smiling, he freed his wrists and Craig reached for his cock, but once again Paul stopped him. "No. This time I'm doing it to *you*, remember? All you have to do is enjoy it."

"I—"

He silenced Craig with yet another kiss and then drew his lips upward, kissing his cheek, his nose, his eyes, his hair. And down again the other side of his face where he ran his tongue along Craig's neck, encircling his Adam's apple once, twice, then downward again to the nipples. Paul kissed every part of his chest and stomach until Craig's head felt dizzy and it was as if the two of them were alone, somewhere far away from London and all it contained. Alone and safe and in a place where their lovemaking could go on forever with no fear of disturbance. That would be so *good* and....

And he gasped again as he felt Paul lift up his arse and ease his jeans down over his legs. At the same time, his mouth encircled the tip of Craig's cock and then, cruelly, vanished as he struggled with removing the rest of the clothing.

"No," Craig moaned, squirming on the bed and trying, in vain, to help him. "Please, don't stop touching me."

Paul laughed as he finally freed him so Craig was as naked as he was. "God, you're demanding, but hey, I like that in a man. I like someone who knows what they want. So tell me, Craig, where do you want me to touch you the most?"

No contest there. "My cock. Touch my cock. Please."

"Soon. Not yet, but soon."

Then Paul disappeared and for a moment Craig had no idea where he'd gone, or why, but then he felt a warm tongue encircle his big toe before licking its way along the foot and around the instep—a sensation that made him cry out. No one had ever kissed him there before. He

half thought about objecting as surely all the sweat and dirt of the nightclub must still be upon him, but then the ability to speak left him entirely. He'd never realized it could feel so good. Paul worked his way up his leg, kissing his calf, his knee, his thigh inch by inch. As had happened in the living room, time slowed, and Craig could feel each touch of his hands, the regular warmth of breath on skin. This time he felt as if he was floating along a warm river, heading to the sea. With the sun overhead in a clear sky and the two of them once more the only people in the world.

Paul reached his cock. Craig hissed between his teeth but before his boyfriend could do what he longed for, he'd moved on, onto his other leg and down toward his foot.

"Wait," Paul whispered. "Wait."

Craig only hoped he could. Attempting to think of something else apart from his throbbing cock and the warm sea of kisses Paul was surrounding him in was proving difficult. He groaned again and half-rose from the bed to try to reach him.

Now Paul laughed. He placed his hands on Craig's legs and pushed them outward.

"Paul, Paul, please."

The next moment, Paul's mouth wrapped itself around his cock and Craig cried out as he came. Fire ripped through his blood. At the same time, the world around them shattered as the window exploded and something hard landed on the bed, just missing his arm.



"JESUS *Christ*, what...?"

Paul leapt off him, spunk glistening a stream down the side of his face, and pushed the two of them off the bed on the side away from the window. A second or two ticked by but nothing else happened. Only the sudden inrush of London traffic and freezing air.

"You okay?" Paul asked.

Craig nodded. "You?"

"Sure. What the hell was that anyway?"

Scrambling to a kneeling position, they both peered over the bed. Craig realized how stupid they must look. A brick with something white wrapped around it, held together by an elastic band, nestled on the green duvet.

Paul cursed. "Bloody hooligans. I've never had that happen before. Still, at least it wasn't a bloody bomb."

Craig raised his eyebrows that he could even think it might be and reached out for the would-be missile. Next to him, Paul slipped on a pair of sandals and made for the window.

"Careful of that glass," he warned as he skirted the bed.

"You too," Craig replied. "Anyway, they'll be long gone now, whoever they were, and shouldn't you put some clothes on?"

But already Paul was standing naked at the window edge, peering out, breathing heavily.

"What can you see?" Craig asked, clutching the brick, which he realized was wrapped in paper.

"Nothing and nobody, damn it," he replied, as Craig felt his shoulder muscles tense up. "Just one of those things, I suppose. Random "

But already Craig had ceased to listen. In his fingers, he held the paper he'd unwound. He read it carefully. And then he read it again.

"Not very random," he whispered.

"What?" Paul pulled the curtains closed and turned to face him. "What did you say?"

Staring at him, Craig thought how beautiful he was. And then understood how out of place that thought was.

"It's my father," he said. "Look."

With that, he spread out the paper on a part of the bed with no glass on it and gestured for Paul to read. He padded back around the bed to hunker down beside Craig and the two of them stared at the note:

> MEN COMMITTED INDECENT ACTS WITH OTHER MEN, AND RECEIVED THEMSELVES THE DUE PENALTY FOR THEIR PERVERSION (ROMANS 1:27)

"Bloody hell," Paul said. "That's your father?"

Craig nodded. "Yes, it's him. It's the sort of thing he'd quote. God, he used to quote it all the time, when I was a teenager. He'd know I'd remember "

As he spoke, a flash of disjointed images spun in his head: water running from the outside tap on the farm; his father's shadow; something red; something broken. He shook it away and, from nowhere, his throat was filled with laughter.

"Jesus," he spluttered, "this is crazy, isn't it? The whole thing's just crazy. I mean, look at me: I might be a murderer, my father's a lunatic and now I'm crouched naked, staring at a note that's just come in through a window on a brick. It's not exactly the everyday life of city folk, is it? Jesus."

When Craig swallowed his laughter down, he found the tears weren't that far away. Paul stroked his elbow.

"No," he said. "Maybe you're right. Your life certainly isn't dull, is it? I tell you what. Now we've had rampant sex and the big finish, shall I make us a drink? My vote's on tea."

He made it too. It wasn't how Craig had imagined the evening ending. Or, as it was now, the morning of the next day beginning. It was still dark of course but here in Paul's kitchen he could glimpse the slight change in the sky outside as he clutched the reassuring mug and sipped at the boiling liquid.

Back in the clothes they'd started out in, Craig could almost imagine that nothing had changed. But he knew it had. First the way they'd made love, rather than fucked. It was different. Craig felt as if he'd crossed a barrier. Paul had allowed him here and hadn't asked him to leave. Bloody hell, they were even almost sharing breakfast. Or a postcoital mug of tea. One of the two. Though what with the brickthrough-the-window business, maybe Paul felt that was the least he could offer?

Which brought Craig to the second thing, of course: the message around the brick. His bloody father. He had to find him. Find him and talk to him, in case he did something else. But his father had managed to keep one step ahead of him so far. If only from Craig's own cowardice. Instinct told him that now his father knew he was onto him, the search would be that much harder.

There was something else he had to do as well. Something just as important, which he'd started and hadn't yet finished. Something that might draw him closer to the truth, whatever the outcome.

"So what do you want to do now?" Paul's words broke into his thoughts, adding to the mix of them, crystallizing them into a decision. "The best thing, in my opinion, is to go after your father. After that we can fill in what we can about Michael. But it's up to you."

Craig looked up into the deep green of his eyes.

"No," he said. "I-I can't do that. Not yet. I just can't. It'll have to be Michael first. My father later. Because first I have to tell Mrs. Langley the truth."

In the chill at the beginning of February, he and Paul arranged to see Michael's sister once more. Paul had rung her this time, made an appointment at his office. There, at 3 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon, they would meet with Eva Langley and her husband, Jack, and talk about... well, what Craig might have done and whatever it was they might need to know. Craig had wanted the appointment sooner, if only to get it over with, but realized that other people's lifestyles and routines weren't of course his own. They'd be working; they'd need to book time off or come in the evening. In fact he was surprised they hadn't opted for an evening appointment, but assumed it must be something to do with the children.

"Craig, I think you should sit down." Paul's voice pierced the edgy mess of his thoughts, such as they were. "You'll tire yourself out if you keep pacing up and down like that. Actually, scrub that: you'll tire me out. And it would be good to meet Michael's family when we're both alert."

"Okay," he said, and did as he was told. Not at the chairs Paul had arranged in a circle in the middle of the newly cleaned office and not at his desk either. No, he sat down at the spare desk, which boasted a computer perched at one corner and a few photographs. One of which he picked up.

In the picture, Craig saw a young woman, somewhere around her late twenties maybe, curvy and with wild blonde hair. She was wearing a close-fitting green dress and enormous earrings. Instinctively, her expression made him smile.

"Friend of yours?" he asked and, when he looked up, found Paul was standing right in front of him. His expression was closed in. Again.

Before Craig could say anything else, Paul had taken the photograph from him and replaced it on the desk, easing it to exactly the same position it had been in before.

"Yes," he said. "It's... it was a friend of mine. My best friend."

"What's her name?" Craig asked as quietly as possible. He thought if he spoke too loudly it might hurt Paul; his boyfriend looked as if he was suddenly a long way away. Somewhere Craig couldn't reach him

"Jade. Jade O'Donnell. She's dead now. She used to work for me. She died because of a stupid mistake I made."

Craig put his hand on Paul's where it rested next to the photograph. "I'm sorry. But I'm sure it wasn't your fault."

"Yes it was." He shook his head and blinked at Craig. He could see the tears in Paul's eyes. "It was my fault. I put her in danger. I screwed up and I have to live with that."

"Okay, okay." Still holding his hand, Craig slipped around to the other side of the desk where Paul stood and took him in his arms. "God, we all make mistakes—I of all people should know that—and it doesn't matter to me. I still love you."

This was the second time Craig had told Paul he loved him and he only said it now because he couldn't find anything else to say. While of course ignoring Gay Rule Number Twelve: *If you make the mistake of saying you love him once, don't compound the error by saying it again.* Ah, well. He'd always been a bloody idiot. Why change the habit of a lifetime?

As he continued to hold him, Craig felt the other man's body relax and, after a while, Paul's mouth sought his. More for comfort than

anything sexual. And hell knew he was happy to give comfort if that was what Paul wanted.

Only a couple of seconds seemed to pass before the doorbell rang, though maybe it was longer. He'd lost track of time. Paul half-laughed and wiped his eyes.

"God," he said. "Always the bloody consummate professional, aren't I? Somebody turns up and I'm crying my eyes out like a bloody baby."

"Don't sweat it. If my best friend had died, whatever the cause, I'd be upset too." As Craig spoke, he thought of Maddy, and a wave of emptiness even at the idea of losing her powered through him. "Tell you what. Why don't you go and wash your face and I'll let the Langleys in. By the time they're settled, things will be fine."

Paul nodded, smiled his thanks, and disappeared in the direction of the bathroom. As promised, Craig made his way to the front door. His heart was beating fast, the knowledge of what he had to say weighing on his shoulders. They were early. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was only ten to three.

Outside the wind was rising and Eva Langley's dark curls almost obscured her face. For a moment her expression reminded him of Michael and, with a stab of guilt, he pushed the memory away. Her husband stretched out his hand and Craig grasped it.

"We're early," Mr. Langley said. "May we come in?"

"Of course." He stood aside to let them pass. They brought with them that particular outdoors smell London had—air and cars and dirt. No sooner were they settled in Paul's office than the owner-operator of the business himself appeared. He looked pale but calm.

"Thank you so much for coming, Mr. and Mrs. Langley," he said, shaking both their hands and smiling at Craig. "We appreciate it very much. Would you like a drink?"

They both asked for coffee and when it was made the four of them sat in the chairs facing each other. Craig wondered in fact how good an idea that had been, but assumed Paul was aiming for the businesslike approach. This, after all, wasn't going to be a cozy chat. Even now, three of them were poised on the edge of their seats and only Paul sat back, seemingly at ease.

Eva glanced at her husband, who took her hand in his.

"Please," she said, "could you tell us why we're here? I know it's about Michael, but I don't think I fully understood what you might want from your message. You haven't found out anything else, have you?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't. What I'm after, you see, is information. But before I get into that, I think my client, Mr. Robertson, has something he'd like to tell you."

For a second or two, Craig had no idea who he was talking about, and then realization kicked in.

"Yes, yes, of course," he mumbled before giving himself a swift mental shake and looking Mrs. Langley straight in the eye.

His throat felt as dry as sand. "It's like this," he said again, this time more slowly. "When I met you at your flat, I didn't tell you all the truth. In fact I lied. You took me by surprise but I know that's no excuse. There are things that aren't clear in my mind. But there are some things that *are* clear. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. But this... this is what I remember."

Craig proceeded to tell them what he'd told Paul, but as calmly as he could this time. While he was talking, he didn't take his eyes from Mrs. Langley's. He watched her face turn pale, then redden, then grow pale again. Her hands gripped the side of her chair, as if they were the only thing preventing her from springing up and attacking him.

When he'd finished, Mrs. Langley was trembling, her eyes wide.

"You killed him," she whispered, "and I thought... I thought... but I was wrong after all. You *murdered* my brother."

A swift movement and she half-rose, her hands clenched into fists now. Paul stood up but Mr. Langley had already taken his wife in his arms, pulled her back down to her chair.

"Hush there," he said. "Don't do this to yourself, Eva. Please. That's not what Craig said. It sounds as if it was an accident, a terrible accident."

"You say that, Jack. But how do I know he's not lying again? How do I know?"

"You don't, Mrs. Langley." Paul's steady voice rose above the tension in the room. "All I can tell you is that I believe that Mr. Robertson has been as honest as he can in what he says about what happened seven years ago at his home. He has told you about the weapon, about Michael's sudden appearance in front of him, and about the blood. None of that proves conclusively either that my client killed your brother or indeed that Michael is dead at all. What Mr. Robertson has asked me to do is to find out as much as I can. I've a number of other leads I'm fully intending to pursue, but I'd like to start with your brother. With your permission, that is?"

"We hired a PI after Michael disappeared," Mr. Langley said as his wife remained silent. "When the police gave up, that is. In the autumn. He didn't discover anything useful at all, and he stayed in Devon for at least two or three days, talking to local people there. It was hopeless."

Paul nodded. "I understand, and it may well be that we'll discover nothing new now. But that doesn't prevent my client trying. I know this is painful for you, Mrs. Langley, and I'm sorry for that—more than you can know—but I'd very much like us to continue, if you'll allow it."

Eva Langley extricated herself gently from her husband's embrace and sat back down. She didn't look at Craig and he couldn't blame her. He felt as if up to that point he'd been playing at whatever task they were embarking on, but now things were different. Very different. Part of this was simply the fact of being referred to as a "client." As if his voice and opinions mattered. The other part was how professional Paul sounded. Then again, at work everyone showed another side to themselves. He'd probably think the same thing about Craig on a fashion shoot. Or even on set or on stage. If he were that lucky again.

A moment more went by and then Mrs. Langley nodded.

"Thank you," Paul said. "In that case, in order to help me with my enquiries, I'd like to know what Michael is really like. Or what he was like seven years ago. I understand people change. The reason I ask this is that knowing the man a little better—from someone who knew him for a long time, rather than the few days my client did, however intensely—will help me find out more about what might have really happened." As he spoke, Paul gazed at Eva Langley. Not harshly, but as if he were waiting, and would be prepared to wait a long, long time until she was ready to answer.

"All right," she said at last, breaking the impasse so that they all shifted their positions a little. Her voice broke as she continued speaking and her husband took hold of her hand. "All right. Michael is—or was—my brother. Whatever you say, I still believe he's dead and, now, that your client killed him, but I want to know exactly what happened. Of course I do. I try not to think about hope; I can't. Not anymore. But there are things that I must ask you to do."

Paul nodded. "Please. Ask away."

Eva released Jack's hand, leaned forward. Caught Paul with her gaze as if they were the only two people in the room. "I want you to investigate for a month only. No more than that. I can't bear it for longer. And if, at any time before the month is up, I find I can't bear it anyway and I want you to stop, then that is what will happen. I understand that I'm not your client and I'm only providing information for you, but I think that, as Michael's sister, I have a greater claim than his one-time lover. I will also go to the police with what you've told me, see if they can do anything else."

She suddenly began to cry. Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders and Craig reached for tissues, but she waved them away. "No, please, I'm fine."

"Mrs. Langley." Something in Paul's voice made them all look at him. He took hold of Eva's hands. "Mrs. Langley, I know what it's like when a relative goes missing. My sister disappeared when we were both very young. She was never found. I know that after that everything changes. Please believe me when I say I'll do what I can to get closer to the truth about Michael. If in turn you could not talk to the police immediately, but later when I've had a chance to work on the case for a while, that might be helpful. Without a body and as your brother wasn't a child when he disappeared, they won't give it the focus that I will. At least not without more evidence of some kind. So, if you and Mr. Robertson are both happy with these terms, then I hope we can continue on that basis. Craig?"

Thinking about what he'd found at his father's house and wondering if that after all constituted some kind of "evidence," Craig nodded. Paul gave him a brief smile and then turned back to Eva. A long silence followed his words. So long that Craig didn't know if it would ever end, or even if he was brave enough to want it to.

"I hadn't known about your sister," Eva said at last. "And, yes, I agree with what you say. For now. What would you like to know first?"

They talked about Michael. Or rather Eva talked and the three men listened, with Paul taking notes every now and then. She started off with her brother as an adult, how he'd hated his work, even though it was a good job, but had seen it as a necessary evil on the road to doing what he really wanted to, which was being a writer. Some of his poems had already been published in small magazines, but he was in the middle of writing a novel when he'd vanished. Craig hadn't known any of this. They hadn't talked about it and he wished with all his being that they'd had the time. Or that Craig had thought to ask him. He'd known how much Michael read, but he'd never thought to make the logical connection. Now, for a man like him, it seemed obvious.

As Eva continued to talk, Craig came to know Michael again in a different way. His love of opera of course he knew about. But this too opened out into something else: a fine baritone voice, on the rare occasions Michael found time to sing. Occasionally in one of the local churches, but less often than his sister would have liked. She talked too of the times they'd spent together, the meals they'd shared, the films they'd been to. Sometimes as a foursome with Jack and Peter, but more often just the two of them.

"He would have been a good uncle," she said, tears glistening again in her eyes. "If he'd been allowed to be. But he never had the chance "

As she said these last words, she glanced at Craig, her eyes cold, and he looked away, reddening.

As time ticked by, he and Paul heard about Michael's younger days: his years at university, his schooldays and even a couple of moments from childhood, the memory of which still made Eva smile.

"We never really got on that well when we were children," she said. "Then again, does anyone? It was only in late teenage that we really got to know each other. The two years between us didn't seem to matter so much then. Mind you, he could still make me the angriest I've ever been. Not that me being angry had much effect—he could give you the cold shoulder if he had a mind to. I still remember the week we didn't speak to each other, but I can't recall what it was all about now. It's funny how what was so important then can be so completely forgotten. And I don't think he *ever* passed a phone message on to me and I'm sure I lost at least two boyfriends that way. Not to mention several nights out with girlfriends. Though he would never admit it; he could be stubborn in his own fashion, and you could never get him to do something he didn't want to do. I don't know why he did that."

"Maybe he was lonely," Craig said, staring down at the table. "He always gave me the impression that he could be lonely, though I didn't realize it while I was with him. It was something I only thought about later."

Eva blinked and her jaw tightened.

"Yes," she said, hesitating over the words as if reluctant to say them. "Yes, he could be lonely. He never made friends easily. Perhaps that was why he was jealous of mine."

"How did he meet Peter?" Craig asked her. "I know they were together for a long time before they split up. He told me that."

