



**AUTHOR  
OF PAIN:  
MINOR MAYHEM**

**DAVID DWAN**

# Author of Pain: Minor Mayhem

David Dwan

© Copyright David Dwan 2021

This is an authorised free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.

## PROLOGUE

It's a curious thing, researching your own death.

Which, once the inevitable disorientation of his post- mortem rebirth had passed, was the first thing Randall did once he had returned from oblivion to the land of the (almost) living.

He even had a copy of the crime scene photographs, very grisly, not the kind of keepsake one would normally hang onto but they still held a macabre fascination for him, even after all these years they never failed to illicit a shiver down the spine.

He had been originally prompted to do all this by the dream of the final moments of his mortal life.

The before, to this after.

It always began the same, the caress of a gentle breeze on his face as he drifted off to sleep and with it the smell of freshly rain soaked streets.

Then came the shouts and that God awful burning in his chest. Fractured images reassembled in some sort of vaguely coherent order would play out in his mind's eye, over and over like a damn movie loop but one edited by a madman with a hatchet. Yeah, he remembered just about everything about that night. Which considering what happened wasn't that surprising. After all, if you can't remember your own murder, then just what the hell are you going to remember?

He was running now, down a long dark New York cobbled street, the burning in his chest was his lungs screaming for air. The shouts were coming from the four shadows chasing him with murderous intent. A volley of gunshots rang out followed by that sound like angry bees buzzing past his head, one so close he could feel the concussion as it zipped by his ear. Randall could still, even now, feel that first bullet hit as it slammed into the back of his right shoulder and with it, just like always, everything became crystal clear.

He remembered struggling to keep his feet as his mutinous legs threatened to buckle as he ran. He remembered stumbling on and firing blindly behind him and that much needed hit of adrenalin as one of his pursuers screamed and tumbled to the ground. Lucky shot, but then again Randall had always been lucky. Lucky until he ran blindly into that alleyway.

Once he was beyond the reach of the streetlights the alley soon became pitch black, but still he ran on. The footsteps at his back were closer now and more gunshots rang out, their bark echoing off the walls around him and with each shot came a muzzle flash which cut through the darkness giving Randall fleeting glimpses of this surroundings; walls closing in around him.

He remembered the blood, icy cold running down his arm, he couldn't be sure, but he thought that must have been why the gun slipped through his fingers and clattered to the ground behind him. Betrayed by his own blood.

Randall's head was spinning wildly, his usually clear thoughts muddled by blood loss and an overdose of adrenaline, but he stumbled on, concentrating on just putting one damn foot in front of the other. Another gunshot briefly illuminated the alley ahead and the brick wall that was right in front of him forcing him to skid to a halt. A dead end, very apt.

He remembered not being afraid, of turning to face his executioners with a smile, or maybe that was just his pride and memory playing tricks on him. But either way it felt good not to be running anymore. That was when his legs finally gave out and he slid down the wall and onto his backside. He remembered laughing as he looked up at the three silhouettes standing over him, each of them breathing hard from the pursuit. One of them was speaking, but to this day, of all the things Randall remembered so vividly about that night, he couldn't remember a damn word the man said, strange that.

Then, after that forgotten epitaph they finally opened fire. He got fleeting glimpses of their faces, they were all grinning like loons, one of them, did his face look familiar? Was openly laughing as he emptied his gun. Randall could still feel every single bullet hit, nine of them, he guessed at least one of the bastards must have been a lousy shot.

So Randall remembered almost everything about that night, which stands to reason when you think about it. After all it's not every day you are shot to death in an alley, is it? Yes, he could recall with an almost absolute

clarity, the sights the sounds, even the damn smell of the place. But curiously that was it.

There was nothing from that feeling of slipping into darkness to the moment he walked back out of that same alley looking exactly the same as when he had entered it, even wearing the same damn suit,(less the blood and bullet hits).

This he soon realised was the first thing he had to remedy when he discovered he'd been away for some fifty odd years. Nineteen seventies New York was the first of many shocks that day. Half a century gone by in a heartbeat and he remembered nothing of it.

He was just, different somehow.

Worse still, he had no recollection of the deal, of the selling of his soul and signing up for this new life he found himself slap bang in the middle of. For surely there must have been one, some little seduction scene play out in the void between life and death where he had readily given up his eternal soul for his lost life back, and not forgetting the power he now possessed.

There was no end of the mischief Randall could perform; he could manipulate those around him, not to mention the numerous creatures he could conjure up, just by will alone and with the help of a little spit, blood, smoke and shadows. Sure, that would explain where all the years had gone, you can't learn all that shit overnight, but he couldn't remember learning any of it, not even a training montage like in the movies.

And what of the moment of actually signing his soul away? Nothing, and surely that has got to be even more important to a guy than simply dying. Any idiot could do that, people did it in their thousands, every damn day.

There was nothing from the moment he died to when he walked out, dazed and disorientated, into a world that had quite literally left him way behind.

Hence the research into his own death, it was his way of confirming all this wasn't just some hallucination brought on by blood loss and the odd bullet to the head. No, he was dead and it hadn't been big news either, if he was honest, Randall thought it would have been bigger, but there no screaming newspaper headlines for him, just a few paragraphs found almost by accident in an old copy of the New York Times in the city library. No one

knew who had killed him or why, and Randall couldn't imagine they had made much of an effort to track down his murderers. He wasn't missed, just another dead hood in the carnage that was the gang wars of the roaring twenties. Gone and defiantly forgotten.

But now he was back.

Randall had been wandering around in a daze for almost a week with all this power but no clue what it was for or why he was back. That was when the annoying little bastard Ishrel finally found him, and that was when things had gotten really surreal.

## ONE

Larry McCulloch was a survivor, no doubt about it. Say what you like about him, (oh and they did) but the one thing you could never do was deny his ability to worm his way out of trouble. In his sixty-seven years, Larry had been shot, (twice) stabbed, (thrice) and beaten to a pulp, (too numerous to mention) but had always come out the other side smelling of roses, no matter what the bastards had thrown at him.

He'd led a charmed life that was for sure, so how he'd come to find himself in this present company eluded him. Larry looked around at the three plain clothed officers he was sharing the car with as they drove through the rain and turned onto yet another dimly lit street.

They were kids really, not one of them was over forty, and although he had only known them a matter of hours, he hated the lot of them already and certainly didn't relish the fact that these three were his last line of defence against those who, most of whom he had once called friends, now wanted him very dead.

Lewis, who Larry had already taken a particular dislike to, was in the front passenger seat fumbling with a hand drawn map. The man was thirty five at most, and looked like a dishevelled accountant in his crumpled cheap suit and badly combed dirty blond hair. Larry figured none of them had heard of a SAT NAV which didn't bode well.

Lewis frowned at the makeshift map and absently ruffled his already messy mop of hair. "Ok Jeff, you want to take your next left," he instructed Jeff, the driver who was barely into his twenties, but looked even younger, the kid nodded and obediently took the next turning.

Larry peered out of his side window at the urban decay as it passed by. "Hmm," he said. "Dark deserted streets, that's a good idea."

Lewis craned his neck around. "Relax Larry, you're with the professionals now. No more uniforms, we're the real deal."

"Huh!" Larry grunted in way of response: MI5? Bollocks, he thought, this was all far short of the five star treatment he had been promised by the pencil pushers in Whitehall. Oh, he had been assured this was only temporary of course, just until things died down a little and they could guarantee his safety. Then they would begin the negotiations in earnest. Larry had already made up his mind to make them pay a little extra, to make them beg a little more, for the gold mine of information he had ferreted away down through the years.

It still brought a smile to his face when he recalled how Chief Inspector Willis had almost had a thrombosis upon seeing just a glimpse of the evidence he had gathered over his fifty odd years of criminal activity.

There was dirt on most of the underworld's biggest movers and shakers. Larry knew, sometimes literally, where the bodies were buried. But it was the other stuff that had Willis practically panting, the names of all the bent judges, coppers and the odd politician (past and present) that Larry had encountered, all backed up with cast iron proof. That had been the real gold. It was that mother lode more than anything that would save Larry McCulloch's life.

It had started as a hobby of sorts, little pieces of information filed away here and there, just in case. But the evidence had mounted up over the years and Larry soon began to realise what if things went badly for him, then this was his winning lotto ticket, his get out of jail free card. And he sure as hell intended to play it now that things were looking bleak.

Queen's evidence; Two of the sweetest words in the English language.

He must have been smirking to himself because Peroni who was sitting next to him, an Italian Woman in her early thirties who Larry had first thought



attractive until he realised she never smiled and who had the dubious honour of being the leader of this happy little troupe, gave him a sideways glance.

"Having fun?" She said with a strong accent. Larry assumed Lewis and the kid Jeff must be MI5 so that made Peroni Interpol, which made sense considering Larry's mischief over the years had often taken him over to fleece our European friends.

Quite a collaboration he thought, maybe he would see if he could get these three fuckwits fired as part of his deal, or shipped off to Outer Mongolia. "Yes," he finally replied meeting her brown eyed gaze. "Yes I am having fun."

"That's it," Lewis piped up. "Last house on the left."

Jeff nodded. "Yep got it, number twenty." And pulled the car over to the side of the road.

Larry looked up at the house they were parked in front of in dismay. Now they were just taking the piss. "Oh come on," he said. Even under the flattering mask of night the place looked dilapidated.

Lewis folded away the map and glanced back at Peroni. "Don't think he approves of your choice of safe house, Ania." To which Peroni just raised an eyebrow in way of response. "Careful Larry, you'll hurt her feelings." Lewis added.

The old crook glared at Lewis who clutched his heart in mock pain. "Ugh! If looks could kill we'd be a man down," Lewis said. And Larry wished he had a gun.

Peroni opened her door and moved to get out. "Come on Larry, let's get you inside before the bad men see you, eh?" And with that she got out.

"Huh," Larry snorted. "No self-respecting hit man would be seen dead in a place like this," he added more to himself than anyone.

"Exactly Larry, exactly." Lewis said as he got out.

"Here," said Jeff before Lewis closed the door. "I tell you what, he catches on quick though, doesn't he?"

Larry exhaled and buttoned up his coat. 'Just relax,' he told himself, 'don't bite and in a few days you'll be away from all this bollocks.' The



thought warmed him as he stepped out in to the cold night air and followed his protectors over to the safe house. Rundown as it was, this was to be his home for the next couple of days or so. Then he promised himself, it would be nothing but five stars for the rest of his, hopefully very long, life.

Once Jeff had finished fumbling with the front door keys they finally got inside, it was just as Larry had feared. The place was as rundown inside as the outside had suggested. The interior décor reminded him of a time, back in the eighties, when he had briefly gotten into renting fire traps to students. Everything was second hand and mismatched, the whole place smelt of damp. Hardly the Ritz.

Lewis pushed passed Larry rubbing his hands together. "I'll get the heating on," he said and then disappeared into the kitchen.

"I suppose room service is out of the question?" Larry deadpanned.

Ignoring the remark Peroni went through into what looked like the living room jabbering in Italian on her mobile phone, leaving Larry in the hallway with Jeff. The kid locked the door and turned to Larry grinning. "You're a real card, Larry," he said. "A real card."

"Yeah," came Lewis' voice from the kitchen. "Ought to be dealt with!"

Peroni reappeared snapping her mobile shut, she could see Larry wasn't happy. "It's just temporary, until things die down," she told him. "I'll order some food, you'll feel much better after you have had a shower and something to eat. Besides, it doesn't look too bad to me." She eased past Larry and started up the stairs.

"I can't believe I agreed to all this," Larry said.

Without stopping Peroni called over her shoulder; "Don't recall you having much choice McCulloch, do you?"

Lewis came back through from the kitchen. "Heating's on, it'll be toasty warm in no time." He unzipped his jacket. "Tell you what," he continued. "You can have the big bedroom if you like?"

"Oh, well that makes all the fucking difference then doesn't it?" Larry said testily. He rubbed his tired eyes with the balls of his hands. Yep, it was going to be a long few days, he thought, a long few days.

## TWO

Larry stepped into the shower and stuck his head under the tepid water, it robbed him of his breath for a moment, but he was so desperate to wash away the grime of the last few hours that he gladly risked hypothermia. Now that he was out of sight of those clowns downstairs, Larry allowed himself a brief moment of self-pity, the urge to sob uncontrollably almost over took him but he just about managed to suppress it, even though he knew it would help ease the knot that had been tightening deep in his stomach ever since he had woken a week ago and finally realised he was shit out of luck, which left only one option.

And so he had reluctantly surrendered himself into the hands of those he had always thought of as the enemy. He stopped himself because he knew that once he started he wasn't sure he would ever be able to stop.

He rested his forehead against the cold tiles and tried to tell himself that he had been in worse scrapes than this before and still come through the other side. After all wasn't that what he was famous for? By rights Larry McCulloch should have been found dead in a ditch somewhere on any number of occasions before this, but someone had always come through for him at the last minute.

Larry's philosophy, which had kept him alive this long, was quite simple: If you are going to pull a fast one and fuck somebody over on a deal, just make sure it benefits not only you, but also somebody who's bigger or stronger than the fella you've just fucked. That way they have to grin and bear it or risk an even bigger shafting from your new partner. Sure it was risky, but in the end Larry knew that was all part of the charm, he had a thinly disguised self-destructive streak, always had, sometimes he even shocked himself. He remembered what a hit man had once said to him while they were waiting for their victim to emerge from a late nightclub one night, years ago. 'Deep down every killer wants to get caught eventually.'

That had always rung true with Larry and in moments of vulnerability, like now, more than ever. Still as no one he had ever known had the balls to pull some of the stunts he had over the years, Larry had attained a kind of mythic status amongst the underworld, not just here but in Europe too, which he had always enjoyed, probably too much in fact, because it had worked well

enough as long as his friends had outnumbered his enemies. But somewhere along the way his list of friends had grown shorter and his enemies alarmingly longer, until he'd had no choice but to play his last card and get the fuck out of Dodge.

His famous black book, (which was in fact, rather less glamorously, half a dozen tatty folders crammed full to bursting and a cheap flash drive) that was his ticket out of here. It was a stroke of genius and safely tucked away ready for its big entrance. The thought of the chaos it would cause never failed to lift his spirits. And when the shit hit the fan he would melt quietly way somewhere hot. Somewhere a million miles away from here so all this would be just a distant memory, if he would be able to recall it at all.

And then he knew the legend of 'Lucky' Larry McCulloch would be set in stone. He imagined there would be books, maybe even a biopic, yeah he would like that.

And so with images of media immortality buzzing around his head, Larry got out of the shower and dried himself off.

Once he had changed into some clean clothes, Larry felt a million times better and even felt up to another round of moronic conversation with his so-called protectors, that coupled with the smell of freshly delivered pizza tempted Larry down stairs.

As he got to the hallway he could see Peroni through the living room door, mobile in one hand and a slice of Pepperoni in the other. She was pacing the floor speaking Italian again in between nibbling on the pizza, although he couldn't speak much Italian he knew whomever was unfortunate enough to find themselves on the other end of the phone was getting a tongue lashing, hopefully about this shit-hole they were staying in.

Hearing voices from the kitchen Larry wandered through to see Lewis sitting at a cheap plastic topped table munching on some garlic bread while Jeff was in a corner studying two monitors which occasionally flicked between different parts of what Larry assumed must be outside the house. At least they had some sort of security system in place.

Lewis jumped up theatrically from his seat seeing Larry enter. "Don McCulloch, take a seat. What can I get you, Sir? We've got Pepperoni, Ham and pineapple and for our veggie friends Margarita."

Larry ignored him and eyed the pizza boxes on the table, he opened one and took a slice of Margarita. "Anything to drink?" He asked, taking a bite.

"Tea, coffee, it's freshly brewed, and I think there's some bottled water in the fridge." Offered Lewis.

"Anything stronger?" Larry said in between chewing.

Jeff looked up from the monitors. "I've got some shandy. I know I shouldn't while on duty but what the heck." This won a smile from Lewis but just more contempt from Larry.

"Coffee," Larry grunted and took a seat on one of the mismatched chairs opposite where Lewis was sitting.

Lewis poured Larry a mug of coffee and sitting back down slid it across the table to him, up close it smelt burned.

"How was your shower?" Jeff asked.

"The water's freezing," Larry said, he sipped the coffee and winced at the sour taste. He gestured around him. "Is this really the best you people can come up with?"

"Government cut backs," Lewis said shrugging apologetically. "You know how it is?" He then picked up another piece of garlic bread and proceeded to feed his face.

"Yeah," Jeff said, leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Here, Larry, there's been something I've been meaning to ask you. Seeing as all the trouble you're now in, didn't anybody ever tell you, crime doesn't pay? At school maybe?"

"Be fair," Lewis said. "That was a long time ago."

Larry was about to answer when Peroni poked her head around the door. "Arh, good you're eating, Larry. How was your shower?"

"Cold, like his heart," Lewis said glancing mischievously at Larry.

The Italian ignored the comment. "I'm off then, keep in touch, I should be back tomorrow sometime."

Lewis nodded. "Will do chief, see you later."

"Any problems Larry, see Lewis until I return. Bye for now." She disappeared again.

This pleased Lewis no end. "I think he's got a list." He said.

"Be nice!" Peroni called back before the front door slammed shut. Jeff checked one of the monitors and followed her as she walked down the garden path and in to the car and once she had pulled away, repositioned the camera so it was covering the front door once more.

"She'd be attractive if she removed that rod from up her arse." Larry said and finished his slice of pizza.

"Don't knock the boss, Larry. She's a gem" Jeff said playing with a camera control. "She will keep your sorry backside alive if you let her."

This won a snort of derision from Larry.

"Sooo, Larry," Lewis said pointing a half-eaten piece of garlic bread at him. "How did a high roller like you end up in a place like this?"

He gave Lewis a bored look, but thought, what the hell, a bit of banter might make the time go quicker. "You goody-goodies tell me crime doesn't pay?"

"Just an observation, Larry taking into account your current situation." Jeff said, turning to face them both.

"Alright smart guy," Larry continued. "Tell me this. Where will you two dickheads be this time next year, eh? Shall I tell you?"

"Go on," Lewis said.

"Nowhere, that's where." Lewis and Jeff exchanged a mock quizzical look. Lewis made to speak but Larry continued. "You'll be risking your lives, stuck in a dump like this, guarding some other wanker who doesn't care if you live or die. And you know where I'll be?"

"No," Jeff said. "But I'm sure you're going to tell us."

Pausing for dramatic effect, Larry took another sip of bitter coffee before he spoke. "In the sun mate, in the fucking sun, living it up in Rio for the rest of my pampered life. Now tell me crime doesn't pay."

Lewis leaned back in his chair he raised his eyebrows and gave Larry a look something akin to pity, which riled him instantly. "Larry," he finally said. "Just because you've agreed to testify against all your so-called gangster mates, doesn't mean you're going to be able to walk away from all you've done. It doesn't work like that anymore I'm afraid. You're fast out of friends," he gestured to Jeff. "We're all you've got left. Now how sad is that?"

Larry gave Lewis his best smug look. "Queen's evidence is a wonderful thing by friend. Once I give your bosses the shit they want, the ones who I haven't got dirt on that is. I walk, scot fucking free."

"He's got you there, Lewis." Jeff interjected.

Unruffled, Lewis got to his feet and walked over to the sink, where he began washing out his mug. "Arh," he said. "The famous book. You really do live in your own little world, don't you?"

"He's a legend in his own lunch time," Jeff spun on his chair and glanced at the monitors. Then happy all was well he spun back.

"Huh, yeah," Lewis continued. "He's just going to walk away from all he's done," he clicked his fingers. "Just like that. The infamous Lucky Larry McCulloch, huh?"

Larry drained his cup, which made him wince at the taste. "You know, why anybody would want to be a bodyguard in this day and age is beyond me."

Lewis turned around, suddenly serious which took Larry aback slightly. After all this was just harmless banter, wasn't it? "You don't know anything about us, Larry."

The kid Jeff however was still in fine form. "But they give us guns Larry, guns!!" He pulled his jacket aside to reveal a shoulder holster.

Larry glanced at it then back to Lewis who was staring at him intently, frowning slightly. So, Larry thought, a chink in the armour, Lewis hated him, that much he already knew. But he hated having to risk his life for him even more. Thanks for the ammo, kid.

As if feeling the tension, Jeff said; "Guns!" again. To which Lewis nodded and patted his own gun under his jacket.

"Huh," snorted Larry. "You lot have to fill in a million forms just to shoot one of those things. God forbid you should actually hit anything."

"Not like when you were a lad, eh Larry?" Jeff said with a sarcastic wink. Larry happily ignored, but nodded all the same.

"In my day," he said. "If I wanted some twat shot, all I had to do was pick up the phone." He made his hand into a gun and 'fired' it at Lewis. "Bang!" Then he hit the table for dramatic effect.

This raised a slight smile from Lewis. "And just think, now someone is going to do the same for you," he said, then softly added; "Bang?"

Larry held his gaze, refusing to be intimidated. "Don't worry about me," he said.

The smile on Lewis' face broadened. "Oddly enough, we don't." He replied.

'Got ya!' thought Larry. "Hmm," he mused. "Yet you might have to take a bullet to save me and my precious book." Lewis' smile faltered ever so slightly, but Larry saw it only too well, so added; "How do you spell imbecile?"

Lewis was openly frowning now, he sighed. "You know, you really aren't a very nice person, are you Larry?" Larry looked at him, amused. Lewis studied him for a moment, then added. "Ever heard the expression: 'What you sow you shall reap?'"

"Very Biblical," Larry replied nonchalantly.

"Or live by the sword, die by the sword?" Jeff added gleefully.

Larry shook his head, the clock on the wall said 22:30 and he decided after the day he'd had and the way things were going down here that it was well passed his bed time. He stood up. "You know if asshole could fly, this place would be an airport!"

This made Jeff laughed out loud and it even raised a smile from Lewis. Jeff clapped. "Good one liner, Larry," he said.

Lewis shrugged. "Well it was more two than one, but good never the less."

That was it, Larry threw his hands up and left them to it. "Enough of this bollocks," he said on the way out. "I'm off to bed."



He got as far as the bottom of the stairs when Jeff shouted; "Ere Larry, you should go into showbiz with a repartee like that."

He couldn't help himself and shouted back; "A fuckin' airport!" He was about to ascend the stairs but he could still hear the two of them twittering on and stopped on the first step to listen despite himself.

"Arh," It was Jeff. "Everyone a classic, everyone a pearl."

"Yeah, watch out Bob Monkhouse, eh?" Lewis replied.

"Bob Monkhouse is dead," explained Jeff.

"Don't be daft, no he isn't." Countered Lewis.

"He is!" Insisted Jeff.

"Nar."

"Well," concluded Jeff. "He must be flipping old then."

"Old yes, dead no."

Hearing this Larry trudged up the stairs in despair. He couldn't believe these clowns were his last line of defence. "Your life in their hands," he said out loud. All the coppers in the world, he mused ruefully and I get Laurel and fucking Hardy.

### THREE

The young novice priest walked down the old corridor with only the sound of his footsteps bouncing off the stone walls for company. As he approached yet another set of stone steps leading down to the next level, (these would be the fourth, that meant once he was at the bottom, he would be four floors below ground level) he gave silent thanks that at least they had managed to get electricity down this far.

He passed yet another ancient looking door but the brass plate on it named it as a store room, so he walked on and down the steep stone steps to the next level. One of the bare light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, which lit

the way, had failed so the novice was met by a large pool of darkness once he reached the bottom.

Now he knew why none of the other novices had volunteered to take the dusty old suitcase he was carrying down to the Vatican's historical research department. But despite the rumours that all the old priests that worked down here had gone mad through lack of sunlight, he had jumped at the chance to see the place for himself.

Time seemed to have stopped still once he got below ground and despite the fact that apparently dozens of priests and nuns worked down here, he had yet to see another living soul.

The novice put his head down and walked purposely through the darkness and didn't look up until he was back in the light at the other end. God how he was regretting his curiosity which was now fading with each step he took. Another door up ahead caught his eye and he offered up a silent prayer that he had at last gone as far as he needed. The nameplate on the door read: Research and Archive Department, which prompted an audible sigh of relief.

The novice knocked hard on the heavy oak door but it seemed to make no noise at all, he waited a moment but couldn't hear anything from inside, so he moved to knock again. As he raised his fist the massive door swung open to reveal a young nun, with a lollypop stick hanging out of the corner of her mouth. She chewed it for a moment and looked the young novice up and down, her eyes settling on his fist, which was still in the air ready to knock. She raised her eyebrows at this and the novice quickly dropped his hand by his side and grinned nervously.

He opened his mouth to speak but the nun turned and walked away before he could get a word out leaving the door ajar. "I told you we need an intercom!" She bellowed. "Father Nichols, this one's for you."

The novice gingerly stepped inside to what he assumed would be an office but to his amazement walked into what looked like a massive library. Rows upon rows of metal shelves crammed full to bursting with boxes, books and files stretched high towards the curved stone ceiling some thirty feet above his head.

To his right, the nun who had answered the door flopped down behind a large desk, which was buried under piles of papers and files. The novice took a step towards her. "Excuse me sister..."

She held up her hand to silence him, not bothering to look up from her work. "I'm not getting up again, my knees will be shot by the time I'm thirty," she said.

He was wondering what to do next when a whistle rang out from the far end of the room and he turned to see an old priest, some forty feet away, leaning out from behind a filing cabinet waving to him. The novice returned his gesture and gratefully made his way across the room towards him.

He glanced around as he passed several other priests and nuns sitting behind desks at intervals between the shelves working away, some at computers, which looked anachronistic in the extreme compared to their surroundings. Another ancient looking priest was chambering precariously up a ladder with an arm full of books, which he deposited on a high up shelf and then much to the novices amusement slid back down the ladder without using the rungs, stopping a foot from the bottom and jumping the rest of the way with ease.

"Hello, my Boy," said the waving priest as he finally reached him. "Found the place alright then?" He gave the novice a warm smile and slapped him on the arm.

"Hello, Father, yes, thank you, quite a trip." He said.

The Priest nodded. "They won't let us put a lift in, this being the Vatican and all. I think it may actually be sacrilege to try." He looked at the old suitcase. "That for us?"

"Yes sir, some old files Father Perelli found, I think." The novice replied.

The Priest held out his hand and took the case. He glanced around at all the clutter in the room with a wry smile. "Just what we need."

"And, Father Nichols, I have a message for you from Cardinal Luppi..."

The novice pulled out a crumpled envelope from his cassock pocket and was about to give it to the old priest when he held up his free hand and shook his head. "It's not for me, I'm Father Mendez," Mendez gestured to a small office with a glass front tucked away in the corner, and to a priest who

looked in his early sixties with greying black hair who was sitting at a desk hunched over some papers. "That's Father Nichols, you'd better give it to him personally, just in case there's a reply."

"Yes, Father, thank you." The novice replied and Mendez watched him as he approached the door, knocked and was waved inside by Nichols.

Nichols looked up sternly as the novice entered but his face softened seeing how young and nervous he was.

"F, Father Nichols?" The novice said weakly. "I, er, I've got a message from Cardinal Luppi."

Nichols made a face and picked up the telephone. "What are the phone lines down again? Or is it top secret?" He said it in perfect Italian, but the novice picked up the hint of a long buried English accent.

The novice look flustered. "I erm, I don't know, Father," he stuttered. "I mean, yes the phones are down, but I don't know about the message."

The priest held the receiver to his ear and nodded, phone was indeed dead so he replaced the handset. "Don't worry." He looked at the novice who frowned and just looked at him blankly. Then, "well, the message?"

"Oh, sorry, yes," he rummaged in his cassock pocket again and pulled out the envelope. "Sorry Father."

Nichols took the note and began to read. As Nichols was reading the novice idly scanned the contents of his cluttered desk. Among the various books and paperwork his attention was drawn to an official looking police document that was sticking out of a pile of folders tantalizingly half uncovered and begging to be read. His eyes flitted back to Nichols who was now frowning as he read, and then back to the paper, he had to resist the urge to tug on the paper out a little further to get a better view but instead craned his head so he could read the available text sideways on.

It was a French police report, and although the novice's French was only passable he was able to make out the gist.

It was a crime scene report from somewhere near Paris, two bodies found in a hotel mutilated almost beyond recognition. The novice could see the corner of a photocopied crime scene photograph attached to the report, he could make out a foot and part of a leg lying in a pool of dark liquid that

could only be one thing. The fuzzy image made him shiver and although he had a morbid curiosity to see more, thanks to the words '*mutilated beyond recognition*' he was glad he couldn't. But instead read on as best his French would allow.

Nichols cursed under his breath and exhaled. "Old fool," he said in English, as he always did when he was alone. He pursing his lips irritably then remembered where he was and looked up at the novice, just in time to see the remainder of the colour in the young man's face drain away.

"You alright, boy?" Nichols asked back in Italian mode. The young novice was deathly white and Nichols could see a sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead and the kid looked like he was going to pitch over at any moment. "Boy?" He said a little louder.

The novice finally looked up at Nichols with a look on his face like the priest had just appeared out of thin air, his mouth moved but nothing came out. Nichols snapped his fingers. "Still with us?" The novice nodded slightly but was still dumb. "You want to sit down before you fall down, you look terrible." Nichols said, then added as an afterthought. "If you're going to be sick, use the bin over there."

"No, thank you, Father," the novice replied weakly. "Do, erm do you have a reply for the Cardinal?" He was clearly concentrating on getting every word out coherently. Then he actually swayed slightly.

"No, you get yourself off and get some fresh air. I'll speak to the Cardinal myself. Off you go," *before you pass out on my office floor*, Nichols thought but kept it to himself.

The novice nodded and left without another word. Nichols stood and watched bemused as he half walked half ran from the room. "José?" He shouted and Father Mendez appeared in the doorway holding a file.

"You bellowed?" The older priest said and gestured to Nichols with the file. "You know, there might actually be some useful stuff in here, I swear I don't know where Perelli finds this stuff."

"He's a hoarder," Nichols said still looking after the novice who had now disappeared. He screwed up the Cardinal's note and threw it in the general direction of the bin.

"Good news then, Peter?"

Nichols gritted his teeth. "The old fool, he won't let me take it until the paperwork's cleared. Paperwork! Can you believe it?"

"It is priceless, Peter," Mendez said calmly.

"It's not like I'm going to leave it on the bus or something!" Nichols slumped back down into his chair telling himself to calm down. "I need it, José. If the reports are true, I won't be able to do a damn thing without it."

Mendez sat on the edge of the desk. "I agree, but why not wait until they let you take it? Shouldn't be more than a couple of days, a week at the most. His Holiness is in South Africa at the moment, but he's back on Wednesday, I think."

Nichols shook his head. "I can't, they're over there on their own as it is. I'm still flying out on the third, regardless. I have to. I'll go see the Cardinal myself. I'll steal the damn thing if I have to."

Both men stood in silence for a moment, then Mendez smiled. "I bet you would too."

"No one believes, José," Nichols said flatly. "No one believes anymore. But I've seen what they can do, seen it with my own eyes." Nichols let his voice drift off as he remembered that night so many years ago that had changed everything. Thanks to a tramp seeking sanctuary and the woman with the impossibly blue eyes. As it always did when he let himself remember, the memory of her warmed and terrified him at the same time.

The novice sprinted up the final set of stone steps and out into the sunlight, the sudden rush of fresh air made his stomach flip and he thought for a moment he was going to throw up. He lent against a stone pillar gasping and held his face up to the sun, oblivious to the strange looks he was getting from those around him. He thought someone spoke, asking if he was alright, but the voice seemed a million miles away. His legs finally gave way and he slid down the pillar.

There were definitely figures around him now, silhouetted against the blue sky, someone was shouting for a glass of water, another to give him some room. The sun was blinding him now so the novice screwed his eyes tight shut. Now he knew why no one wanted to go down there. And as the

conclusion to the crime scene report flashed into his mind's eye again with sickening clarity, he swore that he would never go down there again, not even if the Pope himself asked him.

The attack, the report had concluded, had been carried out by one perhaps two large wild dogs. Simple enough were it not for the fact that someone had crossed out '*one perhaps two wild dogs*' and added next to it their own conclusion as to the attacker's identity. One word in red ink: *Demon?*

## FOUR

When Larry McCulloch had been at the top of his game, which seemed a life time ago lately, he had spent a blissful six months staying at the Hilton Hotel in London, all expenses paid courtesy of a real life Arab oil sheik he was working for selling fake Saudi land rights to British and American oil companies. It had been a good gig while it lasted, but like so many of his ventures had ended in a mini blood bath at a London nightclub one late November evening.

Larry had, of course got away Scot free without a scratch and twenty grand in used tens and twenties. The Sheik hadn't faired so well, being tortured to death and all. The truth of it was he was a real Saudi Sheik, of sorts, but didn't own a grain of sand over there let alone the acres and acres he and Larry had sold. So it had all come to a bloody end, but hey, at least the food at the Hilton had been good. Larry had put on half a stone while he had been there.

So where did it all go wrong this time? Larry mused as he prodded a folk at what Lewis had laughingly referred to as a full English breakfast, which was laid out in state on the plate in front of him. Lewis was sitting opposite him reading the paper, he peeped over it. "Larry, you've hardly touched that, what a waste. Starving children in Africa, etcetera, etcetera. Don't tell me you're a vegetarian?"



"Oh, that's what this is?" Larry said still prodding. "Sooo, this black charred stuff must be... No no, don't tell me. Toast? And the rubbery yellow and white thing? Come on, help me out here."

Lewis sighed and put his paper aside. "Play nice," he said and took the plate from in front of Larry and dumped its contents straight into the bin, after rescuing a piece of toast for himself.

Larry picked up his mug and looked into it. "And your coffee, which I assume this lukewarm black liquid is, tastes like shit."

"That'll be the arsenic," Lewis said taking a bite of toast. "Should kick in, in a few minutes by the way."

"I'll look out for it." Larry said draining his mug. He hadn't seen Peroni or the kid Jeff all morning and wasn't relishing the thought of another fun filled day cooped up in the house from hell, especially with only Lewis for company. And he was getting increasingly frustrated at the lack of movement on the deal. He had been here two days already and there was no sign of the so-called man from the ministry they were all waiting on.

He was having serious doubts about the whole thing, which wasn't helped by the fact that he had been unable to contact his no good solicitor Tommy Whitaker, since Larry had been moved from Scotland Yard. He made a mental note to try the slippery bastard again later. Whitaker was another one who would pay for all this shit he was having to put up with, disappearing of the face of the earth whilst he was stuck here.

Larry looked across at Lewis who had started doing the dishes. Christ, he thought, the guy was supposed to be a government bodyguard and all he ever seemed to do all day was the house work! That and taking great pleasure in winding him up. More than anything though, Larry hated the lack of control, he could deal with most situations if he was pulling the strings. But here he felt like the puppet, and it scared him. Still he mused, what with the stress and Lewis' cooking he would at least lose a few pounds. But still, he missed the Hilton.