"Eight years," she replied, though to Paul and not to Craig. "They were together for eight years. He met Peter at a party given by a friend of them both, I think. It developed quickly from there, though they only really found a house together a couple of years after that."

"Did you like Peter?" Craig couldn't help himself. He wanted to know.

Eva sighed and stared down at the floor for a moment or so. "I've always said yes to that whenever anyone has asked. Even now. I don't

know why. Loyalty, I suppose. Michael loved him. How could I say I didn't?"

"What didn't you like about him, Mrs. Langley?" This time the question came from Paul.

"Nothing specific," she replied. "Not exactly. It's just that he always seemed as if he was in the relationship just to have a good time, even though he was older than my brother. It wasn't serious for him, as it was for Michael. Sometimes he enjoyed making Michael jealous, even though he meant nothing by it. He could be quite flippant. Don't vou agree, Jack?"

She turned to her husband, who nodded. "A little, maybe. But I think it was just his way. He liked the attention. And of course in the end—"

"Yes," Eva said, "in the end it was Peter who got hurt after all."

Craig stared at her. "No, that can't be right. Michael was devastated when I met him. He told me how much Peter had hurt him."

Chin up, Eva stared back at him for the first time since after he'd told her what he'd done. "That was true. Of course it was. Ending a relationship is never easy. But the fact is that it was my brother who cheated on Peter. He had an affair with a friend from work. I think it went on for about four or five months or so, though Michael never said. When Peter found out, he was furious. And that surprised me too. They had a terrible row—I think they might even have physically fought each other-and Michael walked out. Swore he'd never go back, no matter how much Peter pleaded with him. He was living with Jack and me when he went on that holiday to Devon. You... you didn't know any of that, did you?"

Unable to speak, Craig was grateful for Paul's hand on his shoulder. The truths he'd always assumed to be right were suddenly falling out of their accustomed place in his life. He'd trusted Michael. Instinctively. He thought the older man had been honest, would have staked his heart on it too. Now he'd found that Michael had been deceiving him. Could he actually rely on the reality of his memories at all?

"No," he said at last. "No, I didn't know. It's not how he told it to me. God, you must think I'm an idiot, but I suppose I was very young. I thought... I thought I meant more to him, that's all."

"You did," Eva said. "No matter what you did to my brother, I'm convinced of that. He said so in his card. The one I showed you. That was why we spent so long trying to track you down after Michael disappeared."

Craig shook his head, trying to let her know it didn't matter, and the conversation moved on. Not that there was much else to hear that was different from what they'd heard before. Paul made more notes, took down the last-known contact details of Peter and also the name of Michael's friend from work—a man called Adrian—and then the meeting was over. All the time, Craig's mind churned over the fact that what he'd thought to be real, however short-lived, had apparently been something less than that. He was being stupid; even he could see that. But it surprised him how much he must have clung on to his teenage dream of perfection in order to feel this way now.

It made him think about other parts of his past, in a way he didn't want to.

When Paul returned from seeing the Langleys out, he hugged Craig. "That was tough. Are you okay?"

Craig gave a short laugh, one without humor. "You mean apart from confessing to Eva Langley that I might have killed her brother, then having love's young dream blown out of the water and being told things weren't as perfect as I thought they were? Yeah, I'm fine. No bloody problem."

"You're not a good liar, you know."

"Yeah, I know that too. Sorry."

Paul smiled. "People are always human, Craig. A mixture of good and bad. It's the way things are. It doesn't mean to say something wasn't right. At the time. For you and for Michael."

"I know that too, but thanks."

They stayed silent for a few moments, then Paul spoke again. "Look, if you still want me to pursue this particular avenue rather than tracking down your father, then the next thing is to talk to Peter and this Adrian. If they're willing. After seven years, they might not be."

Craig knew Paul was preparing him for failure, but he nodded anyway. "Let's do it. After all, it can't get any worse, and what have we got to lose?"

In spite of this bravado, he only had a faint hope that what he said might be true.



FINDING Adrian proved a lot easier than tracking down Peter. It only took Paul a couple of phone calls to discover that Adrian had moved from his old firm—the one where he'd met Michael—and was now working for another insurance broker only a couple of streets away in the city. It took another five minutes after that to make an appointment. On the pretext of wanting to discuss business. While Paul made the call, Craig listened to him spin a tale in order to get the meeting. When he put the phone down, Craig grinned.

"God, you're good."

"Convinced?"

"You bet. Especially by the fact that you didn't mention insurance once."

Paul shrugged. "It covers me. People don't want to speak to a PI by choice, not initially, but once I'm there, they tend to get interested and answer the questions. Even though they might not know that's what they're doing. And it helps in these cases if I haven't lied too much in the first place."

"Can I come with you?"

He hesitated. "It will be easier alone. I don't mean to be funny but—"

"But I might cramp your style?"

"God, no." To his surprise, Paul hunkered down in front of him, put his hand on the back of his head, and drew him into a fierce kiss. As dark as coffee but twice as strong. When it ended, he smiled as Craig caught his breath. But there was still something in that smile that remained uncertain.

"No matter what you do or have done, I don't think you could ever cramp my style," Paul said. "If I had any."

"Believe me, you do. But I still can't come with you?"

"No. Afraid not. Some things I need to do on my own."

That made sense, but Craig made him promise that he'd ring and tell him what he found out as soon as he could. At home later that night, alone, he tried to get straight in his head the things that were happening. It took a while, and he found he needed a couple of beers and some wallpaper TV to help him. Until he escaped to his bedroom, Maddy or Julie kept wandering in, but didn't stay long. Was it obvious he was trying to think? Trying being the word for sure. After all, he wasn't employed for his brain power. Though he was damn sure he would have got those A levels if he'd taken them. That was his story anyway, in spite of what his father had said. His father had never been a great one for education, preferring to trust in the Lord and work with his hands. On the land, where maybe he felt most at home.

Funny how since he'd met Paul, so much had happened. And all to do with the past. That was unfair though. It wasn't Paul's fault that Andrea's letter about his father had arrived on the same day as his call. That was simply coincidence. He was being great—even in spite of the doubts Paul obviously still had about him. Craig hoped what was happening wouldn't put him off entirely. Gay Rule Number Thirteen—unlucky for some: Don't let them see you're a complete psycho before they've expressed some kind of commitment first. He'd failed on both counts then: though he probably wasn't a psycho—at least if he had killed someone then it was an accident, wasn't it?—but he hadn't waited to see what Paul's feelings were before plunging into his own

commitment, all guns firing. Which might make him a psycho after all. Who could tell?

In the meantime, as if that wasn't enough, he had his ruddy father to think of. Craig sat back on the bed and tried to think of him. And what the hell he was up to. Not to mention that stupid message:

> MEN COMMITTED INDECENT ACTS WITH OTHER MEN. AND RECEIVED THEMSELVES THE DUE PENALTY FOR THEIR PERVERSION

What was he supposed to take from that? His father didn't like homosexuals. Well, get over it already. He had one for a son, whether he liked it or not. Tough.

With a long drawn-out sigh, Craig settled back on his pillow and stared up at the ceiling. As he did so, that elusive fragment of memory once more spun its way outward to the forefront of his mind. But this time it was different. A sunny day, the smell of lemons. And water, running from somewhere he can't see. Something red too—what is that? There's a stretch of wood just above his eyes. A desk? A workbench? He doesn't know. A woman singing. The touch of her hand on his shoulder. And then the sound of something harsh. A slap? The hand is gone. And his father's voice pours in: Keep yourself decent.

With a cry, he shuddered back to reality. He was sitting upright on the bed, hands clenching and unclenching into the duvet. His skin felt hot and his mouth tasted sour. Jesus, he hadn't remembered anything like that before. In all the broken-up memories of childhood, he'd only ever been outside looking in. This was a first. Jesus. Trying to search after the pictures, trying to hold onto them or even expand them, would be worse than useless. He knew it. He'd never had any success with that. If he was lucky—or should that be unlucky—they'd surface more and more frequently over the next few weeks before subsiding again to give way for others, none of them making much sense. Best have a drink and forget it. Best get some sleep.

As he stumbled from the bed toward the door, he glanced down at the bedside cabinet and saw again the mementos of Michael that he'd taken from his father's house. Taken and not had the courage to explore since. The Sainsbury's carrier bag. Containing Michael's light green jacket and his engraved watch.

Why would his father still have these? He must have taken them from the cottage Michael had stayed in. He must have thought to protect his son from what had happened. But in that case why not simply get rid of them? He didn't know; the workings of his father's mind had always been a mystery. Now Craig took out the items and laid them on the bed. He was breathing hard, trying to concentrate. The jacket and the watch. Even if by some miracle Michael was still out there somewhere, the man he'd known seven years ago would never have left the watch behind. Would he? It was a gift from Peter. Something special to him. Then again, Craig hadn't known him as well as he'd thought, had he? The meeting with Eva had shown him that.

All that time ago, what had he known at all?

Closing his eyes, he gathered up the jacket and held it to his face. This was the first time he'd opened the carrier bag since he'd brought it back from Devon. He had no idea why he hadn't done it before. No, that was a lie too. The fear of what he had done to the man whose jacket he was now clutching had prevented him. But he wasn't a murderer, was he? Not a deliberate one. Paul had discounted that idea. Though Paul didn't know what else he was hiding, did he? How could he, when Craig didn't really know it himself?

No, he mustn't think like that. He'd spent so long in his life thinking and not thinking about the things he could no longer remember that now it was a habit. It was only recently, with the investigation he'd started almost by default, that the habit had started to slip. Without warning, Craig found he was rocking, there on the bed and holding Michael's forgotten jacket. Now of course, after so long, he couldn't catch any trace of his scent from it. From memory, he had almost expected the herbs and grasses he'd associated with Michael. The smell of his aftershave and the outdoors, where they'd always met.

He didn't know how long he sat there before he opened his eyes again, but the first thing he saw was the watch. Rather than face the

questions the sight of it raised for him, he made it across the floor and out of his bedroom.

And almost knocked over Maddy, who was in the hallway carrying what appeared to be a bundle of curtains.

"Hey there," she yelped. "Steady."

And then, "Are you okay?"

Craig shook his head, finding himself unable to speak and inwardly cursing his own weakness.

"Hmm, I thought as much," she said. "Kitchen. Coffee. Now. But I can only give you ten minutes of my precious time as the new man's due soon, lucky me."

He obeyed. Once in the kitchen, Maddy put the kettle on, grabbed a mug, and turned to face him.

"So where's Paul then?" she said. "Not staying over tonight?"

"No." Even to Craig, his voice sounded as if it had been put through a combine harvester and back.

Maddy looked at him, eyebrows raised, and after a few moments plonked a mug of dark, grainy liquid in front of him.

"Um, thanks," he said.

"Well," she shrugged. "It was the best I could do."

"Really, it's lovely, thanks. I'm just... no, forget it. I'm an idiot. Take my mind off it—tell me about the new man."

She did. In record time. As Craig had thought, the new man—whose name turned out to be Andy—was the bloke she'd met at the office party. He was six months younger than she was and lived south of the river but hey, nobody's perfect, and she had no real objection to younger men. Andy did something technical in IT, but he was nearly as into fringe theater as she was and they were even thinking about taking up running together.

"Running? You?" Craig couldn't help the interruption at this point, but Maddy gave him a mock-hard stare.

"Don't knock it," she said. "He's blond, kind, and I like him. Besides, exercise will do me good."

"Sounds perfect," he said. "Good for you."

"Thanks. Now I've brought you up to speed with me, why don't you tell me what's happening with you? Though I assume this is to do with what you told us before. About your old boyfriend?"

"Yes, but God, where to start?" Craig put down his coffee and sat back. "Paul's helping me out. He thinks I might be reading more into what I remember than I should. At least, that's what he implies. Unless he's fooling himself. I don't know. Anyway, he's questioning someone tomorrow who used to know Michael. I would have preferred to be there, but I can see why that's no good. I can see why Paul didn't want it. God knows I'm assuming on him way too much, but I can't help it. I've started something—whether I like it or not—and I want to see it through to the end now. I have to. Do you understand?"

By the time Craig had finished speaking, he was leaning forward across the table, all but spearing Maddy with his eyes. Or at least that was what it felt like. And with his final sentence, he gestured to try to underline the point, and the mug of coffee spun from its resting place and teetered for a second or two on the edge before plunging to the floor. With a sharp crack the china broke into three pieces.

He swore. "My fault. I'll get it."

But Maddy was there before him. She wiped up the mess while he retrieved the broken crockery and dropped it into the bin.

"Another?" she asked. "I might just have time."

"No. I think I've had enough. In many, many ways. I want to know what's going on, and I want to know it soon. Whatever that may mean."

There, leaning against the wall near the bin, he stared again at Maddy as she squeezed out a dishcloth full of coffee into the sink. She put the cloth down and returned his gaze.

"And what exactly might it mean, Craig?"

He thought for a moment. "I'm not exactly sure. It probably means getting in touch with the life I used to have. The things that happened when I was a child. Including stuff I don't remember. Right up until I left home and came to London. I'm feeling my way through all this and, honestly, it's like the blind leading the blind, with me in both roles. But I'm convinced I have to do it, or give it my best shot, so I can work out what the hell happened. To me, and my family, all those years ago. And somehow Michael is a key to some of it. No matter how crazy that sounds—bearing in mind that I only knew him really for a few days—no matter how crazy, I know it's the truth."

When he finished speaking, Maddy didn't reply at once. Which was a relief, as Craig needed time to get to grips with what he'd actually said. If she was going to be surprised, then she wasn't the only one. Until he'd said it, he hadn't realized that was what he meant, but it was. He wanted to solve the puzzle of the dreams and fragments of nightmares, the things he couldn't recall in full, which had haunted him for as long as he could remember. And he didn't care what it might cost him. Here and now, he was twenty-four years old. He wasn't a boy anymore. He was no longer seventeen. He was a grown-up. Or at the very least he wanted to have a good stab at being one. The time to start was now.

Maddy's words, when they finally came, weren't what he'd been expecting.

She grinned at him, just as the doorbell rang, bringing with it her new boyfriend.

"You go for it, babe. It makes perfect sense," she said. "Almost."

## 18

IN his new role as a man in charge of his own destiny rather than a would-be Hamlet in charge of none, Craig was primed to leap into some kind of action. Any action. Get Paul's thoughts on his meeting with Adrian, persuade him so he couldn't say no about letting him in on his interview with Peter, finally meet his father after seven years, hell, maybe even talk to the bastard, and most of all *find out exactly what he'd done to Michael*. He was all ready to do any and all of these things but this wasn't a novel and he wasn't Harry Bosch.

Because the next day he found himself in the middle of Muswell Hill, on a freezing cold February morning, attempting to look sultry and glamorous in a gallery so upmarket he probably wouldn't have dared to go in. In all three rooms, each divided by a wide archway, pale walls were dotted with enormous pictures consisting of bright swirls of color on white. Here and there, Oriental-looking sculptures and tiny rose-colored figures broke up the stark feeling. The place reeked of elegance and money. Craig hoped he would be up to it. Whatever it was.

Last-minute work like this was never, in his experience, the easiest to do. He wouldn't be first choice for the client and wouldn't be quite sure what they wanted either. Neither was he likely to see a familiar face that might be willing to chat enough to give him a clue—

so he would just have to wing it. Besides, he couldn't afford to refuse a real offer of work, no matter what was going on elsewhere in his life. Refusal in this business was always the slippery slope to unemployment.

Still, if the shoot came together in the way they sometimes did, he swore that modeling could be the best job on earth, and the craziest. This morning, however, that wasn't happening. Right now, he was trying to work out the sort of smile the director—a dapper man in his fifties called Pedro—was after, and making a valiant bid not to be fired before lunch. Neither task was proving easy.

"More subtle, Craig, if you don't mind. I don't want you looking like you're out on a picnic with your maiden aunt. This is supposed to be arty, not a jolly jaunt with the family."

Another few seconds' silence as Craig tried to give him what he wanted, while thrusting himself next to the body of a size-eight-at-the-outside brunette in an off-the-shoulder pink T-shirt. He hadn't yet caught her name, didn't know if he needed to. The heat from the lights was already making him sweat, or that might have been his nerves. Or a hundred other things.

Then: "No, *no*, not sulky. *Sultry*. Don't you new boys know how to do that? God, no wonder I'm pouring good money down the drain on these shoots these days. Take a five-minute break, for God's sake, everyone. Maybe when we come back, Mr. Robertson will have found his groove again."

In the restroom, Craig pissed away the remains of the morning's coffee, which was all he'd managed for breakfast before taking the bus north, washed his hands, and stared in the Art Nouveau-style mirror, practicing suitable expressions. Yes, he could bloody well do *sultry*. What the hell was the stupid bugger talking about? Craig might be a screwed-up head case and possible killer, but there was nothing wrong with his *sultry*.

Behind him, the door swung open and one of the technical guys strolled in. He caught Craig's expression in the mirror before he could close it down, and grinned.

"Hey, mate, don't let what Piss-Artist Pedro says get to you," he said, his accent more Liverpool than London. "He's a tosser with people he doesn't know. If you can hang on 'til he's got his first whisky down him, he'll lay off a bit."

"Thanks." Craig grinned back. "I was starting to think I'd lost it. You work for him a lot then?"

Asking questions in the restroom was the last great no-no of civilized society, but it was funny how the fashion world never bothered with the rules. Craig knew Technical Guy wouldn't be bothered by it, and he also knew Technical Guy was straight. Just as he'd already clocked Craig as gay. It would also do him no harm to have an ally.

"Yeah, I work for him some," the other man grunted, heading to the urinal in the middle. "If my luck's not in, you know? Oh, by the way, the name's Douglas."

"Hi, again, and I'm Craig," he replied before leaving him to it. Social niceties or no social niceties, if he stayed around too long he was likely to be offered whatever today's designer drug of choice was, and Craig had never been into that scene. Not really anyway, and never now. Not if he wanted a career.

Back on the gallery floor, Piss-Artist Pedro kept up his stream of complaints about what Craig was or was not doing and how it could all have been so much better if his original choice hadn't let him down at the last minute. One or two of the other models kept giving Craig sympathetic grins, but he imagined there was little they could do about it. He also noticed Pedro still hadn't asked him to leave. It couldn't be that bad then, could it? Still, by the third change of clothes, any kind of professional veneer he was trying to keep in place had long since crumbled.

"For God's *sake*," Pedro was saying, "if there's a problem with doing *sexy*, Mr. Robertson, why the hell are you trying to be a model in the first place? Why not just take up bar work or something. This is beyond hope. I wouldn't find you sexy if I was in the Heaven nightclub and you were the only bloke left at the bar."

Pedro might have been going to add something else. In fact, he probably was. But Craig found himself stepping out of the frame, pushing past the photographer, who gaped at him, and standing right in front of the condescending little tosser. His skin prickled and he noticed everyone was now completely silent. Oh hell, he thought, he was just about to end his modeling days. Still, bloody hell, though, what a way to go. Maybe Paul would be proud.

As Pedro blinked at him, Craig leaned right in so the director could catch what he wanted to say. Beads of sweat lined Pedro's forehead and he smelled of stale aftershave. Finally, Craig opened his mouth

"If you were the only bloke left in the Heaven, I'd probably consider going straight," he hissed.

Then he turned on his heel, thankful for his minimal drama training that had at last come into its own, and left.

It was bloody freezing outside. He wished he'd remembered to pick up his jacket. But going back to get it would be humiliating. And he couldn't take any more of that. He supposed this would be taken as stealing the outfit he was still wearing, but right then he didn't care.

A shout from behind made him stop and glance around.

"Craig. Wait."

The voice was familiar. It was Douglas. Craig waited for him to catch up. Already, the wave of emotion that had carried him out of the gallery—and no doubt out of his career—was fading.

"Look, I'm sorry," Craig said. "I don't want to make things awkward for you all, but I just couldn't hack it anymore. I need the money, God knows I need the money, but there are some things I can't take."

"Hey, don't apologize," Douglas said. "Bloody Pedro is in the wrong, not you. He sent me out here to bring you back. Though I would have come anyway—that was impressive. We all wish we'd had the balls to do it."

Despite the whole stupidity of the situation, Craig couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, the balls to come out here and freeze to death, more like. Sometimes, you know, I'm my own worst enemy."

"Well, Pedro comes pretty close."

"Yeah, you're right." He shrugged. "Anyway, why does he want me back if he doesn't like what I'm doing? It's a waste of my time and his."

"You think?" Douglas said. "He's still taking the shots, isn't he? No, Pedro's all mouth. He might think you need a bit of guidance in working out what he wants, but you're getting it a damn sight quicker than the other million models he's bitched at and dumped. He's a bastard, but he knows what he's doing. That's why we put up with it. Most of the time. Not only that, but he'll make you look bloody good when the pictures come out. Which will make your next assignment one that's likely to be a little further up the ladder. See what I mean?"

Craig thought about it. This didn't take long. He nodded. "Okay. I get it. So what now?"

Douglas sighed. "Well, the old bugger isn't going to apologize, so there's no hope of that, I'm afraid. But I reckon if you come back in, he'll be as nice as the proverbial and you'll have a better time. What do you say?"

"If it gets me out of this bloody cold and back into employment, it sounds good to me."

"Great." He clapped Craig on the shoulder and the two of them began walking back to the gallery. "There is one thing though."

"Which is?"

"You can probably only do that walking-out trick once. Cool though it was. It's not the eighties anymore, sad to say."

"I hear you. And thanks."

When he and Douglas opened the door, the place was filled with the sound of tense talking and speculation. The moment the door clicked shut, the silence was even louder. Before Craig could think how best to ease himself back into model normality—whatever the hell *that* was—Mr. Piss-Artist himself had leaped to his feet and was strutting toward him. Douglas slipped away and Craig couldn't say he blamed him.

*Oh great*, he thought. *Showdown time*. Had Douglas been wrong after all?

Rather than running back out into the street, screaming—well, it was frigging cold—he stayed where he was. Pedro stopped dead in front of him, frowning. Craig noted his fists weren't clenched so at least the director wasn't going to punch him.

For another long moment, the silence continued. Then, unexpectedly, Pedro smiled.

"Good to see you can do drama when you want to, Mr. Robertson," he said.

"Good to know you can be polite when you have to," Craig replied, not daring to risk a name in case *Piss-Artist* came out instead of *Pedro*.

"Shall we get back to work then?"

"If you like."

The rest of the morning was relatively calm. Pedro kept on barking instructions, which were very different from the ones he'd only just given a moment before, but he made no more personal comments and after a while Craig relaxed into what he was doing. He got more used to the instant changes Pedro wanted as well.

When it came down to it, modeling was nothing more than acting. Which was maybe why he loved it so much. Yes, you had to have the looks and the body, and yes you had to keep both those in shape and as good as you could get them. But when you were actually under the spotlight and the camera was snapping away, character was the focus that held it all together. Without the terror of the audition either. Maybe it wasn't as intellectual as the work Paul did, but still it gave Craig a buzz. He could pretend to be somebody else—someone more confident, sexier, more on top of it all—and that gave him a lift too. Pretending was something he'd always been good at. His childhood had taught him that.

At lunch—nothing more than a snack wolfed down while the setup of the gallery was changed for the afternoon shoot—Douglas and a couple of the female models, whose names he discovered were Janine and Carlotta, kept him company. In the ten minutes they ended up having, they talked the usual modeling talk—who was in, who was out, what they thought of the outfits, what they all thought they might be wearing later in the season, whether they knew the same people or not. Plus a smattering of techno talk so Douglas didn't entirely collapse of boredom. Though the way he was staring at Carlotta's chest, Craig didn't think that would be an option. Honestly, straight men. They were nearly as obsessed with sex as gays.

Just before Pedro summoned them all back to the floor, Carlotta nudged him.

"Love your style," she whispered, brushing back her long dark hair. "At this rate, Pedro will be hiring you again before you can sit down tonight with your first designer beer. The old bugger loves a challenge."

Oh well. There was always a downside to every small triumph.

That said though and, in spite of the difficult morning, Craig found that by the time they clocked off late afternoon, he'd actually had a good—if hard—day. Douglas was right. Pedro knew his stuff. If you could get over his method of delivery, you could learn more in five minutes with him shouting than you could in a year of other people being nice. Not that he'd seen a whole lot of niceness in this profession. Maybe *distant* was more the word. And maybe the thing about the Piss-Artist was that he cared a hell of a lot about what he produced and didn't like it when his preparations went down the pan. Even if that included Craig. Bloody hell, Craig could be noble. Or at least think noble thoughts. Sometimes.

With that idea in his mind, on the way out Craig hesitated before telling himself just *do it* and turning back.

Pedro was still at the back of the gallery, deep in conversation with the owner, a tall red-haired woman dressed entirely in green. Instinctively Craig liked her, but he never got to know her name. After a while, Pedro glanced around as if he knew someone was hovering, and caught his eye.

"Ah, Mr. Robertson," he said, his expression a perfect blank. So much so that for a second or two he almost fitted in with the gallery's understated approach. "Mr. Robertson. You haven't gone yet then."

"No," Craig said stupidly, and then plowed on regardless. "No, I haven't. I just wanted to say that, even if we got off to a bad start, I learned a lot from this afternoon, so thank you for that. God knows I need all the advice I can get.'

Having said his piece, he turned to go, but the director's voice called him back

"Yes, anyone can see *that*," he said with a shrug. "But on the other hand it's always good to find a model willing to listen. A miracle really. You did okay, Mr. Robertson. In the end."

Craig smiled his thanks, just as the gallery owner cut in.

"Mr. Robertson?" she said, frowning. "I think someone left a message for you earlier on. It's here somewhere."

She rummaged around underneath the sales desk and produced a small brown envelope that had been stapled shut at the top. "Craig Robertson? Is that you?"

Nodding, he took the envelope and cursed when he recognized the handwriting. Knowing there was no way he could wait until he got outside before seeing what his father in his infinite bloody wisdom had sent him *this* time, he ripped it open.

Inside, there was no message. Simply a torn-off section of a driver's license. It contained Michael's name and date of birth. On this the word *SIN* had been scrawled in capitals.

## 19

CRAIG leaned his finger on the doorbell of Paul's flat and waited until he saw his boyfriend's figure through the mottled glass. He'd already told Paul he was coming. It was about 6 p.m. He'd made the call moments after reading his father's message. He had no idea what on earth Pedro had thought about his rapid exit, but in truth he didn't much care. He was way too angry for that.

And he needed someone to be angry with. Because several things were crystallizing and he didn't like any of them.

Paul opened the door on the chain, saw who it was, and let him in. Craig was talking even before he had one foot over his threshold. Even before the door had been closed.

"Look," he said, waving the driver's license in his boyfriend's direction but not allowing him the luxury of focusing on it. "Look. The bastard has sent me something else. What the bloody hell does he think he's playing at? I mean, it's not enough to mess up my childhood, it's not enough to try to destroy my whole frigging life, it's not enough to throw a bloody brick at us, but now he has to start sending me things that I know belonged to Michael. And he knows that I know. What the fuck is he trying to tell me? Maybe it's not me that killed Michael after all—maybe it's him. Yes, that's it, maybe it's him. That would make

sense, wouldn't it? I can't believe it. All these years I've been trying to avoid thinking it was me. I've been thinking that I'm the loony in the bloody family, and now all along it's been him. Isn't that what he's trying to tell me? Isn't it?"

When Craig stopped talking, he found he couldn't catch his breath. It felt as if he'd been running for a long, long time and only when he'd stopped had he realized how far he'd gone. Paul gazed at him for a moment before reaching out and gripping his shoulder. Right then Craig wasn't sure he wanted to be touched but in the end it was okay.

"You'd better sit down," Paul said. "You look like you need a drink."

In the living room, Craig sat on Paul's sofa. He thought he'd be too restless to stay there long but in fact he wasn't sure he'd be able to get up again. A wave of exhaustion flowed through him. It felt as if his blood was being drained from his flesh by some strange outside force he had no hope of fighting and all he could do was sit and take it. But he'd had *enough* of that, hadn't he? He'd been sitting and taking it for too many bloody years, and now every ruddy thing felt different. Without warning, the anger came again and Craig was up and pacing the room, even though he'd been so sure only a second ago that he didn't have it in him.

Paul returned, carrying a tray on which rested a bottle of whisky, two glasses, and two mugs. When he saw Craig, he blinked.

"I still think sitting down would be better," he said.

"Why?"

"Two reasons. One: if you carry on flitting round the room like that, you won't be able to drink anything. And two: the last time that I had a boyfriend—or ex-boyfriend as he was by then—in here, he did exactly the same thing and it's making me nervous. So, please, sit down?"

The mention of Paul's private life before him jolted Craig into social normality, or its nearest equivalent, and he sat down. His mouth crowded with questions but he spoke none of them, instead taking the

whisky and pouring a good slug of it into both glasses. Paul set the tray on the coffee table and sat next to him.

Craig downed the whisky in two gulps, feeling the fire of it on his tongue. Paul took his glass but didn't drink. Instead he held it up to the light and smiled.

"I love the Macallan," he said. "It always does the trick."

"Not much of it left. Maybe you should buy another?"

He smiled. "Maybe. Or maybe not. Tell me, Craig, now you've finally admitted that it might equally be your father, rather than you, who killed Michael, what makes you so sure this time? It's a serious accusation to make."

"More serious than accusing myself of killing him?"

"Maybe," he said again. "It depends how much you mean it."

"If you think this is a joke...."

"I don't." Paul was quick to reassure him, placing his hand on Craig's knee and leaving it there. "But I know what families are like. God knows my own can be like walking a tightrope sometimes, with nothing underneath but broken glass and dead promises. In that kind of hothouse atmosphere, things get muddled. Assumptions are made which might seem like the truth, but may not be. If you're going to turn the spotlight on your father, again you've got to have evidence. Do you have any?"

"I might have. What about the license?"

"You mean the paperwork you were threatening me with at the door?"

"Yes," Craig said.

"Okay. Show me it."

He did. Paul unfurled the screwed-up license in Craig's hand and read the typeface and the writing on it.

He sighed. "Once again it's not enough. It shows your father stole something from your former lover seven years ago. It shows he's angry enough now to send it to you. It shows he doesn't like you, or perhaps your lifestyle, very much. And, yes, I admit it's strange that he kept something like this for so long, but that doesn't necessarily make him a murderer."

He might have been going to say more, but Craig was on his feet and all but spitting his next words at him.

"You don't understand," he said. "You just don't understand what my father is like. And you don't know anything about my family life."

Paul's eyes, staring up at Craig's, were green pools of calm. "No, you're right. Apart from the fact that you had a very religious upbringing, I don't understand and I don't know. I think you should tell me. As much as you can. And now."

Craig took a step back. It felt as if Paul had punched him and he was trying to find his footing again.

"I don't see how that helps anyone," he said, his voice sounding unfamiliar even to him. "It won't help catch my father. It won't help stop whatever's happening now."

"Won't it?" his boyfriend countered. "How do you know that? A thorough look at how your childhood was might help us a great deal. It seems to really bug you. Do you know, in some ways you look so straightforward, but actually you're a mystery man. Never mind what happened with Michael. The key to this seems to be your father, and your relationship with *him*. That seems to have affected whatever happened to your lover then, *and* what's going on now. My question is: why?"

"You don't have any right to ask me about any of that when everyone knows you and your father haven't spoken for years. Who made *you* into the judge and jury of *me*?"

Paul's face turned white and there was a terrible silence. Craig didn't know if he was going to shout at him or cry. Or ask him to leave. He couldn't tell which. With all his heart, Craig wished he'd said nothing at all.

"Paul, I—"

"No, please." Paul swept his hand in front of him in a dismissive gesture, as if sweeping away the words. He wouldn't look at Craig. "Give me a moment. Please."

Right then, Craig would have given him anything. Paul turned to stare out of the window at the darkness and Craig could see he was shaking. Should he try to touch him? Craig didn't know. Sometimes, he wished so much that he was older, and knew more. He couldn't think what to do. So he did nothing.

After a while, Paul spoke again. Craig had to strain to hear him.

"It's not quite true that I haven't spoken to my father in years," he said. "When I was in hospital last year, we had a brief conversation. In person. It was inconclusive and I don't imagine that I'll see him again. For a very long time, perhaps not ever. So you see that even now there are some things the press doesn't know about."

"I'm sorry," Craig whispered into the pause that followed. "What I said was way out of line."

It was as if Paul hadn't heard him at all.

"But this isn't about me," he said, turning around to face Craig at last. "This is about you. You've told me about your affair. And about your father's religion. Now tell me about the rest of your childhood."

Craig broke his gaze. Sat down. Tried to think, tried to seize the jumble of memories and broken images in his head to gather them into some kind of order.

"It's difficult," he said finally. "I can tell you all the practical stuff. You know, school, the friends I had, working on the farm, the books I read, the games I played. But when it comes to working out what my family were actually like, honestly the only thing that made a difference was my father and his religion. It overpowered everything I ever did and set us apart. And it was always only him. I don't think my mother was religious in quite the same way. Even though they met in church. Though as she left us when I was six, I'm not really sure. I don't really have any proper memories of her. Not ones I've been able to key into anyway. But my father—everything about him and about our lives together was based on the rules of pleasing God. As I've told you. What I haven't told you is that I had to memorize large chunks of

the bible, pray every day. Even when I was very young. If I didn't, he'd hit me. Sometimes so hard that I blacked out. I was terrified of him. I grew up being terrified of him, never knew it could be any different 'til later on. After the Fellowship threw me out, I gave up the bible, didn't bother with prayer or anything, though I don't think I'd ever believed it really. Not in the way he wanted me to. That didn't stop him trying over and over to convert me *back to the path of righteousness*, as he used to say. It was exhausting, you can't imagine how much. You know, I think the truth of it was that being with my father, growing up with him, never felt like being in a family at all."

"In what way?" Paul asked, but Craig shook his head.

"I don't know. No, that's not really true, but it's like the negative of a picture. You know, when everything's the opposite from what you think it should be. When I used to go round to see mates from school, whatever, their families were so different from mine. God it sounds crazy, but I think I might have been jealous. Whatever it was they had, we didn't. I used to wonder why it was that my father and I were never a family—but other people I knew, other boys from school who only had one parent, *they* were families. In the end, I realized that it was his religion that had stopped us from being close. Funny really, that something that's supposed to bring people together, offer comfort, should be so cold and so harsh. And without any sense of love."

Craig stopped, hoping that would be the end of it, but he should have known better. Paul's eyes appeared darker, more intent.

"What about your mother?" he asked. "You never talk about her. Can you really remember nothing about her at all?"

"I was very young when she left. Sometimes, I... I think—dream—about her, though I can't really be sure it *is* her." He laughed but it didn't sound right and Paul didn't join in. "I just can't remember, you see. Anyway, it's not important. What's important about all this is my father and Michael."

Paul cocked his head at him. "Is it? Really?"

"Yes, sure it is. Michael's the one that's dead or missing and my father is the reason for that. No matter what you say, I know that's true. God, I just know it."

He thought Paul might say more—he feared he would—but in the end he kept his silence. So much so that it became up to Craig to break it.

"How did your meeting with Adrian go?" he asked.

"I discovered nothing useful," Paul replied, his voice sounding more clipped than it had before. When Craig glanced at him, he could see he'd snapped into professional mode. "Which was much as I'd expected. Adrian Kenny had an affair with Michael for four months before they split up. Which was shortly after Michael left Peter. Bearing in mind Adrian is married now with one child and another on the way, this isn't something he particularly wants to be in the public domain"

"He's in the closet?" Craig interjected, glad to have the focus of conversation away from him and his family. At least for a while.

"No." Paul shook his head. "I reckon not. My feeling is he's bi. Just wants it to be private. And there's nothing wrong with that."

"Okay. Go on."

"The split was pretty bad. He won't say it now, but I got the impression that he was ready to make a go of it, but Michael wouldn't bite. The last time Adrian saw him, they had a row. Michael left and he hasn't seen him since that time. It's basically exactly as Eva Langley told it. He freely admitted talking to her when she was looking for her brother, but he couldn't help. Didn't want to at the time either. I think his pride took a bit of a bruising. You know what these city types are like."

"Some of them, yes."

"Yes. Some of them."

"Do you think he could have hurt Michael somehow?"

"No, I don't think so. Believe me, Craig, Adrian Kenny was telling me the truth. Not because he wanted to help—he didn't—but because he was afraid of who I might talk to if he lied to me. And I've been in this business long enough to tell when someone is lying to me. At least most of the time."

Something in his voice—a subtle change of tone—caught Craig's interest. "Most of the time?"

"Yes." Paul broke his gaze and ran one finger over his trousers, smoothing out an invisible crease. Craig wondered if he was making his mind up to tell him something and, if so, what it might be. "Yes. There was one man who had me fooled. Until almost the very end anyway."

When Paul raised his eyes once again, Craig thought he'd never seen Paul look so open. Craig licked his lips, took a breath. "Was that the one you'd just split up with when we met?"

"Yes"

"Okay. Tell me about him," he said. "It's your turn to talk."

Paul started slowly but, once he started, the words came easily. Craig wondered if he'd been waiting to say them for a long time. And if he was the first person Paul had told.

"I met... Nick when I was twenty-six," he said. "Friday 12 May 2000. At a party given by a client. I did well that year. Nick was there too. He followed me outside the hotel when I went for a smoke. Offered me a light, struck up a conversation. We ended up kissing. I was intrigued, I think. He was married. Had a family. Still, he gave me his business card, asked me to call. No, told me to. God, I couldn't stop thinking about him. We met the following Monday. Had sex. That was when the affair really took off. I fell totally and absolutely in love with him; couldn't get enough. Wanted him to leave his wife, his children, wanted him to move in with me. He wouldn't, of course. He always had more sense. And the upper hand. That too. Oh yes, he always had that. We were together for just under a year. When he finally dumped me, it was one of the worst experiences I'd ever had. I went into freefall, had a nervous breakdown. Took a long time to recover. Then last year, he contacted me again. I should have told him where to go. God how I wish I had. But I didn't. He asked me to take on a case for him. I did. It went terribly wrong. He lied to me all the way through and I never saw it-didn't want to see it. Because of that, my best friend died and everything changed. The last time I saw Nick, he asked me to be with him, but I couldn't. Not after what had happened, not after the damage he'd done which could never be undone. I sent him away. It nearly tore me apart but I had no other choice. He might have been a liar but I didn't want to be. Not to myself. So. There you have it, Craig. Maybe we're both as bad as each other, eh? Maybe we're both screwed."