"Here, Lewis. So just how long and I going to be subjected to your dubious company for anyway? Where the hell's your boss?" Larry asked.

"Don't ask me," Lewis said with a shrug. "I'm just a little worker ant, they never tell me anything. What's the matter Larry, eager to spill your guts?"

"No. Just to get away from your ugly mug. And also I'd like to talk to him about how I'm being treated around here. Why couldn't have I been put up in a fucking hotel, like they agreed?"

Lewis turned to face him, drying his hands on a tea towel. He studied the old crook for a moment. "This again? Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you come running to us after all your gangster pals turned on you?"

"I didn't go running to anyone." Larry said coldly.

"Really?" Lewis looked amused. "That's not what I heard. I heard you really crossed the wrong people this time. The bad men are coming for you, Larry. You need us more than we need you."

Larry wasn't having that, he put one elbow on the table and jabbed a finger at Lewis. "Bollocks! I can look after myself. I'm just waiting for the best hand, that's all, and it's coming, I can feel it. I didn't survive for this long just to get dead in some dingy doss house like this." He relaxed his posture. "I'll die, aged ninety in sunny Brazil. Or maybe Greece, yeah, I've always liked Greece."

"Really?" Lewis said. "Tell you what, I'll make sure they bury whatever's left of you out there. How's that?"

"All I'm saying is wait and see," Larry said and held his hands out defensively. He saw Lewis' face darken so he added a sarcastic grin as punctuation.

Tossing aside the tea towel Lewis took a seat opposite Larry and fixed him with a steady gaze. He drummed his fingers on the table as he studied McCulloch. "I've been reading your file," Lewis finally said. "You should write a book, colourful life, to say the least. Always one step ahead, always ready to sell your soul to the highest bidder. And always on the winning team, no matter how many times you have to switch sides, eh Larry? No matter what that team might be?" He paused, but never took his eyes off Larry then said. "Your Mother must have been so proud."

Larry shook his head and gave Lewis a look like he thought he was simple in the head. He leaned back and folded his arms, there was no way he was going to let this little shit intimidate him, if anything he found it amusing he was even trying. He took his own sweet time before answering. "And it just eats you up, doesn't it?" Larry said softly. "Sure, I've played dirty all my life, and yeah granted I might not be at my best right now. But you know, don't you Lewis? You know deep down, I'm gonna come through this whole fucking mess set for life."

For once, Lewis' reaction was not what Larry expected. Over these last couple of days he had learnt exactly how to get Lewis' goat, the young man hated Larry, but hated even more the fact that he had to protect the 'bad guy' this time, even at the expense of his own life. But this time Lewis just smiled and had a look of genuine pity in his eyes. Larry frowned without realising it. It was a look you would give to a dog before putting it out of its misery, an '*I know something you don't.*' kind of thing. And it made Larry feel distinctly on edge.

Then Lewis leant forward with a look of pure mischief on his face. "All I know is that I'm on the right side, Larry. And that's good enough for me. Whatever happens over the next few days, in the end you'll be just another anecdote. Sure I might be dead, but I'm at peace with that." He said it with such genuine sincerity it unnerved Larry all the more. "But you?" Lewis continued. "You'll be just another lowlife who thought he knew it all." He lowered his voice for affect. "You know those shadows?" His voice was barley a whisper now, and Larry found himself leaning forwards to hear. "The ones that keep you awake at night? I know what's in them, Larry. And I've got a feeling, sooner or later so will you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Larry blurted out and sat back, annoyed with himself for being drawn in.

A grin snaked its way across the Lewis' face, he was enjoying the moment. "I'm just saying that's all. I know what's coming for you. And I'm not sure we're going to be able to stop it when it does."

"Lewis!" Both men jumped, the voice was sharp and Italian. Peroni was standing in the kitchen doorway with a face like thunder. Lewis was about to speak but she cut him off. "That's enough! Out, and relieve Jeff, he's in the car. Now!" She jabbed her thumb back over her shoulder. Without a word

Lewis got to his feet and sheepishly left the room staring at the floor as he went.

"What's his problem?" Larry said wondering what the hell had just happened.

Peroni's face lightened a little. "His problem? Why Larry his problem is all of ours. Just what in the world are we going to do with the infamous Larry McCulloch, huh?" With this Peroni turned on her heel and disappeared back through the door, leaving a bemused Larry to curse the day he'd ever agreed to this lunacy.

## FIVE

The concierge of the Manchester Hilton watched the scruffy old bag lady trying to negotiate the revolving doors with mild amusement and he knew as she finally managed to squeeze her considerable bulk and baggage into the reception area that unless she was an eccentric millionaire he was going to have to kick her right back outside again before she stunk up the place.

On a good day he may have pointed her in the direction of the kitchens in the alley around the back of the hotel, but today had not been a good day. Two double booked suites and a bar fight had seen to that. So Mrs. Shopping bags better flash her gold card or she'd be out on her arse and he would at least feel a little bit better about his shitty day.

The bag lady waddled up to the front desk and plonked her bags down, she muttered something about the freezing weather and her aching legs then looked up at him. He braced himself for that old lady smell of dirty clothes and week old piss, but the concierge was surprised that she actually smelled of lilac even though her clothes looked dirty and worn, and he forgot for a moment that he was supposed to be throwing her out.

"Are you dumb boy?" She said in a surprisingly educated if harsh voice. "Or are you hoping to catch some flies with that gaping maw of yours?"

The concierge closed his mouth and it crossed his mind that she may actually be some kind of upper class nutter. "Can I help you?" He said lamely.

"Well I fucking hope so, sparky. I'm here to see Thomas Whitaker." She gave him a look of thinly veiled disgust.

He shook his head, her language catching him off guard. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," he hesitated at using the word 'madam'. "I'm unable to divulge information as to who we have staying here. If you had an appointment..."

"Just get him on the phone, I know he's here, but he's properly using some other name or other." She thought for a moment. "Marcus Carver, he said he was using the name Marcus Carver." The concierge glanced at the register. "D'you want me to spell it for you, sweetie?" She added.

And there it was; room forty-seven. Someone had drawn a little smiley face next to it the way they always did when a guest was obviously using a false name.

"I'll have to ring up, just to make sure, erm Mister Carver is expecting guests."

"Christ on a bike!" She exclaimed loud enough to make him flinch and several people in the lobby turn their way. He fumbled with the phone and punched in the room's telephone number. He was hoping that Carver, or whatever his name was would pick up straight away, he had an uneasy feeling about this woman and wanted her gone as soon as possible, and despite how he had felt when he'd first seen her struggling through the door, he didn't want to have to tell her to get out anymore. She may have been old and short but that look in her eye actually scared him.

He stood there sweating with the phone clamped to his ear for what seemed like an eternity until finally a weak voice answered. "Yes?" It was barely a whisper.

"Erm, yes, Mister, erm Carver? This is the concierge, calling from down stairs." He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry, the bag lady was boring a hole into his head with her icy gaze. "I have a lady here to see you, sir."

He heard a sharp intake of breath. "Describe her," he said.

The concierge felt physically sick at this, she was still staring at him, her eyes narrowed.

"What did he say?" She asked.

"He, erm, he asked me to describe you..." His voice trailed off, Carver may as well have asked him to tell her to go fuck herself.

She let out a shriek of laughter and put her elbows on the desk, she grinned revealing a mouth full of gold teeth. "Go on then, describe away."

The concierge swayed, he felt faint, which made the old woman shriek again. "Huh, don't worry," said the voice on the phone, "I'd recognise that cackle anywhere. Send her up."

"Oh thank Christ!" The concierge said out loud before he could stop himself. "You, you can go up miss. Room forty seven, the lift's right over there." He gestured to his left.

He was about to hang up when the woman slammed her hand on the desk. "Hey, not so fast. I want two lobsters and a bottle of Champagne sent up, Whitaker's paying."

"I heard her," Whitaker said through the phone. "Get her whatever she wants."

"Yes sir," The concierge said hanging up.

"And it better be the fucking good stuff, not some old piss poured into a vintage bottle, understand?" The old woman narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

He nodded vigorously. "I'll order it straight away, madam."

She snorted at this and waddled over towards the lifts muttering obscenities. Watching her go, the concierge thanked God she hadn't asked him to carry her filthy bags up for her. Yes he said to himself, this was one shitty day.

"First things fuckin' first, Tommy. What the fuck are you doing in a place like this? Low profile!" She wasn't even in the room yet and she was tearing a strip off Whitaker. He stood there holding the door open and just took it. "You've got the world and his dog looking for you, so where do you hide?" She continued. "The fucking Hilton! I suppose because it's out here in the

provinces and not London, you thought no one up here would know who the fuck you are? Is that it? You numb bastard."

"Good to see you too, Mary. Find the place alright?" Whitaker shot back. He was desperately trying to keep his voice steady and his gaze firm, his best court room façade, but he knew the old hag could see right through it. This was only the second time he'd met Mary but that was two too many.

Mary barged past him and dumped her shopping bags onto the sofa, she glanced around the hotel room with a look of mild disgust. "Yeah, I found the place alright. Who the fuck is Marcus Carver when he's at home anyway?"

Whitaker shrugged. "An artist's agent I represented once. Think he's dead now. It was the first name that came into my head. If he isn't dead, he can sue me if he likes. Besides, you told me not to use my real name."

"I did?" Mary seemed genuinely surprised. "Hmm, must have had a good reason." Then she seemed to remember. "Sharks!" She added.

"What?" Although he barely knew the woman, Whitaker had already grown accustomed to her way with words. She would throw random sentences around and then it was up to you to arrange them into some semblance of order or meaning.

"What do you mean, what?" She said and waddled over to the mini bar, which Whitaker had been attacking with a vengeance all day. She helped herself to a gin.

"Mary," Whitaker took a moment, he had to keep calm, had to remember that what this raggerty old dear knew about the people who were after him and Larry could save his life, and more besides if the rumours were true. "I don't have a lot of time."

"Huh, no shit," Mary snorted, and downed the gin in one, which made her pull a face. "Do you have my money?"

Whitaker gestured to an envelope on the table. "Five thousand. Now what exactly am I buying? Apart from your lovely company of course."

"Protection, knowledge, a crash course in the world as it really is. Standard stuff, should help, maybe, if you start thinking straight and lay off the fucking booze." With this she uncapped another mini gin and downed it. "You must have a clear mind, Whitaker. I can only help you so far, given the



shit you're drowning in right now, you and McCulloch. Pair of dumb shits that you are. You know I could have sold you out for ten times that much?" Mary abandoned the mini bar and picked up the envelope of money. She felt the weight of it in her hand. "Hmm, tens and twenties, good boy."

"So why didn't you?" Whitaker suddenly wanted her gone, he was desperate, yes, but had he really sunk this low? Taking protection advice from a bag lady?

"I'm neutral," she said. "Wouldn't have been fair, let them find you in their own way if that's the way it has to be. You've hired me, I'll do my best for you, then I'm gone. You people can fight it out amongst yourselves. I don't give two shits if you're dead by the end of the day, but if that's the case, it won't be because of me. I'll have done my bit, fair and square." She tossed the envelope into one of her bags and then dumped the contents of one of the others onto the table.

"That's very reassuring, thanks." Whitaker watched as she rummaged through the various charms and trinkets she had in the bag which were mixed in with what looked for all the world like the contents of someone's rubbish bin.

"Where is it?" Mary said frowning, she picked up what looked like a minute metal dream catcher, twirled it, then threw it back amongst the crap and shook her head impatiently.

This drove Whitaker over to the mini bar, he took out a vodka popped the cap and sipped it. "What's all this about sharks anyway? Don't tell me Jaws is after me too?" This brought a smile to his face, the first one in what felt like weeks. He finished the vodka and tossed the empty into the waste basket.

"What?" Mary grunted. "What the fuck have sharks got to do with anything?"

Whitaker turn to face her, she had laid out several of the trinkets, which ranged from what looked like charms off a charm bracelet a couple of old coins and another of the dream catcher things, on the coffee table by the sofa and was now stuffing the rest back into the carrier bag. The vodka soothed him a little. "You brought the fuckers up," he said. "Now what are those things for?" He gestured at the trinkets.

She gathered them together and gave him a sideways glance. "Now I'm gonna tell you a bunch of stuff, Whitaker." She said her tone serious. "Trust me you won't believe half of it. But that doesn't matter, just follow my instructions to the letter, and you may live a little longer."

"I'm I gonna need another drink?"

"Shit, yeah. And pour me one too." She said, "And Where's my champagne and Lobsters anyway? The service here is shit." With this she stretched out on the sofa and made herself at home. "You should try the London Hilton, now that's a fucking palace."

If she kicks her shoes off I'm going out the window, Whitaker thought as he watched her make herself at home, and once again the ghost of a smile played on his lips. Christ, that's twice in one day, he mused, maybe I should keep this loon around for comic relief.

"Christ with egg in his beard! What are you grinning at man?" Mary snapped. "I asked you about my lunch! I'm trying to save your soul here fancy pants, the least you can do is feed a girl."

The smile evaporated right off Whitaker's face, along with the soothing effect of the vodka, at the word; *soul*. He felt cold, his mouth suddenly dry. Now he remembered why Mary was here, forget her eccentric dress and comic foul mouth. This woman had knowledge of a world Whitaker knew nothing about, but one he was now up to his neck in. 'Supernatural shit', she had called it when they first met. Although the sane side of his brain wanted to laugh off comments like that, it had only confirmed what he already knew. He'd pissed of the darkness and now it was out there somewhere, looking for Larry McCulloch, and the best way to find Larry? This idiot right here in the Armani suit.

He physically shivered, suddenly cold as his mind drifted to a freezing November night last year, of sitting in the relative warmth of his Mercedes looking through a frost covered windscreen at six haunted faces standing in a Polish field in the middle of nowhere, lit by the cars headlights waiting for those around them to decided their fates. Six lives (and that word again *souls*) saved, albeit unknowingly, by a con man and his greedy hot shot young lawyer.

Whitaker shivered again and realised that while he had zoned out he had wrapped his arms tightly around himself, for comfort or warmth he didn't know. He tried to speak but the words got caught in his dry throat. Mary was staring at him with a perplexed look on her face, she had put her feet up on the table, but thankfully her shoes were still on.

The mismatched pair looked at each other for what seem like an age, and then Mary suddenly jumped to her feet, her face a blaze with recognition. "Sharks!" She announced to the room at large. "Christ with a crew cut! Sharks!" She clicked her fingers together for punctuation. "They can find you through your name. That's why I told you to use an alias."

"What?"

"You're name! It's like sharks; they can sense movement in water from miles away, or the merest drop of blood and all that discovery channel shit. It's the same with your name, Larry too I imagine. That's one of the reasons for the false name. If someone uses your name, even thinks it, it sends out ripples of psychic energy, they can lock onto it, follow it to its source, like a shark. You'll need something to block this." She examined the trinkets on the table and frowned. "Fuck all here for that. Hmm." Whitaker could almost hear the cogs turning in her brain as she pondered.

"Fuck," Whitaker whispered to himself in disbelief and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and fore-finger and screwed his eyes shut. When he opened them again he half expected, hoped, she would be gone along with all this madness. "What?" He said again, it was all his brain could conjure up.

She held up a finger to silence him. "One second." She put her fingers into her mouth and began to pull at one of her front teeth.

Although she didn't seem to feel any pain, Whitaker winced for her as she tried to wrench the tooth free. "Mary, for Christ sake..."

She glared at him, her eyes watering then with a soft 'pop' pulled out a bloodied gold tooth. She held it out to him with a gap toothed grin. Whitaker stared at it incredulously. "Fuck that!" He said.

She rolled her eyes and spat out a mouthful of blood onto the insanely expensive carpet. "Don't be such a big girl's blouse, Whitaker. You can clean

it first!" She lisped. That's worth more than five hundred on its own. Calved it myself, take a look."

With this she tossed it to Whitaker who caught it without thinking and was surprised at its weight. He shuddered, rolling it around the palm of his hand, and was about to throw it in the waste bin when he saw it was covered in an intricate pattern of lines, shapes and symbols, carved by a master craftsman, or woman in this case.

"Don't worry," Mary said. "You don't have to get it inserted or anything," she laughed at this and spat out more bloody saliva. "Just keep it with you, it's got a pretty good range. Should block any ripples from your name. You can use your name, and any one close to you can, and you should be ok. Or at least I think so." She waddled over to the mini bar, trailing lilac, and took out another small bottle of gin, she took a drink and swilled it around her mouth before spitting it out in the vague direction of the waste bin.

Whitaker held up the tooth to the light. "Now I can safely say I've seen it all."

Mary grunted at his side. "You ain't seen or heard shit yet," she said, taking another drink, this time she swallowed and smacked her lips.

Ripples from your name? Charms made out of gold teeth? All of a sudden, Whitaker felt like he was the subject of some elaborate reality TV prank show. Not felt, wished. He felt faint all of a sudden. He vaguely heard the knock at the door and for a second mused that maybe it was the prank show host about to burst in to reveal all and tell Whitaker it was all a joke and he was free to go home and back to his gilt edged life.

But if it was the host, then he was doing a damn good job as disguising himself as room service, Mary instructed the kid to bring in the lobster and champagne and then get the hell out, he even though he heard her threaten to pull out another tooth if the kid wanted a tip.

Evidently he didn't, judging by the speed in which he exited. Mary was mumbling something as she sat down and attacked the lobster. But all Whitaker could hear was the blood rushing through his ears and his stomach doing back flips. He looked down at the blooded tooth in his sweaty palm.

Later, after she had demolished the lobsters and drained most of the champagne, Mary would tell him everything she knew about the darkness

that was coming and what laid in wait for him inside it should it ever catch up and smother him. And as she spoke, Whitaker could feel the last vestiges his of sanity slowly slipping away.

## SIX

The door to Mitch's late night café and bar opened and the last two bar staff came out into the cold night air and walked briskly off together down the deserted street. Bill Fraker watched them from the grateful warmth of his BMW parked discreetly in the shadows on the other side of the road as they turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

This was the part that always gave Fraker butterflies, every time no matter how many times he had done it, those moments of calm, alone with his own thoughts when his mind would wander unbidden to the any number of scenarios, (hardly any of which leaned towards the positive) that could play out in the next ten minutes or so.

And it was usually around this time, stuck in a car at three in the morning waiting for the impending violence, that Bill Fraker thought about getting fit again. After all he was no spring chicken anymore, he would be forty eight in two months and the thirty-six inch waistband of his trousers was beginning to dig into his belly again. And he had vowed to himself once that he would never buy a pair of trousers over that size, so that meant one of two things: Elastic waistband or dropping some poundage.

He leaned across to the passenger side and clicked open the glove compartment and reached inside, the first thing he felt was the hip flask, newly topped up an hour ago and for a second Fraker thought about taking a swig, just to calm the nerves but cursed to himself and pushed it aside. That bollocks was for amateurs, he would need a clear head and only after they were safely back in the car and away would he allow himself a drink, to toast the end of another successful night. Successful because he still had a pulse.

After further groping his fingers finally found the cold metal of the berretta and Fraker took the pistol out and rested it on his lap. Now all he had to do was wait for Charlie, who as usual had gone to take a piss at the most inopportune time.

Fraker had unofficially taken on the role of Charlie Walker's mentor over the last six months due to the fact Charlie's Dad had been diagnosed with cancer and had to retire. Just as Charles Walker senior had done for him twenty odd years ago when he had first got sucked into this life of crime. Charlie was a good kid really but he was only twenty four and was a little too much into the whole 'gangster' (but pronounced with an 'a' at the end apparently) lifestyle for Fraker's liking.

Charlie had already been a part of things on a very low level before his Dad's illness, working behind the bar at one of the clubs or chauffeuring people about for the boss, Mister Lyne, all of which had been legal up to a point, but was still kept quiet about around Charlie's Dad at the time until his cancer had taken him out of the business and into a hospital ward. So now that no one had to tiptoe around Walker senior, Charlie had taken the next step up into the real world. It was a running joke that Charlie's Dad didn't know anything about his Son's involvement with the firm.

Charles Walker senior had worked as a gangster all his adult life, but rightly so didn't want this kind of life for his two kids, Charlie and his sister, Kate (the brains of the family). And so genuinely thought that Charlie was an estate agent and would often brag about how well he was doing, even though everyone else knew Charlie was off driving some dodgy judge around or running errands for the boss. No one ever said anything out of respect for him, that and of course the fact that mister Lyne had made it very clear he would maim anyone who did personally. The joke had soured recently though, now that Charlie's Dad was, although no one would openly admit it, dying.

At last a familiar skinny frame appeared out of an alleyway up the street from where Fraker was parked and began ambling down towards him. Charlie was mouthing something to himself as he approached and Fraker knew he was doing what he always did at this time, going over his lines ready for the fun and games about to kick off.

Fraker got out of the car and concealed the pistol under his jacket as Charlie finally reached him. "Take yer time, sparky, no rush." Fraker said sarcastically.

Charlie shrugged. "Hey, when you've gotta go, you've gotta go." Fraker passed him the pistol, which Charlie put in the back of his trousers.

"Very 'Gangsta'." Fraker snorted.

"Huh? Are we on then?" Walker said vacantly looking across at the café.

"Only about five minutes ago. What was the hold up, couldn't you find it?" Not waiting for a response, Fraker started purposely across the road and over to the café. Walker had to jog to keep up. Fraker could hear the kid whispering to himself over and over; "Look at this Mitch, look at this Mitch."

The older man exhaled despairingly as they reached the door and turned to him. "Christ Charlie, that's my line."

"Huh?" Charlie looked blankly at him for a moment then the mist seemed to clear. "Oh, yeah."

"Jesus," Fraker gave him his best steely stare and backhanded him on the chest. "Charles, look at me. Focus. Are you set?"

Charlie jumped up and down on the spot a couple of times, psyching himself up. "I am set," he said firmly and let out a few short sharp breaths. "Set," he added for emphasis.

Not entirely convinced, Fraker turned and knocked hard on the cafes door, there was silence for a moment, then someone on the other side shouted, "We're closed!" Fraker didn't answer and hammered on the door again, this time more insistently. He could feel heartbeat increase at the sound of footsteps approaching from the other side and resisted the urge to take his pulse by the vein in his neck which was throbbing now.

'Got to get fit,' he thought, 'one of these days I'm just going to keel over.' Bizarrely the thought made him smile slightly, imagining Charlie's face as he just drops dead, leaving him to deal with the guy about to open the door all on his own. The sound of keys in the door and a bolt being thrown back snapped Fraker out of it and as the door opened he made a fist...

There was no two ways about it, Charlie Walker was watching a master at work and it never ceased to amaze him. He lent casually against the bar and watched as Fraker calmly helped the bar's owner, Mitch, get unsteadily to his feet. The poor fellow was coughing and spluttering, still reeling from the almighty punch Fraker had just landed square on his nose seconds before



which had sent him sprawling to the floor knocking tables and chairs all over the place in the process.

"B, Bill, Bill no wait..." Mitch pleaded nasally half blinded by tears and shock.

Fraker picked up one of the over turned chairs. "Sssh, Mitch, come on, calm down. Here give me your hand." Fraker said softly and helped Mitch to his feet. "That's better, come on, take a seat." He guided the dazed bar owner over to the chair and sat him down, then he took a chair for himself, swivelled it around so it was backwards and sat on it facing Mitch with his arms resting casually on the backrest.

Charlie watched all this while desperately trying to keep a straight face, he'd seen it dozens of times and it never got old. Fraker studied Mitch silently for a moment, letting the chaos of their entrance settle somewhat, then he frowned as if noticing Mitch's busted nose for the first time.

"Here Mitch, your nose is bleeding." Fraker pulled out his handkerchief and handed to Mitch who took it with a trembling hand.

Classic, thought Charlie. Every time they did this he would always take mental notes of the way Fraker moved and the soothing tone of his voice. Bill Fraker was a big intimidating man, they could have easily gone in shouting and screaming, smashing the place to pieces. But Charlie knew Fraker had learned throughout the years that this was always the best approach, or at least the one he preferred.

One minute he had smacked the guy in the face, the next he was all smiles and genuine concern. Poor Mitch, just like all the others who were on his end of the routine, didn't know if he was coming or going. 'If they don't know if you're going to kiss or kill them,' Fraker had once told him. 'Then they won't know how to react. So once you're on top of the situation, you stay on top, with minimal bloodshed and tears all round.'

Still stunned, Mitch pressed the handkerchief to his bleeding nose, which caused him to take a sharp intake of breath. "B, Bill, Ch-Ch, Charlie," he stammered. "I was going to call you lads, I swear."

Fraker held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "Hey, Mitch, come on, you don't have to explain yourself to us. We know you've been busy. Don't we Charlie?"

Charlie nodded on cue. "Hell aye."

The bar owner swung his head glancing between Fraker and Charlie, sending beads of sweat flying off his forehead. "Really, it's been bedlam in here the past couple of weeks," he said.

Fraker nodded, listening intently to the man. "I can imagine, Mitch. Like I said we trust you, you're a general good egg and you've always been straight with me. Which goes a long way in my book, believe me." Fraker paused as if fighting to find the right words. "It's just, it's just the boss. You see he gets these headaches, and they do tend to make the old git bad tempered at times. Unreasonable some might say, although not to his face. So we're just here to put his mind at rest. I mean twenty thousand pounds, that's a lot of money, Mitch."

There was no edge to Fraker's voice at all, he just seemed to want to help him, not break any bones. Charlie could see Mitch pick up on this as a lifeline and grabbed onto it with both hands. "Yeah, yeah, of course," he babbled. "I understand, really I do, and I appreciate how patient you've all been. Believe me, now that the place has taken off, he'll get it all back, plus the interest. You see that's what the loan was for, I needed a refit to pull in the punters." Fraker looked around the place admiringly. "See?" Mitch added hopefully, hanging on Fraker's every move.

"And that's money well spent too, the place looks great." Fraker said. Although Mitch was the wrong side of fifty and had been in the pub game all his adult life, he had been quick to see the potential in the whole part café, part bar thing. Unfortunately for him, the banks hadn't shared his vision so he had had to turn to Mister Lyne's 'Loans' department for financial support.

"No problem pulling people in?" Charlie adlibbed.

Mitch jumped slightly as though he had forgotten Charlie was there. He shook his head like an idiot. "No, not at all, the place is heaving after the pubs close," he said.

"Nice one," Charlie said and moved along the bar so he was directly behind Mitch, which meant he had to crane his neck around so see him. Mitch didn't like that at all.

"Yep," Mitch's head snapped back to face Fraker as he spoke. "It's the dog's biscuits, eh Charlie?"

"Oh, yeah," Charlie said. "Even I'd drink here."

Raising his eyebrows Fraker and looked at Mitch, impressed. "Now that is praise indeed, you know how fussy he can be." He gestured to Charlie. "Take that suit. Guess how much it cost?"

"Ooh dunno," Mitch shrugged. "Looks expensive." He absently dabbed his nose as he spoke which made him wince but at least it had finally stopped bleeding.

"One thousand English pounds!" Fraker declared a little too loudly making Mitch flinch. "A thousand quid for a fucking suit, pardon my French. Flash git." Fraker ran his fingers down his own suit's lapels. "This cost me one hundred tops. Never pay more than a ton for a suit, Mitchell and you won't go far wrong my friend." Mitch nodded, clearly wanting them gone so he could throw up.

At this Charlie gave a sigh of genuine disgust and hissed through his teeth. "Philistine," Fraker ignored this as he was absently looking around the bar again admiring the new fixtures and fittings. Then after a long, very uncomfortable silence, which was timed to perfection, Charlie gave a little cough, which prompted Fraker back to the business at hand.

"What, huh?" Fraker said seemingly a little disorientated. "Oh, yeah sorry, Mitch. I was miles away there. Right then, so, I can give Mister Lyne my personally guarantee you'll pay the money back?"

"Oh, Christ yeah, every penny, plus the interest." Mitch nodded vigorously which seemed to make his head spin judging by the way his eyes rolled.

"Right then, on my head be it and all that as they say." Seemingly satisfied Fraker then made a move to stand, which earned an almost audible sigh of relief from Mitch. But then he stopped, mid-movement, as if he'd just remembered something and then sat right back down again. "Oh, yeah, while we're here... Charlie?" Fraker held out his hand to Charlie who reached behind him and pulled out the pistol from the back of his trousers. He took a step towards Fraker and handed him the weapon, Fraker then expertly popped out the ammunition clip and pushed out a bullet with his thumb.

As he was doing this, Charlie couldn't help but glance at Mitch, who seeing the gun had gone quite remarkably pale and watched Fraker slack

jawed as he slammed the clip back into the pistol and handed it back to Charlie.

"Whoa, whoa, hang on, Bill..." Mitch babbled in disbelief. But Fraker didn't look up straight away, he just turned the bullet over in his hand for a few seconds letting Mitch stew a little longer, then finally held it between his thumb and forefinger and raised it up for him to see.

Showtime: They called it *the Kneecap Routine*.

Fraker squinted at the bullet and moved it slightly so the light glinted off its metal casing. "Look at this Mitch," Fraker eventually said. "This is a nine millimetre Parabellum jacketed hollow point round. It's the type the I.R.A used to use in the good old days if they were gonna kneecap someone..."

As Fraker spoke, Charlie moved back directly behind Mitch and said, "You see Mitch..." Mitch jumped a mile and once again had to crane his neck around to see him as he spoke. "It's not big enough to cause any permanent damage. But it is big enough for you to know about it if you did get shot with one..."

Fraker's turn, "Now, the I.R.A always used to shoot you through the front of the knee, usually as a warning. It would hurt like bloody hell but you could walk again in what, six to eight weeks?"

"It's not meant to cripple you," Charlie continued, "It's just sort of one step up from a slap on the wrist so to speak, albeit a heck of a lot more painful, eh Bill?"

"Absolutely. Now me and Charlie here were talking about this, and we figured, if we were gonna kneecap someone..." Mitch was now sweating profusely, he screwed his eyes tight shut, perhaps hoping when he opened them this would all be just a bad dream.

"We'd shoot them through the back of the knee..." Charlie said gleefully.

Feeling nauseas Mitch opened his eyes again, nope they were still both there. He looked at Fraker who lent forward a little. "Yeah, so the bullet would exit through the front of the knee," he gently tapped Mitch's kneecap. "About here."

Charlie began pacing around enthused. Mitch was looking about fit to pass out now, he opened his mouth but nothing came out. "Yeah, yeah. And we'd use one of those soft nosed bullets or a dum-dum."

The light caught the bullet again as Fraker rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. "So," Fraker continued. "When it hits the patella it would shatter into dozens of minute metal splinters, which would each, in turn, tear through the flesh, bone and cartilage of the kneecap before exiting in a dozen different places..."

Charlie shoved his hands in his pocket and sat casually on the edge of a table just behind Fraker's right shoulder. "We figured it would actually take off your entire knee. Not to mention what it would do to your trousers." He smiled and nodded to himself as if picturing this in his mind's eye.

"Uhuh," Fraker nodded also then added ruefully, "And with the NHS being what it is these days..." (Pause for effect.) "You'd never walk again."

Both Charlie and Fraker stared off in to space, lost in the moment. The room would have been pin drop quiet were it not for Mitch's ragged breathing. Then after a suitably long pause Fraker snapped out of it and looked at the poor bar owner sit opposite him, even Fraker was surprised at his deathly pallor.

"Ooph, sorry mate," he said. "I was miles away there. Don't even know why I brought it up. It's just an idea me and Charlie have been playing around with."

"Yeah, we don't get out much," Charlie added.

Fraker lent forward again and placed the bullet carefully into Mitch's sweaty palm. "Here, this is for you. Call it a souvenir."

"Right then," Charlie said buttoning up his expensive coat right to the top. "That's us. Goodnight, Mitch." And with that he walked over to the door and with a casual, "Cheers" over his shoulder he disappeared outside.

Satisfied at a job well done and with the minimum of violence, Fraker also got to his feet. Nobody got shot, and he had no doubts that poor Mitch would pay on time from now on. It was just like he told Charlie, It was all about controlling the situation, stamping your authority on it before anything bad can develop and this had been a text book example tonight.

He buttoned up his jacket and looked down at Mitch, who was still staring at the bullet in his trembling hand, and felt a tinge of remorse which came out of nowhere. Fraker had been using the kneecap routine for years now, he had recited it so many times, with Charlie and others that its threat of underlying violence was lost on him now. It was just that, a routine, everyone he knew it in this line of work and had their own version of it, people added their own little flourishes here and there, like any good joke. Learn it, then make it your own.

He patted Mitch on the shoulder then said a little softer than he had meant, "See you later, mate," and walked away. Although he was sure Mitch hadn't heard him, let alone picked up on the tone of his voice, Fraker silently cursed himself for getting soft and stepped out into the cold night air. It had started to snow since they had been inside and the ground was covered with a light dusting. Charlie was waiting by the car, stamping his feet to keep warm. 'That's it,' Fraker thought digging into his pocket for the keys. 'Get fit the first chance I get and stop thinking so much. It's all just part of the job.'

As he got to the car, Charlie beamed at him. "I thought that went well," he said.

"Yeah, your delivery's getting better."

"Yeah? Nice one."

They got into the car and as Fraker pulled away he remembered the hip flask in the glove compartment and he brightened up somewhat. He would demolish it once he'd dropped Charlie off. For some reason the kid didn't drink which made him a freak in Fraker's eyes. Life without alcohol? Fraker thought, Jesus, He couldn't think of a worse kind of hell.

## SEVEN

"Sharks!?! Tommy, what the fuck have sharks got to do with anything?" Larry got up from off his bed and double checked the caller id on his phone just to make sure he was taking to the right person and not some prankster. Yep it was Tommy Whitaker alright. Right person, if not in his right mind. Tommy had been babbling at him for the best part of five minutes, not letting

him get a word in edge ways. Something about sharks and eternal damnation.

"Tommy, calm down, you're not making a drop of sense." The truth was there was something in Whitaker's voice that unnerved Larry. Total conviction. "Tom..." He tried to interrupt, but Whitaker was in full flow now.

"Christ!!" Whitaker shrieked down the other end. "How many times? Don't use my fucking name. They'll know, can't you understand? They'll feel the ripples and find me. And if they find me, they'll sure as shit find you. Mary gave me the tooth, but I just don't know if it'll work, can't take that chance. Don't use my name and I won't use yours."

Tooth? Mary? Larry was close to total despair now. "Calm down, T..." He caught himself from saying Whitaker's name just in time, no use in agitating him any more than he already was, not that he thought that was remotely possible, given his state of near hysteria. "Take a fucking breath will you?"

"No, no time, they're onto us, I know. I know everything now, we're fucked, damned. I know now... I know who's after us, I know *what* they are." Whitaker said, the word *what* was a whisper.