He took a deep and shuddering breath and fell silent. Once again Craig didn't know what to say. He felt so much younger than Paul, so much less experienced. Understanding also that maybe what he'd just heard was a declaration of love for another man, but not wanting to acknowledge this. After all, wasn't life—both their lives—hard enough already? For lack of anything else to do and because he had nothing at all to say, Craig took hold of Paul's hand and he turned toward him at once, as if he'd been waiting all this time for Craig to touch him.

A few moments later they were kissing. He tasted of whisky, though Craig imagined he did too. Not only that, but he could taste Paul's need. His fingers were scrabbling at Craig's shirt, struggling with the science of buttons. He hadn't come here for sex. He'd come here for answers. And to ask a question of his own. But as always, his body had its own agenda and already his cock was hardening under his jeans. Craig wondered if Paul wanted him because of him or simply to put something between his confession and being here now in the aftermath of it. What the bloody hell was he thinking anyway? Gay Rule Number Fourteen: *If you're about to get it on, don't make it difficult for yourself*.

There was one problem though. He eased Paul's fingers away from his neck.

"Hey," he murmured. "No protection with me. Have you...?"

"Yes. Bathroom. Left-hand side of cabinet. Everything we'll need. But be quick, *please*."

He hoped Paul meant getting the condoms, but in the end it turned out he meant quick in all respects. By the time Craig got back, he'd removed his shirt and was working on his trousers.

"Bedroom?" Craig asked, but he shook his head.

"No. Here."

"Okay. In that case, let *me* take your clothes off. I like doing that."

The moment he pulled Paul's trousers and boxers down, his cock sprang up, hard and strong. Craig knew what he wanted. What they both wanted now. The way Paul responded to him when they made love, no matter what he did, made him hotter than anyone he'd ever known. Even Michael.

Craig pulled down his own jeans and Calvins, not bothering to remove his shirt, cursing when he caught the zip against his prick. Again. Paul laughed and Craig laughed with him, the two of them still kissing, touching, scrabbling for release. And finally he was free. He grabbed the condom, rolling it over himself and, at the same time, reaching for the lube.

"Oh God, please, yes," Paul panted, but he didn't have to.

Moments later and deep inside his boyfriend, Craig came almost at once, but he wasn't alone. Paul's spunk pulsated up, over his face and hair so he could taste the salt of him on his tongue.

"God, God," Paul said. And then, "Sorry, I'm sorry."

Craig started to laugh again, though the laughter had never really gone away. "Don't be. You taste fucking delicious. You always bloody have."

Then they collapsed on each other, tangled up together in sex and sweat and laughter.

A while later they did it again. That time was bloody good too. They lay for a while in silence. Which was good, but in a different way. Sometimes, Craig thought, all the ruddy words in the world weren't any better than just being with someone after sex, listening to the sound of their breathing.

But the day wasn't over yet, and there was the question he still had to ask Paul. Maybe now wasn't the right time for it, but he wasn't sure there would ever be a right time. Not only that, but he needed to ask it soon or it would be too late. Shifting position so that he lay on his back staring at the ceiling and feeling the heat of Paul's body next to his own, he took a deep breath.

"I need to ask you something," he said, not looking at Paul. "And it's not about the past or our families or anything. It's about now. And the immediate future."

A short hesitation and then Paul sighed. "Go on. I think I can guess what you're going to say, but go on anyway. I won't hold it against you that you'll be asking after softening me up with a damn good fuck."

"Only one fuck?" Craig said, hoping Paul could catch the smile in his voice.

He laughed. "Okay, you're right there. Two good fucks. And, yes, I know that wasn't the question."

"Good. Then here it is. Will you let me come to see Peter with you? Because this time I need to be there."



PAUL was reluctant, but in the end he must have seen how determined Craig was. Which explained why the two of them were standing outside a large detached house on the outskirts of Woking on a wet Friday in February.

"God, this is some place, isn't it? The bugger must be doing well," Craig said as he lifted up his jacket collar to keep out the damp.

"Maybe." Paul smiled. "But it's still Woking."

"Snob," Craig hissed at him and would have said more but the door opened and a tall sandy-haired man stood staring out at them. He wasn't smiling.

He was bloody good-looking though. And Craig didn't even like fair-haired men, in spite of being one himself. Or as fair-haired as science allowed him to go. This one wouldn't have seemed out of place in a photo shoot. One for older men of course. Nicely defined muscles, a lean torso under that designer shirt, and good skin. If Craig hadn't been predisposed against the deceiving bastard, he might have offered to put his name forward to his agent, but of course he did none of that.

Paul stepped forward, holding out his hand. "Good afternoon. My name is Paul Maloney and this is my assistant, Craig Robertson. May we speak to Peter Woodthorpe? We've made an appointment."

"Yes, that would be me. Do come in."

Still no smile, but then again Craig wouldn't be smiling either if it was him. Peter waved them through the door and into the house. It smelled of herbs Craig couldn't name and he wondered if someone was burning a candle somewhere or cooking something exotic. Immediately ahead of them was a full-length mirror bathed in light. He and Paul were framed in it and seeing the two of them so close and so clear almost made him jump. They exchanged glances but said nothing, following Peter to the left along a short hallway and then right into what Craig assumed was the living room. Still, the picture of Paul and him in the mirror stayed in his head. They looked okay together, he thought, maybe not what you'd expect but okay.

The living room had the same bathed-in-light effect, which only highlighted the enormous blue sofas and chairs and their accompanying yellow cushions. Craig's first reaction was how 1990s this was, but he stifled it. He wasn't here to make a style judgment. He was here to find out if this man knew something more about Michael than he'd so far told anyone. And, if so, what that might mean.

The three of them weren't alone, however. As Peter gestured them both to sit down, presumably on that out-of-date ridiculously grand sofa, another man stood up from what looked to be the television corner and stepped toward them, holding out his hand. He was shorter than Craig, dark-haired and heading toward plumpness. Craig wondered what the hell someone like Peter was doing with someone like this but then thought maybe he shouldn't judge. At least not in that way. Being nearest to the dark-haired man as he approached, Craig took his outstretched hand, gave it a decisive shake, and let him go. It felt as if he'd been holding nothing at all and neither did he trust the other man's smile. This one would sell him without even asking what the price was.

"Ah, this is my partner," Peter cut in. "Bob Whitehead. Bob, this is Paul Maloney and Craig Robertson. Is that right?"

Craig nodded and Bob smiled.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

Paul shook his hand too and then sat down. Craig joined him but not too closely. Paul scanned the room as if assessing it for bugs—or whatever private investigators did—before looking up at where Peter remained standing and raising his eyebrows.

"Nice place you've got here," he said.

"Yes, we're happy with it. We moved in four years ago. It suits us."

"Must be worth a fortune."

Peter half-smiled at that. "It is."

"I see," Paul replied and then sat forward, still staring up at the man they'd come to meet. "Tell me, are you happy to discuss your relationship with Michael Harris in company or would you prefer a private conversation?"

For a second or so, the room was utterly silent. Then, to Craig's surprise, Peter gave a short bark of laughter.

"You don't mince your words, do you, Mr Maloney?" he said. "I guess if I'd been trying to keep my past a secret from Bob, it would be a little late now."

"Apologies," Paul said, not looking in the least bit sorry. "I don't like to waste your or my client's time. I can't imagine you like having a PI in your home, so I thought it best to get on with what I've come for."

"Fair enough. But, first, would you like coffee? We were just making some."

"Please," Paul said, relaxing back into his seat once more. "A dash of milk, no sugar."

"I'll do it," Bob said, cocking his head at Craig. "And what about you, Craig?"

"White, no sugar," he replied, wondering how they'd moved from crisp questioning to suburban coffee morning so quickly.

It didn't seem to faze Paul though. He waited in silence until the coffee arrived, which only took a couple of minutes. Craig thought

Peter might sit down, wait for the interview to start, but he didn't. Instead he paced to the window, a frown creasing his brow, and stared out at the garden. Which, even to Craig's unprofessional eye, looked as if it had been landscaped. *Rich tosser*, he thought. What the hell had Michael been doing with him anyway? *And what might Peter have done to him after Michael left Devon? If* Michael left Devon. If he had, then maybe it was Peter after all. Maybe his boyfriend was right and Craig had been wrong about what had happened on the farm. Perhaps Michael had gone home and then vanished. *Hell*, he must stop chasing after all the possibilities at once. He would soon not be able to think straight at all. Mind you, if Paul wasn't here, Craig didn't know if he'd be able to sit calmly and look as if he didn't have a connection to Peter. No matter how indirect.

A hand on Craig's arm brought him to himself. He realized his skin felt hot and his shoulders were tense. This was no way to pretend to be a PI's assistant, was it? He should try to look like he wasn't personally involved, but he didn't know how to act that role. Already it felt as if the words *You had a relationship with Michael, you bastard, and so did I* were tattooed onto his forehead and glowing in the pulsating overhead light. He only hoped no other bugger could see it. Even he could tell misplaced jealousy would get them nowhere.

It was Peter who spoke first, just as Bob was bringing in a ridiculously shiny coffee pot and an equally glittering tray. Did neither of these guys ever go for subtle?

"I didn't think I'd have to talk about this again," he said, still staring out at his garden. "I thought it was over."

Something in his voice made everything fall silent. Even Bob said nothing. He just hunkered down, easing the tray onto the glass table, and waited. While Peter spoke and Bob poured coffee into china cups, Craig set his gaze on the magazines piled up on the table's lower level: scattered remnants of the *Sunday Telegraph* and a few copies of *Gay Times*. The combination didn't surprise him.

"I spoke to Michael's sister," Peter said, "but I imagine you must know that. We argued—she accused me of all sorts of things that were probably true. Yes, Michael and I were never the best suited of couples. Yes, I did cheat on him. All the way through our relationship, in fact, though I didn't tell Eva that. But no, what I got up to was never serious and I didn't want him to leave me. Call me a shallow bastard if you like but I thought that if anyone did the leaving, it would be me. I suppose she's already told you all that, or what she knew of it, hasn't she?"

He turned around at last. His expression was completely still, the beauty of his face unchanged.

"Yes," Paul agreed. "Mrs. Langley has spoken to us about her brother's disappearance. But I want to hear what happened from you. Go on."

Peter nodded. "When I found out that Michael was having an affair, I couldn't believe it. He was always completely monogamous, or so I'd thought. He lived a lot of his life in his own head, if you see what I mean. Sometimes it could be hard to get near. Which was perhaps why I... never mind. It doesn't matter now, does it? Anyway, when I found out, I did what he'd never done with me. I confronted him. Asked if it was serious with whoever it was. God, I can't even remember his name now."

"Adrian," Craig said, his voice as clear as if he was making some kind of announcement. "His name was Adrian."

Peter half-jumped and glanced at him. Craig could tell he'd almost forgotten he was there at all. "Was it? Oh well, now I suppose I know."

Craig opened his mouth to say more, but Paul spoke first, one hand gripping his arm. Warning him.

"How did Michael respond?" he asked.

"How do you think?" Peter replied, taking two or three steps to the still-unoccupied part of the suite and flinging himself into the chair. "He was bloody furious. It all came back at me then. All the times I'd been with other men. God, he must have been storing it up in his head, all those years. We ended up shouting at each other in a way we'd never done before. Worse."

"You fought him then?" This from Paul.

Peter nodded, looking away from them now. "Yes. I didn't have a choice. He hit me. Suddenly, as we were facing off in the dining room

at our old house. I couldn't believe it. Neither could he. Then I hit him back and we really began to fight. We were rolling over and over on the floor. It was stupid. I don't remember how long that went on for—not long, I think. It was just the heat of the moment. We only stopped when I pushed him and he hit his head against the wall. Not hard enough for him to black out or anything, but hard enough for us both to come to our senses."

"And you say that hadn't happened before?" Paul chipped in.

"No." Peter's eyes narrowed as he gazed at his questioner. "I'm not usually violent. Michael's disappearance after he left me has got absolutely nothing to do with me."

"But you drove him away," Craig said, unable to keep silent any longer. "So that's not true, is it? You drove Michael away and then he... he vanished."

Peter's eyes locked onto his. Craig could feel the sweat on his face and wondered if the other man had noticed that too. It was as he'd thought; he wasn't going to be able to keep up this pretense of not being involved. In truth, he'd known before he came here that, even in spite of being with Paul, sometimes it felt as if Michael and he had only just seen each other. As if he'd been waiting for seven bloody years for him to come back and to find out for sure what really happened that summer he'd left home.

Without realizing it, Craig had leaned forward and was glaring at Michael's ex. For a moment, Peter was still and then, unexpectedly, he smiled. Not a gesture Craig returned at all.

"That's one interpretation of what happened, certainly," he said, his tone dry, almost amused. "I assume you believed what Eva had to say without question then. A response which surprises me in an investigation firm, I must say. I like to think that what happened was that Michael and I fought and he decided to leave me—not a decision I went along with. In fact I begged him to stay, several times. But he'd decided to go. And once Michael decided anything, he stuck to it. Always. So he went. Not even to be with this... Adrian character, I understand. No, he left to 'have some space' and be on his own for a while and ended up at his sister's. Which you obviously already know. From there, he chose to go on holiday—to Devon—and from there,

well, from there nothing. And *that*, Mr. Maloney and Mr. Robertson, is all I know. And all I'm prepared to say."

"You didn't have any other contact with Michael after he went to Devon?" Paul cut in, which was probably a good idea as it must have been obvious to him that Craig was losing it. "Letters? Cards? Phone calls?"

"No. None of those. I've just said that, haven't I?" Peter's face remained still, as if it had been carved from granite and the emotion removed. Or contained. Craig wondered how that emotion expressed itself when it needed an escape route. The man was just too damn perfect. "Which is what I told both the police and, later, Eva's other PI. There's nothing more I can tell you."

Craig wasn't so sure about that but Paul was already standing up, nudging at him to do the same. Craig wanted to protest, to stop the onward movement to this man's door and away. Surely they had other avenues to explore? But, as Paul went through the usual rituals of leaving, something twisted up inside him to keep the words at the back of his tongue and he found himself outside in the chill winter air in a matter of moments.

He said nothing while Paul started the car and began to drive off. A few roads away from Peter's home, Craig found his voice.

He slammed his hand on the dashboard and Paul jerked to a halt. The Mondeo behind swerved around them, hooting.

"Why did we leave it there?" he said and was surprised to find his voice was steadier than he'd hoped. "There were other things we could have asked them, other things I wanted to say. Is that all you planned to confront him with? Isn't he supposed to lie? He has to be hiding something. We could have found out the truth. Why didn't we?"

Paul stopped the car. He took a deep breath and shut his eyes. When he opened them again and looked at Craig, his expression was almost as distant as Peter's had been before.

"Why didn't we try to get the truth out of him?" Craig asked again, leaning forward and gripping his boyfriend's arm.

"We did," Paul replied softly. "You just didn't see it."

"What do you mean? I—"

"If you let me finish, I'll tell you." Craig fell silent at once and after a second or two, Paul continued. "You were ready to lash out in there. Whether verbally again or physically, I don't know, but it was obvious. I should never have brought you with me. God knows what the two of them thought. I'm supposed to be a professional; I'm not acting like one. I'm acting like...."

He hesitated and Craig was ready to speak again, except Paul got there first

"Like God knows what," he said, but more quietly as if talking only to himself. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. The fact is there's nothing to gain from talking to Michael's ex-boyfriend and his current partner. Not as far as I can see. I shouldn't have bothered to do it. I should have gone with my gut feeling—it always works."

"Okay. So what does your gut feeling tell you now?" Craig asked, his voice all but a snarl.

Paul took hold of his hand, squeezed it once, and let it go. "It tells me that the heart of the matter doesn't lie with either Michael's family or the man he ditched. In fact, it might not even lie with Michael at all. Because the person obsessing about all this, the person dredging up the past is you, Craig. Only you. In response to what your father is doing of course, but it's still you. First you think you killed Michael, then you think it might be your father, and now Peter. Which is it? And what's really going on here?"

CRAIG didn't answer him and Paul didn't push it. Despite the spikes festering in his gut, Craig was glad of it. It gave him time to think. The world outside the car streamed by: houses, trees, people, and always the grayness of road. After a while, Paul sighed and turned the radio on. It was Classic FM again, but Craig didn't complain. It wasn't his place. Besides, he wasn't really listening to anything but his own memories and the way the past reverberated through him. Now more so than ever.

Flashes of his mother. Again. Why was he thinking of her? Over the past few days, he thought he might even have dreamed about her but he could never be sure. He found it hard to remember his dreams in the morning. It was as if seeing his father, knowing he was watching him, had released a trough of remembrance Craig had no desire to pick through. He should have spoken to his father when he had the chance before. He'd been a fool not to. A fool and a coward. But what would he have said? The two of them had had nothing to say to each other for so long that to find something to talk about now was beyond Craig. And certainly beyond his father.

Michael too. His disappearance—no, call it what it must surely be: death, caused by... someone—was entirely due to the fact that he'd come to Devon and stayed with them. If Craig could understand fully the truth of how Michael had died, even find proof maybe, then other people would surely believe him. No matter what that truth was. No matter who was guilty. But if it was Craig, would he then lose Paul? He didn't want to think about that. If that was the result, then he wanted to think no further than the next moment, the next hour, the next day. Still, from somewhere within, he needed to *know*.

The journey back home seemed to take longer than usual. The awkwardness in the atmosphere was partially responsible for that. Craig could think of nothing to say that wouldn't be stupid or irrelevant. The failed interview with Peter was entirely his own fault. When they finally arrived at his flat and Paul turned off the engine, Craig reached over and put his hand on his knee.

"Look," he said. "I messed up. I thought I could handle it and I couldn't. You're right and I'm wrong, and I'm sorry."

Paul took his hand. His fingers felt warm, but he stared straight ahead. "It's okay. As I said, there wasn't anything there to find out. Shall we go in? I could do with a drink. Coffee. Might warm me up."

He got out without looking at Craig. Okay, Craig thought, he probably deserved that. He was acting like a prick anyway so it wasn't much of a surprise that Paul was pissed off. Still there was something in the air he didn't much like; it was up to him to make things right again. Up to him to say something, but he didn't know what. The day seemed to be slipping from whatever grasp he'd had on it in the first

place. He trailed after Paul, fingers fumbling for keys, almost dropping them.

"You okay?" Paul muttered.

"Sure," he said. "Come in."



THE first person Craig saw when he stepped into the hallway was Maddy. He should have been glad to see her but social conversation wasn't on his mind. He simply wanted to be alone with Paul, apologize properly, and see if the unaccountable tension in the air between them eased. At all. Maybe have sex. Yes, that would be nice. That would make everything right. Even as he thought that, his prick began to grow hard. He hoped it was the same for the man at his side. And if not now, then soon. Sex solved everything. Didn't it?

"Hiya," Maddy said. "I'm just going out. How did it go?"