Larry cupped his hand over the mouth piece. "Peroni!" He shouted. "Get in here, for Christ sake." This was all going to shit, he'd been trying to get hold of Whitaker for days, to chew him out about setting him up with this shower of shit he was holed up with. And now that Whitaker had actually contacted him, he had turned into a maniac almost from the moment Larry answered.

"You there, you still there?" Whitaker sounded scared as hell.

"I'm here, Tommy," he winced having used his name again and braced himself for more lunacy but instead was met by silence. "You still there?" He said sharply.

Finally Peroni poked her head around the door. "Whatssup?" she said. And Larry mouthed Tommy Whitaker to her. "Get him to come in," she said and came into the room. "Tell him we can protect him."

"They want you to come in." Larry said into the phone.

"Who?" Whitaker said, and Larry could tell he was pacing as he spoke.

He sighed. "The police, MI5! The ones you did the deal with, remember? I'm with one of them now. She says they can protect you." Secretly Larry wanted Whitaker to turn himself in, just so he could wring his neck.

There was more silence at the other end, then out of the blue Whitaker screamed down the phone; "Jesus! What if they're listening in right now? Mary said they can use phone signals to track you down. Shit. I've gotta go I've gotta go!"

It was so loud even Peroni winced. "Mary, who the fuck is Mary?" Larry asked, his voice cracking with emotion. "And why would the police want to trace this call? They're standing right fucking here." Larry cupped his hand over the mouth piece again and looked up at the heavens. "Christ on a crutch." He cursed.

"No you idiot!" Whitaker shouted. "Not the police, Christ if only it was the police we have to worry about." He began to sob pitifully, it turned Larry's stomach.

"If not the police, then who?" Larry tried to keep his voice steady.

Peroni made a face and shrugged. "Larry," she whispered grabbing his arm, "Tell him to come in."

He pulled his arm away. "Tommy!" This made Whitaker shriek again. "Oh shut up," Larry snapped. "Pull yourself together and come on in, for Christ sake. I'm the one everyone wants dead Whit-a-ker," he lingered on his name deliberately. "No one gives a shit about you."

"I'm going McCulloch, and don't fucking call me again, you hear? You're fucked and you're not taking me with you. You hear!?" His voice was so loud it distorted.

"What?" Larry said incredulously. "You called me, you fucking lunatic!" The phone went dead. "Jesus!" Larry tossed the phone onto his bed and sat down next to it.

Peroni picked up the phone. "Whitaker?"

"He's gone," Larry said shaking his head in disbelief. "Fucking nutter, that's all I need."



Peroni hit the redial last call button and listened. "What did he say, Larry? Exactly, it may be important." She frowned and turned off the phone. "He's not answering."

"Huh, no shit." Spat Larry.

"Larry!" Her voice was sharp. He finally looked up at her. "What did he say?" She asked again this time a little more gently.

"Christ, I dunno," Larry shrugged. "Couldn't make out half of it. He kept saying he knew everything now. And some bollocks about not using his name." Larry remembered that tone of absolute conviction in Whitaker's voice, and he physically shook his head to dislodge the memory. "Kept saying *they* could trace him just be someone saying his name."

Peroni took out her own phone. "No names? Just, *they*? She said.

"Yeah, just *they*." Larry got to his feet and heard his aching knees crack. This was all wrong he thought and rubbed the back of his neck. "Shit," he said, something occurred to him. "Does Whitaker know about this place?"

"What?" Peroni clearly took an affront at this. "Give us a little credit, Larry." She said. "No one else knows about this place." She paused a second. "Oh, apart from the full page ad we took out in the Evening Post, that is. You may have seen it, it had directions and everything."

Oh, great, thought Larry. I'm back in a fucking sitcom again. And not one of those good American ones. We're talking BBC 3 here. He laughed out loud at his own joke, Whitakers raving forgotten for a second. Peroni gave him a funny look. "Yep, BBC 3." He said obliquely.

She narrowed her eyes and looked ready to retort but evidently thought better off it. (Where was Lewis when you wanted him?) "Still," she finally said. "Shame about Whitaker, we could have helped him. I'm going to report this." She moved to leave but turned back as she reached the door. "Oh and I'm sure you'll be glad to learn, the boss should be here soon. Best you tell him everything Whitaker said to you, might be important."

At last, something was going right. The elusive boss of this shambles was on his way and that meant things could finally start to move forwards. Whitaker had clearly lost his mind, that much was plain, but Larry didn't need him any longer. Peroni was about to leave when Larry called her back. "Hey,

well it's about fucking time. And to hell with Tommy Whitaker," he said. "If he thinks he's actually going to get paid for setting up this farce, he truly is out of his fucking mind."

"I think getting paid is the least of his problems now, Larry." Peroni said and Larry caught the hint of a melancholy smile on her face. Then she seemed to remember something. "Did Whitaker make any mention of an American?"

"Huh? No. Why?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." With this she disappeared out the door. Leaving Larry with at least half a dozen questions.

So the yanks were in on this too by the sounds of it. Well they could take a number and get in line as far as Larry was concerned. He glanced at his phone on the bed and did a quick tally of people in his head that he could call to get him the hell out of here if he needed to. It came to a grand total of none. Whitaker had been his last hope and that made him feel like crying, but he sucked it up. "Shit's creek." He said and wiped his eyes, which were watering all the same.

## EIGHT

As Thomas Whitaker, thanks to just a few short minutes with Mary the gold toothed bag lady and sometime shaman, was now all too aware. The world in which he was living had a very thin veneer of reality. Those who, intentionally or not, come to scrape the surface and see what lies beneath could not fail to be touched by what they found lurking there.

Whether it was physically or emotionally (but mostly both) no one who happened upon that world, (beneath the world we think we know) comes out of that experience unscathed. Some chose to hide in the comfort of madness, others take their own lives to be rid of the nightmares. And others still, although in the minority of the three options, choose sides.

Father Peter Nichols had just turned thirty, half his lifetime ago now, when his old life had ended, ripped to pieces in a frenzy of blood and blind panic one September night in the apparent safety of his own church by those razor clawed nightmares who called the darkest of the dark shadows their home.

Nichols had only been given charge of his new church St. James' in Brighton a year previous when the unseen, but ageless war fought in the corner of reality's eye came, literally, knocking on his vestry door. In the grand scheme of things the young priest had been little more than a bystander to the events that unfolded that night, which in hindsight probably explained how he had got the hell out of there with most, if not all of his skin and bodily fluids intact.

"Weird city," The young Father Nichols whispered to himself with a shake of the head. He leant against the kitchen door frame and stared at the Demon sitting at his kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal and watching the portable television perched on the work top. Whereas it was true that evil could sometimes be on the mundane side, this was bordering on the ridiculous. But a Demon this was, in human form. And that was straight from the Vatican itself.

What had Cardinal Santini called it? A soldier of darkness. A collector of souls. This raggedy old man who had appeared at his church just before midnight seeking sanctuary dressed in an ill-fitting tatty suit and overcoat, his hair, which looked like it hadn't been washed or cut in months hung down over his face as he ate and coupled with his massive equally unkempt beard left little room for any recognizable facial features and what little there was showing was caked in grime.

This man who Nichols had assumed was a tramp was anything but that. This *man* was a soldier of darkness alright, and quite a celebrity by all accounts in the right circles, an agent of evil, but one who had grown tired of the never ending war between light and dark and wanted to surrender.

Its name was Macready and its impending defection had been what the Cardinal had called the most significant event in the war against evil since the discovery of something called *Mynor's Poem* some hundred years ago. During his increasingly surreal telephone conversation with Cardinal Santini, Nichols had thought it was best to keep to himself the fact that he had no

idea who on earth this Mynor character was when he was at home, let alone that he didn't have a clue what was so important about his poem, and what that had to do with the fight against evil.

Mostly because the Cardinal spoke of these things as if both were common knowledge to any Catholic priest worth his salt. And once the call was over, Nichols was left with the uneasy feeling he had just taken a big step into a world he knew nothing about, and that it was a world of magic, and not the good rabbit out of the hat type.

Macready looked up from his cereal, seeing Nichols in the doorway. "So," he said through a mouthful of corn flakes and Nichols caught the hint of a soft Scottish accent. "What did they say?"

"It was just like you said," Nichols replied. "They are going to send someone over to check you out." The Demon nodded and picked a piece of corn flake out of his beard. "I mean," Nichols continued. "They can't very well have Demons running around the Vatican unchecked now, can they?" Even as he said it, Nichols couldn't actually believe he'd just used those words in that particular order without smiling. God, how he longed for the bliss of ignorance again.

He could almost feel his grip on sanity slipping away moment by moment, especially when Macready grunted in response and said, "Huh, wouldn't be the first time."

Yes, the more Nichols found out about this clandestine world he had been thrust into, the more he wanted nothing to do with it. That was a choice of course he no longer had. For whatever reason Macready had chosen his church to hide out in, so like it or not Nichols was up to his neck in all this. Whatever *all this* turned out to be.

"So when are they coming?" Macready asked.

"Cardinal says they should be here tomorrow, early afternoon."

"What? What's the hold up?" Nichols was slightly taken aback at the shock in Macready voice.

"Hey, don't blame me," he said defensively. "Apparently there isn't anyone suitable in England, they are sending over a team from the Vatican. You're quite the celebrity over there."

"Shit," Macready smiled and gave a shake of the head. "I'll bet." He stared down into his cereal lost in thought and Nichols could see a look of concern on his half hidden features. "I'm gonna need some plain paper. You got any?"

"Paper? What for?"

"Protection," Macready said without looking up. "It's going to be a long night, Father." He frowned and after a moments contemplation adding. "Yes sir, a long night."

Protection? What the hell did that mean? Nichols shook the question out of his head, but he had a feeling there would be a lot more of them before the night was over. "Paper, paper, right," he mumbled absently as he thought. "Yeah, will a note pad do?" he asked.

"Sure," Macready said finishing off his corn flakes.

"Sure," Nichols echoed and began searching through one of the kitchen draws, he pulled out a faded pad of headed note paper which had the sketch of the church in one corner, he held it up to Macready. "Will this do?"

"Yeah, paper's paper, doesn't have to be anything special," he squinted at the sketch on the top page. "What's that, this place?"

"Uhuh," Nichols nodded and tossed the pad onto the table in front of him the when back to rummaging in the draw. "You need a pen?" He turned back to Macready as the Demon gave a snort.

"No," Macready said with a genuine smile. He pushed the cereal bowl over to one side and slipped the pad over to himself he looked at the sketch more closely. "No pen required." With this he began tearing sheets of paper off the pad and then tearing those into several roughly three inch squares which he then set out in front of him on the table.

"What are you doing?" Nichols asked more than a little bemused.

In response Macready pulled a small pocket pen knife out of his coat pocket and snapped it open, he grinned mischievously at Nichols who was surprised to see that it revealed a perfect set of white teeth. "You got anything to drink?" He asked. Nichols was looking at the knife's rusty blade so didn't answer. "Hey, Father?" Macready prompted.

"Huh?"

"Drink?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." Nichols snapped out of it somewhat. "I think I have some brandy around here somewhere.

"I was thinking more on the lines of tea. Haven't had a decent cup of tea in years." Macready pulled the knife across the palm of his left hand cutting deep into it, Nichols winced at the action but Macready didn't even flinch. He squeezed his hand into a fist and let the blood drip into a small pool on the table, next he spat into it and began to mix the two together with the tip of the knife humming tunelessly to himself. Nichols watched all this transfixed, he was about to ask him what the hell he was doing when Macready looked up at him. "Tea?" He asked again.

"Tea?" Nichols said flatly.

"Yeah, tea. I don't drink alcohol."

"I assumed you'd drink human blood or something." Nichols said, only half joking.

"Get a grip." Macready replied testily. "And make it sweet, four sugars, I'm gonna need to keep my strength up if I'm gonna be holed up here all night." This said he returned to his mixing.

"Fair enough," Nichols said with a shrug. The guy is bleeding all over my table and he wants a cup of tea, why not? He picked up the kettle, filled it with water and set it to boil. When he turned back Macready had finished mixing the spit and blood, he then dipped the tip of the knife in the concoction and using it like a fountain pen began drawing a series of runic symbols on each of the pieces of paper. "That's your protection?"

When Macready had finished drawing on the last of the paper, twelve in all, he looked up at the priest. "That's right," he nodded over to one wall which had an old crucifix on it. "These'll work a damn sight better than that old trinket." He passed his open hand over the pieces of paper mumbling some incantation or other under his breath.

Nichols folded his arms and lent back against the worktop and watched the old Demon, he still just looked like a tramp, and had it not been for the call to the Vatican he would give the man his tea and a bite to eat then send

him on his way. He tried to make out what he was saying but his beard and the strange language made lip reading impossible.

The kettle switched itself off as it finished boiling and Nichols was about to turn to make Macready his sweet tea when the dozen painted squares fluttered as if touched by a light breeze as his hand passed over them and Nichols could have sworn he could see what looked like a faint heat haze type distortion coming from Macready's down turned palm. It was a nice trick Nichols thought, but surely that's all it was.

"Fuck," Macready winced in pain and shook his hand. He blew on his hand and made a couple of fists. "You know what the annoying thing is?" He said to Nichols. The priest shook his head slightly, still bemused at the magic show. "I'm dead, but that still hurts like hell. What's that all about?"

The question was so genuine and made without even the slightest hint of humour that all Nichols could do was shrug. "I'm dead and I can still feel pain," Macready continued. "That's one thing I never got. I get hungry, but I'm pretty sure I can't starve to death, I've been shot, stabbed, you name it down through the years. Yet I can't die, not by the conventional ways anyhow. So what's the point of the whole pain thing?" Macready stared off into space, clearly perplexed by his condition.

"You're asking me?" Nichols replied even though the question was clearly rhetorical. Macready's voice was so weary all of a sudden, almost melancholy. That Nichols suddenly felt sorry for the old man, because in the end that's all he could see him as, not some Demon from the pit, some collector of souls. Just a weary old man who had had enough of what Cardinal Santini had called the great fight. Nichols tore himself away and made Macready his tea, he put in the four sugars gave it a good stir then place the mug down on the table in from of the old man.

"Thanks," he said softly and gathered up the pieces of paper into a loose pile. He took a sip of the tea and nodded appreciatively. "Perfect."

"Tea and sympathy," Nichols said. "The British way."

"I've missed it." Macready smiled ruefully and took another sip, this time he smacked his lips. "Hmm,"

"What are you?" The question escaped Nichols lips before he even thought about asking it.

"What am I, truthfully?" Macready lent back in his chair and folded his arms, he looked off into space for several seconds thinking, then finally turned to the priest. "I'm tired," he said plainly.

"Cardinal Santini called you a Demon."

Macready let out a little laugh at this. "It's a little more complicated than that, Father." He leaned forwards again and collected all the pieces of paper together then began shuffling them like they were playing cards, all except one which he left face down on the table. "But no, I'm not a Demon. I was a man, once, just like you only without the faith. I wasn't made, as much as I was..." He paused, thinking of the right words. "As I was recruited, years ago now."

"By the Devil?" Nichols asked. Again he couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Fuck knows," Macready shrugged. "It's all a game, you see? Your side, my side. One long never ending, pointless game. They don't want mindless robots, they have real Demons for that. I was picked because I had a natural aptitude for causing mischief, that's all."

"And now you've had enough?"

The old man nodded. "I just can't do this anymore," he frowned and chewed on his lower lip. "Christ, the shit I've done." Nichols watched his grubby hands absently handling the papers.

The young priest watched him lost in thought for a full minute, although he was loathed to break the spell he finally said, "The Cardinal called you a defector. Said you wanted to come over to our side." Whatever *our side* actually meant.

Out of nowhere tears came to Macready's eyes, but his voice remained steady. "I'm a traitor," he said flatly and looked up at Nichols, but the sorrow in them made the priest look away instantly. Nichols studied his feet as Macready continued. "In the end that's all I am. Just a traitor to my own kind. It's just..." Now his voice cracked with emotion slightly, he paused trying to keep his tone level. "I just want it all to end. If someone doesn't do something it's all just going to go on and on forever."



Nichols chanced a look up to see Macready staring at the papers in his hands. "I've spilt enough blood over the years to drown an army, Father." He exhaled and placed the papers in a pile on the table in front of him, then after a moment added. "And I won't spill anymore."

Cardinal Santini had warned Nichols that what he had called 'the agents of darkness' (Nichols had mused that they always seemed to have such colourful titles, these bad guys) would stop at nothing to prevent Macready's defection. Not that Santini could offer him any means of defence against them if they did come. Just hope we get to you before they do, was all he would say. And trust Macready. Trust a Demon? Thanks for nothing.

"So what are those things for?" Nichols gestured to the pile of paper.

"There are those out there who will do anything to stop me doing this." He picked up one of the pieces of paper, the crude drawing on it put Nichols in mind of a malformed dog. "These will help hide my presence, for a while at least. That's the theory anyway."

"You don't sound too confident." Nichols had to admit he was hoping for something a little more solid, a machine gun would have been nice.

The old man shrugged. "I'm not. But this is all I've got, I've lost so much power, since breaking away," he frowned lost in thought again, then came back with a shrug a moment later. "We'll see I guess. I just hope your lot get here before I'm detected. The sooner I'm in the Vatican, the sooner I'm safe." He stopped and thought about this. "Christ, safe," he added with a shake of the head. He selected two of the papers and held them out to Nichols. "Take these, pin them to the church doors out the front, I'll place the rest."

Nichols looked at the papers but didn't move.

"You don't believe in any of this, do you?" Macready asked still holding out the charms.

"What, that you're a Demon? A collector of souls? Gee, let me think." Nichols was unable to mask his sarcastic tone.

"I thought you Catholics were all about the blind faith?" Macready asked with a lop-sided grin.

"Everything has its limits." Nichols said but took the two pieces of paper all the same. He studied the designs, one was the deformed dog thing the other looked like a crudely drawn pad lock.

"That'll stop anything, shall we say unnatural, getting in and soiling this precious church of yours." Macready offered. "But I tell you what, if anything does get in, you turn the other cheek, see where that gets you."

"Here's what you do, put those two on the churches door like I said." He then selected four more which Nichols took obediently. "These others go on each of the walls out there, doesn't matter which one on which wall. They will stop anything coming through the windows." He smiled. "Collectors just love fucking up stained glass windows. I should know, I've razed a few churches in my time." He looked at Nichols as if expecting a response to this, but the priest wouldn't give him the satisfaction, he just looked back with a bored expression on his face.

"What about this Mynor's Poem thing, the Cardinal told me about?" Nichols asked and noted with no little glee that at mention of the words *'Mynor's poem'* the smile fell right off Macready's grubby face.

"Fuck no," Macready said sharply and physically shuddered. "The less you know about that thing the better." He fumbled with the other papers but Nichols could see he had left one face down on the table. "I'll place these, around here," Macready nodded around the room."

"What about that one?" Nichols gestured to the face down paper he had left on the table. Macready took the spoon out of the empty cereal bowl and used it to slide the piece of paper across the table to Nichols who reached out a hand but hesitated in picking it up.

"It's okay, you can touch it." Macready pushed it a little closer with the spoon.

"You sure?" Nichols asked more than a little suspicious.

"That's your last line of defence, Father," Macready tapped the paper with the spoon. "If it touches anything tainted, for want of a better word, something like me, another collector, or something we have created. Attack Demon," (*Attack Demon*, the words rolled off his tongue so effortlessly) "that kind of thing. It will burn them up like fucking napalm, and believe me I know, I've been on the wrong end of one of those bastards." He shuddered

again but this time theatrically. "Burns for hours, if it's a collector. It should kill a Demon out right, but that depends who's created it."

Nichols gingerly picked up the piece of paper and turned it over to reveal the picture of a flaming eye. He slipped it into his pocket. "And are we expecting to see any of these 'attack Demons' running around my church?" Nichols didn't believe a word of any of this, but still felt strangely comforted by the charm, he patted his pocket, which won a grin from Macready.

"To be honest, the only drawback to one of those, is the fact that if you get close enough to use it, you're already as good as dead." He paused watching Nichols. "Whether you believe in any of this shit or not." Macready got to his feet and arched his back which cracked alarmingly. "Ooph," he winced. "Better get to it Father," he picked up his mug of tea and held it up in a toast. "Here's to a quiet night, and your continued ignorance to the real world."

"I'll drink to that," Nichols said turning towards the door.

"But you'll place the papers.?" Macready asked behind him.

"I'm quite happy to humour you," Nichols turned to look at him. "If it'll make you feel better."

"It will, and admit it, it can't hurt," he raised his eyebrows then added, "and it'll make you feel better too."

Never, thought Nichols and left the unlikely Demon without replying.

## NINE

If Father Nichols had known then that that would be the last time he would ever speak to Macready he would have thought of some witty parting shot, or at the very least asked him why, of all the churches in this city he had chosen to wander into his and as a result right royally mess his life up forever.

As he walked down the long stone corridor which led from his living quarters to the church itself, Nichols turned the paper charms over in his hands. He hadn't noticed before but whatever enchantment Macready had

placed on it had made the texture of the paper somehow denser, it felt almost like leather now and he wasn't sure if it was just the meagre light in here but the blood symbols on them looked quite black against the white.

He wanted to put this all down to cheap parlour tricks, but the more he tried to rationalize the night's events as they were unfolding; Macready's arrive at his vestry door ranting about sanctuary, and of course not forgetting the bordering on comical Vatican phone call and Macready's sleight of hand show in the kitchen. The more he found it hard to do so.

Sure he could tell himself this was all nonsense, to just play along until the cavalry arrived and whisked Macready, Demon or not, off out of his live forever. But there was something lurking at the back of his mind telling him that no matter how outlandish all this was, it somehow rung true.

Maybe I am losing his marbles after all, Nichols thought to himself as he reached the heavy oak door which lead through to the back of the church. He turned the iron door handle and stepped through into the church, although it was mid-September, the church felt much colder than normal, Nichols reached to turn on the overhead lights but decided against it, he liked the way the church looked at night, and there was more than enough light coming through the stained glass windows from the street outside to see what he was doing.

He made his way through the back pews and over to the right hand side wall, he selected one of the papers and was about to pin it to the stone when he realized he didn't have any means of doing so. "Damn it!" he whispered and was surprised to see his breath in the air. Maybe it was colder tonight than he had thought. The paper bristled in his hand for a moment as if it were alive which was more than a little unnerving. "Oookay," Nichols held out the paper and touched it against the wall, the instant it touched the stone it seemed to spark as if electrified, Nichols cursed and pulled his hand away and was only half surprised to see that it stuck there all by itself. He rubbed his hand, it hadn't hurt but there was no denying that he had felt a surge of power run up his arm which made the hairs on it stand up on end. The air around him felt almost oppressive like a thunderstorm was brewing and he caught the slight smell of static.

"Just 'till morning," Nichols told himself out loud, he screwed his eyes tight shut, "C'mon!" he scolded and opened his eyes again. He looked

around the church, was it him or was it darker than when he had first walked in? Normally when your eyes become accustomed to the gloom you can see better, but in the few short seconds his eyes had been closed the reverse had happened.

No! Nichols dismissed the notion and let out a short sharp cleansing breath which once again misted in the air in front of him. But he still couldn't dismiss the growing fear that was welling up in the pit of his stomach, the church just looked, wrong somehow, the shadows misplaced the air oppressive and it was damn near freezing now far too cold to be natural for this time of year.

The priest uttered a short prayer to himself and did his best to push thoughts of magic out of his head. He moved away from the charm and put his mind to placing the rest of the charms so he could get out of here and back to the relative comfort of his living quarters. As with the first each of the others stuck to the walls as if magnetized to something deep within the stone and gave off a spark of power and by the time Nichols had placed the last of the charms on the double doors at the front of the church the air around him was fair crackling with power and he didn't like the way it felt.

He stepped away from the doors and backed into the church. As he had been placing the charms the fear in his belly had mixed with that of shame, this was supposed to be a place of God and he was defiling it with this unholy dark magic. He took a step back towards the charms on the door suddenly wanting to tear them down but managed to catch himself before he did.

Like it or not he needed them, just for a few more hours and then he would take great pleasure in ripping them to pieces and burning them. But still he couldn't shake the feeling that if this was all some grand test of his faith in God then he would have surely failed it. Turning so quickly as he had to this... This... *witchcraft*? The word stung his conscience, because behind all the mumbo jumbo and sleight of hand that's all this really was, the Devils work, not only had he himself let that Demon into his church but had actively taken part in this abomination.

Nichols had never felt so ashamed in all his life, he knew this was so wrong, felt it in every fibre of his being, but worst of all, he couldn't bring himself to stop any of it, and even worse still, he couldn't deny that now that the charms were up and he could feel their power in the air around him, he

felt physically safer now that they were up and keeping whatever may come knocking at the door at bay. He trusted in their magic and it made him sick to his stomach.

He rummaged in his pockets and pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and his trusty old Zippo lighter, thinking that maybe a hit of nicotine would calm his frayed nerves a little, he pulled out a cigarette using his teeth and lit it, he took a deep pull letting the smoke fill his lungs. Over the past few months Nichols had gradually been cutting down on the amount he had been smoking and was down to just two or three a day. (Four on Sundays if performance anxiety got the better of him.) So the nicotine made him pleasantly light headed and he tilted back his head and blew the smoke up into the air watching it drift upwards caught in the street light streaming through a nearby stained glass window.

"Better," he said and took another drag before putting the packet back into his pocket along with the Zippo. He glanced around the church at each of the paper charms in turn and shook his head. A couple of hundred years ago they would have burnt you at the stake for less than this.

He chuckled at the thought and feeling a little better thanks to the nicotine coursing through his weary system started to make his way down the aisle and over to the back of the church. Nichols looked up at the life size statue of the Virgin Mary which stood on a plinth close to the back door near the confessionals and as he past it he instinctively tapped one of its stone feet for luck and crossed himself.

The sudden grating sound of wood scraping on stone behind him made Nichols start and he spun around and looked off down the church and over to the front doors half expecting them to be wide open. They were closed and the charms that secured them were still in place, but as he looked around the shadows cast on the walls from the meagre light coming through the windows seemed to have shifted yet again, dark foreboding pools of darkness lay in defiance to the light that should have drown them out.

Nichols let out the breath he had been holding as he listened, but apart from his own breathing and his heart pounding in his ears the place was pin drop quiet. He narrowed his eyes and peered through the gloom, something was wrong with this picture, not just the ever shifting shadows that were making a nonsense of the light but something else was out of kilter. It took

him a moment to make sense of what was wrong but then he saw it. The front pew on the left hand side of the aisle and closest to the double doors had shifted a good few feet and was now at an odd angle compared to the uniformed neatness of the others.

Something moved in the shadows behind the pew. "Jesus Mary and Joseph," even though the oath was little more than a whisper, the words echoed off the walls around Nichols as if he had shouted them. The pew shifted again as whatever was behind it brushed against it. Nichols jumped more at the harsh screeching sound than the movement itself.

Although it was hidden from view, he knew instinctively that whatever it was had to be incredibly strong, that pew was at least fifteen feet long and made of solid wood, but it had just moved like it was balsawood.

He tried to take a step back but Nichols was getting conflicting messages from his fear clouded brain which rooted his feet to the spot when they should have been be sprinting to the back door and safety. But his brain was too busy to give the simple instruction of flight. The thing in the shadows quite simply shouldn't be there, he had placed the charms just as Macready had instructed, but there it was all the same, lurking behind the displaced pew.

The thought flashed into his head that maybe the whole placing of the charms thing had been some sick joke on Macready's part, that those simple scraps of paper were useless and the old Demon had got him to put them up just to see if he would place his faith in there supposed power ahead of his own faith in God. Just for his own amusement at how quickly Nichols would abandon his faith in favour of Macready's dark magic. And he had, there was no denying that. "*I've razed a few churches in my time,*" Macready had said. Was this going to be another? After humiliating Nichols was Macready going to destroy this place as a grand finale?

The shadow behind the pew shifted again, defying the light coming through the nearby window that should have drowned it out. The sudden movement focused Nichols' mind again back to the problem at hand, like it or not, charms or no charms something was in his church.

And then it started. A low guttural growl like an idling power tool drifted down the church to him. Pitch perfect to induce terror into any unfortunate close enough to hear it. Although he was some forty feet from its maker

Nichols could physically feel the growl vibrate through the soles of his feet. *Run!* Some small part of his brain not frozen in fright was screaming, but he couldn't move even when the shadow moved out from behind the pew and into the aisle.

The beast, which he had at first thought was hiding in the shadow was in fact the shadow *itself*. It had the vague undulating shape of a four legged creature, crouching low with its belly nearly dragging on the stone floor. Although the body seemed to lack any solidity, indeed it looked to Nichols to be nothing more than a seething mass of darkness, there was no doubt it still had a formidable weight to it.

As it moved, dark matter almost like tar dripped from its body but the instant it fell away from the whole of the creature it turned to smoke and drifted away. Nichols shifted his feet almost unconsciously and the creature paused for a moment as if studying him, ready to pounce at a split seconds notice if he moved again. Its eyes, blood red and cat like flashed in the depths of the dark matter that must have been its head, then faded an instant later when it was content that its prey was frozen to the spot. The beast moved off again with the slow methodical gait of a predator, it was almost purring now as it approached the paralyzed priest.

The nightmare was close enough now that Nichols could see through the dripping almost viscose darkness and to the skeletal frame beneath. Its skull was almost human in appearance if warped somewhat like wax kept out in the sun too long, and it was nearly twice the normal size. There was no room that Nichols could see for a nose on its misshapen face which was dominated by two huge hollow eye sockets, with those piercing red eyes set deep inside, and the remainder was taken up by its mouth which was a mass of jagged razor sharp teeth that would put a great white to shame. The head was connected to its body by a long crooked vertebrae snaking down into the folds of murk which thankfully was too dense for Nichols to make out anything but the faintest outline the spindly body that lay beneath. It took one more step towards him then stopped.

The beast stopped purring as it crouched down again poised to strike, leaving only the sound of Nichol's short sharp intakes of breath. He tried with all his will to tear his horrified gaze away from those two eyes, burning like faint embers from deep within the shroud of darkness as it studied him. Both instinctively knew what was next, that the end was close for one of them, that



the beast would strike at any moment to easily snuff out the human's life and that it would take little longer than the space between two of Nichols' rapid heartbeats to finish the task it *so* wanted to carry out.

But still Nichols couldn't move, even though the fear that was strangling his brain he knew the back door with its promise of relative safety was only a few steps away but it may as well have been miles for all the chance he had of actually covering the ground in time to get through it. The thing would be on him a split second after he even thought about making the move. That look in its burning eyes was testament enough to that. *'Go on holy man they almost begged, take a step. I dare you.'* No it was useless.

"Sssshhhittt," The curse escaped his lips as little more than a hiss. Nichols rarely swore, and never in a house of God. But, he thought, if you can't swear when faced with an abomination like this. When in God's name could you? Nichols was in no doubt with death so close, God and the statue of the Virgin Mary over his left shoulder would understand. He shook his head, fear was making him think of the most bizarre of things. He closed his eyes and screwed them tight shut and looked deep within himself in a vain attempt to find some sliver of the courage that had so readily deserted him, but came back with nothing but despair and he let out a sob of anguish. He heard the beast shift slightly at this, clearly his pain was music to its ears, but he refused to look at it instead kept his eyes tight shut.

The end was near which prompted Nichols to say a final prayer before it came. Mostly he prayed for forgiveness, he wished he could have been stronger, not in the face of this unholy death, who wouldn't sob at the sight before him, but in so readily turning to Macready's charms for help above his own faith in God, he had desecrated the church, *his* church and it had gained him nothing but shame.

And finally he prayed that death would come quickly. Nichols was surprised at how much the simple prayer comforted him, he felt the fear and shame drain away replaced by an almost overwhelming sense of serenity.

"Amen," he said softly and felt tears stream down his face. He opened his eyes more than ready now to face his executioner with a renewed faith.

The beast was gone.

## TEN

Nichols must have stared blankly at the place the thing had occupied moments before for a full thirty seconds before his befuddled brain managed to process the fact that it was now empty. When it did, it hit him like a physical blow hard across the face followed instantly by one to the stomach which made his legs buckle from underneath him and he fell forwards onto his hands and knees. He tried to catch his breath but when he sucked in air his stomach flipped and he had to clasp a hand over his mouth to stop himself from throwing up all over the church floor.

His body convulsed and he retched violently over and over. "Oh, God," he winched and spat out a mouthful of foul tasting bile. Nichols held his breath and tried to regulate his breathing, controlling the urge to throw up until he was sure the worst of the sensation had past, then he collapsed onto his backside.

His mind was reeling, but not so much that he didn't know that things were far from over. Nightmares don't always disappear the moment you wake up, life, especially now, just wasn't that simple anymore.

"C'mon," he chided as his until now untapped desire for self-preservation kicked in with a vengeance and with great effort he pulled himself up using one of the nearby pews until he got unsteadily to his feet. He frantically scanned his gloomy surroundings looking for any sign of that putrid darkness dripping monster. Although the thing was almost twice his size, there were still plenty of dark nooks and crannies for it to hide and he knew it could be watching him even now ready to pounce just when he might dare to believe he could survive.

But if it was still lurking somewhere quietly watching him, waiting. Why? Why hadn't it ripped him to shreds when it had the chance? Had what he thought was his dying prayer worked? Had the thing sensed his renewed faith and fled? So many questions, so few answers. Another; Was it still here and simply toying with him like a cat with a mouse whose hole is in sight? Cruelly enjoying the moment giving its victim cause for false hope of survival?

Nichols looked around, the charms were still where he had placed them and he could still feel their power in the air. Perhaps the beast had sensed

them too. They were meant to keep the enemy out, but what if their presences had given the creature cause to pause. Still no answers, just a legion of questions to ponder as he stood there sweating in the dark.

Whatever the reason the thing was gone, for now. And that was good enough to be going on with. He was still breathing and his limbs were still all where they should be so he wasn't complaining. Nichols so wanted to believe it had been his faith that had driven the Demon away, but he couldn't deny what little sense of reality he had gnawing away at the back of his head which told him otherwise. Could it have been the charms? Or Macready himself?

Nichols spun around at the thought of the old man coming to his rescue and half expected him to be standing in the doorway grinning. But the door leading to his living quarters was still shut.

"Macready?" His voice was hoarse from the bile. He cleared his throat and without thinking spat on the floor. "Macready?" He shouted it this time and his voice bounced of the stone walls around him. He waited for a response from behind the door but none came. Either he hadn't heard or, and the thought made him shiver, the beast had somehow gotten past Nichols and claimed his true victim, after all there was no charm on that door to stop it. And what if there had been another hiding in the vestry all this time? Perhaps the old man was already dead and the one that had been stalking Nichols in here had gone, content in the knowledge it's brother had fulfilled their task and was at this moment feasting on Macready's withered soul.

"Macready?" He said but this time almost in a whisper, fearful of being heard. He cursed his cowardice, he had no love for the old man but he had to be sure, one way or the other. Nichols took a tentative step towards the door when a noise close by, stone grating stone, made him spin on his heel and he faced the church once more, he hunched down slightly waiting for an attack, but nothing came. He cocked his ear and listened but couldn't hear anything but his own hesitant breathing and the blood rushing through his ears.

Nothing moved in the church be it shadow or solid and if it hadn't been for the fact that the pew at the front of the church was still askew from the others where the thing had knocked it, Nichols could have almost allowed himself to believe that the last few minutes where nothing but a surreal

interlude to his normal banal existence, nothing more than a vivid hallucination brought on by talk of Demons and magic charms.

He waited, breathing as softly as he could and looked from one dark corner to the next but still nothing moved, natural or otherwise. He took a moment to regulate his breathing, whatever had just happened one thing was clear, he had to get back to Macready whether the old man was alive or dead.

Nichols took a tentative step backwards and without chancing to look around reached out his left hand to touch the statue of the Virgin Mary's foot which was just behind him. For luck and to give thanks that he was still somehow drawing breath. His hand touched down where her stone feet had stood for a good two hundred years but there was nothing there. He slowly craned his neck around to see the plinth she should have been perched on was empty. The priest did an almost comical double take but the statue was gone.

"What the hell?" He inquired to the empty plinth as if it could answer. "God," his head was spinning again and he almost keeled over, he had touched her foot earlier for luck as he always did, the statue had definitely been there then, he had performed that little ritual countless times before, he'd carried it with him from his previous placement as a curate to Father Jacobs at St. Josephs in Cardiff. The old priest had done it for forty years or more and he had in turn picked it up from the priest he had assisted when younger. Nichols had picked up the habit almost without knowing it and continued it on here.

He looked around for any sign of the statue, what the hell had happened to it? Had it just got up and walked off at the first sign of the Demonic trespasser? "What in God's name is going on here?" Nichols shouted the question in frustration and it echoed off the stone walls around him. He hadn't expected a reply, so damn near fainted dead away when it came from the shadows close by.

"It's all just a kind of game really." It was a soft woman's voice with a strong Eastern European accent. Nichols turned to the speaker who he could now see in the shadows behind one of the confessionals. There was something not quite right about her appearance which became all too apparent when it moved.

"Mother of God," it was both an oath and God help him a statement of fact. Nichols' legs almost gave way again at the sheer shock of it, he half staggered half fell against the empty plinth, he had to grasp hold of it with both arms to stop himself from collapsing as the statue of the Virgin Mary stepped unsteadily out of the shadows and into the multi-coloured half-light coming from one of the nearby stained glass windows.

"You... You're..." Nichols stammered, his tongue suddenly two sizes too big for his mouth. The statue took a faltering step closer; it was bathed in a psycho surreal mixer of coloured lights from the window, patches of blue and red moved across its stone features. "This can't be," Nichols managed to get out as tears sprung to his eyes again. Tears of joy or disbelief he didn't know, but they came all the same.

"I answered your prayer," the statue said softly, its mouth though stone moved ever so slightly as it spoke, again with that heavy accent, the only flaw in what surely was a facade. Wasn't it? The Virgin seemed to sense this and added. "Is that so hard to believe?" *No*, was the simple answer tonight of all nights he so wanted to believe what he was seeing.

The statue was a perfect rendition, identical in every detail (apart from the walking and talking) from the one he had passed every day and tapped its toe for good luck ever since his arrival. Nichols chanced a look around, the beast had disappeared that much was certain and hadn't he wanted answers as to why? And here it was right in front of him. *'Is that so hard to believe?'* She had asked, so, was it? Was it so hard to believe that she had answered his prayer and delivered him from evil?

"That, that thing..." He asked turning back to her again and gestured to the now empty church.

"You prayed Father, and I answered," she said almost matter of fact as if prayers like this were answered every day. "I chased that thing away, out of my church. Such an abomination in a house of God." The statue frowned slightly causing flakes of plaster to fall from its brow. "It's a miracle," it added in way of explanation.

'I'll say,' Nichols almost said out loud. He believed in the power for prayer, it was the very cornerstone of his own faith. But even in a night of magic such as this he couldn't believe his prayer alone, no matter how

genuine, could have brought the Mother of God herself down to answer them.

She seemed to sense this. "For a man of faith you seem to have so little," there was an edge of accusation in her voice that stung Nichols.

"It's just," he was fumbling for the right words again, no matter how he spun it to himself he had dismissed this visitation as an illusion all too quickly. "I, It's hard to take in..." He cursed his meagre vocabulary and knew he must have sounded like a babbling fool, but to be fair who wouldn't in the face of the things he had seen on a night that started out with the visit of a soul collector and had gone rapidly downhill from then on.

"Lack of faith can be a dangerous thing," she said and raised a stone arm to point down to the far end of the aisle. Nichols followed the gesture but heard the beast before he saw it skulking around in the shadows close to where he had first seen it. The meaning was clear, the statue, or the thing inside was keeping the creature at bay. So was the fact that he knew her power wasn't drawn from his faith in God but from something much darker, the polar opposite in fact.

"That's quite a trick," Nichols said nodding at the statue trying to keep his voice as nonchalant as he could. "But the voice needs some work." He added coldly.

The statue shrugged and a rain of rubble peppered the floor. Nichols could see thought the ever growing cracks that were appearing in the illusion and to the person underneath wearing this sacrilegious disguise. "There was a time," she said with a weary voice. "When my appearance would have sent you into delirious rapture. The Mother of God herself stepping down off her perch to chase the nightmare away."

"This is an old routine I take it?" Nichols asked.

"Perhaps a little too old," she said. "But oh, how it used to work wonders, but that was a long time ago I'm afraid, that was in a time of faith which seems to have passed me by somehow." Her voice trailed off and was tinged with genuine despondence.

"I have faith," Nichols said to the strange creation. "Just not in you." He heard the softest of sighs coming from within the stone face. The statue took several tentative steps and with great effort sat down in one of the nearby

pews. Up at the far end of the aisle Nichols could see the beast out of the corner of his eye, pacing back and forth impatiently by the front doors as if waiting for orders.

"It seems I have lost my touch," the statue said after contemplating its stone feet for a few moments. And the thing looked strangely lost to Nichols. He moved towards where it was sitting, seeing this the beast began to bound down the aisle like a shadow shrouded freight train, it was surprisingly agile for all its bulk. Nichols cried out and braced for the impact but the beast skidded to a clumsy halt barely ten feet from him and looked disapprovingly to its left panting. Nichols turn to see the Virgin had her hand out stopping the beast from attacking.

He let out a long breath. "You're here for Macready," he said, his voice barely audible over the beast's breathing. He glanced nervously at the seething monstrosity but it was reluctantly holding its ground. The Virgin nodded in way of response. Nichols ever so slowly edged his way over to where she was sitting, never daring to take his eyes of the beast.

Much to his surprise the statue gently patted the pew next to her for Nichols to take a seat. The priest physically shrugged, then after a moment of deliberation, Nichols figured he had nothing to lose, the Devil and its dog were here in his church tonight despite Macready's best efforts and there wasn't a damn thing a mere mortal like himself could do about it, so he sat stiffly down next to her, and there they both sat in silence, man of God and the Virgin Mary (of sorts).

"Got a cigarette?" The fake Mother said after half a minute, absently picking bits of plaster off her arm. Why not? Nichols thought. The statue was well over a hundred years old, that's a hell of a long time to go without a smoke. He smiled at the absurdity of the situation and pulled the crumpled packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, he offered it to the Virgin, she slid one out and put it to her faded stone lips.

"Light?" She asked.

"Sure," Nichols brought out his light and touched the flame to the death stick.

The Virgin took a long pull on it and held the smoke in her lungs for a moment before tilting her head upwards and blowing it up into the air.

Nichols watched it swirling in the air, he felt strangely serene in her company. "Arrh," she sighed. "That's better." She flexed her fingers which were already more flesh now than stone. "Didn't take you long to figure it out. Didn't you even want it all to be real?" The fraud asked.

"God, yes," Nichols replied with simple honesty, there was something about this creature that made the thought of lying to her seem as much like sacrilege as the form she had taken. "What man of God wouldn't want to be saved by the Virgin Mother herself?"

He thought she smiled at this as the plaster on her face cracked some more but in truth she may just have been stifling a yawn for all he could tell. She offered him the cigarette but he shook his head, this scene was surreal enough as it was without sharing a smoke with the counterfeit deity. "But even though I've clearly gone mad," he continued. "I just couldn't quite swallow the whole divine intervention thing I'm afraid."

This time she did smile, causing little flakes of painted stone to fall from her face. Even in the gloom Nichols could see fleeting glimpses of the flesh beneath and he was almost surprised to see it was human, and flawless.

"You're a strange one, Father," Nichols drunk in the softness of her voice, but try as he might he couldn't quite place the accent, he had thought it was eastern European but now wasn't so sure, it seemed to fluctuate from sentence to sentence with the hint of half a dozen accents. All part of the illusion? Or the only natural thing about her? "I'm beginning to see why Mac' chose you. He was always drawn to characters."

"I had wondered why I was the lucky one."

"You've a spark of mischief in you, Father. It's very apparent too," she thought for a second how to articulate, then added; "You saw right thought my little game almost straight away. Sure perhaps I am slipping. I've been doing this for a long, long time." She drew out the second long; *Loooooong*, for effect. "In the old days, when I played this card, you could always count of much tears and wringing of hands, not to mention the good old fashioned praising of God."

She gave a slight shake of the head which showered Nichols trouser legs with a fine covering of dust, he brought his hand up to brush it was but for some reason couldn't bring himself to do it. He frowned, but the Virgin didn't



seem to notice, she was looking off into the gloom. "I remember this one priest," she laughed out loud at the memory and it sounded like music to Nichols' ears. "Just up and died on the spot. Mind you, he must have been a hundred," she added casually as if addressing an old friend.

"I imagine you get that a lot," Nichols asked, more to hear her sweet voice again than anything.

She shrugged and flicked what was left of the cigarette off into the darkness. As he watched her awkward movements, Nichols wondered just how long the statue, or the thing inside, had been watching him.

"The charms, they were useless then?" He asked suddenly remembering the scrapes of paper he had put around the place.

"No, not at all," she replied. "Mac' is very weak these days, especially after what he's done to try and break away from us, but the charms are solid enough. They would have been more than strong enough to keep me out. But of course, charms for keeping something out, aren't much good if the enemy is already inside." She made a fist and watched as most of the stone around her hand crumpled to dust. She flexed her fingers which Nichols could see were perfectly manicured. "I slipped in a little after Macready got here. I've been close to catching up with him for days now. We had a feeling he was going to do something a little..." She paused, trying to find the right word. "Rash." She nodded, that seemed to fit quite nicely.

Then she turned to look at him directly for the first time and Nichols almost gasped out loud seeing her eyes, all too real, they were a deep flawless blue encased in the rapidly disintegrating mask of stone. Now he knew he must be going mad as he slowly felt himself falling deeply, hopelessly in love with this impossible creation sitting next to him. His breath caught in his throat and his heart began hammering in his chest like a love struck school boy and for the briefest of moments Nichols thought he was going to keel over on the spot just like that old priest this dark Goddess had spoken of.

All this just from a glimpse of her eyes. He tried to speak, but out of nowhere fear suddenly robbed him of his voice. Not fear of death, no if her gaze was the last thing he would see in this life then he would gladly welcome death now, as what else could he possibly hope to see in a thousand lifetimes to match that sheer beauty behind those clear perfect pools of blue? No not

fear of death, he feared that his fumbling words would break the spell and she might look away. And in that moment, lost in her eyes, Father Peter Nichols could not think of anything worse.

He thought he heard something shift shifting behind him, that creature of shadow and hate no doubt, growing restless and eager to get its filth coated teeth into him.

He was wrong.

"Sofia?" It was Macready, his voice bathed in desolation. And with it she looked away to over Nichols shoulder breaking the exquisite eye contact and his heart in an instant.

Nichols physically gasped out loud it felt like she had slapped him hard across the face. *Sofia*, her name was *Sofia*. In the many years since he had heard this Nichols' heart always soured, then inevitable sank whenever he heard that name, in whatever context, it didn't matter. *Sofia*, the love of his life was called *Sofia*. Tears filled the priest's eyes as he looked back over his shoulder following her lost gaze to see Macready standing in the shadows with his back to the open doorway leading to the vestry, he looked to Nichols like a rabbit caught in a juggernaut's headlights.

"Hey Mac," she said with a lightness and familiarity that made Nichols instantly hate the raggedy old man. "Surprise."

"Fuck," Macready cursed through gritted teeth. He looked from her to the creature, who scurried forwards a few steps seeing its prey. Again, as she had done for Nichols, the Women, Sofia, held out her hand and stopped the beast in its tracks. Clearly vexed, the creature let out a deafening howl and struck the stone plinth the Virgin should still have been perched upon, hard with its left claw. The plinth exploded sending a shower of rubble and dust all over Nichols, a sharp piece the size of his fist struck him on the side of the head simultaneously drawing blood and snapping him out of his love Lorne melancholic coma.

Without thinking, Nichols jumped to his feet, a shout of protest ready to escape his lips, but no sooner had he drawn breath to unleash it when the creature spun towards him and instinctively took a swipe at the priest catching him a glancing blow across the chest. Although it was little more than a half-hearted love tap, Nichols chest exploded in a shower of blood.

The world was turned upside down and a split second later Nichols was crashing into one of the nearby confessionals which collapsed around him.

Shock kept the worst of the pain away for a few frantic seconds as he laid there amongst the shattered wood, then it came flooding back. Nichols tried almost in vain to catch his breath. Most of which seemed to be escaping through the ragged hole in his chest. He managed a couple of shallow breaths before his mouth filled up with blood which was bubbling up through his throat. He puked it up but more was coming, he just about managed to make sense of his surroundings but almost passed straight out as he looked down at his mangled chest, he quickly looked away again seeing what could only be the white of his shattered exposed ribs sticking up at odd angles through the meat.

"Oh... Oh, God," he spat out another mouthful of blood his head swimming. Then the lights and with them he assumed his life went out.

Nichols was pulled back from oblivion by the voice of an angel whose sweet tones drifted through the darkness like flecks of light showing him the way back from the brink of death, as if she had answered his prayers all over again. But these prayers, although Nichols would never admit to anyone, least of all his conscious self, had been made to her directly, forsaking all other deities. He would have clawed his way back from the abyss just to hear her sweet voice again and hope against hope perhaps feel her gaze on him once more. *Sofia.*

When he came to, Nichols was laid amongst the shattered remains of the confessional, his clothes felt hot and sticky, soaked through with his own blood. He instinctively brought his hand up to his ruined chest but pulled it away feeling something jagged through the exposed flesh, the beast's little love tap had left him with four deep claw marks which looked for all the world like he'd been attacked by Freddy Kruger. Nichols had been to see A nightmare on Elm street the previous week at the local cinema which had drawn many an incredulous look from the other audience members, apparently they didn't get many priests going to horror movies around here. 'Research,' Nichols had told them with half a smile.

Now he was slap bang in the middle of his very own horror movie, but one that hadn't played out its final scene with him just yet it seemed. He could hear Sofia's sweet voice again, pulling him further back into

consciousness, but it was being ruined by Macready's drawl, they were talking somewhere close. Nichols gritted his teeth and with great effort raised his head as best he could to see where the conversation was coming from. The first thing he saw in the gloom was the beast prowling between the pews still eager to dispatch Macready at its mistress' bidding.

The old demon Macready was standing in the aisle with his head bowed opposite Sofia, who Nichols could now see had dis-guarded the last of her disguise. She was clothed in a simple long blue summer dress which was far too flimsy for this time of year but the cold didn't seem to bother her. Even in the half-light her skin was so pale that for a moment Nichols thought she was still wearing the stone facade from the statue, her long hair which fell in loose curls past her shoulders was a deep unnatural red which made her skin seem all the paler still in comparison.

The priest raised himself up further on his elbows and winced at the fresh stabbing pain in his chest. He gritted his teeth again but couldn't altogether stifle the cry of pain that escaped his throat and echoed throughout the church. They must have heard, but none of the three trespassers even glanced his way. He was no threat or help to anyone.

Sofia was whispering something to Macready but Nichols couldn't make out anything but her tone which was almost loving. Macready shook his head and she gently stroked his matted hair, for an assassin she had a strangely benign look on her beautiful ashen face. She caressed his grubby cheek with the back of her hand and raised his bearded chin with the other so that he had to look up at her. She frowned and gave the slightest shake of her head which sent a ripple through her exquisite blood red hair.

"Mac," she said it so softly Nichols only just caught the word. "Look at you. You used to be so... Handsome," Nichols felt a wave of jealousy wash over him and was a little too pleased to see Macready pull away from her touch slightly and he could see the glint of tears in the old man's eyes.

"I didn't think it would be you," Macready said, his voice was a hoarse whisper, full of such emotion Nichols could barely believe the old tramp was capable of. "Jacob, maybe Randall, but not you." Tears were streaming down his face now.

She smiled, and even in his weakened state, Nichols felt butterflies in his stomach. "You are in so much trouble, Mac. You know that, don't you?" She

spoke to him like he was an errant child, almost lovingly and without the merest trace of malice in her sweet voice. Nichols didn't know if it was his weakened state, but he found himself envying the old tramp. It was clear the two had a history between them just as it was clear she loved him even if she came here as his executioner. Nichols would have gladly switched places with him at that moment even if it meant his certain death. That would have been a small price to pay if only she would look upon him the same way.

Macready exhaled slowly and looked up at her again and she actually winced at the pain in his eyes. Such a strange execution scene. "Aren't you sick of it all?" He asked her obviously fighting hard to keep his composure. Although even from where Nichols was viewing this endgame it was clear it wasn't fear just pure emotion, he seemed almost glad things were finally coming to a head and he could speak what was in his heart to one of his own kind. This wasn't a bargaining, it was a confession. "Don't you just want it all to end?" He struggled on. "Christ Sofia, you've been at this a hell of a lot longer than even me!"

She took his face in her hands with a heart breaking tenderness, and gently kissed him on the forehead. "You were the best of us, Mac," she said after looking at him for what seemed like an age. "We all get tired, of course we do. But you've really crossed the line this time old friend. Killing your observer Demon?" She grimaced. "God knows we've all wanted to do it at one time or another, but there's no coming back from that."

"I don't want to come back," he said flatly, holding her gaze until it was she who looked away. He caught her face with his hand and gently forced her to look him in the eyes again. "I want it over. All of it."

"Mac!" She hopped from foot to foot like a child, clearly that was something she didn't want to hear. "It'll never end," she had an edge in her voice now and Nichols could see the beast mirroring her growing frustration. "But running off to those shit merchants at the Vatican?" She made a face and spat on the floor like she had a bad taste in her mouth, she swung her arms out in an expansive gesture to take in the church, and presumably Nichols as well, which hurt a thousand times more than the seeping wound in his chest.

Sofia took a breath to calm herself. She looked deep into his eyes again and took a hold of his face in her hands as if scared he might look away.

There was such a tenderness between them that Nichols found it hard to believe they were Demons. '*The enemies of goodness*', that was another of Cardinal Luppi's phrases. It was clear the Cardinal had never seen a scene like this before, if he had even seen one of their kind ever before, which Nichols severely doubted now. How could two creatures who were supposed to be so evil share such compassion for one another? He knew it was a paradox that would never leave him, even if by some miracle he made it beyond the next few minutes.

Macready gently took a hold of her wrists and pulled her hand away from his face. "It's over for me," he said softly and slipped his grasp down to take a hold of her hands. "I couldn't kill myself, though God knows I wanted to. And I couldn't trust those Vatican fuck ups to ever catch up to me. So I thought maybe I could do some good."

*Good*, the word clearly stung her, she looked at Macready as though he had just spat straight in her face. "Do some..." she stuttered but the word finally came, "Good?" She shook her head incredulously. Then with resignation she said, "Then you really are lost to us old friend."

She pulled away from Macready but didn't drop her gaze from the old man's face. Nichols felt faint and his vision was beginning to fail him at last. He swooned and slumped onto his back but tried desperately to haul himself back up again, if only to catch one final glimpse of her face before death finally took him. The blood was roaring through his ears now and he felt himself drifting into unconsciousness.

He faintly heard her sweet voice but couldn't make out what she was saying, then caught Macready say, "Oh, just get on with it." Followed by the sound of the beast's claws scampering frantically on the church's stone floor towards its target. Macready let out a sharp cry which was instantly cut short by the sickening sound of flesh and bone being ripped to shreds.

This stirred one final effort from Nichols, he blindly reached out a hand and grabbed the nearest pew to him and pulled himself up as best he could, after a moment of searing pain he managed to get himself into a half sitting half lying position, for a moment he thought he was going to pass out again but fought the darkness back. "No," he gasped, "not yet..." He propped himself against the pew so he wouldn't slip back down again and looked through a haze of pain to see Sofia standing in the aisle looking down at what

must have been the tattered remains of Macready's body laid just out of sight obscured as it was by several over turned pews. She was crying.

The beast which was someway off panting at the effort of the execution had already begun to fade as if it were made of smoke and a moment later it was all but gone. Nichols hand which was propping him up slipped in a pool of his own blood, he cried out in pain as his vision once more began to fade as unconsciousness began to creep over him. He though he saw her look around in alarm, but her face softened a moment later seeing him sprawled there fading fast like the creature. He fought off the end desperate not to miss a moment of her presence and watched as she took out a scrap of paper out of her pocket, one not unlike one of Macready's charms. Then she bent down out of sight to place it on what Nichols assumed was the remains of Macready's body.

The instant she did all the charms on the walls and doors sparked and fell to the floor, their creator was gone now and so was whatever power, useless as it turned out, they had with him. Nichols felt a burning on his pocket he cursed his stupidity. The defence charm Macready had given him, which had been in his pocket the whole time, sparked and died just like the others. Not that he could have ever used it on her. '*It burns like Napalm,*' Macready had told him. No not on her, even if it had meant his death he would have never been able to case her so much pain. The charm soon cooled in his pocket as its unused power faded.

Then the object of what would become a lifelong infatuation for Nichols turned and strode off down the aisle. Nichols summoned the last reserves of energy and pulled himself back up just enough to watch her as she walked out of his life forever. He held his breath both against the pain that was now overwhelming, and in the vain hope that she might pause or at the very least turn back to glance in his direction one final time. In the end she did neither and was gone through the big double oak doors at the front of the church, which parted without a touch to ease her exit, out into the chilly September night without even slowing her pace clearly eager to be gone from this place of God.

Nichols let out a sob of despair and slumped back down once more where he laid and let the growing darkness that was closing in slowly sweep over him, not caring if there was any light left in the world and caring even less if he ever saw it again.

## ELEVEN

'What the hell was a double decaf soya latté anyway?'

Apart from the tasteless sugar free blueberry muffin he was currently trying to force down, Bill Fraker couldn't think of anything (an alcohol free world aside) more pointless. Surely you drank coffee for the caffeine hit and anyway how the hell could something be double decaf? It was either decaf or normal, wasn't it?

Fraker glanced around the coffee shop where he and Charlie Walker were having breakfast, if you could call it that. He had decided to start his new health regime this morning and that meant coming here instead of the normal greasy spoon café he usually started the day in. And looking at his muffin and Charlie's bagel he was already missing his 'belly buster' fried breakfast.

Personally Fraker blamed Charlie. He was a regular here, so much so that he didn't even have to order his double decaf frothy coffee when they had walked in. The pretty girl behind the counter just smiled and started making the monstrosity at once, pausing only to simper; '*Mornin' Charlie*' and go bright pink.

Charlie had confided in him that he was thinking about asking her out, 'just think of the free coffee and cakes!' Hmm thought Fraker, yeah and all sugar and caffeine free. Sometimes he despaired at the world.

Anyhow, to redress the balance somewhat and restore some order to the universe, Fraker had ordered a double shot Americana with milk (full fat of course). But it had been Charlie's idea for him to try the sugarless abomination he was now picking at.

As it was only half seven both men had sat silently like zombies since they got in, neither man had spoken much since ordering, but now, thankfully Fraker could feel the caffeine buzz final start to kick in and he felt half human again. It was now that he was semi-alert that he noticed Charlie seemed to be, most unusually for him, deep in thought.



He was staring intently at his latté while swilling the milky coffee around the cup, the young man frowned then said; "How is it, the foam keeps going until the bottom of the cup? Mental."

"What are you going on about, decaf boy?"

Walker pointed to his drink. "Lattés! I wonder what they put in the milk to stop it from going flat?"

This was classic Charlie Walker mused Fraker, and undoubtedly the result of no caffeine in the morning. Simple things as they say. "I bet NASA are kicking themselves they let you slip through the net, eh?" He said taking a sip of his proper coffee.

But Charlie continued, his enthusiasm undimmed. "I remember going to Italy when I was a kid, and they invented lattés. When you order one over there you get the coffee and the frothy milk in two separate jugs, and you have to mix 'em together yourself, and it never bloody works right," he shook his head at the mystery of it all. "Separate jugs! What's that all about?"

"Christ, you mean Starbucks lied to us?" Fraker threw in. "You clearly ordered the wrong drink, you tool."

Charlie was still lost in a world of frothy coffees. "And," he said quite earnestly. "If you're not careful you get a bloody cold one! One of those Frappés things, Yuk!" Charlie made a face and sipped his drink. Leaving Fraker to wonder how the hell the kid got himself dressed in the morning.

Fraker and Charlie had been summoned to go see their boss, Mister Lyne this morning. Sally his assistant said he had some kind of babysitting job for them and had intimated that it was top priority and that Lyne had asked for Fraker personally to take the gig. Fraker tried to push her on the details but she said even she didn't have a clue what it was all about. 'Strictly cloak and dagger,' she had said and he could tell from the edge in her voice that she was more than a little irritated Lyne didn't trust her enough to let her in on it.

"Babysitting," Fraker whispered to himself with a slight shake of the head. It was probably some old lag from Lyne's past, they seemed to be popping up more and more these days since the boss had taken over most of the West Yorkshire side of the business when Timmy Pinkerton 'died of natural causes' last year. But if so, why ask for Fraker? Any of the younger men could do it just as easily.

He was musing this when Charlie's 'girlfriend' came sauntering over to their table under the pretext of wiping it down. "Can I get you gentlemen anything else?"

Fraker looked up to answer but he could see she was looking at Charlie who shot her one of his winning smiles. "No thanks, Nicky, we're fine thanks." Charlie said and the woman breezed away again.

"Why don't you ask 'Nicky' how they get the milk to stay frothy?" Fraker asked and wasn't the least bit surprised when Walker genuinely seemed to be considering it. He decided to change the subject before the idiot actually did. "Are you going to see your Dad today?" Fraker asked, it was a sore subject but he knew Charlie hadn't been to see his Father in hospital for a few days, as when Fraker had gone to visit the old man yesterday Charlie's Father had commented on it.

Charlie wrinkled his nose slightly the way he always did at the mention of his Father lately. "Yeah," he said without much conviction, "I was gonna nip in to see him a bit later, if I can get away."

"Does he still think you're an estate agent?"

Charlie grimaced. "Oh, don't. I really should tell him the truth. It used to be funny, but now? Christ." The poor kid was looking glum now so Fraker resisted the urge to tell him, 'I told you so.' "I wouldn't mind," continued Charlie. "But he worked for the boss for nigh on thirty years. They started off nicking the lead off church roofs."

Fraker was now regretting bringing it up, Charlie had always been a chirpy little soul, even when he was a teenager collecting bottles at one of the clubs for pocket money. But since his Father's illness he had seemed to grow up a bit, maybe more than he had wanted too. After all he was only twenty-one, and had already lost his Mother when he was younger and the thought of him and his sister, Kate losing both parents well before they got anywhere near thirty, just seemed cruel to Fraker.

There were times when he really missed that cocky little so-un-so Charlie used to be, and he was always secretly glad when that side of the young man reappeared every now and then, even if it was usually at the most inopportune moments. "He only wants what's best for you, Charlie." Fraker said as Charlie played with his cup frowning.

"Yeah, I know, but I've got to tell him the truth, as soon as he's better," replied Charlie.

Only because he knew Charlie so well, Fraker couldn't resist a dig to try lighten the mood. "Maybe you should tell him now, while he's still ill. That way he won't be able to catch you, let alone beat the crap out of you if he does."

And sure enough he was rewarded with a flash of the old Charlie. "True, true but I think you're forgetting the fact you've all been lying to my Dad too y'know? And I'm sure, ill or not, he could still take down the lot of us." A broad smile cracked his young face.

"Ha! Too true mate," Fraker pushed his half eaten muffin away and drained the rest of his real coffee before getting to his feet. "Come on then sparky, drink up your magical frothy coffee and let's get a shift on."

Charlie grabbed his coat and waved goodbye to Nicky who flushed and waved back a little too enthusiastically.

The two men stepped out into the crisp morning air. "I think we should walk, Charlie." Offered Fraker.

Charlie gave him a look. "That's obscene! When we've got a perfectly good gas guzzling taxi rank over there. The sooner you get fed up with this health kick, the better for me and taxi drivers everywhere."

"Me on a health kick? When was the last time you had a real cup of coffee, and a proper sugary Muffin in the morning? Besides, it's half a mile for Christ sake, it won't kill us."

Charlie grunted and said half under his breath but loud enough for Fraker to hear. "Well it won't kill *me* Granddad." Which earned him a solid punch on the arm. "Ow, I'll bruise there!"

"Come on!" And Fraker set off for the town centre at a brisk pace and Charlie reluctantly followed.

All in all and despite Charlie's reluctance, they made pretty good time negotiating the early morning throng of people making their way through the city streets ready to start another working day and made it to the Tropicana club where Mister Lyne was holding court this morning with a good ten minutes to spare. As they waited outside Lyne's office for the official

summons, Fraker took the time to glance through the random tabloid he'd picked up on the way while Charlie was busy playing with his new iPhone, slave as he was to whatever the latest and greatest new gadget was.

"If that thing beeps once more, I'm smashing it," said Fraker without looking up from his paper.

Charlie instinctively shielded his new prize possession from harm. "Give over, I'm still trying to work it out."

"Well work it out on mute you tit!" Fraker replied.

"See what caffeine does for you?"

Fraker threw down his paper and made a half-hearted grab for the phone. Which seemed to do the trick because Charlie put it in his coat pocket. "You're just jealous because you can't even work your own phone. And that doesn't even have a fuckin' camera!" Said Charlie incredulously.

"If I want to take a picture I'll buy a fucking camera. Oddly I use my phone to make fucking phone calls!" Then added. "Anyway, it does have a camera, somewhere."

"Freak," said Charlie under his breath.

"How's that bruise on your leg?" Fraker said to Charlie after a moment.

"What bruise?"

Fraker punched Charlie hard on his thigh. "That fuckin' bruise," and he roared with laughter at his own immaturity.

Charlie grasped his leg cursing. "Ow! That fucking hurt!" He started rubbing it better. "I know people," he announced. "I could have you fucking killed!" Charlie tried to say it with a straight face but failed miserably and both men laughed.

"How old are you two?" They turned to see Sally, Mister Lyne's assistant coming out of his office looking surly, obviously she had failed to find out what the old man wanted Fraker and Charlie for and it showed. Fraker knew she practically run things around here, so wouldn't take too kindly to being kept out of the loop.

"Morning, Sally," said Charlie cheerfully and flashed her a smile but this vanished when he saw her face.

She looked at them both like they were naughty school children about to see the headmaster. Fraker didn't know what it was about her but she scared the hell out of him, even though she was some twenty years his junior.

"You can go in now," she said, her voice sub-zero. She left the door to Lyne's office open and without giving them another look strode over to her desk and sat down, her face like thunder. Fraker and Charlie exchanged a glance and a grimace before going through into Lyne's office, they both knew better than to say another word.

The old man was sitting behind his large oak desk which dominated the office, he smiled warmly as they entered, he stood to ushered them inside.

"Bill, Charlie, come in lads, come in." Lyne was dressed as ever in a Leeds United replica shirt and tracksuit bottoms, in fact Fraker could barely remember ever seeing him in a suit. He looked around the office, which Lyne had covered almost every inch of wall space with football memorabilia. So much so that whenever he came in here it felt like you were going to have a word with the manager of your team. All this and at five feet nothing he was the most unlikely looking gangster you could ever wish to meet.

"You wanted to see us, boss?" asked Fraker.

"Aye lads, sit down, eh? Can I get you a drink, coffee?"

Fraker sat opposite the old man while Charlie was busy looking at a photo of Mister Lyne posing with a football team of kids he sponsored, 'The Hadley Harriers' who he had played with as a youngster. His ears perked up at the mention of coffee. "Oh, coffee..."

But Fraker cut him off. "No thanks, boss, we're good" He wasn't starting that all over again.

"Charlie, how's your Dad? I've been meaning to pop by and see him, but you know how it is." Asked Lyne playing with a silver paper opener.

Charlie tore himself away from the photos on the wall and took a seat next to Fraker. "Oh, he's getting a lot better, thanks Uncle Harry. Still in hospital, they're running tests and that, y'know? But he's doing well. I've been meaning to thank you, you know for the private room and everything."

Lyne waved a dismissive bony hand at him. "Not a bit of it. He's put a lot of years in for us, inside and out. We go way back your Dad and me as you know. I owe him a lot."

"I know, but it really meant a lot to him, to all of us." Charlie replied with a weak smile.

"If he needs anything else, you just let me know. And don't worry about your Dad, it'll take more than a bit of cancer to keep him down.

Fraker saw Charlie wince slightly at the word 'cancer' everyone knew his Dad had it but no one apart from Lyne ever used the word. Fraker shifted in his seat. "He still thinks Charlie's an estate agent," he said trying to lighten the mood.

Lyne laughed out loud at this and clapped his hands together. Charlie rolled his eyes. "Get out," exclaimed Lyne. "He still hasn't told him?"

"Nope," replied Fraker, giving Charlie a sideways glance.

Charlie's cheeks flushed. "I *am* gonna tell him," he said. "I'm just waiting until he gets better." He was starting to pout like a child.

"I'd buy tickets to that," said Lyne wiping the tears of laughter from his milky eyes.

"Yeah, me 'un all," agreed Fraker.

Lyne's face softened seeing Charlie squirm. "He just wants what's best for you Charlie, that's all."

"Yeah, so everyone keeps telling me," said Charlie staring at his feet.

The old man looked at Charlie with genuine affection, he'd known him man and boy and had once confided in Fraker, when they were both drunk one night a couple of years ago, that he felt guilty for letting him join the firm. He felt it was a betrayal of his old friend, Charlie's Dad. But had brightened somewhat when Fraker swore to look after him and above all keep it from Charles senior.