Paul shrugged and it was up to Craig to reply. "Not great. I think I messed up. You know. Hell, I suppose I'll never make a detective after all."

If he'd hoped to lighten the atmosphere with humor, make Paul laugh, he was soon proved wrong. Thank goodness Maddy smiled.

"Oh well," she said. "Best stick to the day job then, eh?"

"Yeah. Good idea."

For a moment, a frown crossed Maddy's face. Then the smile came back, briefly, and she headed for the front door.

"I'll leave you two alone then," she said. "See you later, both."

Craig grunted a reply and, at the same time, a burst of music from Julie's room told him the door had opened and shut again quickly. Just for this moment, he was here, alone with the man he loved. And, okay, things were temporarily tense and Paul hadn't said he loved him yet, but that didn't matter. It was early days. They'd made it this far in spite of everything that had happened. Maybe, just maybe Craig didn't have to worry for once. Maybe something in his life would be okay.

Paul leaned toward him and Craig reached for him, thinking only of taking him to bed *now*, but Paul caught his hand. Caught it and held it. Opened his mouth to speak. It was then that the world turned.

"Look, Craig, I think we should maybe have a break from each other for a while," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"What?" Craig took a step backward and found himself pressed against the wall, his hand still held by Paul's. "Why?"

"Please, can't we go somewhere more private?" He glanced around but all the doors were shut. They were still alone. "To discuss this?"

The thought of Paul being in his bedroom where they'd first really got it together just in order to dump him made Craig's legs shake. "No. I think if you've got something to say, you should say it here."

"Okay. Okay. It's like this," he said in low tones, as Craig continued to stare at him. His legs were still shaking but he didn't dare try to move to sit down. Anyway, this was the hallway. There was nowhere to sit. The telephone table didn't count. "It's like this. My fault. I think maybe I started this thing with you too soon. It's not been easy. For either of us. You've got a lot of issues to think through. Which doesn't mean I think that what you feared you did to Michael is necessarily the case—often things we remember and don't face get blown up out of proportion. I should know about that. But maybe you should just let it go, Craig. Maybe you'll never solve it and stirring things up for yourself and for other people isn't going to help. But, hell, I know I've got stuff of my own too. Stuff which means I don't think I'm ready for this. Not a serious relationship. Not at the moment.

Maybe it would have been different if... if you'd not needed me to do what I do for a living as well. To get involved with you in that way. Professionally. Please, I'm not blaming you. It's not your fault, but I don't think I can mix my personal life with my business one anymore. It was hard enough before when I tried to do that, I swear it. I don't think I can deal with it again."

"But, Paul, please, I...," Craig started to say, his voice rising, before Paul cut him off.

"After Nick and what happened with him, I just can't do it. Not again. I'm sorry. God, I like you, Craig. *Really* like you. A hell of a lot. But I don't think I can give you anything more than that. Not now. Not the way things are for me, and I can't see that changing for a while."

"Are you still in love with him?" This time, Craig didn't lower his voice. This time, he interrupted Paul.

Paul let go of Craig's hand and swallowed. Even then, the way his Adam's apple pulsed in his throat sent fire through Craig's blood. Paul blinked.

"Tell me," Craig said, not caring who might hear. He was vaguely aware that the music in Julie's room had stopped briefly before being turned up again, but none of that seemed to matter anymore. "Tell me."

A terrible pause, before Paul spoke.

"Yes," he said simply. "I think so. I understand I'll never see him again but, yes, I think I'm still in love with Nick."

Craig closed his eyes. Didn't bother opening them again.

"Then you'd better leave," he said.

AFTER Craig shut the door behind Paul, he leaned against the wood and felt its grain carve a memory against his skin. That was it then. Another boyfriend gone. And only himself to blame for the dumping. Or rather being dumped. He couldn't blame Paul. Not for one moment. Not for breaking it off with him anyway. He, Craig, was acting more and more like a child desperate to find out a hidden secret and with no

way of knowing where the clues were. Or even what the fuck they were. Who would go out with a no-hoper like that?

He opened his eyes, unsurprised to find them wet. There was one thing he could blame Paul for though. For still being in love with someone else. Oh yes, he could blame him for that. Paul shouldn't have rung him up in the first place if he'd still known that. But perhaps he hadn't known it until now? After all, among the countless facts that Craig didn't seem to know about himself, blaming someone else for not knowing one fact about their own lives seemed at the very least unfair.

"Are you all right?" The voice was Julie's and Craig turned around, wondering if he'd be able to answer.

"Yes," he managed. "I just need to be by myself for a while. Is that okay?"

Julie nodded, and he stumbled past her to his room. Once inside, he locked the door behind him and put the radio on. Kiss FM. Loud, but not too loud. Bloody hell, but he lived with people after all. He made a noise halfway between a groan and a strangled grunt and slammed his fists against the wall near the window. It made him feel better, but not for long. What would have made him feel better was if he could smash the window with something—anything—without fear of fallout. Or worse, Julie's or, later, Maddy's concern. But there was no chance of that. He wanted to go on living here, didn't he?

Then he fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. From nowhere came the thought that he must return to Devon. If he could somehow, in spite of everything, get his past life sorted out, then maybe his present—even his future—might be sorted out too. If he was less of a no-hoper, Paul might give him another chance. He took a breath. Wiped away tears. No way was that going to happen. Paul wasn't in love with him; he was in love with his ex. Or thought he was. Craig wished he hadn't said that but, then again, if Paul hadn't told him the truth, then he might even now be holding onto some kind of hope. And the truth was there was none.

So as of now, Craig had no boyfriend, no evidence, and no plan. Only the thought that he should return home. Or where home had once been. Then again, if his father was still in London, perhaps he should confront him first. As Paul had suggested. Away from his own territory, his father might be more vulnerable. Craig snorted at the assumption; in all the time he'd known him, his father had never shown any sign of vulnerability. His faith and his opinions had been rocksolid, and he'd expected his family to feel the same. When they didn't, well that was when things got bad. He didn't want to think about that though. Once again, he had a sensation that something in his brain was shutting down, switching off so whatever was there didn't have to be faced.

Craig sat up on the bed. Was that it? Had he in fact witnessed his father murdering Michael seven years ago and his brain was simply shutting out that information? Was that the simple truth of it all? No, surely that was something he would remember. It was crazy to think that he wouldn't. Or maybe he *was* crazy. That wouldn't surprise him. He squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated. On the last time he and Michael had been together. The moment when his father had appeared through the trees. Then the confrontation. The fight.

He concentrated. Hard. All he saw was a picture of a tap dripping. The one in the old utility room in Devon. Then it was gone.

It was no good then. Nothing sensible was coming. If he tried to relax, perhaps it would be better. He sighed and lay back on the bed, closing his eyes. After a while he drifted off into a fitful sleep. The evening wore on. He heard the front door open, presumably Maddy coming back. Then Julie's door, followed by low voices from downstairs. The sound of a kettle, a soft knocking on his door, which he ignored—though he knew he should have answered it. But talking to people—whoever they were—was beyond him right now. Sleep took him again. When he woke it was dark so he got up, turned the light on, and closed the curtains. Turning around, he saw that something white and square had been pushed under his door.

Hope you're okay, the note said. It's 9:30 p.m. Julie and I are out for a quick drink. Back with Chinese & beer by 10:30. We'll get for you too. Drown our sorrows. Love and stuff and see you later. Maddy xxx

Craig smiled and glanced at his watch. Ten p.m. He'd slept as if he were dead. He had a thirst on him the size of Manhattan too.

In the kitchen, he drank the best part of two glasses of water and checked to see if there were any messages on his mobile. None from

Paul, damn it. Not that he'd expected any. He just wanted to hear his fucking voice. Way too much to ask though; he knew it.

There was another message though. Not from a number he recognized. As he began to listen to it, the doorbell rang. The girls were back early. Must have forgotten their keys. As he made his way to the door, despite all that had happened and the fact he'd just been dumped, Craig's breath quickened as he listened to his phone message. It was from Pedro, the shoot director. He wanted to meet up. With Craig and his agent. Discuss another project. Hell, that would be so good. Maybe the day wasn't entirely shit then. He'd have to let his agent know. He'd have to....

He never got the chance to hear the end of the request. Because he opened the door and came face-to-face with someone in a mask. At the same time, something hard hit him with force on the side of his head. He was vaguely aware of trying to cry out but being unable to hear himself. Then he was falling and everything went dark.



THE sea was very rough. As if from a great distance, Craig wondered if the storm would ever subside. It was making his stomach churn and he thought he might have groaned. In his dream, he tried to hang on to the sides of the ship but his fingers kept slipping and he rolled across the deck. Opening his mouth to scream for help, nothing came out.

Something hard slapped him in the face and jolted him into wakefulness. The sea faded and instead he found himself looking at grubby white walls and rope.

"What...?" Craig didn't finish the question. A sudden lurch took him and he turned and vomited, feeling waves of nausea thudding in his head. The floor beneath him was tracked with mud and dust; it shimmered out of focus before coming back solid again.

He groaned. Sat up, leaning against the wall behind. He realized he was still moving, and could smell diesel, hear the roar of an engine. A car. He was in a car. Blinking, he stared around. No, it was bigger than that A van

Okay, a van. And one traveling somewhere. But what the bloody hell was he doing in it? He tried to stand up. He failed. Mainly because,

as he realized for the first time, his feet were tied together. His hands too. Bloody hell.

Lying back down on the floor, thankfully not too close to his own vomit, his mouth pressed against God knew what kind of dirt, Craig tried to remember what had happened. The phone call, the doorbell. Someone in a mask, And then... then here.

Bloody hell. Again. He had to do something. His head felt as if someone had launched a ruddy elephant at it. A quick search in his pockets revealed no phone. Well, he should have assumed that whoever had knocked him senseless and trussed him up like an old chicken would have removed his only means to call for help. Damn them.

His body bathed in sweat in spite of the chill in the van, he knelt upright and shuffled to the front, where the unknown driver would be. Then, banging his imprisoned fists on the cab wall, he shouted as loudly as he could.

"You bastard, what the fuck do you think you're doing? Let me out of here. Are you crazy? Come on then; show yourself, you fucking bastard."

He went on shouting until he heard the sound of muffled curses and the van screeched to a halt. He fell backward and scrabbled in the dirt again. The driver's door slammed shut, the engine still running. Two seconds later and the winter air came rushing into Craig's prison as the rear door was opened. He slammed himself forward, hoping to knock his captor over, though he had no real idea what he might do afterward. He simply wanted whoever it was to *feel some ruddy pain*.

It didn't work

Because the man standing in the doorway swung something hard and strong at Craig's side and knocked him sideways, cursing. Pain ripped through his arm. Even as he fell, he registered the fact that they were on a main road or motorway and it was night.

"Do that again," the man hissed, "and I'll use the bat on your head, not just on your shoulder."

Even before the threat was finished, Craig already knew who it was.

"D-Dad?" he stammered. But then the shutting of the door locked him into darkness again.

As Craig tried to get a grip on what the hell was going on, the van was revved into gear, and the journey continued. But to where?

He wasn't to find out for some hours. From the length of the ride, he guessed they were heading back to Devon, though he had no idea what time it might be. His watch was gone. That was just a guess though; the fact that there were no windows along with the darkness itself both served to muddle him and, for all he knew, they could well be driving to Scotland. But his father was a creature of routine, or had been. Whatever he was planning, he would do on his home ground.

In the meantime, Craig's throat was gasping for water and, worse, he was aching for a pee. He held out for as long as he could, then with a sigh crawled over to the far end of the van, gritted his teeth and got on with it. Luckily he managed to avoid the worst of the splash-back. At least when his father finally decided to stop and he had another chance to fight, he wouldn't be distracted by other issues.

All that didn't cure his thirst though. Not that thirst was the greatest problem right now. He made his way to the door. Leaning as far back as possible so he was less likely to fall headlong onto the road if he managed to get the ruddy door open, he slammed the handle up and down for a few moments and then gave the whole damn thing a few shoves. No luck. Why couldn't his father have chosen to kidnap him in some old banger rather than one with truly lockable doors? All those years on the farm working in vehicles that were one step away from falling apart entirely and now the bugger had to go and choose one that was state-of-the-art. Bloody typical.

After several other goes, he decided to call it a day. For the moment. Maybe the best thing was to wait to be released and then fight back. His head had begun to ache in earnest. He'd have to try to stay awake, be prepared for his chance when it came. Funny how the thought of tackling his father made his head throb harder. Fractured images reared up but he could make no sense of them. Probably a good thing. Besides, he'd never been able to make any sense of anything to do with his father. No use starting now.

In spite of his plan to keep awake, it was the silence of the engine that woke him from an unsettled doze. For a moment, he thought he might be sick again, but he swallowed the feeling down.

He heard footsteps on gravel by the side of the van and tensed himself for action. The door swung open. With a grunt, Craig launched himself at his father's frame. He never got there. Something heavy slammed down once more onto his shoulder and he fell to the ground outside with a cry. As he tried to at least get to his feet, he realized that he was looking at the barrel of a rifle aimed at his head.

"Jesus Christ."

His father shoved the rifle at Craig's chest and he fell backward again. At the corner of his vision, he could just make out the shapes of outbuildings and the distant hulk of a tractor, trees. He'd been right, then. They were back on the farm.

"Don't you *ever* take the Lord's name in vain," his father spat, each word inhabiting its own small universe and accompanied by another jab with the gun. "Do you hear me?"

Craig bit back the natural response and tried to breathe slowly. "Yes, I hear you. I'm sorry."

No answer. His father was standing near the open back door of the van now and for a moment he glanced inside before turning his attention back to Craig. "Have you dirtied yourself in there? *Have* you?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I have. I couldn't help it."

"You sinner."

With a deliberation so measured that Craig couldn't quite believe he was doing it, his father raised the rifle and brought it crashing down on his head.

Once again everything went black.

The ache in his arms woke him. It felt as if his muscles were being impossibly stretched, and he could taste bile at the back of his throat. His head throbbed and his left eye felt sticky.

"Wh-what?"

"Shut up," somebody hissed, and it took Craig a moment to recognize the voice. "Shut up, or the Lord will *make* you shut up."

It was his father. Remembering all that had happened, Craig opened his eyes and tried to keep his breathing steady. He couldn't see much, but he could make out the barn door in front of him, and something metallic and cold behind, touching his back. The coldness seeped in through his shirt and seemed to spread throughout his whole body. Twisting his head to try to see what it was made the bile rise to his mouth and he had to gag and spit it away, but he'd already understood by then where he was.

His father had tied him up. He'd knocked Craig out, and tied him to the hooks on the barn wall. He was hanging from them now, his arms feeling as if they'd be torn from their sockets at any moment, and his feet dangling only a few precious inches from the ground. The south barn, he thought; that was nearest to the van when his father knocked him out. And that's where they were now, though what good that realization might do him, Craig didn't know.

The more important question was: What was his father going to do?

If he wanted Craig to be quiet, then he could only assume that he had something to say. And would say it when he was ready. No earlier and no later. How Craig remembered that trait from his youth. While he waited, he glanced around. From the subtle hint of light coming through the high window, he imagined it must be nearly dawn. He must only just have been tied up here though, as surely the pressure on his arms would have jolted him awake at once. He couldn't have been here long.

The man with him began to hum. Something which sounded like a hymn. Instantly, Craig was fully alert, though he couldn't have said why. Flashes of what might have been memory filled his head, all of it more of a confused jumble than before. His mother. Sunlight. Something red. The dripping tap. The sound of breathing. Then it was gone and there was nothing in his thoughts at all. Simply a terrible blankness. The humming became higher-pitched, and Craig squeezed his eyes shut, trying to scrabble as quietly as possible with his legs for some kind of hold on the wall behind him. Something that might ease the pain. Just for a moment or two.

"Stop that." His father spoke roughly, in between the wild humming. "The pain will heal you. Stop giving yourself pleasure. Pleasure leads to sin."

"Oh yeah," Craig replied before he could think better of it. "And you don't care for pleasure, do you? So what were you doing with that prostitute in London when you weren't spying on me?"

The effort of that little speech cost him dearly as he struggled for breath. It cost him dearly in other ways too. His father took two strides toward him and tugged at his feet. Craig screamed and blacked out for a few moments. When he came to, he realized he'd pissed himself and the pain in his arms was almost unbearable. At the same time, his father was talking, words that made no sense but which were terrifyingly familiar.

"You're a sinner, you need to be shown the right way, you've been a rebel all along, God has told me to punish you, I've tried to save you all these years, I tried to show you right from wrong but you've always been a sinner, sick you are, sick, and now the Lord has showed me what to do, now I must obey Him."

His father said the same things over and over again, and all Craig could do was listen. Without wanting to, he was transported to his boyhood all over again, the years in between fading away as if they had been nothing.

HE was just six. At home after school. It was spring, he remembered. Not long before his mother left them. He'd waved goodbye to the friend's parent who had given him a lift. Then he'd gone into the house, dragging his schoolbag behind him, and accidentally knocked the Nativity statue off the hall table and onto the floor. There'd been a dull thud and a splintering sound and the donkey had been broken off from the manger and rolled across the carpet.

Daniel froze. His bag slipped from his hand and he glanced at the office door on his left. At the same time, the living room door opened and his mother stood, framed by the light. He stared dumbly at her and a shadow of concern flitted across her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but whatever words she might have been intending to say were never spoken.

His father came out of the office and stood before them both. His eves were shadowed and his hair brushed back.

"What's that noise? Can't you keep quiet while I'm trying to pray?"

"I'm sorry," Daniel mumbled. "I didn't mean to...."

"Didn't mean to... what?" Mr. Clutton interrupted, a frown creasing his forehead. "What have you done now?"

"It's nothing, James," his mother began to say, as she stepped between his father and the broken statue. "Danny's just home from school, that's all. Why can't you leave our son alone?"

Daniel sent a brief glance of gratitude in her direction, his heart thumping fast. Thankfully his father didn't see. Maybe, he thought, maybe he'd got away with it. This time.

"Don't speak to me like that—it's not the Lord's will," his father said. "You know that. Besides, the boy's making too much noise. Hasn't he learnt any manners at school?"

His father turned to go back into the office, but then hesitated. Something must have caught his eye.

Daniel followed his gaze and felt himself begin to shake as he realized that his mother's swift action hadn't managed to hide the donkey, which was now lying a foot or so away, staring blindly upward. He felt tears prickle at the corner of his eye and fought to control them

"What's this?" His father bent down slowly and picked up the broken animal. "What's happened here? What are you hiding, Anna? Let me see."

For a long moment there was a terrible silence. Daniel's mother gazed at his father, jaw lifted, before shrugging and stepping to one side. His father reached for the remains of the holy family, weighed them in his hands and placed them reverently back on the carpet.

Then, without any other warning, he grabbed Daniel and shoved him back against the wall. Daniel gasped for breath and his mother shouted, scrabbling at Daniel's father with her hands. But it did no good. All the time, his father was talking, the sound of his voice rising ever higher, his breath pushing the strong smell of coffee over Daniel's senses.