"Right," Lyne clapped his hands again like a teacher getting the attention of the class. "Back to business, boys and the reason I've called you here." He paused for a moment, his grey eyes flitting between the two men. "I've got

two words for you. Larry McCulloch." Then he lent back in his big chair and waited for the inevitable response.

"*The* Larry McCulloch?" Exclaimed Fraker in disbelief.

Lyne nodded. "Uhuh, the one and only, and now very lonely, Mister Larry McCulloch."

"Lucky Larry McCulloch," Fraker almost spat the words out.

Charlie looked a little perplexed. "Hang on, isn't he dead? I heard he turned up dead."

"Huh," said Fraker. "We should be so lucky. Please tell me someone has finally tracked down that slippery little git."

"No such luck I'm afraid," continued Lyne. "He disappeared off the radar last week, apparently some of Jessie Morgan's boys were this close..." He held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart, "to nabbing him. Now it turns out the twat is turning Queen's evidence and that his in bed with the secret service, so that's why no one can find him."

Fraker shook his head in disgust, he had only ever met Larry McCulloch once and had taken an instant dislike to the man. Larry was one of those criminals who thought he was better than everyone else, so much so that he fair radiated smugness. "More fool the government if they actually believe any of his bullshit," he said. "You know I heard he actually did sell his Grandmother once."

"So, just who's after him anyway?" asked Charlie.

"Huh, everyone, I think," said Fraker. "Anyway, boss, this is southern stuff isn't it?"

Lyne's eyes wondered around the room as if searching for the right words, but when none were forth coming he looked back at the two men with the steadiest gaze he could muster. "I've been asked, well to be honest, told, to lend a hand in tracking him down. It's hard to explain, lads but suffice it to say McCulloch has pissed off all the wrong people in a quite spectacular way this time. Whoever he was working for want him bad. Guess he knows too many things about too many powerful people. And it's making everyone very nervous." Lyne furrowed his brow and his eyes glazed over for a moment. "It was strange, we had a big meeting, all the big wigs were there and that hadn't

happened for years. And I've..." His voice faltered as he remembered and for the first time in all the years Fraker had known him he looked scared.

The old man stared off into space and Fraker wondered if he should say something, when Lyne said, "I've never seen everyone look so, afraid before."

Fraker leaned forwards in his seat, "Boss? Who was he working for?"

Lyne snapped out of it. "Dunno, but whoever it was has some of the toughest men I have ever known, very, very nervous. I agreed to help out of loyalty to the other bosses, but to be honest Bill, I don't think I had any choice in the matter."

"Mafia, you reckon?" Whispered Charlie.

Both Lyne and Fraker laughed and the mood lightened somewhat. "Yeah," said Fraker. "Why not?"

"What? What did I say?" Protested Charlie.

Fraker gave him a look of pity then returned to the matter in hand. "Alright, so we can say McCulloch has got some very funky enemies, nothing new there, that guy was never too particular with who he did business with. But where do me and Charlie fit in, boss?"

"They've sent some yank to help track him down. He's in London at the moment, but he's coming up north and I need you two to meet him at Leeds Bradford airport and look after him while he's up here. Which with luck won't be for too long, then he's some other buggers problem."

"Is he a hitman? Asked Charlie.

"Tut, Charlie shut up." Scolded Fraker.

"Don't know and don't care," said Lyne. "Look. Listen to me, both of you. I don't want either of you getting mixed up in the finer points of why this yank is here. Your job is to look after him. We've got the three of you booked into a hotel in town. Do what the fella says up to a point. But if McCulloch is up here and you do manage to find the twat, leave it to the yank." Lyne jabbed his finger at them both and added sternly. "I mean it, just walk away. It's none of our business. I don't want either of you getting hurt. Understand?"

The two men nodded, the point well and truly taken.



"Any idea why they might think McCulloch's up here?"

Asked Fraker trying to hide his growing unease at how things were unfolding.

"Yeah. Tommy Whitaker's been seen up here. He's McCulloch's solicitor, and we know he's been the one trying to broker the deal so McCulloch can spill his guts to Scotland Yard or whoever. Concentrate on tracking him down. Find him and he'll know where McCulloch is being hidden."

"Yes boss," said Fraker.

"No problem," added Charlie.

Lyne looked grave as he drifted off into deep thought again, he seemed to be feeling every one of his seventy years weighing down on him. Fraker felt butterflies in his stomach and the overwhelming desire to get out of the office, which was suddenly feeling oppressive, and out into the fresh air.

Charlie shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Erm, anything else, Uncle Harry?"

Lyne shook his head but didn't actually look directly back at them. "See Sally, she's got all the hotel and flight arrangements."

Fraker and Charlie exchanged a look and both men rose from their seats. Fraker fought the urge to ask the old man if he was okay. He cleared his throat, which had gone dry. "Right, come on Charlie." He said hoarsely and gestured to the door with a nod of his head and they made a hasty exit without another word.

## TWELVE

Obedying the sign above his head and the practised request from the brightly attired air stewardess, Father Peter Nichols secured his seatbelt and braced himself for the plane's final descent into a rainy Manchester International Airport. Although Nichols had flown around the world half a dozen times this was always the part of the flight he hated the most. And so as the plane banked alarmingly to the right he felt that all too familiar knot in

his stomach. He grasped the ornate box sitting in his lap even more tightly until the white of his knuckles showed through the pale skin of his sweaty hands.

It still amazed Nichols how he had managed to get the box out of the Vatican without the permission of the Cardinal. But he knew that was one theft, even though it was for the right reasons, that he would have to account for once all this was over, *if* he got back. But that was a worry for another day.

The priest glanced out of the window to the rapidly approaching ground and only now realized that, for all his globetrotting over the last twenty five years, this was the first time he would set foot on British soil since the fateful events on that cold September night at St. James'. When an old demon had sort sanctuary in his church, bringing with it such chaos and of course his first and so far last meeting with Sofia, although in the intervening years she had never been too far from his thoughts.

When Father Nichols had awoke from what he had assumed would be his final sleep, weeks later in a Vatican hospital, he had awoken a changed man in so many ways. His fleeting glimpse into that world of walking nightmares had left him with three things.

One, the battle scars carved deep in his chest from that darkness dripping monster's little love tap. He idly traced his fingers over them through the fabric of his shirt even now as he tended to do when deep in thought.

Two, since Nichols had been the only person in over a hundred years to actually witness and more importantly survive such events, he was now officially the world's leading authority on the soldiers of darkness, the collectors and all their assorted kind. This was a title he had spent the last few decades trying to live up to. Nichols had dedicated himself to the pursuit of these evil creations who inhabited the world of shadows and rumour, and to shine a light on their secret existence, and trying, so far in vain, to track them down and, (he tapped the box held like a lover's hand in his lap) to even one day kill one of them.

And finally three, and secretly the only legacy from that night he truly welcomed, was the still vivid memory of her. The cool bottomless pools of pure blue that were her haunting eyes and the sweet music of her voice. All

still so crystal clear in his mind's eye, undimmed even after all these years. Nichols had never told anyone of his obsession and when he had recounted countless times in the greatest of detail what had happened that night to the Vatican's great and the good not to mention the several Popes that had come and gone down the years, each of whom had listened wide eyed perched on the edge of gilded seats. He had only ever skirted over her involvement giving little more than a thumb nail sketch of her, jealously guarding his knowledge as if it might diminish the memory of her if he spoke of her out loud.

His obsessive research on the collectors which so impressed those around him down through the years had all been in search of her if truth be told. Any snippet of information he found in the Vatican's vast archives, though sadly few, would spur him on a new to continue his quest with renewed vigour.

There were times however since that night that Nichols had found himself doubting her very existence. That it was nothing more than a figment of his imagination. He had the scars to remember the creature by and the old useless defence charm Macready had given him, scrawled in the old man's blood on a scrap of paper, which he still kept with him at all times, 'for luck'. But he had nothing but his memories of her brief but devastating cameo in proceedings to remember her by.

He was so starved of information on her that even the merest hint of a description in some century old account he came across served to keep those doubts at bay. Secretly, his faith in past events renewed once more, Nichols always hoped that when he jetted off to some far off place after another possible encounter with one of the elusive soldiers of darkness. That the soldier in question would be her. But sadly not this time, for once, this time Nichols knew the name in advance.

Yes, a collector was close again, or as close as it were possible to get in such a clandestine war. The rumour had become flesh once more and this time if accounts were to be believed with a positive I.D no less, (of course not the one he would have hoped for). This was rare to say the least with a thing so elusive that few, even in Nichols' own department actually believed existed outside of folk tales and ghost stories.

But in the end that was their biggest strength, always nothing more than the hint of smoke on the wind to those lucky enough to inhabit the real world, a luxury Nichols no longer had. It was this growing scepticism he was confronted with on an almost daily basis these days it seemed, even among men of so called faith. Hence the theft of the box.

So off Nichols dutifully went, and if things followed the normal sequence of events in cases like these, he would be always one step behind his quarry, until finally it would melt back into the unknown again, leaving behind one scene of woe or another. And Nichols would have to explain coming back empty handed, except for the usual hefty expense bill once more, to those of who scarcely believed as it was and would now, with no evidence but the misery left behind, believe even less (if such a thing were possible) in the war he was waging.

But somehow this time more than any other Nichols truly believed things might be different if he could just keep his faith. Mainly this was due to the fact that this particular incarnation of evil was something of a celebrity to those dwindling few whom still believed in 'the game' as Sofia had once called it. Nichols had heard and read the name half a hundred times throughout his long years of research, seen the records of his particular brand of mischief making in the Vatican archives, and even the odd grainy out of focus photograph (aren't they always?) laying claim to be of him.

*Him.* Yes the infamous Randall had come to Britain, and this time Nichols not only had hearsay to go on, he had the name of the unfortunate who had somehow unwittingly attracted the attentions of a collector. So once again it would be here on home soil that Father Nichols would have the dubious honour to come face to face with the darkness again, look it in its eyes and feel its breath on his face.

And all because of that one cold September night so many years ago, when he had been chosen quite at random and baptised in his own blood to lead the fight for the light against those walking and talking nightmares that call darkness and misery home.

## THIRTEEN

Banter! Christ knows how it happened, but he was now sick of the endless banal chatter. Usually, Larry McCulloch was the master of witty banter and he liked nothing better than to verbally cut his lesser man down to size with a well-aimed quip or two. He was even known to take the odd verbal barb in good humour if it was good enough. But lately over the last couple of days holed up in this two star (at best) prison Larry had found that particular dish harder and harder to swallow.

He came trudging out of the toilet, a place he felt his life was going these days, and back into the dubious sanctuary of his bedroom. Through the net curtained window he could see the sky outside was an ominous slate grey and was threatening to unleash a torrent of snow as it had all morning. This did little to ease the increasing feeling Larry had of impending doom.

Quite simply, as he waited for deliverance from this nineties wall papered nightmare, Larry McCulloch had too much time on his hands. Time he could only spend thinking about his desperate situation and more often than not this would lead to his mind wandering back to the disturbing telephone conversation he had had with Tommy Whitaker the other day. When was that anyway? Yesterday? Or the day before that? The days just seemed to merge into one waking nightmare of late. And the more his mind drifted back to the rambling rant from the young lawyer, the more it... No, not *scared* him, not that. Larry McCulloch had been many things in his time, but never flat out scared. Though he had to admit to himself that the conversation had left him... Unnerved.

To hear Whitaker lose it so profoundly had chilled Larry to the core. Tommy had always given off such an effortless air of self-controlled confidence in any given situation Larry had seen thrown at him. Some of these could have literally been fatal to either man. But the lawyer, like Larry himself, had the ability to keep icy cool and use the gift of the gab to talking himself out of even the tightest situation. That was why the old crook had gravitated towards Whitaker, he could talk the talk and that was a gift they both had in spades.

So to hear him babbling like a lunatic down the phone like that, all composure shot to hell, unnerved Larry alright, but worse still was that diamond edged tone of pure conviction in his voice, it made Larry physically shudder of think of it.

Larry had heard Whitaker bullshit a thousand times before, so much so that he knew without a doubt that the lawyer believed one hundred per cent in what he was saying no matter how fantastical and downright insane it sounded. That would... Unnerve anyone.

"Fuck," Larry said out loud and shook his head as if to dislodge the memory. He came away from the window and over to his bedside table and poured himself a generous measure of cheap whiskey. He checked his watch before raising the glass to his lips. 11:30am. Far too early for anyone but the most dedicated of drunks to have a shot at this hour. But what the hell he thought with shrug, it must be cocktail hour somewhere in the world.

And thus, feeling suitably vindicated, Larry took a long swig and drained the glass in one, it made him wince but was soon rewarded as the calming effect was almost instantaneous as the acid in his stomach turned to a warm calm feeling that soon reached his over active brain washing the last of the anxiety away to the back of his mind.

He held up the bottle which was now only a quarter full and made a face. No way would that be enough to get him through the rest of the day, let alone the seemingly endless nights in this place. That meant he would have to see if he could coax Lewis, or better still bully the kid Jeff into going out on another 'food run' to the twenty for hour super market close by a little later. This place was bad enough when you were half drunk, but sober he would throw himself out of the window before tea time.

As if on cue, Larry heard the terrible twosome clattering around downstairs in a fuss about something or other. He went over to the bedroom door which was still ajar and listened but couldn't make out much of what they were saying although he could hear the occasional burst of static coming from their walkie-talkies.

Finally, Lewis bellowed up the stairs, "Hey Larry."

"What?" Larry bellowed back coming out onto the landing.

"Show time. Make yourself presentable, the boss is here."

Larry felt a wave of relief wash over him, it was as if he'd just taken a drink of twenty five year old single malt whiskey and not that cheap crap Lewis insisted on buying, and it felt good. At last, after all the bullshit a chance to shine, to do what he did best. Manipulate weaker minded people

for his own ends. He nodded to himself, so the man from the ministry was finally here was he? Right.

He walked briskly back into his room with a veritable spring in his step and over to the bedside table again where he poured himself another shot of whiskey to complement the endorphins racing through his system. He downed the drink in one. "Show time," he hissed and grimaced against the taste.

Show time indeed. Larry glanced to his left and out the window once more. Maybe it was the alcohol taking effect but suddenly the sky outside didn't seem quite so foreboding any more. He walked over to the full length mirror on the wardrobe door and studied his reflection, he patted down his shirt in a vain attempt to smooth to the creases but soon gave it up as a bad job, what the hell did it matter anyway? His whole body looked like it could do with a good iron lately. This won a smile from the old crook and he could see for the first time in a long, long time the old Larry McCulloch starting to shine through again.

Things were finally beginning to move in the right direction, his. Soon he would be able to get the hell out of this shit hole and into some place more fitting his five star status. He almost (almost) felt sorry for that poor unsuspecting pencil pusher downstairs who was about to reap the whirlwind of frustration that had slowly been building up in him over the past week. The poor bastard wouldn't know what hit him.

Larry McCulloch is on his way back to the top baby, now was his time to have it all, just like the good old days, to get what he wanted when he wanted it and to hell with Tommy Whitaker. Soon this nightmare would be nothing more than a half forgotten anecdote in the amazing life story of 'Lucky' Larry McCulloch's rise back to the big time. This deal he had decided would make him a legend, the day he made the whole British government pay through the nose for the wealth of information he, and he alone had.

Public figures would fall and the press would have its feeding frenzy. Oh the dirt he would sling and the price they would have to pay to get it. Yes sir, he would make those bastards pay until they wept.

And then? Then he would simply melt away to somewhere hot, write his memoirs and watch the whole sorry mess he had created unfold on his sixty inch plasma TV.

Larry realised he was still holding the whiskey bottle, he held it up and flicked the glass with the index finger of his other hand, it looked like he wouldn't be needing its Dutch courage any more so he tossed it onto the bed. And with this, Larry walked confidently over to the bedroom door, out on the landing and set off down the stairs taking them two at a time eager to meet his guest and give him what for. And he felt good for the first time since this whole sorry chapter had begun.

It didn't last.

"You're a Priest!" Larry McCulloch was exasperation personified.

He stopped dead in the living room doorway as the wind was well and truly knocked out of his self-righteous sails. He almost gasped out loud; it felt like he had walked into a vacuum which sucked all the air out of his lungs. It robbed him of something worse still. Hope.

There was a priest, of all people, standing in the middle of the room talking with Peroni. He turned and smiled at Larry as if his being there was the most natural thing in the world.

"Well, well," Father Nichols said. "The infamous Larry McCulloch I presume?" Nichols couldn't help but smile, McCulloch had a look on his face like someone had just slapped him across the face with a wet fish while loudly calling into question his Mother's virtue. The man quite literally had his mouth open in shock.

"But, but... You're a priest," Larry repeated with equal disbelief.

"I told you he was quick, Father," Peroni said.

The priest studied the dumb struck crook who was still glued to the spot. "I must say Larry, if I may call you Larry? Your reputation precedes you." Nichols moved forwards to greet McCulloch, who clearly couldn't move, and offered him his hand. "I thought you'd be taller."

"A priest," Larry said for a third time as if somehow repeating the statement wouldn't make it so.

Just then Lewis barged in past Larry and came into the room. "Come on Larry," he said. "Shake the man's hand."



"Lewis! Good to see you again," Nichols said with genuine warmth. Although he had only met Lewis a handful of times he liked the man, he had a great sense of humour and a good heart.

"You too, Father," Lewis beamed and shook his hand.

Nichols turned back to Larry who had gone a remarkable shade of white and was still rooted in the doorway trying to take in this unexpected turn of events. "Come in old man, you're among friends here," Nichols told him.

The three of them looked at Larry for the longest time waiting for any signs of life. It was Peroni who spoke next, "You alright Larry?"

McCulloch finally tore his eyes away from Nichols' dog collar, "Is this some kind of joke?" He asked, the venom returning to his voice. "A fucking priest?"

"You were expecting maybe the Pope?" Nichols asked good naturedly.

"No," Larry said and took a couple of steps into the room. "I was expecting someone from MI5, or at least the government. Like I was promised."

"Arh," Lewis said with no little glee. "To be fair, no one actually said that. Technically speaking."

Nichols looked perplexed. "MI5? What are we spies now?" He looked from Lewis to Peroni who shrugged.

"Are you all bloody comedians or what?" Larry said throwing his hands in the air. He could feel his blood pressure going through the roof, the calming effect of the whiskey now long gone. He desperately told himself to stay calm, in control, at least outwardly but as usual he didn't listen to himself. "Now, is somebody going to tell me what the hell is going on here?" He flung a derisory hand in the general direction of Nichols but kept his eyes on Peroni. "Why is there a fucking priest here, Peroni? And please, don't tell me he's a kiss-a-gram."

He had always found Peroni to be a humourless woman, but this comment won a look from her that was dangerously close to a smirk. He didn't need to look across at the clown Lewis to know he had an idiot grin plastered all over his face.

"A kiss-a-gram?" She said. Yes it was definitely the beginnings of a smirk.

"Only on a weekend." The priest replied, quite deadpan.

"I fucking swear I'm gonna kill Tommy Whitaker," Larry shook his head in disbelief and began pacing the room. "I'm sorry Padre, I don't know what this shit is about, but believe me, I'm not the confessing type." Larry said without looking at the priest. He ran a sweaty hand through his thinning grey hair and chewed on his bottom lip. Was this fucking candid camera or what? He could feel that all too familiar knot in his stomach again, like a fist twisting at his guts.

"Oh really?" Nichols watched the old crook as he paced, the poor guy looked fit to pass out and the priest decide enough teasing was enough. "But isn't that why you are here?"

"Not to a priest, no," Larry said and finally stopped pacing, he turned to the priest and was surprised to see a look of genuine concern on his face but tried to ignore it. "There's no profit in salvation, Father. If you're here to save my soul. You're a little late for that my friend."

The priest nodded and frowned, "Never a truer word spoken, I'm afraid." He said then took off his heavy winter coat and tossed it over the arm of a nearby chair. "But call me an optimist, I believe there is always hope." He gestured at Larry. "Even for a scoundrel like you."

"Feh!" McCulloch hissed through his teeth and began pacing again like a caged beast.

Nichols thought the old crook looked much frailer than his reputation had led him to believe.

"Larry, take a seat, please," Peroni said. "You look fit to drop."

"I'll stand," Larry said to her and was glad to see at least she had stopped smirking which was one thing. But stopped his pacing all the same.

"As you wish," she said defensively.

"What's going on here?" Larry wanted to know and looked at the three stooges for answers.

"Things, things aren't what they seem, Larry," Nichols said plainly.

"Huh! No shit," Larry snapped back, then added, "If you really are a priest."

"I can assure you I am," Nichols replied. "I'm here to make sure you do the right thing, Larry." He raised an eyebrow, "even if it's not for the right reason."

The right thing? For whom? Larry wondered. The two whiskeys he had recently sunk were making him sweat even more, or at least that's what he told himself. But deep down he knew the reason for the sodden shirt clinging to his back. It was the coming punch line to this little joke, and it was one he knew he wasn't going to like.

"Why do I get the feeling," he said tasting bile at the back of his throat. "That I'm not going to like this?" It was a rhetorical question. The next question wasn't even though he knew the answer. "There never was a deal with MI5, was there?"

"To be fair," Peroni said looking suitably apologetic. "We never actually said there was."

McCulloch did a quick rewind of current events in his head. It was true though it sickened him to admit it, all talk of MI5 and deals with the government after they had taken him out of police custody had all come from McCulloch himself. That left him with one more question. If these people didn't work for the government, then who the hell did they work for?

"It's all a bit... Complicated," Nichols said as if reading his mind. "We were called in by the government when it became clear they could no longer protect you. They were a little out of their league, out of their... How can I put it? Area of expertise and into ours."

"This is bollocks!" Larry felt the sudden urge to get out of here, just pack up and just go, though he didn't have a clue where to. "Okay," he said as firmly as he could. "So you're not the government. Then I'm just fucking wasting my time here. So what's to stop me just walking away from this farce?" He could feel that old familiar feeling of helplessness creeping over him, but he was damned if he was going to let it show. He cleared his throat before continuing. "What's to stop me going to the real MI5. I've got a lot of valuable information. Information people should be falling over themselves

to get." It all came out in a bit too much of a ramble but it was done now, he just had to keep up the facade of confidence.

"Quite frankly," Nichols said flatly. "Nobody wants it."

"What? Don't talk shit." Larry cursed himself for sounding so desperate. He glanced skyward; this was all going horribly wrong.

"That ship has long since sailed, Larry." Nichols continued. "Your information is worthless to put it bluntly. You see association with you these days holds too higher price. It's just not worth crossing those who want you. Even her majesty's government knows when it's out of its depth."

The words hit Larry like a truck filled with anvils, he looked from the ceiling to his feet and half expected to see the floor fall away and swallow him whole. His trump card worthless? Impossible... Right?

"Larry, take a seat, hear me out," the priest said.

"Stow it," Larry spat out, he couldn't look the priest in the face, but made the mistake of glancing at Lewis who was grinning. "Fuck!" He cursed screwing his eyes shut. He could feel this pulse pounding in his temples and he knew he must look as red as a beetroot.

"Larry sit down, please," it was Peroni this time, her voice softer than Larry could have thought possible. "Please," she said again softer still. "Hear what Father Nichols has to say."

"I'll stand." Larry stated but at least looked the priest in the eye this time. Who's face was a picture of concern.

"Come on Larry, let's get you a drink. It won't help anyone if you have a thrombosis."

"I don't want a drink, I want the fucking point to all this."

Nichols nodded. "Okay. Firstly on your earlier point. There is nothing whatsoever to stop you from walking away from us. You're not our prisoner." He gestured to the door. "There it is no one here will stand in your way."

"I'll help you pack," Lewis offered.

"Lewis!" Peroni scolded the edge back in her voice. "That's not helping." And at least Larry got to see the smirk drop of his face.

"Sorry Chief," Lewis said sheepishly.

"And secondly," Nichols continued. "MI5, nor anyone in the government will touch you anymore. Not now they know what's after you."

'*What's after you?*' Larry thought it was an odd chose of words.

"It was MI5 who called us in." Nichols paused for a moment, then, "Everyone knows about this famous mine of information you have. But right now, because of what you've gotten yourself into. That all means nothing."

Larry thought he might have swooned slightly at this, he felt as if that truck full of anvils had just begun reversing to have another go at him.

Peroni took a step towards Larry, she held out a hand to steady him but McCulloch pulled away. She frowned. "They have washed their hands of you, Larry, regardless of who you can turn states evidence on. That option is over for you now." She said.

Larry looked at the floor again, this time he wished it really would open up. Although he didn't like the idea of where that would take him. Down.

Nichols moved over to the sofa and sat down. He turned to Lewis who looked like he didn't know whether to catch Larry if he passed out of push him over himself. The man clearly needed something to do. "Lewis. How about getting us all some tea?"

"Yes sir, right away." Lewis replied and left post haste.

McCulloch watched him go and then looked over at Peroni who smiled back at him, again with genuine concern. He was beginning to feel more and more like a condemned man.

"Now," said Nichols. "If you actually have any desire to get out of this colossal mess you're in. I think it's worth ten minutes of your time to hear what I have to say?"

Silence hung in the air for a moment, which felt heavy and oppressive to the old crook. He swallowed hard and actually thought he was going to be physically sick right then and there on the living room carpet. To hear it so plainly stated that everything he had hoped for, his get out of jail free card, his much relied on retirement plan, were all gone damn near put him on his arse.

"Okay," he said, his voice barely a whisper. And then sat down in a chair opposite the priest before he fell down. He could feel the two pairs of eyes boring into the top of his skull as he lent forward and put his head in his hands, but he just didn't care as the last breath of bravado left his body.

It seemed like an age before Peroni's voice broke the spell. "Father, I forgot to mention, Larry has been in contact with Thomas Whitaker."

"Oh, right." Nichols had almost forgotten about the hapless lawyer. "How did he sound?" He asked Larry who was staring off into space looking shell-shocked. His eyes flashed fear and narrowed.

"Out of his mind," he replied still studying the oblivion over Nichols' shoulder. "He was babbling like an idiot. Coming out with all kinds of bollocks."

The priest snorted. "Can't say as I blame him. It sounds like he's had a taste of what's happening to him. Realization can be a real kick in the balls all right." He flashed Peroni an apologetic grimace at using the word balls. But the Woman had heard and said much worse he knew, but still tame as it was he was still a priest after all.

She smiled and raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'you're apologising for that? I could teach you a few phrases and in Italian too!' "Still, it's a shame," Nichols lamented returning to the topic in hand, "I had hoped we could get to Whitaker in time. Save two souls for the price of one to coin a phrase."

*Souls*, odd chose of word thought Larry or at least he hoped it was. "Fuck Whitaker," he said almost petulantly and a little louder than he'd meant. "I'm the one everybody wants ten shades of dead!" He bit his lip and held his breath for a second to try to calm himself. He needed somehow to wrestle back control of his situation, before he lost it completely. He couldn't think straight long enough to keep a level head and that was dangerous, he could easily get rail-roaded into something here. Maybe it was the alcohol clouding his thought process, but he just couldn't keep a lid on the crushing disappointment he felt, the growing sense of helplessness.

"Tommy Whitaker," Nichols did his best to keep his voice slow and calm. He had a lot to explain to McCulloch, most of which he wouldn't believe, even if, as Nichols suspected knowing the man's past associations, he must have a

slight inkling of where this was going. "Like you, Larry, has underestimated whom he has double-crossed."

'Double-crossed?' Christ the list was endless, but something at the back of Larry's mind dragged him back to a cold Eastern European night last year. Back to six lost souls standing in a Polish field awaiting their fate. That and been a double-cross to end them all. And that had been the start of all this hadn't it? When he thought about it? That had been the straw that broke the camel's back and had sent him running at Whitaker's behest into the arms of what he had thought at the time was the Government and his long hoped for Queen's evidence trump card.

"Mind you," Nichols said dragging Larry back to the matter at hand. "If he was as agitated as you say, then perhaps he was had a glimpse at what he has gotten himself into. In many ways, now that you are under our protection, if you choose it of course. Whitaker is now the key in all this for those who want you are concerned. After all, it would be better for him to turn you over to them if they ever get their hands on him."

Larry grunted at the thought of Whitaker spilling his guts to his enemies. "I've no doubt that guy would turn me over in a heartbeat if it would save his sorry neck." Larry said plainly. "But he doesn't know where I am." He glanced over at Peroni who had perched herself on the sofas arm. "Or at least I don't think he does." This won little more than a slight raise of the eyebrow from the stoic Italian.

"And you have no idea where he might be?" Nichols asked.

"In a nut house for all I know," Larry replied. "But don't worry about Whitaker. No one will find him. He's even more paranoid than me." He added bitterly.

The priest frowned. "Oh, they will find him, I'm afraid."

It was a fact plainly stated. Larry looked at his face for any sign of doubt, and thus hope, but looked at his feet again seeing none.

"And when they do, they'll find you." The priest added his tone solemn.

The words weighed heavy on Larry's already overburdened shoulders, his head was pounding again at all the bottled up stress that threatened to split his skull, but a smile found his lips all the same as it occurred to him that he

might actually have a heart attack right then and there and die on the spot. That would be irony in the brightest Las Vegas neon lights. He could feel the pair gaze on him once more but he just couldn't help himself, he let out a short bitter laugh at the thought of keeling over and imagined the looks on their faces.

Things were looking about as bleak as he could remember and he was reminded of something someone once said to him a few years back when faced with only slightly better odds than he was now. 'Well Larry old love, in times such as these, you've got two hopes of getting out of this mess alive. No hope and Bob Hope... And Bob Hope's dead.'

"Bob Hope," he said out loud.

"Larry?" It was Peroni, she had a look of pure puzzlement on her face and it took him a moment to figure out why. Despite everything he was grinning from ear to ear.

"I know you feel all hope is lost," she went on with practised calm. "But we can help you, if you will let us. They haven't got to you yet."

"They! They!" Larry snapped and was on his feet before he realised it and it made his head swim and wiped the grin, manic or not, off his face and replaced it with a scowl. "Just who the hell are *they* anyway?" He asked. "Enough of all this cloak and dagger shit. Is somebody actually going to tell me who the hell you people are?"

Peroni was on her feet now. "Hey, Larry calm down," she said firmly. "It's this so called cloak and dagger shit that's kept you alive this long." She dwelt on the word shit as if enjoying swearing, something Larry realised he had never actually heard any of them do before.

"Ania, please," Nichols said softly and still sitting, gently took a hold of her arm, she nodded and pulled away turning her back on them both to compose herself.

"We had to let it be known you were with the police, to perpetuate the whole Queen's evidence thing." He gestured for Larry to sit, which he did.

"Just cut to the fucking chase," Larry said. "What the fuck have I gotten myself into, and who the fuck are *they*?"



Arh, here it comes, thought Nichols, he had faced that question countless times down through the years and had found it was best, when shattering somebody's notion of reality to begin with the basics, not sugar coat it, just come straight out with the facts and lay them out as simply as he could which was no small task faced with the subject matter.

"Perhaps we should wait for the tea," he said.

"Fuck the tea," Larry snapped. He heard Peroni 'tut' at his language which gave him no small satisfaction, but the priest didn't bat an eye, which was a little disappointing.

"Very well," Nichols said. "Tell me, have you ever heard of a man, and I use the word loosely, called Randall?"

Larry breath caught in his throat and the sweat on his back turned to ice water. He did his best to nonchalantly clear his throat. "This is about Poland, isn't it?"

The priest nodded. "That whole episode was low, even for you Larry. I mean, people trafficking?"

Larry couldn't think of anything to do but shrug. It wasn't something he was particularly proud of but in principal he had nothing against people trafficking per say, except that it presented extra risk to the trafficker. After all drugs or stolen goods can't give the police a detailed description of you or pick you out of a police line-up, can they? People had an annoying tendency to do that.

Poland, *fuck*. He had always known that little jaunt would be the death of him.

"Randall? So you have heard of him?" The priest asked again.

Larry shivered, he felt as cold as he had done when he was in that godforsaken country. Yes he knew the name, or at least the reputation attached to it.

"The Yank? Sure, he's a Hit man, isn't he?" Larry asked.

Nichols looked grave. "I'm going to need you to keep a tight hold on your suspension of disbelief here, Larry.

"Go on." Larry felt fit to pass out. Maybe a heart attack wouldn't be such a bad way to go out.

"No Larry he's not a hit man." Nichols said plainly. "Randall is a soul collector."

## FOURTEEN

Now, contrary to what you might think, the life of a soul collector isn't all fun and games. Of course there is the odd epic battle between the forces of good and evil, resulting in its fair share of death, destruction and the always popular suffering. But mostly it's a mundane existence, consisting of months of plotting and planning, or simply waiting for the events you have set in motion to unfold. And the results it has to be said are quite often a let-down. There is, to put it bluntly, a significant amount of 'down time.' A fact Randall found out quite early on, much to his chagrin.

The job, he had been told over and over again, was to cause as much minor mayhem as possible, to upset the balance of things. Move quietly through people's lives, reaping only when and where it will go un-noticed to the world at large. People don't believe in demons and monsters and it has to stay that way. Stick to the rules, collector they would say. Anonymity is our greatest ally.

The general rule of thumb, as Randall liked to interpret it, was to do whatever the hell you like, just as long as you get the soul at the end of things and whatever mess is left behind can be explained away, no matter how tenuously, by the wonders of modern science. And in this case, standing in the late Mrs. Mullan's kitchen, he'd done just that. Okay, so it had been a touch on the messy side, even Randall had been surprised at the vigour the usually meek Mr. Mullan had shown when hacking his wife to death. She had been a big woman, but even so that was a lot of blood, he had to tiptoe out to avoid standing in it, thus leaving tell-tale footprints.

Climbing the stairs, Randall heard a thud from one of the bedrooms. Job done, chalk one up for the bad guys, he thought. And sure enough when he went into the room at the top of the stairs, the former Mr. Mullan was hanging from a makeshift noose over the chair he'd just kicked over. Where he kicked and chocked for a moment, before his life finally gave out.

That was another thing that disappointed him about being a collector. When a soul leaves the body, destined for good or evil, nothing happens. Where was the light show? The celestial choir or the screech of hell spawns? Nothing. Randall remembered his very first soul collection, talk about an anti-climax. Is that it? Very poor.

"Are you pleased, master?" The voice was ethereal, coming from behind him in the corner of the room, Randall turned to face his fading creation. The succubus, sitting against the wall with its knees drawn up under its chin was already starting to dissipate, returning to the smoke from which it had been formed some three weeks earlier.

Randall nodded, "Yes, you did well, you can sleep now." And so content at a job well done, the succubus faded away before his eyes. Now that, Randall thought, was a work of art. Although he'd never tried a succubus before it had worked perfectly, it was a classic scenario; Mild mannered middle aged Husband, loving Wife, nice suburban setting, into which Randall had introduced the succubus, then it was just a matter of standing back and wait for the fireworks.