"You're an evil little boy," his father said. "I try so hard to teach you the right way but always you defy me. You're a sinner and I'm going to beat the sin out of you. I'm going to make you good if it's the last thing I do on God's earth. I swear it to you. Why did you want to break this? *Why?*"

"I-I d-didn't mean to...," Daniel sobbed, his words all but swallowed up in the gulps of tears shaking his whole body now. "P-please d-don't—"

"James, for goodness *sake*, it was only an accident. *Stop it*. It wasn't—"

"There's no such thing as an accident. You know that. I know my son. The boy meant it to happen."

While his father was distracted, Daniel saw his chance. Slipping out from underneath his arm, he fled. He would have headed for the door and into the relative safety of the farm but, partly due to his terror and partly because his father stood in his way, he raced for the stairs instead. He could have tried the back door, but instinct told him it would be locked. His heart was pounding furiously and he was still sobbing. Behind him, he heard his mother's sharp cry and the sound of his father's pursuit.

At the top of the stairs, he turned right into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Gasping for breath, he held the meager sum of his full six-year-old weight against it and at the same time tried to drag the bedside table across to help him.

The attempt was doomed to failure. His father forced his way in within seconds. His face was as hard as the concrete in the tractor shed. And as unforgiving.

Outside he heard the sound of his mother's footsteps clattering on the stairs. Without a second thought, his father dragged the bed across the door, barring her entry as Daniel had tried to bar his. Then he grabbed Daniel, picked him up as if he weighed nothing, and pushed him until he was kneeling against the bed, face first.

"I'll teach you a lesson," he said.

His father then proceeded to drag Daniel's trousers and pants down, pulled both his arms backward so he was unable to fight—should there have been any fight in him—and imprisoned them both in one of his hands. With the other, he began to spank his son hard, over and over again, so the stinging pain and humiliation of it tore its way through Daniel's skin. His arms too ached where his father was pulling them at an almost impossible angle. And, all the time, his mother's furious cries, her pounding on the door, drifted in.

His punishment seemed to go on forever until finally, mercifully, his father let go and Daniel collapsed across the bed, his shoulders singing with pain and his face hot with tears.

"That'll teach you to be more careful with holy matters," his father hissed in his ear. "Next time, give more respect to what comes from the Lord."

Thankfully no reply was expected. When his mother finally fought her way in, spitting anger at his father before he left, Daniel was sitting slumped against the wall. All tears were gone. His right shoulder was, however, dislocated. When the two of them arrived at the Accident and Emergency department in Exeter, his mother said it was a farming accident. Daniel simply nodded. It took weeks to heal and during that time he tried to avoid his father as much as possible. He replaced the broken statue with his own money. A couple of months later, his mother left. This was the first time he understood how dangerous his father could be. But not the last.

NOW, listening to his father's wild mumblings, he knew that the danger was still as real and as pressing as it had always been. Not only

that but the pain in his arms was ripping through him. He'd black out again if his father didn't release him soon.

"Please," he said. "Please."

The sound of Craig's voice stopped his father and for a moment or two there was silence. Craig tried to take a deep breath but the pain hit him again and he couldn't do anything more than pant.

"Please. Please, I'm sorry. I know I'm a sinner. You have to help me. I can't learn how to... to become good again. I can't learn how to be saved. Not like this. I-I need to repent."

He didn't know where that had come from, only that the phrases from his childhood and early youth were suddenly there on his tongue in a way they hadn't been for years. Fighting against the pain, he knew he had no other ideas. No Plan B.

"You're a sinner," his father mumbled, but this time he sounded less forceful. "A sodomite."

Craig bit his lip. The pinpoint of pain helped him to concentrate. "Yes. I know. Forgive me."

Another long silence. He closed his eyes. He was about to give up, maybe even slip into unconsciousness again when he felt the ropes on his arms begin to slacken. When he opened his eyes, he saw his father, unshaven cheek close to his own, sawing on the rope with a hunting knife. He smelled of stale sweat. Craig tried to make himself as unobtrusive as possible, to avoid becoming the subject of the frantic movements. When his right arm was free, he hung down, one foot making tentative contact with the barn floor, as his father turned his attention to the remaining rope.

At last he dropped to the ground. Any plans of escape vanished as his legs buckled under him and he fell, groaning. The barn walls, the machinery moved hazily across his vision and he tried to get up. Instinct told him he couldn't afford to be any more vulnerable than he was right now.

A sharp slap in the face knocked him down again.

"Kneel," his father snapped. "The Lord demands your repentance."

Craig did as he was told. It seemed the best thing to do. Underneath his knees, the floor was rough and hard. He wondered how long he could hold the position. Even now, he was shaking, partly with cold, partly with shock.

"Wh-what do y-you want me to do?" He wished his voice sounded stronger, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Pray."

He blinked. All the words he might say escaped him and he simply stared at his father.

"Pray, you sinner." This time, he felt the cold barrel of the gun against his cheek. As if from nowhere the words finally came.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name..."

As he continued to chant the ancient prayer, he felt the rifle ease away from his cheek and his breathing became calmer. When he got to the end, whispered the *amen*, he paused and felt the rifle pressing his face once more. In truth, he knew no other prayers. Not anymore. Clenching his fists, he started for a second time on the Lord's Prayer and the rifle was pulled back again. Thank goodness.

He spoke the prayer over and over, until his knees ached and his tongue felt useless in his mouth. He spoke it until the words, already worn thin by familiarity, lost all their meaning and became just sounds that pierced the air around them both. He could almost imagine that it was the words themselves that were making the darkness clear away, bringing in the slow dawn light. Every time he paused for breath, tried to moisten his mouth, the rifle jabbed him in the cheek and every time he took up the prayer again, the threat receded a little. His whole body continued to shake and he wondered how long he could keep this madness up. What did his father want anyway? When would he be allowed to stop?

He thought too of Paul. In the gaps between speaking, Craig thought of the way he'd looked, that mysterious smile, full of pain and hope. He remembered his boyfriend's eyes. It kept him going. Somehow.

Finally, when he was near to collapse, his father barked, "Enough."

Craig stopped at once. The *your will be done* vanished into silence. The only sound was his own panting and his father's steady breath. He swallowed, in spite of his dryness. Glancing up, he saw his father's frown and felt his pulse begin to race again. Whatever he'd done, whatever he'd tried to do to please him, it wasn't enough. No matter what his father said. It had never been enough. Not when he was a child. Why should he think it would be so now?

He had to do something to break the deadlock. And soon.

He coughed. His father looked down at him, brought the gun up again.

"It-it's not right," Craig said, the words slipping off his tongue as if they'd been stored there for a long while. "God—God isn't pleased. I need to do something else to repent. Something serious. That way—that way I won't f-fall back into sin again."

The gun stopped its upward movement toward Craig's face. Something cleared in his father's expression and he almost smiled.

"Yes," his father muttered, as if talking only to himself. "Yes, that's it. A full repentance. That is what the Lord will want. *Out of the mouths of babes and children*.... Yes, it shall be done. *Get up*."

On his feet, Craig's vision blurred and he staggered and almost fell again. At once, his father pushed the rifle against his neck. "Don't try to run, don't try to escape the Lord's judgment."

"No, I won't," he replied, knowing that was a lie. He'd take his chance when he saw it. He just had to find a way to get beyond the rifle. Without doubt, he knew his father was crazed enough to kill him. And call it mercy. Was this what had happened to Michael after all? And his mother. His mother.... Was it? No, he couldn't think of that now.

"Then walk out into the yard," his father said. "We'll see what the Lord demands."

"Can I have some water first? Please. I'm very dry."

The only answer was a shake of the head and another jab with the rifle, right against his Adam's apple. *Okay*, thought Craig. *No drink then*. He started to walk toward the barn door. It breathed freedom into

his skin. Maybe if he could open the door, kick it back into his father's face, he might escape the bullet. There'd be the chance to run. Get help. He discounted attempting to tackle his captor, not while he held all the power. If he could just distract him for a moment, knock the gun down, then maybe, maybe....

He opened the door. The shaft of dawn light made him blink. He'd grown accustomed to the dark. The cold too made him shiver. He stood for a moment on the threshold, orientating himself.

"Where to then?" he asked.

"Home," his father barked. "We need to go home. Everything will be made well again there."

Somehow Craig doubted that, but he had little choice but to obey. As he stepped out onto the concrete, he could smell wet grass, the aftermath of rain, and a hint of manure on the wind. The neighboring farms must already have started the milking; he could hear the cattle. Even so close, it seemed a universe away.

Exiting the outbuildings and heading across the mud path for what had once been home, he glanced across at Andrea's house just at the corner where it came into view. He hoped to the God he no longer believed in that she would be deeply asleep. The consequences of her involvement didn't bear thought.

Without warning, he stumbled and fell, his attention distracted by the worries about his father's old neighbor. Behind him, his father gave an angry shout, the sound of it full of words Craig didn't recognize.

"It's okay," he gabbled, mouth full of dirt. "I slipped. I—"

"Get up, get up now," he screamed. "The Lord will have his revenge. There is nowhere you can run."

Before Craig could stop him and even before he knew that was what he was going to do, his father pointed the rifle at his legs and pulled the trigger. The shot deafened him, but it missed, instead tearing up the ground and mud at his feet.

"I'm not running, I'm not running!" he yelled, hands in the air. "Don't shoot."

As the words tumbled out, a flash of yellow caught at the edge of his vision. When he turned his head, he saw that Andrea's bedroom light had come on and he groaned, heart beating double-time. "Please, Dad, please, for God's sake we have to go."

The blasphemy was spoken before he could bring it back and Craig cursed again, but this time silently. His father began to shout, waving the gun. At the same time, another light in Andrea's house split the darkness. The landing light.

He scrabbled to his knees, the fear of the rifle battling with the need to get away where Andrea couldn't see them and be foolish enough to come out. "Please, Dad. I'm sorry. Forgive me, please."

"No. Stay where you are. You are a sinner, not worthy of forgiveness. You take the Lord's name in vain and you only pretend to repent. You must be taught that *the Lord will not be mocked*."

"James? Is that you?"

Andrea's voice, thin, hesitant, pierced the standoff between Craig and his father. She was standing at her front door, the thick blue dressing gown only serving to make her seem more vulnerable.

"Andrea, no. Get back in the house!" Craig yelled. "Now."

"Craig? Are you here? What's wrong? Are you all right?" Instead of heading to safety, his neighbor took a few paces forward, waving the torch she carried at them, even though the sky was light enough now to see by.

He realized the gun must have woken her but she hadn't made the connection with what was happening now. Worse than this realization was the fact she was continuing to walk toward them.

"No," Craig yelled again. "Stay where you are. My father, he's—"

A sharp explosion from next to him and something small and round appeared in Andrea's forehead. At the same time, blood spattered backward. Her eyes widened and she fell. Craig's heart missed a beat. Then he shouted one word and one word only. It echoed around the yard and inside his head, over and over again. Until finally it vanished away.



"YOU'VE shot her, *you've fucking shot her*." Not caring what the hell his father did to him now, Craig scrambled the short distance to where Andrea lay sprawled across the yard. Blood trickled from the wound in her forehead. Her eyes were wide open and staring upward, but seeing nothing.

"Andrea?" He felt for a pulse, knowing even then it was stupid. His father was a farmer; he knew how to aim and how to kill. "Andrea."

A movement behind him and he whipped around. The gun was pointing straight at him. For the first time he found he didn't much care.

"You've killed her," he snarled, torn halfway between rage and tears. "Why? *She's done nothing wrong*."

"She would have interfered," his father whispered, his gaze fixed on Craig alone as if, in dying, Andrea was no longer important. "Nobody interferes with the work of the Lord. Nobody."

"You didn't have to kill her"

"Get up."

"What about Andrea? What about...?"

"Get up." This time his father shrieked the words and the rifle jabbed him in the mouth. He could taste its dull metallic tang. He got up. Slowly. Not just because his body would allow him to do nothing else, but because somehow the fear as to what might happen to him was gone. He was left only with puzzlement, grief, and overwhelming weariness.

"So," he whispered, more to himself than his captor. "What happens now?"

"Repentance," his father said.

They left Andrea in the yard and completed the journey to his father's house. Craig felt as if somehow he'd known he and his father would together end up here. One day. He hadn't expected it to be now.

Inside the house, the gun still at his back, he hesitated. "Can I have some water?"

"No. You don't deserve it. Get upstairs."

With no option but to obey, Craig turned right and headed to the landing. It felt as if it were not just himself now, doing this, but all his previous selves as well. He could sense the echoes of his own childhood in his head. Something else too. Flashes of memory he couldn't grasp. Water, silence, the winter sun. His breath felt too thick in his mouth.

His father pushed him into his old room. Only a few weeks since he'd been here himself, but everything had changed. The wallpaper had been ripped off, the bedspread torn, and the pillows slashed. Mud had been stamped into the carpet, and the books and papers thrown from the shelves. Beyond all that though, the bare walls had been painted in red with the sign of the cross, on every conceivable inch of space.

"What have you done?" Craig whispered.

"You have asked to be cleansed and that is what will happen," his father replied.

IN sleep, Craig's world was blank and visionless. He had no dreams. A fact for which he was thankful. The light streaming in the window finally woke him. *It must be the afternoon*, he thought. He'd been asleep that long, a realization which made him shiver. Something was digging into his back and he shifted to try to ease it. This didn't work. He opened his eyes, twisted around. He was in a chair. Tied to it securely. In his bedroom. Where his father had put him. And he was naked.

It was this fact that caused him to retch, though nothing came up but a thin stream of liquid. He spat it out. His mouth tasted acrid, raw. It was then that he saw his father. The older man was standing at the other side of the room, watching him. His face was expressionless. He still held the rifle. At the sight of it, the memory of Andrea—the pointlessness of her death—came back to Craig and he blinked away tears. Whatever happened, he mustn't think he wouldn't come through this. It was more important now than ever to be calm. That he understood. The image of Paul came into his head. He ignored the pang of regret, focused instead on his ex-boyfriend's strength. Whatever bad stuff had happened to Paul, he'd gotten through it. Craig could too.

He stared at his father. In his other hand, he held a book of some kind. Craig couldn't see what it was, but it seemed familiar somehow.

"So you're awake then?" This time, his father's voice was soft, at odds with the scenario they found themselves in. He could have been asking for bread at the local store, tending to the neighbor's lambs in spring, instead of staring at his captive son. "Are you ready?"

"F-for what?" Craig managed, though the words seemed hard to say. His tongue was thick with thirst.

"For what we must do."

Taking a couple of steps closer, the rifle lodged under his arm, his father put down the book on the floor and offered him a drink from a bottle of water. He placed the cool spout against Craig's lips but before Craig could take more than a few precious mouthfuls, he'd snatched the bottle away again.

"Enough," his father muttered. "That is enough."

Then he hunkered down and opened the book. At once, Craig recognized it. The bible his father kept in his office, its pages worn with reading. What was he going to do?

He didn't have to wait long for an answer.

"Do you remember this?"

All Craig could do in response was nod.

"Good." The older man smiled. "I'm glad that there is something holy still left inside you. I tried so hard to instill the commands of the Lord in you, but I thought you had forgotten your lessons. It's good to see you haven't."

They hadn't been lessons though. Not really. Just a small boy standing for hours at a time in an office and made to learn vast passages of the bible Craig's father had staked his life on. They had meant nothing then and even less now. He remembered some of the words, especially from the Psalms, but his mind had always skittered away from their meaning. Couldn't square it with the life he knew.

His father stood in front of Craig now. He opened the bible. "Tell me what you remember."

For a moment, all his thoughts were blank but then, from nowhere, words filtered through.

"All scripture...," he began before trailing off as his voice faded. He coughed and tried again, forcing himself to sound stronger. "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for... for...."

"For teaching, rebuking, correcting...," his father whispered, eyes narrowing, and Craig took up the chant again.

"Correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

He stopped. The memory of what came after that had gone. It didn't seem to matter, as his captor smiled. "Yes. Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter three and verses sixteen and seventeen. A good saying. You have chosen well, or rather the Lord has led you to choose well. Come then, let us finish the task."

Before Craig could wonder exactly what that meant, his father had turned to what he assumed was 2 Timothy in his bible, torn the page out, and was offering it to him.

"What do you want me to do? I—"

"Eat it."

"What?"

"I said eat it. You have learnt the words—I have taught you as many of the Lord's holy words as I could—but you have not taken it to heart. This is the only way. Then your repentance will be sure and you will be saved from the hell you stand so close to."

Craig gasped. He couldn't take in what he was hearing, especially in light of how calm his father sounded. He had no time to object; the next moment the page of the bible was pushed into his mouth and his jaw closed tight around it by force.

"Eat it," his father said.

Heart beating out of control, Craig shut his eyes and chewed. The paper was thin, easily broken down. Still, it took a while, and he almost gagged. Whatever happened, he mustn't be sick, not with the rifle primed and ready for use. Eventually he swallowed and felt the small wads of paper moving slowly down his throat. His father let him go and he gasped for breath.

"What are you doing?" he panted. "You'll kill me."

Maybe, Craig thought, that was what his father wanted, but he shook his head. "The Word of the Lord brings no harm. Only good. The words you eat will heal you, my son. What do you remember next?"

"Nothing. I don't remember anything, I swear it."

"You lie." His father took a step back and raised the gun so it was pointing once more directly at his head. "You can remember something of what you have learnt. *Tell me what it is or I will send you straight to hell, as the Lord commands.*"

"Okay, *okay*. In... in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. He... he was with God in the beginning."

Craig stumbled to a halt, hoping that would be enough, but his father frowned.

"He was with God in the beginning. Then what? Tell me more."

"He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life...."

"That life was the light of men. Go on."

"The light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but... but...."

"The darkness..."

"Has not understood it." With those last words, Craig was all but out of breath. He felt as if he'd been running for miles and could run no more. He couldn't have said anything else if his father had pressed the gun against his head and pulled the trigger, but thank goodness he didn't need to. Because his father was smiling and nodding to himself.

"Yes, yes, very good. Again, a wise choice. Now, eat."

This time, Craig opened his mouth and took the paper from the old man's hands, feeling the roughness and warmth of his father's fingers on his tongue. He chewed without objection, finally swallowing when he was ready. When he'd finished, everything around him seemed very still. As if waiting, but for what he couldn't tell. He was surprised by how calm he felt.

"Yes, yes," his father said, the frown on his forehead easing a little. "You are fulfilling your repentance well. The Lord loves a humble penitent, one who accepts his command."

Twice more, Craig spoke aloud bible passages from his memory, and twice more ate the words that he'd spoken from his father's hands. One segment from the twenty-third psalm and the last from the letter of James: Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

After that he knew he'd had enough. His stomach felt swollen and his head ached. More than that, the weariness in his bones was making him slump, half-asleep, on the chair.

"Please," he whispered. "Please, forgive me. I can't eat any more."

A silence, during which he expected more shouting, the feel of the gun, or—worse—the sound of it firing. None of that happened. What did happen made his skin grow hot and he began to shake again.

His father stood beside him. The shadow of his body blocked out the sun from the window. He brushed his hands through Craig's hair and down his face to his chin. The caress was gentle, a deadly contrast to the scenario they found themselves in. He lifted Craig's head until he was staring upward into his father's eyes.

"You've done well, Daniel," his father whispered, smiling. "Very well. So far. I will leave you for a while to meditate upon your sins and consider the path to salvation that the Lord has offered you. Then I will return and we will finish what we have started."



HIS father took a strip of cloth from the bed and walked behind him. Craig heard what sounded like liquid being wrung out and then the cloth was jammed into his mouth. It tasted sour and he struggled against it.

"No," his father whispered. "No."

Craig continued to pant but forced himself to remain still. His father patted his shoulder. Then he left the room. At once, in spite of the situation, Craig felt his shoulders relax. His body felt even more tired than it had before. His father must have drugged him. Whatever it was on the cloth, it wasn't anything he recognized. Still, whatever happened, he must keep calm. Everything depended on that.

Before he could wonder what the hell he ought to do next, apart from the bloody obvious, he'd drifted into an uneasy, vivid sleep.

He kept waking, flashes of light from the window piercing the edges of his eye, bringing him to a doze where he had no idea how quickly time was passing. Or if it was passing at all. From there he would fall again into a deeper unconsciousness, where he found comfort in forgetting.

It was dark when he fully awoke again and his head was full of questions. Turning, he gazed outside the window, toward a world that felt a long, long way distant now. Were people really living their lives out there? Maddy? Julie? Paul? Where did they think he was anyway? Were they worried? And, if so, what were they doing about it? His heart thumped and he tried to focus on something else. Not people he knew. Instead he thought of all the hundreds of people he'd brushed up against during his past few months in London. What were they doing now? It was nighttime. People, wherever they were, would be going out, seeing friends, watching TV, maybe even sleeping. Most of them could probably never even imagine this. He wondered why he himself hadn't; with his personal knowledge of his father, he should have been more prepared. He hadn't been.

It was then that he realized he wasn't alone in the room. Even as this fact made itself known, he heard the sound of footsteps toward him, a dark shadow looming, and then his gag was wrenched from his mouth. His father remained in front of him. He could make out the shape of him more easily as his eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light. As he watched, his father lifted something—the bottle—to his lips and drank before replacing the cap and dropping it onto the floor. Water

Craig took in a deep breath. Let it out again. Once more he longed for water, but thought there'd be little point in asking again. Besides, he didn't want to encourage anything more of his father's idea of repentance. Instead he licked his lips to try to create moisture where there was none

"How long have you been here?" he asked, the darkness seeming to give him permission to speak.

"A while. Waiting for you to wake."

"Why don't you turn the light on?"

"Soon. But not yet. I am waiting on the Lord. I do not yet know how He wishes me to proceed."

"Is he here then? The Lord?"

Craig's father laughed. "He is always here. He watches you always, to see if you are doing good or not. He has always watched you, Daniel. From the moment of birth until now. In spite of my best efforts, he has found you wanting. But now, well I think now there is hope. Your penitence appears more honest than your mother's would ever have been."

The mention of his mother brought Craig's head up sharply and he heard the gasp hissing between his clenched teeth. "What do you mean? Did—did you *kill* her? She never left at all, did she? Not in the way you told it."

The shape in front of him drew away and the low humming began. He knew he had to wait it out until the noise stopped if he was going to get any kind of reply he could make sense of. While he waited, the chair underneath his buttocks seemed to become harder and more unforgiving, and the air turned colder. All the time, his mind was racing for a way to take in what might have happened, a way to connect with his father. He had to find something that would reach him. Either way, he had to know.

When next there was a pause in the humming, he took his chance.

"Please," he said, "if you tell me, then I can learn from... from her mistakes. I want to know salvation. I need to be accepted by the Lord."

His father sighed. "You don't know how much I have longed to hear you say that. I pray to my God that you are telling me the truth. Are you, Daniel, my son? Are you telling me the truth?"

The answer came fully formed into his mind. "Yes. I have the words of the Lord in me now. I have to tell the truth."

"That is true, *yes*, that is true." His father's voice rose in pitch and speed as he continued to speak. "Out of the mouths of babes and children.... Yes. Not like your mother. No, she never told me the truth. I watched her try to ruin you. I saw how much you loved her, the effect she had on you, how she lied for you, tried to protect you from the punishment you needed. She wanted to leave me, I knew it. She'd even talked to Andrea about it. It was easy enough to find out her plans. I couldn't let that happen. If she'd left me, the Fellowship would have counted it as my sin. I knew what I had to do. To save you both. The Lord told me what I must do and how to do it, and I obeyed Him. It is

good that one man die for the sake of the people. Oh yes, yes, it is good."

Everything then in Craig's head turned to crimson. He couldn't catch his breath properly as the pictures he'd kept in his thoughts, all the jagged pieces of the puzzle, began to slot slowly into place. His eyes filled with tears but his voice, when he was able to speak, was as calm as stone.

"You killed her then," he said. "I'm right. You killed my mother."

"I saved her," his father replied. "She needed salvation. She was walking the path to hell, in danger of losing her faith. Because of what I did, she's in heaven now. I saved her, Daniel, and I'm going to save you."

Once more his father stepped forward and touched him on the face. More than anything, Craig wanted to flinch away from his fingers but something inside told him not to. As his father's hand stroked his cheek and wiped away his tears, another slow realization began to form in his mind.

He opened his eyes. He needed to know. This time for sure.

"Tell me," he said quietly. "Did you kill Michael, the man I met here on the farm? The man you found me with seven years ago?"

His father laughed. "Of course. I must sweep aside all the obstacles in your path to keep you on the right way. If you hadn't left, then by now my task would be complete and the Lord would be pleased."

Craig nodded. His body felt light, as if he were floating above in the room somewhere, looking down on them both. He glanced up at his father, the greater darkness in the shadow of the room.

"Let me go," he said. "I'm ready now. For whatever the Lord wants."

"Don't be a fool; don't try to deceive me. You must not add that to your sins. If I release you, you'll run and your only destination will be hell."

"No. It won't. I won't run."

There was a long silence. Then Craig heard the sound of footsteps padding away. A moment later, the light came on and he blinked with the shock of it. He felt his father's fingers under his chin, lifting his head

"Tell me again."

"I'm ready," Craig repeated. "I won't run from you. This isn't some weird thriller where I get tied up and someone has to rescue me, is it? That isn't going to happen. This is real life. Anyway, you're not going to kill me. You never wanted to, did you? If you did, you would have done it before now. You just wanted to save me. To frighten me into being saved. And you've succeeded in that. I'm terrified. My mouth feels like sand and I can't stop shaking. But you want to talk, and so do I. So untie me and we'll talk. I won't run; I'm not capable of running. Or fighting. You only have to look at me to see the truth of that."

When Craig finished speaking, he felt out of breath. He didn't know if his father would believe him—but it was the truth, all of it. Neither did he have the strength to force any more words through his throat. His mouth was too clogged with them.

"All right," his father said at last. "All right."

It was the work of a few moments only for his father to release him from the chair. He kept the rifle trained on Craig throughout. Then he retied his son's hands in front of him with the rope.

"Please," Craig whispered. "I need some water again. The... the Lord can't do his work in me while I'm thirsting like this."

A long silence. Then his father reached for the water bottle once more. Placed it on the carpet in front of Craig.

"Drink then," he grunted.

Trying to lift the bottle made Craig's arms shake and he dropped it. His father muttered something under his breath. He took the bottle, unscrewed it, lifted Craig's face upward and placed the top of the bottle into his mouth. Just as he had before.

This time, for a few seconds Craig found he couldn't swallow, then instinct kicked in and he sucked at the now-warm water. There wasn't much left but it tasted like the best drink in the world. All the time, he could hear his father muttering, perhaps even praying, but tried to ignore him.

When the water was finished, his father pulled Craig to his feet, using the rope. From necessity Craig swayed against him, saving himself from falling by clinging to his arm.

In spite of his promises, he could try to run. Get out of here. Or push his father over, grab the rifle, overpower him. Ring the police. But he knew he wouldn't do any of those things. He wanted to see this through to the end. Come what may.

Without warning, his father pushed Craig in the side. He took a step away. His father pushed again. Another step. They were heading toward the door.

"Where are we going?" Craig panted and his father grimaced at him, spittle flecking the edges of his mouth.

"Talk," he said. "You wanted to talk."

They continued their journey. Downstairs, his father pulled open the front door.

"The truth lies outside," he whispered.

Shivering in the winter air now filling the hallway, and unable to stop, Craig's answer came out staccato. "All right. Where then?"

His father laughed, a harsh sound. "We talk at the hill."

"I-I can't talk, or listen, if-if I'm cold. You have t-to get me something to wear. To k-keep me warm."

"No," his father said. "It's part of your suffering. The Lord has decreed it "

So, naked and shivering, Craig followed his father out into the yard, the rope tugging on his hands. The full moon lit up the dark hump of Andrea's body and he had to turn away to avoid gagging. His father didn't even seem to notice.

The two men turned toward the hill, Craig following wherever his father led. The moon made it easier, once his eyes got used to the gloom. He could sense the old man's purpose; he was walking his own path to a kind of conclusion now. Then, perhaps, Craig would know it all in full. What had happened to his mother. And Michael. What his father had done to them.

On the slow climb up the hill, thorns snatched at his bare legs and the ground was chill and slippery beneath his feet. *Frost,* he thought. There'd be a frost tomorrow. He wondered if he'd live to see it, and then whether it mattered.

Finally, they reached the top. The last time he'd been here had been with Paul. And before that, years before, with Michael. Hands raw from the rope, he gazed into the valley of blackness. He couldn't stop shaking from the cold and perhaps from something else too.

"I killed him here," his father said. "Here where you committed your sin and blasphemy against the Lord. He deserved to die, the *sodomite*, and you did too, but I pleaded with the Lord for you and he granted me your life."

Briefly, Craig shut his eyes. "Tell me."

His father began to talk as if he were speaking only to himself. Or to God. His words came out faster and faster as he continued to say them. "I knew something was happening. The way you would look at him, that sodomite Michael, when you thought no one could see you. Your whole body would light up, burning with sin and shame, and all the time you thought nobody noticed. Well, I noticed and God noticed. We saw how you had fallen into the snares of hell. I spent two whole nights praying for your soul, but still your heart was hardened. To the pure all things are pure, but to the evil all things are evil. I had to save you. So that afternoon, before I killed the man tempting you, I came home. I knew I had to speak to you, force you to give him up, but you weren't there. The tractor was abandoned and all the barns were empty. The cottage too.

"So I prayed to the Lord and he told me to come here. To the hillside. The place where you went to get away. To commit sin. I took the largest of the spanners you'd left near the tractor and I went in search of you. When I found you, you were lying with the man, naked and without shame. I knew then what I must do."

Craig swallowed. He noticed his shivering had stopped and he could no longer feel the cold. It was as if he'd moved somewhere farther away, where cold and pain and even memory could no longer touch him

"What did you do?" he asked. His voice didn't sound like his own. "After we fought?"

"You took the spanner," his father replied. "You tried to use it against me. The sodomite got in the way. So you fell back and knocked vourself out against the tree. A blessing from the Lord. So again I took up the weapon I'd brought and I killed the tempter with it. Later you left our home and I knew that I must hand you over to Satan. The devil would have his way in your life and then, after that, you would return here. All would be well then, all would be well, all will be well."

For a long moment, Craig felt as if his father was talking about something that had never happened at all. Or at least only to someone else. Then he began to cry. Quietly. The tears wet his cheeks but he didn't try to wipe them away.

"What did you do with Michael's body?" he whispered.

"You wouldn't wake up," his father replied. "Not 'til the morning. I took you home and put you to bed. Then I came back, when the night was dark enough for all sins to be covered, and buried him."

"Where?"

"Why, here. Of course."

"Here." Craig groaned and sank to his knees. From somewhere outside himself, he became aware of the distant sound of cars. He wasn't sure but the noise of them might have been there for a while, and it was only now that he realized what it was. The sound of cars driving up to the farmyard below. He glanced at his father, but his face in the moonlight showed no concern. He was gazing out over the valley, lost in his own world.

Craig had to keep him from realizing. If his father thought someone else might be about to discover what had happened, Craig had no idea what he might do.

"Why did you bury him here, on the hill?" he said.

"The dog returns to his vomit," his father intoned. "The sinner is unsaved so must lie in the fruits of his sin."

"Michael wasn't a sinner. He didn't deserve to die." Craig couldn't help himself. His heart was beating so fast that it was forcing the words out from within him. And he still had so many questions to ask. Now the farmyard was bereft of the noise of cars, but Craig could hear doors slamming and someone shouted. His father continued to pay the disturbance no heed.

Instead, without warning, the older man turned and slapped him. Hard. Taken by surprise, Craig fell, scrabbling in dirt and cold grass as words pierced the air around him.

"Yes. He deserved to die, but I am not unmerciful. No, I placed him where he'd be for always, until the great Day of Judgment. Just as I did with the deserter, the sinner who needed her sins purged. The woman I made clean"

As his father continued to shout, standing over him and waving the rifle in his face, globules of spit fell on Craig's head and neck. At the same time, he could hear other shouts farther off, and then what might have been the sound of running. Boots on grass and gravel, rustling in the trees.

Finally, at the corner of his eye, only a few yards away, a shape.

Without looking, Craig could tell it was Paul. In spite of what had happened between them, he knew it was right for him to be here. Now.

Paul made a sudden movement and Craig turned toward him at last. His frame was a black shadow against the trees. He couldn't see anyone else with him, but there would be others. Somewhere.

"Stay there." Craig's voice sounded as clear and calm as if this were a summer day, and not the middle of a winter night with no glimpse of morning. "It's okay. I'm fine."

"Who's that?" His father spun around, striking out wildly at unseen enemies. "Who's there?"

"It's Paul," he replied, looking at his father again. "The man I was with. You remember? When you found me and sent me the note? You showed me it was wrong and we're not together anymore."

As Craig spoke, his eyes filled with tears that he blinked away. Now wasn't the time for this.

"Yes. Sin," his father hissed. "You were both sinners. Sin needs to be purged to make a person whole. The Lord demands it."

The intensity of the silence near the trees deepened, but Craig didn't respond to it. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed on his father.

"I understand," he said, "but you were telling me about my mother. How you purged her sin and made her clean."

"Deserter," he whispered. "Jezebel. She was so pure, once, and she fell so far. How could she have done that?"

Craig swallowed and wondered if his father could hear it in the night's silence. "What did you do? How did you help her?"

When his father laughed, the wind and chill swept over Craig again and he began to shake. All the time the old man talked, Craig dug his nails into his palms to try to stop the shaking. Because more than anything else in the world, he wanted to hear his father's words.

"I cleansed her," he said. "I cleansed her so she would never be impure again. I did it for her. And you. You were only six, Craig, when I found out her sin. Such a small boy. How could I let her corrupt you by leaving me? No, I did it for you. For you and her. The Lord told me what to do to save you both and I did it."

"Wh-What did you d-do?" He no longer knew if the quiver in his voice was due to cold or something else. It no longer mattered.

In answer, his father gave the rope that tied Craig's hands a sharp tug, bringing his face so close to his that Craig could almost taste the shape of every word he spoke.

"I found you both in the utility room," he said. "It was summer. I can still remember how bright the day was. I'd come in to wash and fetch the toolbox—my hands smelt of oil—and it was then that the Lord spoke. You were playing a game with your mother, so engrossed that neither of you saw me come in. She was wearing a red dress. Her favorite. I spoke her name—Anna, I said—and she glanced up at me. Her face had been so alive, so shining when she'd been with you, but all that went the moment she saw me. I knew then she would leave me

soon. So I reached out, took the hammer from the worktop—the one I'd been looking for—, and hit her over the head with it. I had to drive the evil out of her, and it was the only way. The Lord said so. I kept on hitting her until all the sin had gone. The Lord's instrument drove it out and she was cleansed. There was so much blood, but that was good. It's how the sin comes out. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. And you—you screamed once, but then you were so silent, so still. I knew you understood. You could be such a good boy when the Spirit was upon you; at your heart you knew it was for the best. And you never spoke of it afterwards. That's why I thought you were safe. That's why I thought you were pure. How could I have been wrong? And how could you have fallen so far into sin?"

By the time he finished, Craig's eyes were shut and his breathing was shallow. But, with his father's sudden quick-fire questions, instinct and the need to survive kicked in. He had to distract him.

"How did you get away with it? How did you stop the questions?"

"The Lord provided," his father replied. "My wife was going to leave me. It was easy enough to tell Andrea, and the villagers, that she'd gone. Easy enough to write to Andrea too, once or twice. A letter from my wife. The Lord permitted the deceit."

"And the Fellowship? What did they think?"

His father frowned. "It took a while. In the end I told them I'd had to ask her to leave as she was a sinner. I told them I did it for you."

Craig opened his eyes, staring into darkness.

"Wh-What. Did you. Do. With. My mother's body," he said. "Is she. Here. Too?"

Only then did Craig look at the older man. He thought his father was smiling but he could never be sure.

"I buried her," he said. "In the place we loved the most. Here on the hill overlooking the valley. Just like the sodomite I killed. She's here now, Craig. Beneath us. Where she's always been."

Several things happened at once. Craig spat in his face and, at the same time, Paul gave a small, sharp cry and began to run toward them.

Craig's father gasped and stepped back, pulling Craig with him. As Craig tumbled down onto grass and mud, his father dropped the gun.

"Stay away, stay away!" his father screamed at Paul.

Craig scrabbled for the rifle, though he had no clear idea what he'd do with it if he succeeded, but his father got there first. A *boom* and a streak of fire in the darkness, and Craig realized his father had fired the gun. He heard the sound of something—some*one*—landing on the ground.

"Paul? Paul!"

"Shut up!" his father yelled. He turned toward Craig and the rifle came with him until it was level with his eyes. "Shut up or I'll kill you. You must be pure. You must stay away from evil or it will defile you."

Something in him snapped and, careless of the gun and whatever might come next, Craig snarled back at him. "I *know*. And I've tried. Believe me, I've tried. I've stayed away from you for seven years, but in the end you always come back. You always defile me. Because, you see, it's not me who's evil. It's *you*."

"No," His father's cry began as a low moan, but it rose ever higher. "No."

Behind his voice, Craig could hear shouts at the bottom of the hill coming closer. The knowledge that they were no longer quite so alone lent power to his voice.

"Yes," he said. "It's true. You're the evil one. Not me, not my mother, not Michael, not any of us. But you."

"You're a liar and the son of a liar. You're the devil's son." He chanted the words as if they were a song, still pointing the gun at Craig's head. "You're a liar's son."

"Yes, and I'm your son. What does that make you, you bastard?"

"No!" he cried out again, the pitch of it this time all but a scream.

"Put the gun down, Mr. Clutton, please." Paul's low voice somehow cut through everything else. It sounded so close that Craig could almost have touched it. "There are people here now. The police are coming. You need to drop the gun."

The fact that Paul had spoken at all—the fact that he was alive—sent a ripple of joy through Craig's body. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, his father was turning the rifle around. Discounting the pain in his head, Craig launched himself toward him, crying a warning to Paul. But he was already too late and already too wrong in his assumption.

Just as Paul dived toward him, the barrel of the shotgun entered his father's mouth. For a moment, everything around them simply became still: the trees, the wind, even their own attempts at stopping what was to come seemed frozen in time.