Over the past three weeks the succubus had worked her feminine charms on Mullan, visible only to him, and it was a deception he'd taken to with an almost indecent haste. She turned everything he had loved about his wife on its head, with whispered flirtations and promises of undying passion, if only they could be rid of her.

All those little faults he had once thought endearing now grated on every nerve ending, even the sound of her sweet voice raised his hackles towards the end. Until finally, just ten minutes ago, he'd finally snapped. And the reason for his murderous rage? An under cook hard-boiled egg. That had brought a smile to Randall's face he had to admit.

With the mission accomplished, and any evidence of other worldly intrusion, literally disappearing up in smoke, it was time to get gone. The police would find the unfortunate pair in a day or so and everyone would be

suitably shocked. It would probably run in the local press for a couple of days then die a death when the next tragedy of the week came along.

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped a few degrees instantly, which mean only one thing, Ishrel had arrived. His/hers/it's (Randall had never been quite sure, but we'll stick with 'him' for now) arrival was always heralded this way, followed a little too closely by that ever present sulphur smell.

He could feel the pressure in the room change as the demon appeared behind him. "I was beginning to think I'd lost you, Ishrel." Randall said without turning around. He watched as the last of the succubus faded away. The 'death' of one of his creations always made him feel a little melancholy, they were a part of him he could never get back, their only wish, to serve their Father and then disappear for ever. He was sure they were happy to go after serving him so well, but still. He shook the feeling off and patted his pockets for a cigarette. He had none.

*"I knew I'd find you moonlighting, what's this, a little side project?"* The demon's voice was almost cavernous in its lack of emotion. This was a big part of why Randall liked to rile him so much, to try and squeeze even the slightest inflection out of it, which could be done on occasion if he was particularly vexed. That and, well it was fun to wind the little fucker up.

Ishrel was Randall's observer demon; every collector had one, that was one of the many rules. He was a kind of netherworld bureaucrat, just a low level critter as Randall understood it. Randall's Jiminy Cricket, his conscience. But really all he was, was a nosey son of a bitch with absolutely no sense of humour, whose job it was, was to make sure he stuck to the rules and go running off to its superiors if Randall bent them even a little. Which he had to admit, tended to be quite often.

"Things have been a little slow, just keeping myself busy." Randall said, still with his back to the demon. He allowed himself a little smile and closed his eyes concentrating. The moment he did, he heard Ishrel grunt.

*"Don't you dare!"* The demon said and Randall thought he detected a little emotion in the vacuum that was his voice.

Ishrel was a demon, but not in the; 'I'll tear you apart' type. He couldn't even affect the dust in the air around him, he was just... There. The only form

it could muster on its own was the vaguest hint of a heat haze type distortion floating a few feet off the ground. That was unless you concentrated really hard as Randall was doing now, then you could make him appear exactly who you wanted him to, which was a lot of fun when you were bored, or just feeling immature.

It hadn't taken Randall long to realise that Ishrel was basically incorporeal, he had no physical form other than what it could feebly project. But it did have its tricks to those who didn't know any better. During their first meeting years ago in New York Ishrel had appeared to Randall as a classic movie demon, all smoke and horns, with a booming voice to match. But that hadn't lasted long, the cracks in this façade soon began to show themselves, Ishrel did his best to keep the illusion going but it just wasn't him. And that's when Randall really started to have fun.

And so, Randall concentrated, he made a mental picture in his head as to what he wanted the demon to look like. When he had it he couldn't help but let out a laugh.

*"Oh, for crying out loud,"* sighed Ishrel, and Randall knew it had worked like a charm. He turned to face the demon, who sure enough was now wearing a cheap children's Halloween mask, a school girl outfit and body to match. Ishrel looked down at himself and shook his head in quiet resignation, before saying; *"God I hate you, collector."*

"I know." He gestured to the still twitching Mister Mullan. "One more for the cause," he said, although he still wasn't too sure what 'the cause' was. He'd long since stopped keeping score, but he was sure Ishrel would know. "How many does that make?" He asked.

Ishrel was still taking in his new attire. *"You are a sick, sick puppy, Randall, you know that?"*

The collector shrugged. It was an old game, but one he never got tired of, anything to cut the officious little shit down to size. He had heard that this little trick actually worked for the Devil himself, but woe betide the poor sap who tried that on the fallen one.

*"If you've quite finished playing dress up with me,"* Ishrel said. *"Can we please get back to the real job in hand? Not this little,"* Ishrel swept his schoolgirl hand around the room, *"interlude."*

"Job?" Said Randall, feigning ignorance.

Ishrel's masked head dropped, and he shook it once more, this time accompanied by a sign. "*McCulloch? Your primary assignment?*"

Ah, yes, the petty hood Randall had been charged with finding and causing mischief to. It wasn't often a collector like Randall was given a specific target, so he knew this McCulloch character must have done something pretty bad to deserve such a dubious honour. Normally it would have been little more than a formality for him to track the unfortunate down and have one of his more meaner creations rip him to shreds, but somehow this lowly crook had remained hidden from all of Randall's best efforts. This could only mean one thing. Larry McCulloch had protection.

"McCulloch's with the God squad." Randall said plainly, and turned to look at the observer demon.

"*The God squad?*" Ishrel echoed albeit tonelessly. "*Are you sure?*"

"Hundred per cent," Randall replied and idly pushed Mullan's dandling body with his index finger making it swing gently. The motion was almost soothing and it helped Randall think. He had noticed lately that he could think more clearly amongst the dead. Kindred spirits that they were.

It made sense that the reason there was no trace of the old crook was due to the fact that somehow he had found the God squad, as the collectors like to call them. Or more likely the God squad had found McCulloch.

The school girl in the cheap Halloween mask began pacing the floor. Randall watched it and was now beginning to regret the illusion as it was starting to creep even him out, which was no small achievement. "*But how?*" Ishrel asked. "*We have no outward connection to McCulloch. How could they possibly know we are seeking him?*"

"Beats me," Randall said with a shrug. If he was honest he didn't really care, if anything it made the chase all the more worthwhile. Who knows maybe it would lead to a good old fashioned showdown. It had been years since the last really decent one of those. "But let's face it. I don't even know what the connection is. Remember?"

This stopped Ishrel in his tracks, and Randall thought he heard the demon mutter something from under the mask. When Randall had been

given the assignment he had been told by Ishrel in no uncertain terms that the connection between this petty crook and the forces of darkness was on a strictly need to know basis.

Although it was irrelevant for his job, Randall knew that these days the forces of darkness did more and more covert business with those in the mortal world. Mostly delving into the world of underground crime whose population didn't ask too many questions about who or what they were doing business with as long as the money was good they could handle the rumours about the dubious nature of their silent partners.

The deal was always mutually beneficial as the fight against good didn't fund itself, even those in the Devil's employ need cold hard cash sometimes. Randall himself, as a front line soldier rarely got involved in such dealings as he liked to work alone, but sometimes as with the case of Larry McCulloch he had no choice but to interact with mortals again.

*"If this is true,"* Ishrel said and putting his girly hands behind his back began pacing again. *"It complicates matters."*

Randall watched the absurd creation pace away. "Makes things more interesting, that's all." He patted his pockets again but remembered he was all out of smokes. But he did remember the late Mr. Mullan had been a smoker, which was one of his few vices until of course he added murder and suicide to them. So Randall reached up and rummaged through the dead man's pockets and was rewarded with half a pack of cigarettes and a cheap plastic disposable lighter.

He offered a cigarette to the School girl. "Smoke, sweet heart?" But all this earned him was what he took for a look of contempt from beneath the mask. "Suit yourself," he lit one and took a long drag. "Ah, that's better," he sighed. And not for the first time he wondered what was the point of a dead soul collector having nicotine withdrawal. He just didn't get. In fact there are many things about being a collector that just didn't make any sense. Take the whole pain thing. Randall was dead. Wasn't he? Shot to death in an alley way in New York, circa nineteen twenty-five, he had the memories and the scars to prove it. Christ, he'd even seen the crime scene photographs! Yet he could still feel, not just pain but discomfort, cramp, the nicotine thing not to mention hunger, although he was pretty sure he couldn't starve to death, he could feel everything. And it was, to be frank, a pain.

*"When you are quite finish daydreaming, collector,"* Ishrel said pulling Randall back to the situation at hand. *"What are you going to do about our little problem?"*

"Everything's under control," Randall said in between drags on the cigarette. "We might not be able to get to McCulloch just yet. But we can get to his lawyer."

*"Thomas Whitaker? You know where he is?"*

Randall dropped the remains of his cigarette and ground it into the carpet with his heel, although this was technically a crime scene and would be subject so a thorough forensic going over when the bodies were found, the one thing collectors didn't need to worry about was DNA on a cigarette butt. "No, Whitaker's protected too. So we'll just have to find him the old fashioned way."

*"Humans?"* Ishrel asked his voice as close to incredulous as it was possible to get.

"Humans," Randall said. "It shouldn't be too hard half the criminal underworld is after these two. A word in the right ear will get me all the help I need. I've arranged for a couple of babysitters to meet me up North. I just made it clear that we were to be put at the top of the pecking order so that if anyone does find them, they come straight to us first. Or else, as they say."

Ishrel shook his masked head. *"This is all too public for my liking. There's far too much interaction with their kind as it is these days. It increases the chance of exposure. Rumour of our existence is one thing, that's fine, it creates fear. But when does rumour become fact? That's what worries me."*

Here we go again thought Randall, the precious rules. But the truth of the matter was that he was looking forwards to the interaction with real people, it was something he genuinely missed. Besides, compared to Ishrel, he would welcome the company of the Pope himself, even if he was sending him straight back to hell in a hand cart. "You worry too much Ishrel. Who knows a little detective work might actually turn out to be fun."

*"Fun?"* Ishrel squared up to Randall as best he could considering his current diminutive stature. *"This is a very serious matter, collector, just watch how you conduct yourself with these, these mortals."* He jabbed a tiny finger up at Randall but even with his arm at full stretch it barely reached his chest.



*"And remember," he warned. "I will never be too far away. I'm always watching you, Randall. Always."*

The collector held his hands out in mock surrender, "Whatever you say, sweetie."

Ishrel made a fist and shook it up at Randall, he was about to speak again but thought better off it, then turned away muttering something inaudible under the plastic mask and walked straight through the wall and was gone, leaving Randall alone with the late Mr. Mullan. Randall poked the corpse again so it set off swinging. Yes company with a pulse would make a refreshing change all right.

## FIFTEEN

Considering the nature of his job, Father Nichols was used to stunned silences. These usually occurred after the Vatican accounts department had questioned his latest expenses claim. Or when he gave the Cardinal a blow by blow account of his trip to the Chinese, Tibetan border where he had witnessed the aftermath (alas always the aftermath) of a suspected collector's effect on a small Buddhist monastery there. He shuddered even now five years later at that one. Fifteen monks all drown themselves quite willingly, apparently according to the only survivor, (who had been dragged out of the water before death took him, much to his distress), at the behest of a water demon who had taken up residence in the monastery's well.

Yes, Nichols believed in telling it like it is, regardless of how outlandish the information was. He'd done just that with Larry, giving him a brief but relevant history of the war against evil, a war he had told the old crook he was now slap bang in the middle of.

Of course at first McCulloch had scoffed and complained, who wouldn't when faced with the realisation you had in inadvertently double crossed the Devil and as a result now had one of the deadliest collectors on your trail, with an army of diabolical tricks and creatures up his sleeves. But as Nichols continued a change slowly came over McCulloch, that cocky self-assured

façade began to slip more and more and with it the wise cracks and denials died up altogether.

It had only taken fifteen minutes but he had seen Larry McCulloch's whole belief system crumble down around him and he hadn't taken it well. He had been sitting in that all too familiar stunned silence with the old crook for a full five minutes and could almost hear the cogs turning in his head. As Nichols watched him he wondered what the villain was thinking.

*Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!!* The word bounced around Larry's skull like a stuck record, repeating it over and over, but the word lost a little more validity with every repetition. But it was all bullshit... Wasn't it? Sure he'd heard the rumours, but he had dealt with these people before albeit indirectly so had many others he could name. They were always two steps removed, a contact from a contact somewhere away from the action, they paid the bills but stayed in the periphery, which suited everyone. But there was still the rumours, no one ever came right out and said it, that would be silly, wouldn't it?

They were powerful for sure and clandestine to a fault, so what? But evil? Come on, Larry didn't believe in all that crap. They were, at best some shady cult, that's all. Besides, the Devil's money spends just as well as anybody else's, right? Not that he had believed for a second in any of that. He was always more than happy to take on a job for them. Which usually involved transporting some lost soul or other (Strange turn of phrase that he suddenly realised, apt but that's all it was, just a saying, didn't mean shit.) Transporting some person here. Or dumping a body there.

Easy money. But the Polish gig had been a little different. Get six scrawny looking unfortunates from Warsaw to London, no questions asked. It had been too easy just to go through with it as planned. So he had done a burn on them and the six Poles had never made it to the UK, he had sold them on in France to God knows who, and they were never seen again.

Is what this was all about? Six missing illegal immigrants? Surely not. He'd been warned not to do it, but if he was honest, the group's reputation had just made him want to scam them all the more.

"Bullshit." He said plainly with a shake of the head.

"You know it's not, Larry." Nichols replied. He looked down at the tea tray on the table between them the contents of which was long cold by now.

"Huh, you would say that, padre. There can't be a God without a Devil, right?" It was a good argument Larry knew but didn't change a damn thing.

"Believe what you like, Larry," Nichols said almost coldly. "In the end it doesn't really matter. But like it or not, dark forces are at work in the world. And the people you ripped off in Poland? They are amongst the darkest." He fixed McCulloch with his best hard stare. "And they want you, Larry in the most terrible of ways."

There was a time and not that long ago, when Larry would have laughed in the priest's face. Dark forces? Bollocks. But not now, the crushing sense of the reality of his situation sucked any bravado he had had left right out of him. So all he could manage as a riposte was, "Yeah? Well they can just get in line with every fucker else."

It was only now that Larry realised he and the priest were alone, he hadn't even noticed Peroni leave or that arse hole Lewis come in with the tea. He wondered if they were all in the kitchen along with the kid Jeff having a good laugh as Larry's life disappeared down the toilet. The priest leant forwards with a frown that seemed permanently etched on his face.

"That's just it. There isn't anyone else after you, not any more. A month ago every low life and crooked politician in Europe wanted you dead. But these people have warned everyone off. No matter how powerful they might be, they've been told in no uncertain terms to leave you alone. Now that has to tell you something about whom has that kind of power." Nichols, let the statement hang heavy in the air and for want of something better to do while it did, he poured himself a tepid cup of tea.

Larry watched him pour and take a sip of tea, which apparently judging by the look on his face didn't taste quite as bad as the thought it might. Larry looked down at his own cup which he hadn't touched. He could see the thin layer of skin on top caused by the milk turning cold which was testament to how long it had been standing there.

An enemy even more powerful than a crooked government politician? Once upon a time Larry would have taken no small amount of pride in that.

"All you have is *us*," Nichols said breaking the silence.

Hadn't Lewis said something similar? 'All you have is us, and how sad is that?'

"I understand they call us the God squad, so I hear." Nichols added before taking another sip. "You know I think I could get used to cold tea. I mainly work out of the Vatican, it's all coffee over there."

"The God squad." Larry said trying the phrase on for size, it didn't sit well at all, even with all this talk of demons and Vatican coffee.

Nichols put down his cup. "We are the light against the darkness that is stalking you."

Larry looked at Nichols. Yes he wasn't dreaming, the priest had actually just said that with a straight face. "Fuck. You really expect me to buy into all this good and evil bollocks?" He sat back on the sofa which reminded him how much he was sweating as his wet shirt felt icy cold on his back which made him shudder.

Nichols made a dismissive gesture. "Like I said, I really don't care if you believe me or not. The facts are quite plain without any help from me." He held up his index finger. "One, the police can't help you, they called us in. That's a whole country's police force who can't do anything." He held up a second finger, "Two, your underworld gangster mates *won't* help you. And three," he waved his three fingers at Larry. "You sure as hell can't help yourself." He made a fist then after holding it up for a moment tapped it against his chest. "So that leaves only us. The God squad. But to be honest, I'm not even sure we will be able to do anything if Randall gets to you."

"Him again," Larry said. "The *soul collector*. And he's after my soul."

"That's one word for it, yes. Your soul. That little spark of light that's in all of us, even you, Larry. That thing that makes us human. But call it what you will, Randall is coming for you, and if he gets his hands on you, there will quite literally be hell to pay."

The logical part of Larry's brain wanted to make him laugh right in the priest's face. Soul collectors? Come on, have a word with yourself! It was all bullshit, whom ever was after him, powerful or not, wasn't some mysterious supernatural force out for his immortal soul, that was just plain ludicrous. They were just gangsters with a taste for the theatrical. His heart however told him different. He was in a world of shit with the Devil's hit man after his arse.

But in the end did it really matter? Dead without a soul or dead with it he would still be just that, dead.

No hope or Bob Hope.

And Bob Hope's dead.

Well at least this bunch had guns, and whatever their reasons for protecting him, they were all he had left. *The God squad*. It was embarrassing really.

Larry fixed the priest with a firm, steady gaze. "Okay, padre. But I draw the fucking line at prayer meetings."

Nichols beamed. "Me too, terribly boring things. You're making the right decision, Larry. We will do everything in our power to help you, even if it means our lives. That's a promise."

He held out his hand.

"All of you?" Larry asked.

"All of us."

"Even Lewis?"

"Ha! Yes Larry, even Lewis."

If there was one thing Larry McCulloch knew it was how to tell a liar. And this guy may be many things, a religious nut for one, but he was telling the stone cold truth. Even that clown Lewis would die for him. That alone was worth sticking around to see.

Larry took the priest's hand and shook it firmly. Deal. "So what happens now?" Larry asked.

"We wait." Nichols replied then got to his feet and called through into the next room. "Ania, Lewis, Jeff, can you all come in here please?"

Larry stood as the three of them entered the room.

"Larry has agreed to let us help him."

Much to Larry surprise all three, even Lewis looked genuinely please at the news. Of all the things that had happened today thought Larry. That was definitely the most surreal.

Peroni stepped forwards and took Larry's hand in both of hers and shook it vigorously. "Larry, that's great news."

The kid Jeff was next to shake his hand. "We won't let you down, Larry."

Larry looked across at Lewis who was looking down at his feet and thought; *If he hugs me, devil or no devil, I'm out of here.* But Lewis just looked up and gave half a smile and a nod.

"Guess you're brighter than I thought, Larry," he said but made no move to shake his hand or, thank Christ, hug him. It was refreshingly honest and the closest he would ever come to liking the little shit.

"Splendid," Nichols said with a clap of the hands. "Now, let's get some fresh tea, it's about time I gave you all a crash course in what I know about our friend Randall and his little play mates."

## SIXTEEN

Charlie Walker stood at the window of his Father's private hospital room and looked through at the fragile old man sleeping inside. Even though it had been five days since his last visit, Charlie's first reaction upon seeing his Father asleep was to turn around and leave. He'd done it before, last week, telling himself it was best to let the old man sleep, to preserve his strength. But the truth was he hated coming to this place and seeing him like this, so weak, so vulnerable. The truth was Charlie Walker was a coward and he knew that when his Father was finally gone, he would deeply regret times like these no matter how many times he told himself it was for his Father's own good.

Charles Walker senior had been a huge bear of a man and although Charlie himself had never seen any evidence of it, had a reputation as a hard man. He was the polar opposite to Harry Lyne, the muscle to Lyne's brains and that was why they had made such a good team in the old days. But that was before the cancer had kicked the shit out of him, now even Charlie, skinny bugger that he was, could pick up his old man without so much as a grunt of effort.

It had all happened so fast, it seemed like only yesterday that his Dad was still at the heart of things. Even though Lyne had forced him to retire he just couldn't keep away from the clubs, so much so that as Charlie had moved up in the business he had to keep one step ahead of him, just in case he bumped into his Dad, while on a job for uncle Harry, which would have resulted in his immediate painful death. Because Charles Walker senior had never wanted that life for his children and everyone knew it.

But just six short months later he was a shadow of his former self, just a bag of bones now. Charlie's Dad was only sixty-five but he looked twenty years older. Seeing him laid there with his breathing so shallow you could hardly make out the rise and fall of his chest. Deep down Charlie wished the old man could just slip away, to be with his mother who had died, again of cancer, when he and his sister were just twelve.

The old man stirred and opened his eyes he smiled weakly seeing his son standing outside and motioned for him to come in. Charlie opened the door and was immediately hit by a wave of stifling heat. "Christ!" He exclaimed. "Warm enough for you, Pops?"

"Come in, mate. How long have you been lurking around out there?"

Charlie picked up a chair and put it down by his Father's bed and took a seat. "Didn't want to wake you. Dad it's boiling in here, you want to get them to turn the heating down."

His Father struggled to sit up, Charlie moved to help him but he shooed him away with a wave of his hand. "This is how I like it," he said trying to get comfy. "Can't seem to get warm these days, guess I don't have as much meat on me as I used to, eh?" He winced at the effort of sitting up which made Charlie cringe, he desperately wanted to help him, but knew he wouldn't be thanked for it. Finally he seemed to get comfortable.

"Can't stay too long, Dad," Charlie lied. "Just popped in to make sure you're alright."

"Oh, I'm alright," he gestured to a plastic jug on the bedside table. "Pour us a glass of water would you Charlie? So they're keeping you busy at work then, huh?"

He poured him a glass and handed it over. "Eh? Oh, yeah," Charlie replied.

"Suppose those houses won't sell themselves."

Charlie's heart sank. The old lie raising its ugly head again. Even though he was knee deep in the business and slowly moving up the food chain there his Dad still believed he was an estate agent. Charlie suddenly had the urge to tell his Father everything, just blurt it all out and damn the consequences. But checked himself as he always did, he knew this wasn't the right time, it never was these days. When he's better he told himself. He'd been saying that for six months now. So simply answered. "Yeah, something like that."

His Father sipped the water. "Aahh, that's better. Could do with a pint though," and winked at him.

"Yeah. So what did the doctors say? Do they think you'll need another op or not?" Charlie asked.

His Father shrugged. "Christ knows! They've done a load more tests, taken more blood. I'm surprised I've got any left, can't think what they do with it all."

"I think they sell it," Charlie said, trying to keep his voice as light as he could.

"Huh," his Father grunted. "Don't think they'll get much for mine."

He studied Charlie for a moment, the way he always used to. Although his body had betrayed him of late, Charlie could see he still had those same piercing green eyes, thankfully still so full of life. The thought lifted his spirits a little.

"You look a little tired, Charlie, are you eating alright?" His Dad said after a moment.

This made Charlie smile, yep, his old Dad was in there somewhere. "Dad, I'm twenty-one!" He replied. "I can look after myself. Besides, you should be concentrating on getting yourself fit and not worrying about me."

His Father nodded and seemed to drift off, lost in thought and his expression turned solemn. There was a long pause until Charlie finally said. "Dad, you alright?"

"Look," His Father said a little awkwardly, "Charlie I know you're busy," he glanced around the room as if looking for inspiration. "It's just that... I really need to talk to you, properly, I mean."



Charlie lent on the bed, he thought about taking his Father's hand, but dismissed the idea. "Course, I've got time Dad, as much as you need."

He seemed relieved to hear it. "Good, good lad... I've er, I've already spoken to your sister. I know I'm being silly, but I just wanted to tell you..." He exhaled, frustrated at his lack of articulation. "For Christ sake, I'm useless at this type of thing. Your Mother was always the emotional one, God rest her soul."

He always said that, Charlie remembered, whenever he mentioned his Mother. *God rest her soul*. Even though he wasn't even remotely religious. She had been the churchgoer. Always praying for his Dad's soul. 'After all he needs all the help he can get'! She would joke.

Seeing his Father's discomfort Charlie took hold of his hand without realising it. It was only when his Father squeezed it tightly that he noticed he'd done it. "Dad, what's wrong?" Charlie felt a sudden rush of emotion, it had crept up on him and he had to fight it back, otherwise he knew he would lose it altogether.

Charlie got to his feet and his Father released the grip he had on his hand. Charlie hadn't done it to pull away from his Father just break the spell and thankfully it had the desired effect. The old man smiled knowingly, he knew like Charlie they were both as bad as each other; Northern males, they'd rather fight than hug.

"Sit down mate," he said to Charlie nodding towards the chair and Charlie sat back down. "Look, all I wanted to say is just how, how proud I am of you. You and your sister. It can't have been easy with me either away or banged up in prison when you were growing up. I always worried, so did your Mother, God rest her soul, about how you would both turn out." Charlie watched as he took another long drink of water. "I tried my best to be a good Dad, but it was the life I was born into, I didn't know anything else. It sounds lame, saying it out loud, and I'm not trying to make excuses for all the times I wasn't around..."

"Hey, come on!" Charlie cut him off, "you were a great Dad. We never wanted for anything. I know you've done stuff, in the past, but we still knew right from wrong. And let's just say your friends were more 'colourful' than the other kids parents, that's all. Tell you what thought, we were never picked on at school, that's for sure."

His Father grinned, it was the first time in weeks he'd seen that old mischievous smile and it looked good on him. "Don't get me wrong," he Father said. "Harry Lyne's been good to me down the years, always looked after your Mum and you kids when I was inside, and you too after she passed. And like I said I make no excuses for the path in life I took. It's just..."

Charlie suddenly felt sick he knew exactly what he was going to say.

"It's just," he continued. "I always wanted better for you and Kate. And seeing how well you're both doing. Kate, about to finish her degree soon. And you? Never thought you'd end up as an estate agent."

Charlie had to look away, that particular running gag with the lads now made him feel utterly ashamed. Even though the room was boiling hot he felt suddenly cold. "Dad, listen," his voice cracked with emotion, he could feel his bottom lip trembling uncontrollably like he was some kid about to confess to shoplifting or something equally as lame.

"Charlie," his Father squeezed his forearm. "Charlie, look at me, son." Charlie gritted his teeth and looked back into his Father's face. He was crying and Charlie had never ever seen him cry before, not even when his Mother had died. He felt as if the air had been sucked right out of his lungs.

"You have no idea how proud I am of you," his Father said softly. "You and Kate, and I know she never got to tell you herself, but I know how proud your Mum would have been too... God rest her soul. She never got the chance, so I just had to before..."

Charlie fair leapt up and leaning over the bed hugged his Father tightly which surprised them both, his eyes welled then he just let the tears come. "We always knew Dad. Now come on, enough of this bollocks, you'll be up and about in no time, making everyone's life a misery again."

His Father gently patted him on the back and after a long moment gently pushed Charlie away so he could take a good look at him, he smiled warmly, more warmly than Charlie could ever remember him doing before and it felt good to see it. "Yeah, I know. But I'm glad I got to say it." A look of mischief flashed behind his eyes. "Mind you, tell any other bugger about this and you'd better pray I don't get out of here!"

It was just a joke but it made Charlie's heart skip just the same.

"Now come on, give us a kiss you big girl's blouse and bugger off so I can get some rest."

Charlie laughed and got to his feet shaking his head in mock disbelief. "It's the twenty first century Dad, men cry all the time now, I'm sure the boys at the club won't think any less of you when I tell them."

His Father raised his fist and shook it, Charlie nodded. He leant over and kissed him on the forehead then turned to leave.

As he reached the doorway he paused for a second before leaving and turned to look at his Father once more who was wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "I love you, Dad." Then turned and walked off down the corridor.

Half way down he heard his Dad shout. "Gay!" Which raised a smile. It was the first time he had ever told his Father he loved him, it was the truth, and they both knew it, even if it had to end in some nonchalant comment. And Charlie Walker was damn glad he had finally said it.

Bill Fraker watched as Charlie came walking out of the hospital entrance and jogged over to where he was parked. He felt a pang of sorrow for the kid, his Dad was a good man and it was a crying shame what had happened to him. But as he approached the car, Fraker had to admit Charlie looked a hell of a lot better coming out than he had going in. Charlie got in and Fraker pulled the car away. "So, how is the old bastard?" Asked Fraker.

Charlie nodded a little and Fraker thought he saw the faint hint of a smile. "Yeah good, well you know." The smile if it had even been there faded. "He still thinks I'm a fucking estate agent."

"It's the best way, mate."

"Nearly told him," said Charlie staring out of the side window.

"Well bloody don't Charlie. It's better all round," advised Fraker.

"Yeah, suppose. So where to now?"

Fraker had gotten the call while Charlie was inside, it was action stations. "The airport," he said. "The Yank has arrived."

## SEVENTEEN

Airports are excellent places to people watch. Not only that but if you are tuned in enough to be able to pick out the plethora of emotions they give off, you can almost drown in the intoxicating mix of pure raw feeling these places collect over the years. It was the same for any place people congregated in numbers, they'd leave it behind them like a wake, but there was something about airports that made the sensation stronger still, maybe it was because no matter where you looked there is always some drama being playing out, a tearful reunion here, an emotional farewell there, combined with the more mundane, a bored business man making his tenth trip this year to some Eastern European city most people have never heard of, or the poor sap who works behind the counter of WH Smiths, who despite working in an airport has never actually flown in his life.

The air is electric with second hand humanity in places like these. And as such they are a great place to soak it all up if you have all but none left of your own.

Randall could feel it in the air like static before a thunderstorm, it made him feel both exhilarated and depressed all at the same time. To be surrounded with so much life made him remember just how little he had left. He knew it would linger on his clothes for days after like second hand smoke used to back in the days when you could kill yourself slowly with cigarettes in public places without feeling like a social pariah.

He closed his eyes and tried to tune out the cacophony of voices around him and instead concentrated on the fragrant aroma drifting up from the cup of Earl grey tea sitting on the table in front of him. Like so many things lost in the darkness of his creation as a collector he had somehow picked up an almost addictive taste for the drink. Which before emerging from the big sleep he hadn't even heard of let alone tasted. Just another in a long line of unanswered questions resurrection brought.

Randall took a sip of tea and looked around the airports arrivals lounge. His flight had been miraculously early so he had taken the time to feed his addiction and watch the world he could never fully be a part of again go about its daily business around him before his contacts arrived to whisk him away in search of Larry McCulloch.

He felt invisible at times like these, just an observer like Ishrel and the longer he existed the more bitter it made him. He was an outcast, which

made it easy, even at times a pleasure to do his job but still it seemed as if all this humanity, taken so much for granted by those who possessed it, was mocking his soulless existence.

These were dangerous times for a collector, in the company of normal folks with nothing to do but think, to dwell on things. If he let himself he knew it would be all too easy just to snap and let loose such power that would kill everyone in the place, he smiled to himself as he imagined Ishrel's apoplectic reaction to half a dozen demons tearing up an airport in broad daylight. It would almost be worth the shit storm he would reap just to see the look on the demon's face.

The thought soothed him a little and he took another sip of tea and savoured the flavour. He exhaled slowly and felt the all too familiar weight on his shoulders again. The big question which gnawed on his subconscious from time to time reared its ugly head again. Mostly Randall loved being a collector, when he didn't think things through too much. Immortality, power to burn, the job had its many perks. But surrounded by all this life, the big question couldn't be ignored.

What was so special about me?

It was a reasonable question, and it was one Randall had asked himself countless times over the years since his rebirth as a collector of souls. Then he had time on his hands, like now, he would scour his past, to that time before Succubus' and annoying observer demons when he was alive and kicking and looking out for number one on the trash filled streets of New York, Christ over ninety years ago now. Trying to find that forgotten moment when *they* notice him.

What had the powers that pulled him back from the jaws of death and set him on this path of mayhem and destruction seen in him? What had made him different from those millions of other lowlifes kicking around the city back then? He was bright, sure and more than a little devious, but Randall had been strictly small time and no one, even his enemies would have called him cruel, he had never even killed anyone for Christ sake. Nothing he had done would surely have warranted such demonic attention.

Of course he had asked Ishrel, but the little shit wouldn't have told him, even if he knew (and increasingly it was clear he did not). The demon made no attempt to cover his jealousy of him, of his echo of humanity, and

obviously felt a mere human (albeit a dead dark magic wielding soul stealing one) was unworthy of having such power bestowed on it.

But there must have been something, some spark of, for want of a better word, evil in him that had marked him as a prime candidate for immortality and mischief making. But what?

Maybe when all this was over and Randall was finally at rest he would ask the Devil just that when he met him. That and spit in his eye, not because he hated what he was, far from it, but just for the hell of it. That and make him look like a school girl just like Ishrel. Yes that would be a fitting end to this journey.

The thought made Randall smile, he supposed this was as close as a soul collector could get to sacrilege and if sacrilege can't raise a smile what can?

"Erm, excuse me?"

Randall looked up to see a blond haired young man in an expensive looking suit standing over his shoulder, the collector turned around. But didn't speak.

"Erm," the kid said again a little nervously, "Sorry to bother you, but are you, Mister Randall?"

"Why yes I am." Randall replied and stood up offering his hand.

The kid took it tentatively and shook it. "I'm, Charlie, Charlie Walker, Mister Lyne sent me and my associate to meet you, look after you while your here?"

"Pleased to meet you, Charlie Walker, Randall said. Charlie moved to pick up Randall's suitcase but Randall picked it up first. "I got it, thanks."

"Oh. Oh sorry, of course." Charlie said apologetically and just stood there looking at the American as if for instructions.

"Well?" Randall asked after a suitably uncomfortable silence. "Shall we?" He gestured to the door but the kid hesitated. "Or we could just stand around here all day."

This snapped Charlie out of it and he grimaced embarrassed. "Oh, Christ, yes sorry." He said.

"It's okay," Randall wasn't sure if the kid was just nervous or if he was short of a few cards. Time would tell. "After you."

Charlie led the way through the arrivals lounge and over to the entrance doors, Randall gave a final look around the place as they left. It was a nice enough place, but still a few dozen demons flying around the place reaping havoc wouldn't go a miss. Charlie grimaced and for a second Randall thought he'd actually just said that out loud, but as they reached the doors the young man pointed to the weather outside.

"Just started snowing as we arrived," Charlie said with disgust and buttoned up his coat. "Better wrap up sir, you're in the north now." The automatic doors opened and they were hit by an icy blast, Charlie let out an "Oofh!" And headed outside as if into the Arctic.

He didn't know why but Randall had grown to love the snow since coming back, maybe because somewhere deep in his subconscious it was about as far away from the supposed fires of hell as you could get in normal everyday life here on earth. Or maybe, he just liked snow now, like Earl grey tea. Just another knot he would never untie in the puzzle that was his life now. He made a mental note to ask the Devil when he finally met him/it/her. 'What's with the whole snow and Earl grey thing, fallen one? And by the way, love the dress.'

## EIGHTEEN

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they carry themselves, often you can tell volumes about someone from their body language without them having to say a word. Bill Fraker lent against the car and watched as Charlie emerged from the airport with the yank. It had just started to snow again which made Charlie grimace and held his hands above his head in a vain attempt to shield himself from the wintry shower. But the yank, Mister Randall the guy's name was, just tilted his face up and let the snow fall on it as they walked towards him. He even smiled seeing Charlie's reaction to the weather. He didn't seem to mind the cold at all.

The man looked at ease and obviously didn't feel the need to exert any kind of power trip over anyone as he was carrying his own suitcase. Fraker had made sure Charlie knew to offer to carry it but the man must have declined which was a good sign in Fraker's book. The last thing he needed was one power mad crazy hit man lording it over him, they were here to help not to serve. Although it could be because he kept his guns in the case, that option was much less comforting.

"Mister Randall, this is Bill, Bill Fraker." Charlie said eyeing the sky in disgust as they reached the car.

The yank gave Fraker a warm smile and shook his hand. Firm grip, not too tight thought Fraker, still trying to weigh up the man. And none of that, covering your hand with the other in a subconscious show of authority bullshit you get sometimes.

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Fraker," said Randall.

"Mister Fraker was my Father's name. Please, call me Bill." Fraker nodded over to the back of the car and both men walked around to the boot which Fraker had already popped.

"Bill it is then," Randall said and put his suitcase inside.

"Shall we?" Fraker closed the boot and opened the BMW's back door.

"Sounds good," Randall gestured to the weather as the three men got in. Randall in the back, Fraker and Walker in the front.

"Say," Randall continued as Fraker fired up the engine and glided away from the kerb. "Does it always snow up here?"

"Only when it's not raining," Charlie said craning his neck around. "Welcome to Yorkshire. So," he added, "where are you from in the states, Mister Randall?"

Fraker winced, as if a hit man was going to answer that, he despaired at that boy sometimes. They had, had the talk on the drive over here. Don't ask any idiotic questions, keep things polite but professional. The yank is here to do a job, not to make friends. And don't, whatever you do, ask to see the guy's gun! Well don't ask any idiot questions was already out of the window, only a matter of time before he asks about the gun or worse how many people he had 'whacked' this week.



"Please, drop the Mister," Randall said skilfully avoiding the question much to Fraker's relief. "It's just plain Randall."

Fraker pulled the car onto the A46 and headed towards Leeds. He hated driving at the best of times, especially with a VIP in the back, it always made him feel like he was taking his driving test all over again. But as the other alternative was letting Charlie drive, he had no choice. He flicked the window wipers on double speed, the weather was gradually taking a turn for the worse and he was thankful they were in the BMW, this thing could drive through the Arctic without so much as a skid.

They drove on in silence for a while, Fraker had the urge to turn on the radio to break the awkwardness, but the yank seemed happy enough watching the world go by and Charlie was tapping his knees to some imaginary dance track in his head. Still, Fraker thought he should at least try to make conversation.

"We've booked a couple of rooms at the Queen's hotel, in Leeds. It's a decent place but not too over the top. We thought it best to keep things low key." Fraker said and eased passed a slow moving Volkswagen. He caught a glimpse of the yank in the rear view mirror who nodded.

"Sounds like I'm in good hands," he said. "Any word on the elusive Mister McCulloch yet?"

Fraker shook his head. "Not so far. To be honest, we've got everyone concentrating on finding his Lawyer, a guy named Tommy Whitaker."

The yank seemed to recognise the name. "Good," he said, his tone laid back. "Whitaker's the key. He's weak, afraid. McCulloch will be too well hidden of now. But there's no rush, if you can find Tommy Whitaker, It's just a hop skip and a jump to McCulloch."

"So," said Charlie staring absently out of the windscreen. "McCulloch's in deep shit, eh?"

Fraker bit his bottom lip and almost punched Charlie in the side of the head, he made a mental note to save it for later when they were alone. He glanced in the rear view mirror again to see the Yank was actually smiling.

"Believe me, Charlie, he should wish he was in deep shit," he said. "Words cannot express the trouble that man is in."

"Y'know, his nick name is Lucky?" Charlie said with a snort.

"If he gets out of this one," Randall said leaning back in his seat, "you can stick 'unbelievably' in front of that."

The three of them laughed out loud. Fraker let out a relieved breath, this guy seemed all right, things might just turn out to be okay after all. A few days in a hotel, all expenses paid, he found himself starting to warm to the idea. But that was still tempered with the fact that this charming American was a hired killer and could quite easily get them all killed or banged up for life. Still, he mused, this was better than scaring the shit out of club owners at three in the morning with the kneecap routine.

"How was your flight?" Fraker asked.

"Mercifully short," Randall replied. "Where did you say we were heading?"

"City called Leeds, don't know if you've heard of it."

"Leeds, sure." Answered Randall.

"Used to have one hell of a football team once," Fraker lamented, then added, "That's our football, not yours."

"Yeah, I figured."

Next to Fraker, Charlie shuddered and had a sour look on his face. "I hate flying me," he said with a frown.

Fraker's eyes shot skyward. "Oh, here we go. I don't think Randall is interested in your fear of flying, Charlie."

"No, that's Okay," Randall said leaning forwards. "Don't like planes, eh Charlie?"

Charlie's eyes narrowed as if he was recalling some past aviation horror, which Fraker knew was bollocks, this irrational fear of his was all classic Charlie Walker. Fraker returned his eyes to the road, they would soon be approaching the infamous 'Leeds loop' road system, which some sadistic city planner had put in place in a supposed attempt to help motorist negotiate around the city centre and get easy access to the motorways and city centre train station, where unfortunately the Queen's hotel was slap bang next to.

Fraker had often mused this same city planner had to be a dedicated car hating cyclist.

"Yeah, I hate flying me," Charlie lamented. "I much prefer boats. I mean, you've never heard of a boat crashing into a mountain, have you?"

"This is true," Randall had to admit.

"Yeah," said Fraker for arguments sake. "But I've also never heard of a plane sinking, either." He spotted a cyclist up a head and had to fight the urge not to knock him off, besides cycling in this weather was punishment enough.

"This is also true," Randall said.

"Yeah," said Charlie. "Except for that film. Oh, what was it called?" He screwed his face up trying to remember the lost cinematic gem. "Oh yeah! It was one of those airport flicks from the seventies. Airport seventy eight, 'this time it sinks'."

"Sinks or stinks?" Fraker asked.

"Have to say, I didn't catch that one," Randall said.

"Nar, me neither," Charlie said. "Well, I mean, you wouldn't would you? Not with title like that!"

Wow, thought Randall settling back in his seat, Ishrel would hate these two, which made him like them all the more. They were everything the demon hated about humanity, something the demon would never have, but also he had to admit all Randall had lost. Though unlike the airport, Randall felt at ease around these guys and in just the space of a few short minutes he knew he'd made the right decision enlisting their help, apart from the practicalities of the situation, which made it a sound tactical move, sometimes mortal people could have their uses, they could be used, manipulated against one another. But also, as with Charlie Walker and Bill Fraker, they could be fun to be around in small numbers. And in the end wasn't being evil supposed to be fun? Somehow he'd forgotten that along the way.

He watched the back of Fraker's head as he shook it in obvious disbelief at his partner.

"You'll have to forgive Charlie, Randall," he said. "He used to deliberately bang his head in the door when he was a child."

Randall laughed out loud for the second time in five minutes, then realised he couldn't actually remember the last time he had laughed properly at all. Ishrel was never one for witty quips.

He nearly died (again), when Charlie said with an amazingly straight face, "Still do."

Fraker cursed under his breath and the car swerved ever so slightly. "Sorry," he said. "Fucking road system."

"And nothing at all to do with your driving, William?" Charlie said. He easily dodged as Fraker made a half-hearted attempt to clip him around the head. "Jesus, both hands on the wheel! Your driving's bad enough as it is." He turned and grinned at Randall.

"I take it this isn't your usual line of work. Babysitting Americans?" Randall asked.

"Yeah, sorry. I know where babbling a bit. Just a bit nervous that's all." Fraker said. "To be honest, we don't usually get involved with this type of thing." He cursed himself then added quickly. "Erm, not that we know what this type of thing is, you understand." He glanced in the rear view mirror and was relieved to see Randall smiling back at him.

"Don't sweat it," Randall said. "You'll do just fine. And believe me you two make a refreshing change to the type of company I normally keep. You're quite the double act."

"You should catch our kneecap routine," Charlie said proudly.

"But for Christ sake don't get him started on coffee!" Fraker said.

"I'll bare that in mind," Randall said. "So, what do you do when you're not babysitting?"

Fraker thought for a moment. "I suppose you could say we're in collections."

This made Randall smile. "That's funny, so am I."

## NINETEEN

Apparently, some fuckwit once wrote; it is always darkest just before the dawn. Well if that was the case then pretty damn soon there was going to be the brightest dawn the world had ever seen.

But that day was not today. For the second time in just a few short days, Larry McCulloch wanted to burst into tears. Just let it all out, either that or burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all. Something, once upon a time he would have found it quite easy to do, what with all this talk of demons and devils. Of soul collectors after Larry's hide because he had double crossed the Devil's own. Laughable, were it not for the fact that those around him, all grownups no less believed every single surreal word of it.

Larry was back in the dubious sanctuary of his room, he sat on his bed as he scrolled through his phones address book in an increasingly vain attempt to find somebody, anybody he could call to get him out of this river of shit he was drowning in. He had tried half a dozen numbers already, old cronies of his he had relied on in the past, but of those only one had actually deigned to answer (damn call ID's) once they knew it was him on the other end. And that one, Henry Ritter had just screamed abuse down the phone at him and told him in no uncertain terms that he was a dead man walking. Then added, '*worse*' than dead.

That again. What in Christ's name could be '*worse*' than dead? If anything Larry was beginning to think that he might be better off out of it all together, just wrestle a gun off Lewis or the kid Jeff and blow his sorry brains out and let that be an end to it. Then if all this was true he could meet the Devil head on and tell him to go fuck himself. Larry made his hand into the shape of a gun and cocked his thumb back and put his fingers in his mouth and 'pulled the trigger'. Blam, that's all she wrote, thank you and good night. Not much of a legacy, blowing your brains out all over the cheap wallpaper but at least it would be quick and at least he would find out what, if anything was waiting for him on the other side.

"Bollocks to it," Larry said out loud, suicide just wasn't in his nature; he was many things but he sure as shit wasn't a quitter. No, come what may he was going to see this through until the bitter end (and he had the feeling it would be just that, bitter.)

He tossed the phone on the bed, the only number he hadn't tried today was Tommy Whitaker's and he was too sober even to think about calling that nutter.

He turned hearing a tap on the door. "Go away," he said, the last thing he needed right now was Lewis or the priest.

"Larry, it's me, Jeff." The voice sounded miles away through the closed door.

"I come bearing gifts," he added.

Larry let out a weary sign and dragged himself up and over to the door, it was only now he realized the room was in near total darkness, he checked his watch, Christ 8:30 pm. He flicked on the light switch and leaned against the door but didn't move to open it.

"Define gifts," he said to the wood.

"Well, gift to be precise, come Larry, open the door, eh, you've been up here for hours. Oh, and let's just say this gift is twelve years old."

Now that got Larry attention. He opened the door a few inches and a bottle of whiskey appeared through the gap, so Larry opened it further and stepped back to let Jeff enter until he was standing in the doorway, his fresh faced features at odds with the bottle of whiskey he was flaunting.

"So, can I come in?" Jeff asked.

Larry took the bottle and gestured for Jeff to come in. "As long as you don't interfere with my drinking," he said.

"Okay, deal," Jeff laughed and came inside.

"And definitely no preaching," Larry added.

"That's Father Nichols' territory not mine, I'm a mere minion. I just thought you looked like you could probably do with a drink after the day you've had."

"Huh, no shit," Larry said and uncorked the bottle, he scooped up his glass and poured himself a generous measure before putting the bottle on the bedside table.

"Just keep it to yourself though, Larry. Father Nichols is worried about your drinking as it is." Jeff said.

"Looking after my liver as well as my soul, eh?" Larry said which raised a smile from the kid.

"Something like that."

Larry raised the glass and took a sip, damn it was good stuff, no cheap super market own brands here. The kid must have spent thirty quid on it. Larry couldn't help but muse if he could claim it back on expenses with the Vatican. Larry took another sip and studied Jeff. "So what's your story, kid?" He asked.

Jeff frowned. "Story?"

"Yeah, I get Nichols and even Peroni, they're Vatican soldiers, if you believe in all this. They want to save my soul, and catch the bogey man in the process no doubt. I definitely get Lewis, he's a copper through and through and probably fell in with these religious types because he gets to carry a gun. But you?" He made a point of looking the young man up and down which made him squirm somewhat. "You don't seem like the religious type to me," he gestured to the bottle as evidence. "Besides what are you, eighteen?"

"I'm twenty four," Jeff said with the weariness of someone who had been cursed with youthful looks all his adult life and the lack of credibility it inevitably brought.

Larry raised an eyebrow just to goad him. "No, really," Jeff protested.

"And you really believe in this heaven and hell shit the padre is spouting?"

"Yes Larry, yes I do." Jeff answered with conviction.

"You've seen any evidence of it?" Larry asked and drained his glass which brought with it that familiar warm sensation you get from good whiskey and it felt damn fine.

The kid shook his head and his cheeks flushed slightly. "Not as such, no." He said. "But I have faith in Father Nichols and his team back at the Vatican."

This made Larry raise his eyebrows again.

"No, really, I do. I may not have seen any of this first hand, but I've seen the Vatican archives. They're quite an eye opener. Then we join we get an intensive crash course."

"So," Larry asked. "How did they get you?"

"I was training to be a priest. It's a calling I have felt ever since I can remember. Then I was approached whilst at the seminary." Jeff looked away for a moment, seemingly embarrassed. Then he added with genuine humility; "They said they saw something in me, something special. So I joined the team as it were. They apparently call us the God squad on the other side."

"Huh," Larry snorted. "Religious mumbo jumbo, all of it." He motioned to Jeff's Pistol in the holster under his jacket. "That's what I believe in kid. I'd put my faith in that over Jesus H Christ any day."

He was surprised that the comment seemed to hurt Jeff, and with it came even more surprise at himself that he instantly regretted it. The kid was an easy target, he'd spotted that the moment they had met. He was young (twenty four, really? The poor sap was doomed to be ID checked at night clubs until he was at least thirty, if he lived that long.) And impressionable, but now he saw, that even for all Larry's cynicism, the lad had a heart of gold. The whiskey proved that, he was making a genuine attempt to connect with him.

Regardless of what Larry believed, Jeff had sworn to protect him, and with his young life if need be. But not for profit, which Larry would have felt far more comfortable with. But with faith in what he was doing.

Larry swiped up the bottle and took a swig straight out of it, and it was Jeff's turn to raise an eyebrow. Christ Larry silently cursed, this situation was messed up. What was happening to him? He almost felt like apologizing to the kid. Now he knew he was at a low ebb.

He tried to shake off the feeling and just held up the bottle to toast Jeff. "Thanks for the drink anyway," was all he could think to say.

"No big deal," Jeff said with a shrug. "It's like I said, I just felt bad for you. You've been through a lot lately. I know you've got this hard man exterior, but it can't be easy for you."

Larry's heart turned back to stone in an instant.

"I don't need your sympathy," he said, his voice ice cold. Things were really fucked up if this know nothing brat was feeling sorry for him, good heart or not.



Again Jeff looked like Larry had just slapped him in the face. But this time Larry would be damned if he would allow himself to feel sorry for him. If anything Larry was embarrassed at his own moment of weakness for feeling anything at all for this kid. Who, he had to remember was just one in a long line of people to be used to get him out of this shit he was in. He was nothing more than a pawn, they all were.

"Christ!" He cursed out loud. Must be getting soft in my old age he thought. Larry didn't have to look directly at the kid to tell he had his mouth open ready to speak, but he cut him off before he could. "Like I said kid, thanks for he drink, but now fuck off will you? This whiskey won't drink itself and I've have enough of you... You, God squaders today to last me two fucking lifetimes." Although his voice had a hard edge to it, Larry still couldn't bring himself to look at Jeff's reaction.

"Okay," Jeff said softly, but he still lingered by the door. "We'll get you out of this Larry. You can count on us."

Larry just stared at the bottle in his hand which he was desperately trying to stop shaking. But he had to bite his lip when Jeff added before leaving; "We love you, Larry. Goodnight."

Larry screwed his eyes tight shut and fought to keep control until finally he heard the door shut and he was alone again, and with that he collapsed on the bed. He had to bury his head deep into his pillow to muffle the sobs that came bursting out of him. He couldn't stop them now even if he wanted to so he just let them come.

## TWENTY

After he had gathered Jeff, Lewis and Peroni together before meeting Larry for the first time. Father Nichols had made a point of telling them in no

uncertain terms what horrors could await them if they stayed and helped him protect the old crook. Then he had asked them all one simple question. Why?

At some point, he had said, you must all ask yourself the same question. Why am I here? Why am I willing to die for someone who has no faith, someone who quite clearly does not deserve our help, or care if we must make that ultimate sacrifice and die for him. I could give you many reasons, but in the end, the decision must be yours and yours alone.

You must each take time over the coming hours and look to yourselves for the answer. And if you cannot find a reason, there is no shame in you leaving now. This assignment is strictly for willing volunteers only. No one who remains, least of all me will judge you harshly for this and you can go in the knowledge we don't hold you in any less regard than when this all started.

Jeff paused on the stairs and looked back up to Larry's room, he had gone to see Larry in the hope of finding an answer to that question which was weighing so heavily on his young shoulders. To find some spark of humanity in the man that would make all this worthwhile. So that if he had to indeed make that ultimate sacrifice and stand between Larry McCulloch and the darkness knowing it would be his end, he would do so without hesitation, safe in the knowledge it was a worthwhile act.

But Larry just made it so damn hard. Jeff knew Lewis hated the man, but still had decided to stay, not for the guns and glory as Larry had said but because for all his wise cracks, Lewis believed in humanity no matter what it looked or sounded like above everything else, even a scoundrel like Larry McCulloch deserved to be saved. You don't have to like a man to pull him out of the way of an oncoming juggernaut, as Lewis had told Jeff once.

But Jeff needed to see more of the man Larry was, to see past that brash exterior to the real, vulnerable person underneath. Because he had to believe there was one. Larry was coming to the end of a very dark road, sure it was one he had paved himself with the misery of others and the old crook certainly was a prime candidate to sow what he had reaped.

But why? Jeff asked himself. He took a step back up before he realized it. Should he really try to get through to the man again? He paused before going higher. Perhaps the whiskey had been a bad idea, but even so Jeff was sure he had seen something... Well, for want of a better word 'human' behind

Larry's eyes when they spoke, before he put the shutters down again. Just a hint maybe, but it was definitely there.

He was about make his way back upstairs when raised voices coming from downstairs halted him.

"Idiots!!" It was Peroni, she came storming out of the living room and into the kitchen. Jeff could hear Father Nichols who was still in the living room almost shouting at someone and judging by the one way conversation he was on the phone, no doubt to the Vatican again and it was clear from the tone and volume of his usually gentle voice it wasn't a conversation he was relishing or by the sounds of it, winning.

Jeff sat on the stairs, like a child hearing his parents fighting downstairs and listened.

"We can't wait a week, Cardinal, in a week we could all be dead." It took Jeff a moment to realize Father Nichols was speaking English, which meant he must be speaking to (although Nichols would never actually say the word) his Nemesis at the Vatican, Cardinal Vaughn. A man who had little time for the work of Nichols and his team based deep in the bowels of the old city. But much to Nichols' chagrin Vaughn was his immediate superior and as such Nichols had to deal with the man, and his cynicism on a regular basis. Politics, Lewis had lamented on more than one occasion. It's all politics, Jeff mate, better you and me keep out of the way and let the grownups battle it out.

Wait, did Nichols just say they could all be dead in a week!?"

"You are messing with people's lives here, Cardinal," Nichols said. "Please, let me speak to his holiness..."

Jeff exhaled, impressed, he knew that Nichols was high up in the pecking order at the Vatican, albeit unofficially, but he didn't realize the man had the ear of the Pope himself.

"No, Vaughn, I know his holiness is back, he came back yesterday!" Nichols said sharply. Then added softer, "John, please... I know we don't see eye to eye on this, but you have to trust me. Get me that clearance or all of this will be for nothing, we have a great chance here, John, don't let it get buried under all this paperwork. If Randall finds Larry..." His voice trailed off.

Clearance. That meant only one thing, Nichols was trying to get Larry into the Vatican where no one, especially a collector like Randall could touch him, and that sounded good to Jeff.

"John... John? Damn it!" Nichols appeared in the doorway to the living room looking flustered and unless Jeff was mistaken, close to tears, he snapped the mobile phone shut in his hand and rested himself against the frame and let out a long breath. Cardinal Vaughn had obviously hung up. Which meant no clearance, So it looked like at least another week here before they could get to safety. God, Larry would love that. Nichols was definitely close to tears, he rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hands. He looked up as Peroni came out of the kitchen, her face still red with fury. She shrugged as if to say 'Well?' Nichols just weary shook his head in response and Peroni said something sharply in Italian which had to be an obscenity judging by the venom in her voice.

Of all the things Jeff had seen and heard over the last couple of days, this was perhaps the most disturbing. Two of the strongest people he had ever met so disillusioned, they almost looked defeated before the battle had even begun, hardly the best way to face such an unknown enemy. Jeff watched them both, so deflated after a moment they hugged and Nichols said something softly to Peroni in Italian which Jeff did not understand.

"I know," Peroni replied in English, "But we cannot give in, Father."

"I suppose," Nichols said sounding less than sure, "But we don't have a choice, do we?"

"Like you said, we can always walk away," Peroni said.

"That's not an option I'm willing to take," Nichols said with a shake of the head.

It was only now Jeff realized he had been holding his breath, he suddenly felt like a trespasser in this most personal of moments between the two. Finally they both went back inside the living room and Jeff could breathe again.

It seemed to Jeff even their so called own side was against them in this. So Jeffrey, he asked himself. Why? And much to his surprise the answer came quickly. There were two very good reasons right there in that room, and another very sarcastic one freezing his balls off outside keeping watch.

Good people, despite everything, willing to press on no matter what the cost to help a lost soul like Larry McCulloch. Did he deserve their help? God no, and he certainly wouldn't thank them for it. But Jeff didn't care, this wasn't about McCulloch or the Vatican bureaucrats, or even in the end about the fight against evil. This was about the men (and woman) next to you. Father Nichols, Peroni and Lewis, they were why he was still here and why he would stay to the bitter end.

The revelation felt good and with it the weight lifted from his shoulders. Jeff got to his feet and rubbed the life back into his numb legs, it was time to relieve Lewis outside, a job he usually hated but not tonight. So what if they had to wait a few more days for those pencil pushers in the Vatican to clear their precious paperwork and get them out of here? He could happily hold on now that the path ahead wasn't so twisted or overgrown with doubt and fear.

And although he was thankful things were clearer in his head now, he still had one niggling regret. He had wasted thirty pounds on a bottle of whiskey for that ungrateful so-un-so upstairs. Oh, well he would just have to file that expense under idiot tax. Not a cheap lesson but one still worth learning.

## TWENTY-ONE

*"That one called Charlie is an imbecile! What is all this talk of Coffee? I simply don't understand it collector."*

Randall sat casually on the sofa of his plush hotel room and watched Ishrel pacing the floor. This time he had made the demon look like a clown complete with green curly wig, white face and red nose. But the most amusing thing about the get up was that ironically it actually made Ishrel look genuinely creepy. Ishrel frowned and put his hands behind his back as he paced looking at the floor. He had appeared just after noon the day before expecting news on McCulloch's location and wasn't best pleased at the lack of movement, so much so that Randall had to remind him that they weren't actually picking up the hotel bill for their stay at Leeds' prestigious Queen's Hotel.

*"How hard can this be?" Ishrel asked still pacing. "This was your idea collector, remember that. You were the one who insisted on employing humans to locate McCulloch. And all they do is sit around talking about the pros and cons of Latté coffee. Sometimes I swear you do this type of thing just to vex me."*

"Relax," Randall told the clown. "They're just the babysitters. They have all kinds of people after McCulloch, besides it's only been a couple of days. The one called Bill has just taken a call from one of his associates, and I'm sensing he's got news on Tommy Whitaker."

Ishrel turned to face him, yep genuinely creepy. Randall would have to think of some other incarnation or he'd be having nightmares. *"They've found Whitaker?"* Ishrel asked.

"Feels like it," Randall answered.

*"But why didn't they contact you straight away?"*

It was a good question and one Randall knew the answer to. "Guess they're afraid I'll go in all guns blazing. They still think I'm a hit man remember?"

The demon let out what was as close as he could get to a laugh, which sounded more like a strangled gagging sound. *"If only they knew how much you hate guns."* He said

"Hmm," was all Randall said in reply. Although over the last couple of days Randall had grown comfortable around Fraker and Charlie he knew deep down they didn't trust him, or to be precise Bill Fraker didn't. Charlie was an open book and he and Randall had connected almost immediately, so much so that he somehow felt there was something of a collector's spirit buried in Charlie's subconscious, and that was something he wanted to explore later if given half a chance. But Bill had remained at a respectful distance obviously all too aware of the danger he posed to the two of them. Randall knew Fraker would want to check out Whitaker's location first, perhaps even attempt to persuade the Lawyer to give up McCulloch to save his own neck. It was a sensible move and one Randall approved of. After all if it worked that would be one less thing for Randall to do.

Ishrel jumped forwards and wrung his hands as if strangling an imaginary neck. "*We should go next door and throttle it out of them!*" He said.

"You mean I should," Randall corrected him. "You're just the observer, remember that Ishrel."

"*Huh!*" Ishrel grunted indignantly and aimed a kick at an expensive looking lamp on the table which didn't so much as wobble. "*Fuck pig!*" He shouted. And Randall caught an actual edge of emotion in his usually colourless voice which made a refreshing change.

"Time is on our side, Ishrel," Randall said as the demon spun away from the table in disgust. "Let Fraker do his detective act if he so wishes. Besides that will give me a chance to speak with Charlie alone."

*"Collector recruitment is not within our remit, Randall. Anyway the man is an imbecile!"* He paused then added. *"But having said that, I believe that is the primary requirement for becoming a collector."* A ghastly smile cracked his grease painted face.

Sarcasm now? Randall mused. "You know Ishrel, you're getting more human every day." The smile fell right off the clown's face.

*"Now you are just being nasty,"* he said.

"Christ on a bike, Charlie. What are you doing?" Fraker had come into the room looking for his coat to find Charlie with a glass pressed against the wall between theirs and Randall's room. Charlie shushed him with his hand and pressed his ear to the glass.

"Randall's talking to himself again," Charlie whispered as if the American could hear him through the wall.

"Will you come away!" Fraker scolded, he wondered who he was supposed to be babysitting sometimes. He spotted his coat laid on the back of a chair and grabbed it.

"'Ere where are you off to?" Charlie asked and finally came away from the wall.

"I've just been on the phone to Barney, he's got an address where Whitaker might be hiding out. I'm going to have a look see."

"What now? It's nearly midnight." Charlie said idly tossing the glass from hand to hand.

"We've not on office hours, Charlie," Fraker eyed the glass, it was only a matter of time before Charlie dropped it. Hand eye coordination wasn't his best suit. "Put that down," he said.

Charlie put the glass on a table. "I'll get my coat," he said.

"No, you stay with the yank," Fraker said pulling on his coat, he looked out of the window, at least it had stopped snowing. "I think it's best we keep him away from Whitaker for the moment," he continued. "If Whitaker is at this place I don't want Randall making a scene. Maybe I can persuade Whitaker to give up McCulloch without any nonsense."

"Okay," Charlie said clearly not happy at being left behind, but Fraker knew he would do as he was told. The truth was if there was to be a showdown, Fraker didn't want Charlie anywhere near it. He would rather face the wrath of a pissed off hit man over Charles Walker senior anytime. Besides, the kid was becoming too pally with the yank, just like Fraker feared he would.

Whitaker, Whitaker, Whitaker. Fraker had been racking his brains all day trying to think where he knew the man from. He knew he was McCulloch dodgy Lawyer and that he had done work for Mister Lyne from time to time but he just couldn't picture him.

"Here, Charlie," Fraker asked. "Where do I know this guy Whitaker from? It's been driving me mad."

"You remember him," Charlie said. "Flash git, always drives around in a Porsche."

"Narrow it down a bit mate."

"He's the lawyer who got Rob Murdoch off that murder charge a couple of years back. The boss used him a couple of times."

Fraker still couldn't place him. He shook his head.

"Oh, come on," Charlie said. "You remember, always dressed to the nines. Late twenties. Perfect hair."

An image flashed into Fraker's head and he instantly remembered the lawyer. Tommy Whitaker, he of the perfect hair. "Oh, Christ of course," he



said. "I remember the hair. And if I'm not mistaken I seem to remember you thought he was the dog's bollocks too." Suddenly it all came back to him, although Fraker had never actually been introduced to Whitaker, he remembered Charlie fawning all over him several months back when Mister Lyne had asked him to drive the Lawyer around while he was defending Rob Murdoch.

"Sob off," Charlie said defensively. "I admired him, that's all. I was with him for a couple of weeks during the whole Murdoch case."

Mad dog Murdoch. Fraker had the misfortune to meet the man a few times and each time it had ended in someone getting their head kicked in. He was an enforcer of the old school variety and a real nasty piece of work. Fraker remembered the murder case but hadn't realised it was Tommy Whitaker who had been the magician who had got the lunatic off.

"Mad dog Murdoch," Fraker said. "Was as guilty as sin, I remember that much. You'd think his nick name would have tipped the jury off a bit. Mad as a hatter that bloke."

"Hell aye," Charlie agreed. "And there was no doubt Murdoch did it. Got caught red handed. Literally! But oh, you should have seen Whitaker tear the defence to shreds."

Fraker could see Charlie's eyes glaze over as he remembered. It was another case of him idolising the wrong type of person, like Randall. And it was something Fraker knew he would have to stamp out and sharpish.

"It was a thing of beauty, Bill." Charlie added. "You sure I shouldn't come along? I'm sure he will remember me."

"No," Fraker said flatly. "I don't need you fawning all over him."

"Fuck off," Charlie snapped. "Like I said, I just admired the guy. You didn't see him in action."

"Charlie, he had the Judge in his back pocket." Fraker said.

"Yeah, I saw the photos," Charlie said and screwed his face up at the memory. Then brightened. "Oh, but he still had to sell it to the jury. Make it look genuine."

Fraker remembered the outcry. Murdoch not only got off, but got fifty grand compensation on top. He had to give Whitaker credit for that if nothing else.

"Lawyers," Fraker said. "Give me a straight talker any day of the working week, mate. You can't trust people like Whitaker, Charlie," he warned. "Or McCulloch for that matter."

"I know," Charlie said again on the defensive.

"Charlie, about this yank," Fraker said, he paused for a moment he knew he would have to be careful how he put this.

"What about him?" Charlie said eyeing Fraker with suspicion.

"Nothing, just I know what you're like..." Charlie made to protest but Fraker cut him off. "All I'm saying is I don't want you getting too matey with him."

"What do you mean? He seems alright." Charlie said.

"Yeah, but we're here to do a job, Charlie, and so is he. And it's not a nice one. I don't want you talking or hanging around with him any more than you have to."

"I don't know what you mean," Charlie said with a look that was dangerously close to a pout.

"I know what you're like that's all, you're a nosy git and I bet you think he's the bees knees already just from a few days. Just like Whitaker."

"Bollocks," Charlie protested.

"Fine, just don't forget what he is."

"Stop treating me like a kid, Bill, for Christ sake." Charlie turned his back on Fraker and looked like he was about to storm off into his bedroom.

"I'm just saying," Fraker said defensively. "Charlie, look at me." Charlie reluctantly turned to face him. "All I'm saying is that this fella, nice as he might seem, is trouble, he's a hit man for Christ sake."

"I know," Charlie said softly and this time without the attitude. "As soon as we find where McCulloch is, we bugger off."

"Good lad." Fraker slapped him playfully on the arm and buttoned up his coat. "If we get messed up in a shooting, we'll go down for just as long as he does." Charlie nodded in response. "And quite frankly Charles." Fraker added. "You are not the prison type my friend."

"Can't argue with that," Charlie said with a shrug. "I'm far too pretty for prison."

Happy that peace once more reigned between them, Fraker headed for the door. "Right, I'm off before Randall comes in. I swear that guy never sleeps." He turned back to Charlie who gave recovered the glass and was back over at the adjoining wall to eaves drop once again. "And Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

If he asks, you have no idea where I've gone, be vague. You should be good at that. See ya later."

And with that Fraker left to face the cold night air, and hopefully the beginning of the end of their relationship with the yank.

Back in his room, Randall didn't need a glass to know Fraker was gone and what they had been discussing. He had Ishrel.

The demon fair danced through the connecting wall between the two rooms. "*You were right, collector, they have a lead on this Tommy Whitaker...*" His voice trailed off as he looked down at his latest incarnation, curtesy of Randall's vivid imagination. "*Oh, for fucksake, really?*"

"Why not, since you're going to be my little detective for a while," replied Randall to Ishrel who was now wearing the cheap Halloween mask from before (the creepy clown face long gone,) but was now also dressed as Sherlock Holmes, complete with a tweed three piece Victorian suit and of course a deer stalker hat. He had kept the demon short to add insult to injury so he only stood three feet tall.

"*One day, Collector,*" Ishrel warned, "*one day.*"

"So, you were saying?" Randall asked nonchalantly.

The demon sighed and tried to gather up as much dignity as it could. "*The one called Fraker has a lead on the possible whereabouts of Tommy Whitaker.*"

Randall jumped up from his chair and went over to the window, he pushed back the curtain and looked down the three floor to the street below. "Told you they could be useful, we have been looking for McCulloch for weeks now, and they've got the best lead we've had, in just a couple of days."

*"So, what next?"* Ishrel asked.

"You follow Bill. If he has found Whitaker, find out what he knows and where he is and if he can actually be of use to us in locating McCulloch. Come back here and lead me to him. I'll do the rest."

*"You know Whitaker might not actually know where McCulloch is."*

"I'm sure he doesn't, exactly," Randall said coming away from the window. "But I'll bet your fancy hat he can contact him, then we can trace McCulloch location from there. So you think you can keep up with Bill old man?"

*"Huh!"* Ishrel grunted and put his hands on his hips. Randall laughed out loud at the absurd figure he cut and the demon spun on his heels and headed for the door.

"See you soon Holmes." He said as Ishrel disappeared. And he had the feeling that someday he was going to pay big style for all the humiliation he had heaped on the demon over the years. Which reminded him, he would have to remember to say 'No shit Sherlock,' at some point when Ishrel got back. Yes he would surely reap some shit for all this one day, but hell it was just so much damn fun not to.