Craig heard a roar and everything exploded. His father's head split open and warm liquid spattered onto his face and arms. For a moment the whole world was completely silent. Then he was on the ground again, nausea rising in his throat. Between gasps, he vomited on the grass, the taste of it sour on his tongue.

"God, god, god," he said over and over again, and then realized that someone was holding him. Someone was wiping his father's blood and his own vomit from his face. It was Paul.



FOR a while after that, Craig was only vaguely aware of things happening around him. In his head he was caught in the moment before the gun had gone off and forced to relive it many times: Paul's words, his father's mouth filled with the rifle, his own yelled warning. All of these were like a barrier between him and the outside world. Behind it, people shouted, moved to and fro over him; somebody covered him with a blanket; then the sound of an ambulance, maybe two, the clipped tones of authority. Finally and thankfully, he was being carried into an enclosed space bright with efficiency. The grip on his hand was released and he cried out.

"Paul."

An exchange of conversation above his head, then the warmth of fingers in his again and, after that, nothing.

Though his mind was filled with dreams. His mother's face, seen in clarity for the first time in a long time, her laughter, the red dress he'd only half-remembered, the lemon-scented perfume she'd always worn (why hadn't he remembered that before now?), even the game they'd been playing the day she'd gone. The day she'd died. In Craig's dreams now, he found he could remember the moment when his father had walked into the utility room. He could remember its shapes: the

angular sharpness of the worktable, the way his father's legs had been framed against it. Dark shadows against a clear blue floor. He could even remember the sound of the tap. The slow drip-drip-drip of water in those seconds that his mother had turned toward his father and her laughter had ceased. Mercifully, after that, his mind refused to continue the memory, simply shutting down to allow other moments from childhood to appear. Playing in the sheds, his mother feeding the chickens, his father swinging down from the tractor, wiping the sweat out of his eyes.

Now and again though, in the rush of pictures through his brain, Craig could sense himself small and breathing, breathing, breathing. Staring out at his mother as she lay on that clear blue floor, blood matting her hair. And the sound of the hammer in his father's hand falling, always falling and never quite reaching the ground.

Finally, the pictures, the memories dissolved into blackness, and he slept in darkness again.

When he woke, he had no idea where he was or even what day he was in. It took a long time to surface and something in him slowed down the waking process. He felt as if he were drifting on a stream rolling toward a vast sea—faster, then slower, and faster again. Until a rush of current took him and he was plunged into....

Not waves, not salt but air. Gasping, eyelids fluttering, and suddenly he was awake. Staring at something white and bright above him. He couldn't place it. He took another breath while a shadow leaned over him and his hand was clasped in warmth.

"Craig? Craig, it's me. Paul. You're fine; you're okay."

He blinked at Paul, trying to clear his vision. "What?"

"It's okay," he said again, smiling briefly but releasing Craig's fingers. "You're here, you're in hospital. In Exeter. I'm with you, and Maddy and Julie are here too. Andy too, Maddy's boyfriend. From London. They've gone to have lunch; they'll be back soon. You're safe"

"Safe?" he echoed, and just as he said the word, the remembrance of what had happened returned. "I-I have to get up."

"No. No, you don't." Paul put a warning hand on his shoulder, but there was no need. He was too feeble to sit up anyway. "You're in hospital; you're on a drip. You need to rest and get strong. You're not going anywhere."

"But my father?"

"I'm sorry, Craig. He's dead. He—"

"Killed himself. Yes, I remember." Craig was silent for a while, staring up at the hospital ceiling. Trying to bring his thoughts back into some kind of logic. As if from a distance, he noticed Paul had stopped touching him and had sat down again on the chair next to the bed, but he was too exhausted to deal with the uneasiness between them now. The new understanding of being Paul's ex had yet to hit home.

Finally Craig spoke again. But it didn't make sense. "My mother. I don't know. Did you hear him? I don't know if I... if that was real."

"Yes." Paul leaned forward, his arms folded as if to contain something he wasn't sure of. "I heard him. I'm truly sorry about your mother, what you had to go through. Michael too. There's nothing I can say, I know it, but I want you to know that I'm sorry."

"That's okay. I...," he stammered, unable to take in the enormity of the facts. Wanting to focus on something else just as important. "Are you okay though? He shot you, didn't he? I was frightened he might have—"

"I'm fine." Paul nodded, cutting in over Craig's torrent of disjointed words. "He grazed my arm. Nothing more. It's fine."

Then he unfolded his arms and laid his hand on Craig's shoulder. Gently as if fearing he might break it. A gesture somewhere between friendship and the end of love, Craig thought, and after that he couldn't think anymore.

He cried. It came from a place inside him he hadn't visited for too long, a great wave of grief he hadn't realized he was carrying. He didn't know who exactly it was for. There was anger too in the mix.

When at last the crying stopped, Craig felt freer. Knowing that there was more, much more, to come but for now it was enough. He

breathed slowly into the silence, the pressure of Paul's fingers seeming to hold him there on the bed.

"Have they found her?" Craig asked him.

Paul let go and Craig sensed a slight hesitation. "No. No, not yet. They're digging in the area I advised them to, but they haven't found her yet."

Turning toward him, a movement that drained him more than he'd expected, Craig stared at him. All over again, he took in Paul's narrow, arresting face, his dark hair, those green eyes. Wanted him all over again too. "You're not telling me something. Aren't you?"

Paul swallowed, but his gaze didn't leave Craig's. "Yes. I don't want to lie to you. Yes."

"What is it? Tell me."

"They've found the bones of a man. And identification. A wallet, a few cards. Of course they'll have to do tests to make sure, but I'm sorry, Craig—they believe they've found Michael."

Of course, Paul had mentioned his name earlier, but the news, when it came, didn't strike Craig with the intensity he'd expected. To his surprise, it felt more like the end of a journey. One he hadn't wanted to take but which, now, he'd grown accustomed to. Almost. He let out a deep sigh.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what? Bloody hell, Craig, all I bring you is bad news and I can't even..." He stopped speaking, ran one hand through his hair, frowned. "Can't even *be here* for you."

"But you are here."

"Not properly," he whispered fiercely. "Not in the way I should be. I don't know why you're thanking me. I say stuff I shouldn't have said, don't even know now why I said it, then I dump you and walk away. I'm a stupid bastard. God knows why you're even talking to me right now, but I'm sorry, Craig. I—"

Not wanting to get into any kind of discussion about relationships, of any kind, Craig interrupted.

"Look, I can't do this now, Paul. Please. I-I'm thanking you because you've told me Michael is dead and I always knew it. Now I know it wasn't me who did it after all and that—that makes everything different. It brings some things to a finish, doesn't it? In a way which couldn't have happened otherwise."

Paul sat back, shut his eyes briefly as if drawing himself together inside, took a breath. "Closure, you mean?"

"Yeah. Something like that. And thank you for coming after me too. For trying to find me at all. For saving my life."

Without warning, a further wave of exhaustion flowed through Craig and he wasn't sure if he could have said any more. Or what there might have been to say anyway. But he was spared the decision as Maddy and Julie clattered into the ward. Or rather Maddy clattered and Julie tripped elegantly after her. Behind them both the faint outline of a man lurked at the ward door. This must be Andy, Craig assumed. He didn't come any closer. But Craig nodded faintly in his direction and the figure nodded back.

"Craig," Maddy said, her voice shaking.

The next moment, Craig was enveloped in a cloud of blonde hair and concern as Maddy hugged him. For a short while they didn't say anything and it felt good to be in his best friend's arms. When Maddy let go, Julie was arranging a selection of books, newspapers, grapes, and chocolate on the cabinet. Paul had disappeared. No time to work out how he felt about that though—or to take in again what he'd told Craig—as Maddy was talking. As if she couldn't stop.

"Craig," she said again, gripping his arm as if unable to believe he was here. "It was so terrible when we didn't know where you were. We were both so worried about you. We didn't know what to do. You weren't answering your mobile or anything. In the end, we rang Paul. I hope that was all right. But he was brilliant, coming down here with us and Andy, calling the police, finding you. I'm so glad you're okay. But I'm really sorry to hear about everything. Oh God, hon, it's just so awful."

And then, just as Craig had done with Paul, Maddy began to cry and then apologize for crying all at the same time.

"It's okay," Craig tried to say, but was far too tired to make any kind of sense whatever. He wanted them both to know how glad he was to see them, but it didn't seem to come out like that.

It was up to Julie to cast her calming spell over them all.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said, patting Craig on the cheek, a gesture that released a waft of vanilla perfume into the medicated air. "But you've got a lot to take in and you look exhausted. Come on, Maddy, let's give Craig a chance to get some sleep and we can come by later. Okay, everyone?"

He was barely aware of Julie drawing Maddy away from the bed toward Andy before he was lost to it all, asleep again.

He stayed in the hospital for several days. Twice the police came to interview him and twice he went over the whole story. From the beginning. They took copious notes. He tried to be as honest as possible, thinking the time for lies and deceit was probably over. He told them not only about the kidnapping, Andrea's murder, and what his father had done, but also about the stalking in London and his father's notes. And all that he'd half-hidden from himself until now. It took a long time to tell. Partway through, they asked if he wanted professional help. For a moment, he thought they might mean a lawyer and that he was somehow in trouble for not knowing about his past as he should have done, but it turned out that they were only being concerned for his mental health. They were talking about therapists. Maybe he would need one in the end. He didn't know, but for now it would be simply another thing to worry over and he didn't need that. He had Maddy and Julie—though not Paul, his treacherous mind told him—and somehow it was enough. Maddy even stayed with him while he told his story for the first time. She held his hand while he talked.

He wondered if Paul might come back. Couldn't decide if that would be a good thing or a bad one. But he supposed they were still over, whatever madness had happened after. Paul would have his life and business to see to, now that the danger was past. Craig owed him his life. He would have to learn to let that be enough. Maybe they could still be friends. He hoped so.

During his time in hospital, he had one unexpected visitor.

He was dozing, one afternoon, with the winter sun lighting up the ward when he became aware of a shadow over him. Before he was fully awake, the shadow was talking and, even when he blinked his eyes open, it took him a few moments to understand who it was.

"Pedro?"

The man standing next to the bed snorted and dropped his garish bunch of flowers. They looked expensive, not something he'd bought from the shop downstairs.

"Yes, it is Pedro, that is right. I'm on my way to a shoot in Cornwall and wanted to see whether the rumors of the mouthy model having his brains beaten out are true. However, it appears they are not. Good. Because modeling is carried out mostly in the head and I would hate to lose someone even with your small portion of talent. There are few enough decent-looking men around who know how to stand. We cannot afford to lose another of them." He peered closer at Craig. "And I see those bruises will heal, so you're unlikely to lose your looks either. Your murderous father obviously aimed for the head, not the face. That is good."

Craig laughed and was surprised to hear the sound. It felt bloody refreshing to hear someone acknowledge what had happened to him in full voice, rather than tiptoeing around it or whispering if it had to be mentioned.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "I didn't expect you to."

Pedro snorted as he dragged up a chair to the bed. "If I ever did what people expect, then I wouldn't be the success I am now, eh. So, Mr. Robertson, why don't you tell me what happened?"

Craig groaned inwardly at the thought of going through it all again but realized the director was unlikely to take no for an answer. He kept his story brief though but, to his surprise, it still felt like a release to tell it to a stranger. One who listened and made no comment. Until the end. Pedro's words, when they came, weren't what Craig had been expecting.

"A story almost to rival the twists and turns of my own family history," he said with a dismissive laugh. "But no matter. That is not your business. The important thing is: what will you do now?"

Craig blinked. "I don't know. I'm not sure I'd thought about it."

"Then you should. The past is no more. The future is what is important. Once you're discharged from this hellhole they call a hospital—if you survive *that* of course—there's a job I have in mind that will be perfect for your skills. I'll get my money's worth out of you if it kills me."

As the strange director left, Craig laughed again. Something inside shifted as he did so: the possibility of a future. The very fact of it lightened his blood.

A couple of days later, Craig discharged himself. He had the pills, he knew what he had to do, and so there didn't seem much point in staying. Pedro was right. He had to move forward, not back.

Neither could he return to London. Not yet. Even though Maddy and Julie had had to. For work. He could understand that. It was the next step, beyond all this. They'd promised to come back at the weekend. He suspected he'd need them, but was glad to be on his own for a while. Time to think.

He stayed on the farm. He couldn't call it home. Not after what had happened. The press lay in wait at the yard entrance, but the police presence meant they didn't come in any farther. Running the gauntlet of questions and microphones left him breathless as he finally closed and bolted the door. The house smelled of dust and something else he couldn't place. Something the police had used when they were here? He couldn't tell. He wondered if Paul might know but then brushed that thought aside. There was no room for distractions.

Slowly, allowing himself time and space to remember recent and more historic events, he walked through each room. Reclaiming his life and, maybe, marking his future.



BAD memories. That was what the place was full of. Or should have been. But to his surprise it didn't feel quite as raw as he'd expected. Was that what post-traumatic shock was about? The inability to feel at all? No, that didn't seem right either. The pain was there, but it felt as if something was different. As if the memories of his childhood and recent events were no longer viewed from the eyes of a child—as had always been the case when he'd thought of home, when he'd been here before even—but from the eyes of somebody older. Himself. Somebody who'd lived through the shit. Someone who'd survived.

He allowed himself enough time in each room to relive a bad memory followed by a good one. This wasn't something he'd planned. It just happened that way. The bad memories involved his father, though he didn't touch on the murders. Time for that later. For the good memories of the house, he thought of his mother. Her laughter, the red dress, the smell of lemons: these were the things he would carry with him now.

During his time at home, he attended three funerals. First was his father's. He kept it simple. Nobody from the Fellowship came and he didn't know if he blamed them for that. He didn't stay long at the crematorium, a place he was to become familiar with over the weeks to

come. The people there asked if he wanted a plaque or some other kind of commemoration but he simply shook his head. He was in no danger of forgetting. Not this time.

The second funeral was Andrea's. The most normal of the three occasions, if that was the word he wanted. He wasn't sure how her family would view him, so he slipped into the church just before the service started and refused to catch anyone's eye.

He was about to slip away again when the mourners were filing out into the bright afternoon air, but someone grasped his arm and urged him to stay. The fact that he'd been spotted made his heart beat faster—the last thing he wanted was to cause any pain—but he smiled briefly and attended the crematorium service as well. Nobody seemed to take offense. The day after, he wrote a letter to the funeral directors, asking them to pass it on to the family. He hoped Andrea's family would understand how much he would miss her and how sorry he was for what had happened. It was the least he could do.

The last funeral was his mother's. This he spent a long time planning for. At first, he wondered whether anyone would come but, slowly, over a matter of days, people from the village and neighboring farms sent messages of support or dropped by to chat, and he realized he would not be alone in remembering her. Even after all this time.

So, for his mother he chose a service in the village church and two hymns: I danced in the morning and Dear Lord and Father of Mankind. One simple reading as well, though it took him a while to open his bible and search for it. Craig wondered what the local vicar thought; this couldn't be the usual pastoral problem after all. What should the church's response be to planning the funeral for the murdered wife of a local resident? He couldn't imagine it was something that came up very often. Still, the priest was helpful, and he and Craig came to a decision that pleased them both. He chose 1 Corinthians 13. It seemed right for the occasion.

What surprised Craig most was how he wept during the service. He hadn't expected that; he'd thought he was empty of tears. The woman next to him—to his shame he couldn't remember what she was called-kept her arm around his shoulders until the fit was over. He nodded his gratitude to her, hoped that would be enough.

Afterward, he filled the house with people and food, spoke to people he knew from his past and also from now, gave and took support. It felt like normality. It helped to take away the shadow from the place he'd grown up in.

When the last group of people left, he tidied up, decided to tackle the washing up in the morning, and walked out again into the night.

He stood for a long time at the grave in the churchyard where his mother's bones were buried, for the second time, and thought. About her, about his life and about his father. Before he returned home, if he could call it home, he whispered a few words into the darkness, hoping that wherever she was she might hear.

"Thank you," he said. "For trying to make things right."



THERE was one funeral he didn't go to. When Eva Langley traveled down to collect her brother's bones, Craig asked to see her but understood the refusal when it came. Because of this, he knew his presence at the service in London for his one-time lover would be unwelcome, but the fact that she specifically asked him not to come still cut deep. Perhaps some things could never be resolved.

When the day and time of Michael's memorial service arrived, Craig stood for a while under the tree where he'd last seen the man and remembered. It was a day bright with sunshine, but the air was crisp. The hint of mist over the valley shifted as, from so many miles away, he accompanied Michael in his mind to his final resting place. He could smell the pungent odors of the countryside, hear the cattle and the low rumble of machinery. He marked the time, hoped that Michael would find peace, that his family would too. Last of all, he hoped the same might be true for himself.

At the end of it all, Craig did three things. It was March. Only a few months since all this had started. The year had turned and taken him somewhere he'd never expected to end up. Soon it would be summer. Time then to move on. First, he rang Pedro, left a message saying he was back in circulation now and to thank the director again

for visiting. Following on from that, he rang his agent, told him what was happening, fended off the inevitable questions.

His second action was to redecorate, and then put the house and the farm on the market, breaking the final link to his past. There was no guarantee it would sell quickly, but someone somewhere would want it. One day.

His third and final action of note was to ring Paul. When the voice mail switched on, he found he was glad. He swallowed once before leaving his message. As he spoke, his eyes were closed.

"Hi, it's Craig," he said. "I know you think it's over. And that was maybe the impression I gave you in the hospital. Perhaps it *is* over. I don't know, but I suspect you're wrong. And thank you again for saving my life, by the way. I wonder if you've thought about why you wanted to. I know we both have history, Paul, and I won't ring again. I'll leave it up to you. But maybe there's more to come. I'd like to think so. Still, if you think there isn't, then thank you anyway. I—well, you know how I feel. That hasn't changed."

For the rest of that day, Craig busied himself with saying goodbye to the people who'd helped him here in Devon. He also packed a few items from the house he thought he might want to keep. It didn't take long. He chose something of his mother's. He left the bibles alone.

That night, he switched his phone off. He'd need all the sleep he could get for the drive back home. He prayed for good weather, and then grimaced at the prayer. However, he left it said. If there was, after all, something out there, he'd appreciate the help. Without it becoming a habit. No, that would be beyond him now. To his surprise, no dreams disturbed him, and the morning found him up early, ready for whatever was to come. He showered and ate a light breakfast, gazing out at the land he'd used to know, before switching his phone back on.

He saw he had a message. From Paul. He gulped down a scalding mouthful of coffee. Heart beating fast, he listened to whatever the man he loved might have to say. It was short but to the point. It told him everything he needed to know.

When he'd finished listening, Craig smiled. Caressed the phone. Held it to his lips. Pressed "call back." And waited for the day to begin.

ANNE BROOKE's fiction has been shortlisted for the Harry Bowling Novel Award, the Royal Literary Fund Awards, and the Asham Award for Women Writers. She has also twice been the winner of the DSJT Charitable Trust Open Poetry Competition. She loves reading dark and quirky crime novels and has a secret passion for bird watching and chocolate. Preferably at the same time. She once took a balloon flight in Egypt but spent most of the time screaming, and hopes she never has to do it again.

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