## TWENTY-TWO

In the end, it had been Tommy Whitaker's need for pizza that would ultimately bring about his untimely demise. For all his best efforts to keep himself hidden, (not to mention the bag lady's lilac coated advice about keeping a low profile.) The sight of a derelict in a two thousand pound, if soiled, Armani suit paying for a takeaway pizza with an American express gold card had lit up his whereabouts like a big neon sign.

After that, it hadn't taken a master detective to check the credit card number's latest transactions, one of which included room and board at the less than luxurious Riverside Bed and Breakfast, in front of which Bill Fraker now stood. He had just come off the phone to one of Mister Lyne's many Private Investigators who was now five hundred pounds the richer for what in the end had only been at most twenty minutes of sleuthing. 'Nice work if you can get it' thought Fraker.

He looked at the place, someone must have paid the health inspector and half a dozen other agencies a hefty bribe to keep this place open. The Bed and Breakfast was little more than a glorified squat. Fraker couldn't believe the Tommy Whitaker that he knew would be seen dead in a place like this. There was laying low, and there was laying low he mused.

A swift twenty-pound note to the manager had given Fraker the guy in the expensive suit's room number and he made his way up a flight of barely carpeted stairs to the first floor. Whitaker's room was the last at the far end of the corridor and when he reached it, Fraker pressed his ear against the door. He could hear muffled movement from inside and for a second wished he had brought along the berretta, just in case. Whitaker wasn't the violent type but he was scared and scared people could be unpredictable and Fraker was damn sure the kneecap routine wouldn't work here

He hammered hard on the door and pressed his ear back against it, he was sure he heard someone curse and could imagine Whitaker on the other side holding his breath. Fraker knocked again. "Tommy Whitaker," he said to the wood. "Open the door, son, I know you're in there." Nothing, then the sound of shuffling feet close to the door. Whitaker was on the other side, listening, probably with his ear pressed right against the wood so Fraker knocked again, hard and heard someone curse from inside.

"Christ, Whitaker, I can hear you in there. Open the door or I'll kick the fucker in."

"Go away," Whitaker shouted. "Leave me alone, or I'll call the police."

"I don't think you're gonna do that Tommy," Fraker said in a softer tone. "Now how about opening the door? I just want to talk. And it's fucking freezing out here." Although he couldn't imagine it would be any warmer in Whitaker's room, this place didn't exactly sing out central heating.

"No way, I've never heard of Tommy Whitaker. I've got a gun... Try breaking in and I'll shoot."

Fraker had heard a million threats over the years and he knew Whitaker was bluffing, even if he did have a gun, which he very much doubted, he wouldn't use it. "Listen, I'm one of the few people who doesn't want you in casualty, or worse. Now I'm sick of talking to a fucking door. Should I go get the yank I'm working for and let him kick it in? Maybe you'd like to tell him face to face, you've never heard of Tommy Whitaker?"

Whitaker gave an audible gasp. "Yank? Did, you say..? His voice trailed away he sounded sick.

"You heard what I said. Don't worry he doesn't know I'm here, yet. Thought it was best for your well-being if I talked to you first. Call me a humanitarian."

"Who are you?" Whitaker asked weakly.

Fraker bit his lip, he was close to kicking the door into Whitaker's face. "I'm Bill Fraker, I work for Harry Lyne, and I know you know who he is."

The lock on the door clicked and it open a few inches. Whitaker's blood shot eyes scanned Fraker and the corridor around him. There was a look in them that made Fraker physically shudder and he was thankful when Whitaker screwed them shut and stepped away so he could enter.

The room smelled exactly as Fraker knew it would, a mixture of stale body odour, unwashed clothes, and for want of a better word; fear. Whitaker stood in the middle of the room with a hangdog expression on his weary face he looked to Fraker like a scarecrow. His once perfect hair was matted and greasy, his overpriced clothes hung off him looking at least a size to big due undoubtedly to his lack of eating. Testament to this was the treacherous pizza laid still in its box less than a quarter eaten.

"How did you find me?" Whitaker said without looking up, his voice barely a whisper.

Fraker gestured towards the pizza. "Credit card," he said and Whitaker nodded with a weary resignation.

Whitaker put his hand into his trouser pocket, and for a moment Fraker thought he might actually pull out a gun. But instead he produced what

looked like a small gold nugget, Whitaker looked at it, then flicked it across the room. "Should have stayed at the Hilton after all," he said. "Five hundred quid that thing cost me. Huh, there's one born every minute." He finally looked Fraker in the eye. "Where's the yank?"

"Relax, he's not around. Besides, it's not you he wants." Fraker said.

"He said that?" Whitaker said a little brighter.

Fraker kicked the door shut with his heel. "You know who he wants," he looked around at the squalor. "Christ man, what the hell happened to you? Surely you could do better than this shit hole? And look at yourself, you look like you haven't washed or slept in a week."

The lawyer smiled weakly and glanced at himself. "Two, I think."

"Where's McCulloch?" Asked Fraker. He felt like he was in a room with a dead body, sure this one was walking and talking, but he was dead never the less, he just hadn't quite learnt to let go yet. To accept the ride was over.

"I honestly don't know," said the dead guy, his voice empty.

"Do you enjoy living like this?" said Fraker. "Why are you protecting him? Do you really think he'd do the same for you?"

"Christ no, not Larry. But that's just it, I really don't know. Don't you think I'd tell you if I did? I owe him nothing, especially not my life." He looked around him. "Such as it is. I spoke to him, a few of days ago, after I found out what was really going on. Last I heard he was still with Scotland Yard, least that was who I hooked him up with. But now he's disappeared, no one knows where he is. But whoever's got him are keeping him safe..." He gave a grunt at the word *safe*. "Huh, safe, that's a fucking joke."

Although Fraker had never actually met Whitaker before, he had seen him around, usually with some woman barely out of her teens and dripping with diamonds on his arm. Always dressed immaculately, and invariable left in some type of outrageously expensive sports car. And of course his famous hair. If you saw a picture of him, you'd swear it was airbrush on it was so neat.

But now he was just a shadow of that guy. Fraker found it hard to believe this wreck was the same person, how the mighty have fallen. He was suddenly reminded of Charlie, and how he had idolised Whitaker. And for the

first time could see him going the same way, shit out of luck, alone, scared. Anger came out of nowhere.

"Just look at you," said Fraker, even surprising himself at the venom in his voice. "You had it all, now? Christ what have you gotten yourself into?"

"Believe me, all that money, the power, it means nothing. I'd give it all up in a heartbeat, if it could get me out of this shit I'm in. It means nothing in the end. I can't protect myself from these people." Whitaker paused, staring off into space with a look haunted look that sent a shiver down Fraker's spine. "That yank," he said after an age, "Christ the things I've heard about him. The shit he can do."

"What, Randall?" Asked Fraker.

"So," continued Whitaker. "It is him..." His voice trailed off again then he suddenly looked Fraker in the eye, and for the first time held his gaze. "Christ man, what the hell are you doing working for a thing like that? I didn't know Harry Lyne was mixed up in all this. I thought he got where he is the good old fashioned dishonest way."

"We're not mixed up with anyone," Fraker said, a little taken a back. "I'm just babysitting this yank until we can track down McCulloch. Then I just walk away and let him get on with it."

Whitaker looked at him with genuine amusement, and Fraker had to fight the urge to smack him in the mouth. "That simple, eh?" Whitaker said knowingly. "Seem to remember that's what I used to keep telling myself. Oh they're nothing special, powerful? Yeah. But where do you think power like that comes from, Fraker?" He paused for a response, but Fraker could only think of how Lyne had looked back in his office when all this had started: *'They have made a lot of powerful people very nervous.'*

"No, my friend," Whitaker continued. "You get mixed up with people like that, there's no going back. Take my advice, get out while you still can."

"Don't worry about me," Fraker said a little on the defensive, "I can take care of myself. Besides, you're hardly in the position to give me advice, Whitaker."

Whitaker's gaze drifted away again. "True, but you get mixed up with them. It... It stains you, it stains your soul." He shook his head and muttered



something Fraker couldn't hear, then added. "That Randall, he's, he's just a foot soldier, but he's one of the worst. Christ the things I've heard about that one."

"You talk about him like he's the Devil himself." Said Fraker.

"May as well be," replied Whitaker, he looked back at Fraker. "So what are you going to tell him about me?"

"That you're a nutter."

Whitaker took a step towards Fraker, who clenched his fist, but the move was desperate, not threatening. Whitaker held up a trembling hand and lightly touched Fraker's chest. "You tell him..." He voice faltered, thick with emotion. "You convince him that I don't know where Larry is. You have to." He suddenly raced over to his jacket which was hanging over the back of a chair and took out his wallet. He waved it in Fraker's face.

"Look, I can give you money, shit loads of it, as much as you like. Just don't tell him where I am." He pleaded.

Fraker knocked his hand away, "I don't want your money."

"Yes, yes you do." Whitaker said with growing desperation. "And also, and this bit is important. Don't even think about this place, don't think about any of it, what it looks like, where it is, how you got here. Don't think about any of that, and you'll be rich."

"I told you I don't want..."

"None of it, or he'll know," Whitaker cut him off. "He'll know how to get here." He was growing frantic now and Fraker gave serious thought to slapping the maniac, hard. But Whitaker was oblivious to this as he was in full flow now. "Oh, Jesus," he babbled. "For Christ sake, don't even say my name anymore, he'll know, like a shark." He suddenly dropped to his knees and scrambled over to where he had flicked what Fraker had thought was a gold nugget of some kind.

"The tooth, Jesus." He found it and held it up for Fraker to see. "Oh thank Christ."

Fraker recoiled. "What the hell are you talking about, say your name? What fucking difference will that make?" He looked down in disbelief at the gold tooth in Whitaker's grubby hand. "Snap out of it!" He shouted and

without thinking slapped Whitaker across the face. Whitaker's mouth fell open in shock and he stared up at Fraker, stunned. "Next time it won't be a fucking love tap, Whitaker, now pull yourself together." Fraker shouted, his heart pounding in his ears.

What the fucking hell had just happened? Fraker thought. One minute Whitaker was trying to bribe him, (which was thankfully the first normal thing he'd done since Fraker had entered this God forsaken room) the next he was babbling about sharks and scrambling around on the floor like a lunatic.

He grabbed Whitaker's shirt collar and dragged him to his feet. "I can't protect myself." Whitaker finally said. Fraker let him go and half expected him to fall to his knees again, but Whitaker just stood, there with blood dripping from his mouth.

"You should sit down, Tommy, before you fall down." Whitaker nodded barely comprehending, but didn't move. Fraker took hold of his arms and gently let him over to the room's tatty sofa and he finally slumped down into it. "You got anything to drink?" Asked Fraker.

Whitaker shook his head. He looked down at the tooth still clutched in his hand. "Can't protect myself," he said softly to no one in particular. "Who was I trying to kid? It's too late for all that now, always was." He let the tooth fall onto the floor again and looked up at Fraker. "He's been waiting all this time. Waiting for it all to fall into place. Christ, he probably knew the moment you said my name at the door." He kicked the tooth away in disgust.

Not this again, thought Fraker. He was going to speak but there was something about the way Whitaker sat there, like a lost child who knew his parents had long since abandoned him that robbed Fraker of anything to say but banalities, and this sure wasn't the time for those.

Then Whitaker's gaze drifted off again, into the shadows. "I should kill myself," he said in a whisper. "Kill myself and be done with all this horror, before he gets to me. At least it would be quick. But I'm too much of a coward. Shit, don't even know if it would make any difference anyway." He smiled but it melted from his face a heat beat later. "Damned if you do, damned if you don't." Whitaker got to his feet and straightened his shirt, which now had spots of blood on it from his busted lip. And Fraker thought that maybe he was rallying somewhat.

"What's going on, Tommy?" Asked Fraker.

"Be careful who you do business with Mister Fraker," Whitaker said. "That's the moral here. I was warned, can't say I wasn't. Walked into this whole sorry mess with my eyes wide open. Huh, me and Larry both." A thin smile cracked his weary face and this time it stuck. "Damn fool still thinks he's going to be able to bullshit his way out of all this." Whitaker continued bitterly. "Fucking idiot, he has no idea what's coming, oh but he will soon enough. Tried telling him but he just wouldn't listen."

"So you have spoken to him?" Said Fraker, finally an opening.

"Yeah, few days ago. Don't know why I bothered, he thought I was as mad as you do. But he'll see. You will too if you're not careful." He pointed an accusing finger at Fraker.

If that was a threat, it had no weight at all. Fraker took his mobile out of his pocket and opened up the address book. "Give me his number, that's a start at least." He said.

Whitaker brightened a little at this, seeing a chink of light in his situation. "Yeah, yeah, that's a good idea. But if I give it to you, you have to convince Randall to leave me alone. Tell him that's all I know, tell him I'm not worth bothering with." He looked at Fraker hopefully. "I mean, it's like you said, it's Larry he wants, right?"

He was hanging on Fraker's reply, but what could he say? Whitaker was as dead as McCulloch, he'd be trampled in the stampede to get to the old crook. "That's right, Tommy." He lied, "I'll talk to the yank."

He passed his phone to Whitaker who punched in a number and handed it back. "You tell him," he said weakly. And with that he fair fell back onto the sofa.

The lawyer's shoulders slumped and he rested his elbows on his knees and Fraker couldn't think of ever seeing a more pathetic, defeated soul in his life and it was chilling.

"What's this all about, Tommy?" Fraker asked after what seemed like minutes. "Why are they after him?"

"Does it matter?" Whitaker replied.

"There's more to it, than that damned book of his, isn't there?" Suddenly Fraker wasn't sure he actually wanted to know. He was about to turn and leave when Whitaker gave him a haunted look which stopped him dead.

"It started with the people," said Whitaker.

"People?" The look in his eyes made Fraker physically shutter.

Whitaker took a moment to gather his thoughts, by the look on his face Fraker knew he was going to some place buried deep at the back of his mind, a place Fraker now regretted asking about even before he had heard what was lurking there.

"McCulloch had got himself involved in people trafficking, in Eastern Europe. Nothing big, just sort of a side-line really. He'd cut a deal to transport six illegal immigrants from Poland. Didn't know why, didn't care, neither of us did." He shook his head at his foolishness. "We just thought they were going to be used as cheap labour or something. The whole thing was sordid as hell, but if I'm honest it was a bit of an adventure. All we had to do was get them from Poland to England without getting caught. Simple enough, easy money."

"Obviously not easy enough." Said Fraker.

"Should have been, but then Larry got greedy and decided to pull a burn on our mysterious employers." Whitaker raised his eye brows and Fraker detected a familiar if faint glint in his eye.

"It was quite clever to be fair," Whitaker continued, "He took money from everyone, and I willingly went along with it. He took the money from Randall's people, to transport them to England, as agreed. Then, from those six sorry bastards to take them elsewhere. They didn't care where, just as long as it was away from Randall's lot." Whitaker smiled now, it was weak but lit up his face. "Then, and get this, from some French bloke, who needed cheap labour. Christ knows where they finally ended up in the end. Working in some Paris kitchen for five euros an hour most like." Whitaker gave a rueful shake of the head. "Poor bastards."

"That's it?" Said Fraker. "All this for six nobodies?" He knew it didn't add up and that he should just leave it alone, but he just couldn't. "Bollocks," he added even though it would open up a can of worms.

After a moment, Whitaker's face grew darker. "Should have been," he said softly. "The whole fucking thing can't have cost them more than twenty grand. And what's that to them? Sure we knew they'd be pissed off, but..." His voice trailed off as if the gravity of the situation had just dawned on him.

"This is about more than money. What was so special about those six Poles?" Asked Fraker.

Whitaker physically winced at the question but didn't answer, he just exhaled and looked at his feet again. Fraker felt a twinge of anger, he was rapidly getting the feeling he was in the middle of something bad, but he had to drag anything remotely resembling a straight answer out of Whitaker and it was wearing thin. He felt out of his depth, lost and it wasn't a feeling he liked.

He'd always been taught not to ask too many questions, to keep things simple and under control and it had served him well through the years, but this was different. Randall and his mysterious employers were the wild cards here, something he couldn't control. That look in Lyne's eye flashed into Fraker head again. Although with the boss it had been only fleeting, Whitaker had that same look permanently etched on his face. And it was one that Fraker increasingly feared might be catching

"These six," Fraker finally said again. "What was so special about them?"

"They were, special somehow," Whitaker replied softly. Then shrugged as though he didn't really know why. "Important to Randall's people. Not some random meat, slave labour or whatever. No they were special, marked for something big. They all had a tattoo somewhere on their bodies. One each which were apparently six parts that made up a whole picture of some kind. Some old runic thing as I remember. But to be honest, I didn't dig too deeply into the significance of it. And Larry just plain didn't care." He exhaled. "Christ, I dread to think what it was for. But the point is it turns out they were irreplaceable."

"And you and Larry blew it for them." Said Fraker.

Whitaker nodded and look at him. "And now we're damned," he said plainly.

Damned. Such a strange word to choose, but looking at him, it was plain to see at least Whitaker believed it. Fraker had to look away from the man, he glanced at the door and decided enough was enough. "So, this book of Larry's, has nothing to do with any of this."

"Huh, he thinks it's his get out of jail free card, he thinks the government can protect him. But no one can, not from Randall."

"He's just..." Fraker paused, just what?

"He's not, Human." Whitaker answered the question for him. It was a statement of fact, to Whitaker at least, and he said it without a hint of embarrassment.

"Oh, come on," Fraker snapped, more at himself for letting Whitaker spook him than anything else. "Listen to yourself." That was it, Fraker took a step towards the door, but Whitaker stood up and grabbed his arm, it was so unexpected, it took Fraker a moment to process that he'd done it. He felt the grip through his jacket sleeve, surprisingly strong and for the second time tonight he wished he'd brought along the Berreta.

He looked at Whitaker's hand for a full five seconds before finally pulling his arm free. "Don't touch me." He said, almost lamely.

"I know how it sounds," Whitaker actually grinned, but it soon faded. "But believe me, once he catches up with Larry, he's gonna wish it was just those crooked police and pissed off gangsters that got him."

Fraker rubbed his arm without realising it, he could feel the bruise already.

"They would only torture him for a couple of days," continued Whitaker, his voice so cold Fraker expected to see it in the air. "That would seem like bliss compared to what Randall's people have in store for him."

Fighting the desire to run from the room, Fraker back away and opened the door behind him without turning around. He half expected Whitaker to grab him again, but he merely nodded. The stagnant air in the corridor smelt almost fresh compared to the oppressive odour of despair in Whitaker's room. Fraker turned and took a couple of steps.

"Mister Fraker?" Much against his better judgement, Fraker turned around again. "Get out, leave tonight, while you still can." Whitaker looked him up and down. "You're not so, tainted... Yet."

"Don't worry about me," said Fraker, his voice wavered with fear, so much so that he scared himself. He walked away as confidently as he could, but it was all he could do to stop himself from running.

"I'm damned, Mister Fraker!" Whitaker shouted behind him and Fraker quickened his step. "Get out of this nightmare while you still can." Fraker was at the stairs now, he took them three at a time. But he could still hear Whitaker who must have come out into the corridor, but thankfully hadn't come any further. "Fraker! If you have one ounce of pity in you, you'll tell Randall you couldn't find me." Fraker was at the front door now, he kicked it open, it closed behind him, just as Whitaker shouted; "Better still, tell him I'm dead!"

The cold air outside hit Fraker like a slap in the face, taking his breath away. He staggered, suddenly dizzy and had to rest his back against the building to stop himself from keeling over. He bent forwards and rested his hands on his knees and gulp down air until, thankfully the nausea passed without him actually throwing up.

Fraker walked over to the car like a drunk and clambered inside, instinctively, he reached over to the glove compartment and took out the hip flask. But once he got a whiff of the whiskey inside it made his stomach churn. "Great," he said to his reflection in the rear view mirror, and screwed the top back on. He couldn't even numb this growing feeling of dread with his beloved alcohol.

"Fuck this," he spat and fired up the car, he stomped on the accelerator and sped away accompanied by the squeal of tires.

Bill Fraker had no idea just what the hell he was in the middle of, but he instinctively knew it was all wrong. Things were happening around him that just didn't add up and he knew now that he should have just refused the boss's request flat out straight away. But still, like Whitaker said, it wasn't too late for him to get out, and hopefully that meant Charlie too. And that was all he really needed to know. Whatever this unnamed menace stalking Whitaker and McCulloch was. It wouldn't get them.

This nightmare was over, no matter what the cost. The boss would understand, that look in his eye told Fraker that much. All that remained was to get Charlie and get gone. And to hell with the rest of the players in this sick game. Literally if needs be.

Fraker fumbled inside his coat pocket as he drove and pulled out his mobile, he needed to call Charlie and tell him to leave McCulloch's number for the yank and then get out of there, no questions asked. The last thing he needed was to have to face Randall and tell him they were quitting, God only knew what his reaction would be.

"Shit," Charlie's number just rang out not even tripping to voice mail. Fraker ended the call and tried again, the prat always had his phone with him so what was so different about tonight?

Ishrel watched Whitaker as he frantically locked his door and stepped back into the room. He was a broken man, Ishrel's favourite kind. He had been perched in a corner of the ceiling listening to the two men for a minute or so now. It had been much easier than he had anticipated tracking Fraker here. He had thought he'd lost him at one point but when he said Whitaker's name at the door, it pulled him here like a magnet.

'Ripples'. Poor Tommy Whitaker had no protection at all, but he obviously thought he had. He recognised Mary's work the moment he saw the tooth. She was well known to Ishrel and his kind, very theatrical, but harmless. She did possess some power, power stolen or stumbled upon over the years but little else. If anything she was a great help to the cause, people get sloppy when they think they are protected. That was the main reason she was allowed to continue her work. That and the amusement value.

Things were finally taking shape, maybe the collector had been right all along with his use of the humans not that he would ever admit that to Randall. Anyway now that they had Whitaker, McCulloch was but a hop skip and a jump away from damnation.

And with that thought warming his frozen heart, Ishrel melted back into the ether. "*Be back soon, Tommy Whitaker,*" he said, even though he knew the man couldn't hear him. He still delighted to see Whitaker shiver all the same.



## TWENTY-THREE

What was that incredibly annoying noise?

Randall stood in the near darkness of Fraker's and Charlie's room listening to what sounded like someone blowing bubbles into a glass of water, it took him a few moments until he finally realized it was coming from Charlie's mobile phone which was sitting on a coffee table bubbling away. Its owner was in a deep sleep on the sofa next to it. Randall would have thought the annoying ring tone would have been grating enough to prompt the dead to rise from their graves in an effort to silence the cacophony but not Charlie he barely twitched.

The collector looked at the caller ID which read: 'Bill'. Randall gave an audible sigh of relief then the phone finally fell silent. He had broken into the room the old fashioned way, with an expertly applied butter knife to the lock when Charlie had failed to answer the door which wasn't that surprising considering it was now nearly two am.

Randall watched Charlie sleeping peacefully for a moment, he knew the phone call meant Fraker was probably on his way back which meant he didn't have that much time. But why was he here? What was it about the kid that sparked his interest anyway? Was he really a potential collector? Seeing him now laying so innocently asleep the thought seemed a little ludicrous, but still there was undeniably something about Charlie that warranted this intrusion. He knelt down next to the sofa so that he could get a better look at Charlie as his brow furrowed and he let out a low moan then shifted his position awkwardly. He was dreaming.

"Charlie?" Randall said softly but he didn't wake. Somewhere during his training deep within the void before his return, Randall had learned a thing or two about dream manipulation and it had served him well over the years. But he didn't have the time for anything so complicated now so he decided just to have a peak at what was going on inside that head of Charlie's.

Randall rubbed his hands together and felt the instant heat as the power surged through them then with practiced precision he carefully rested the palm of his left hand on the back of Charlie's head and held it there as the

heat increased as the energy flowed through his hand and deep into the back of Charlie's brain deep into his subconscious dreaming mind. "Now," Randall said softly as he closed his eyes and concentrated. "Let's see what we can see."

"Charlie?" The voice was a whisper close to Charlie's ear. He jolted awake expecting to see the speaker right next to him.

"What? Huh?" Charlie sat up and looked groggily around the darkened room. He was alone, no one was leaning over him whispering his name. It took him a moment to orientate himself. He was still in the hotel room and realized he must have dozed off. He swung his legs around and sat up properly. That's when he saw Randall sitting in the chair opposite him, he was masked in the half light, but definitely there. "Randall, Christ,"

"You were sleeping," the American said.

"What? No, just resting my eyes," he blurted out as if a teacher had caught him sleeping in class. "Bill's not here, he's erm, he's out."

"So I see," Randall said and leaned forward so the meagre light from outside finally hit his face.

"Don't know where he's gone I'm afraid," Charlie lied. He ran his hands through his messy hair in a vain attempt to flatten it. He shrugged and smiled awkwardly not knowing what else to do.

"You were dreaming," Randall said after a long pause. "While you were resting your eyes."

"I was?" Charlie replied and felt the sudden need for light so he reached across and turned on the lamp on the table in front of him, the harsh yellow light hurt his eyes but at least he could see Randall better. An image from the dream flashed into his mind's eye for a second then slowly faded like a flash bulb briefly illuminating the scene until it finally melted back into darkness where it belonged. Strangely vivid then gone in a heartbeat but leaving behind a lingering melancholy.

"Weird," Charlie said. Now he could barely remember what it had been, but the feeling of loss, of sorrow remained which meant only one thing: "I was dreaming about my Dad."

"He's sick," Randall stated plainly.

"Hmm, yeah," Charlie nodded. "Hey hang on, how did you know that?" He asked certain he had ever even mentioned his Father in front of Randall, let alone his condition. Why would he?

"And it's serious," Randall said again without inflection, it was what it was, a statement of fact.

The blunt truthfulness of Randall's tone weighed heavy on Charlie and he exhaled sadly but then caught himself and delivered the Walker party line on the issue. "Yeah, but he's going to be okay." He made the mistake of looking Randall in the eye which instantly made the words the lie Charlie knew deep down they were, but he steeled himself to carry on with it regardless.

"Sure he's in hospital," he continued. "Just for test though, y'know? But he should be out any time now." He could feel the American's eyes on him, looking for any crack in the veneer, but this time Charlie made damn sure he didn't meet his gaze.

After an age, Randall said; "You know he's dying."

Again the bluntness of his words hit Charlie hard. "What? No, no," he protested. "You don't know him, he's a tough old git. He'll be alright. For Christ sake, he's only sixty five!"

"People die a lot younger than sixty five, Charlie" Randall said. "Take my word for it."

Truth. Hard and cold. "Yeah," Charlie managed deflated. "I know."

"Like your Mom."

Charlie nodded, "Hmm," wait a second! "Hey, how the hell did you know my Mum was dead?" Charlie asked suddenly angry. He knew for damn sure he had never mentioned that to the yank. He moved to get up but his legs gave way and he sat back down on the sofa.

"I can smell it on you," Randall replied.

"What?" Charlie suddenly felt faint, his head was pounding particularly at the back, he absently rubbed the back of his head and half expected to feel something clamped on there like a weight of some kind, but he realized the feeling wasn't on his head, it was inside the back of his skull almost like a stone, heated by an open fire, white hot burning a hole into his brain.

Before he knew what had happened he was laid back on the sofa, and now that he was, he couldn't remember ever having actually sat up.

"Relax, Charlie," Randall said, his voice oddly soothing. "You're still sleeping."

Of course Charlie thought, that explains a lot, the strange feeling at the back of his mind, Randall's Clairvoyance. But wait a second, he was awake, wasn't he? His eyes were open, sure he felt weird but he was there, in the hotel room talking with the yank, wide awake if more than a little disorientated. "Wide awake," he said out loud as if trying to convince himself.

"Just try and relax," Randall said his voice inside Charlie's head now, it was so soft it made his eyelids heavy if he hadn't been asleep before, he sure as shit was now. Wasn't he?

"What's happening to me?" He slurred, as the room descended into darkness. "What's...." The word drifted off into the black which was all around him now. He was sure he was dying but it felt okay, not so bad at all. "Randall?" His voice sounded a million miles away, barely recognizable as his own, so much so that he thought maybe he had just imagined he's spoken. Perhaps he had.

Charlie was lost now in total darkness, it wasn't simply a lack of light that engulfed him it was an almost physical, oppressive tomb of black. He shouted, but the moment the sound left his lips it was swallowed up by the void he was drowning in. So much so that he began to doubt he had even made the sound in the first place it was gone so suddenly. Perhaps he had just thought about screaming in terror and not actually uttered a word.

He held his hand up to within an inch of his face but could see nothing, or at least he thought that was what he had done, but as with the phantom shout, maybe he had just imagined the action, after all he couldn't even feel his breath on his hand if it was so close. Charlie was alone in an infinite dead space, and wondered if this was what death was like.

*Am I dead?* He said, or dreamed he thought he'd said.

*No.* At last a sound, a voice but not his own. No not a sound, it was inside his head again. Wasn't it? It was familiar somehow, an American accent. Yes, the yank, Randall's voice inside his head?

*Where am I?*

*In a place between sleep and the waking world. The voice/thought inside his head replied cryptically.*

*I'm scared.*

*Don't be.*

*But I can't feel anything. Can't hear or see or feel anything... Except scared. At least that was something to grasp hold of in the void. Fear. It wasn't the most comforting of anchors but it was the only real thing he had at this point.*

*You can hear me, Charlie.*

*In a way... You sure I'm not dead?*

*Positive.*

*What are we doing here? In the space between sleep and the waking world?*

*You were dreaming before. When I came in, you were dreaming about something, remember?*

*No, I can't. You sure I'm not dead?*

*You're still sleeping, kind of.*

*This place is weird. You sure I'm actually here? Shit, that's a strange thing to say, erm, think. Whatever it is I'm doing now, saying, thinking, that's all the same here, right? Saying and thinking. What am I doing... Saying or thinking?*

*Right now? You're babbling.*

*Hmm, You know what this is like? Feels like tripping or something. Well I say feels like, I can't feel anything... Yep feels like tripping...*

*Tripping?*

*You know, LSD.*

*Never tried it.*

*I feel... Out of my body.*

*You are.*

*Can I wake up now please?*

*You were dreaming, before.*

*So you said.*

*I want to know what you were dreaming about, Charlie.*

*Can't remember.*

*I can help you with that. That's why we're here.*

*In the place between sleep and the waking world.*

*Now you're getting it.*

*Did I mention I'm scared?*

*Even though you can't feel anything?*

*Okay, I think I'm scared.*

*I think therefore I am.*

*Huh?*

*Charlie, I need you to concentrate. I need you to remember your dream.*

*Why?*

*Because I believe that dream has a memory you can't quite reach. And it's the one that is shaping what you are, or what you could be if you let me help you unlock it. It's buried deep in your subconscious and I think it could make you a good collector.*

*Collector of what?*

*Later, I need you to remember that forgotten moment.*

*Why? Oh, wait, I think I asked that already. I'm I repeating myself? It's hard to remember anything out here.*

*I need you to remember, because I can't remember mine. That moment, that event that triggered all this... after life.*

*Huh?*

*Forget it, it's not important. Now, come on, tell be what you were dreaming about.*

*Can't.*

*Why..? No, hang on... That's it, I'm getting a summer's day, Children's laughter...*

*How!?*

*Concentrate Charlie.*

*Randall, stop! I can't remember.*

*You already have, Pal... Yes that's it, I've got it now.*

*Discombobulated.*

*Huh?*

*That's how I feel. Or think I feel. One thing's for sure, if I could feel anything right about now, it would be a big fucking headache.*

*It'll be over soon. Yep, tuned in now. Say Charlie?*

*Yeah?*

*Wanna see something really cool?*

*Randall. To be honest, you fucking freak. I'd be glad to see any fucking thing at all right about now. Cool or otherwise!*

*Can't argue with that.*

*Oh, and Randall?*

*Yeah, Charlie?*

*Sorry about that fucking freak crack. It's just that I'm...*

*Discombobulated, yeah I know.*

*Yeah.*

*Fair enough.*

Something now, Charlie could hear faint voices, drifting towards him from out of the darkness. Definitely voices that he was sure and no longer in his head. Voices being carried on a light breeze which he could feel caressing his face and blowing through his hair.

He could feel it.

No light as yet, just blessed sound and feeling. He raised a hand and ran it through his hair where the breeze had touched it and was grateful to feel it slipping through his fingers. The air was filled now with the sound of children playing, still someway off in the darkness but getting louder as he listened. And he could smell the slight hint of a summers day, which grew stronger second by second, the unmistakable scent of freshly cut grass mixed with the smell of half a dozen types of flowers, none of which he could name.

The children were shouting excitedly; "Run, Run!" followed by a peel of grown up laughter. The breath caught in Charlie's throat as more shouts and laughter erupted, tears sprang instantly to his still sightless eyes. He didn't need to see the children to know who they were. This was a scene he had revisited many times before in dreams. A lost moment of happiness from years ago.

"You're out!!" A girl shouted.

"Kate..." Charlie breathed.

Then a boy protesting; "No way!" Followed by more laughter.

Twelve year old Charles Walker junior, bowled out at cricket by his sister. Voices from the past, made all too real somehow.

"Oh, God," he choked. "This can't be..."

Laughter, grownups joining in the fun. Charlie recognized his Uncle Benny's voice jokingly telling him not to worry, that he wouldn't tell anyone he'd just been bowled out by a girl. Then a ripple of applause for his sister.

"How..." Was all Charlie could say, his voice thick with emotion. Now he knew for sure he could feel again because his heart was breaking, and he could feel the tears pouring down his cheeks.

"It's all smoke and mirrors." Randall said from close by. "Say, is that barbeque I smell?"



Charlie couldn't speak so he just nodded. A useless gesture in this endless void but he just couldn't find his voice again as the memories flooded his brain threatening to over load it completely. It was so real he could almost taste the steak cooking nearby.

A pinprick of light appeared way off in the distance. Although it was the merest dot in the nothingness, the endless darkness lightened a touch and as his eyes began to adjust to this new sensation Charlie could make out vague shapes in the gloom around him. Was that the hint of a tree he could see? Shifting shadows moving back and forth, little more than smudges of grey against the black, but if he concentrated he could make out they were half formed figures, little more than outlines, the rumour of substance really but growing more substantial moment by moment.

Charlie felt something between the toes of his bare feet and looked down to see he was standing on grass, he moved his foot over the top of the blades and sure enough they tickled his sole. The sensation, coming as it did so close on the back of numbness was electrifying.

That's when the pinprick of light exploded flooding Charlie's starved vision into over load, instantly illuminating the scene all around him in vivid detail.

He cried out and instinctively threw his arms up to protect his eyes. The sudden contrast to the darkness hit him like an almost physical assault, he reeled back a step and nearly lost his footing. "Jesus... Jesus." But gradually as he stood there panting, his vision began to adjust so he could slowly lower his arms and gingerly open his eyes. Even before they could take it all in, Charlie Walker knew exactly where he was.

Charlie was standing in his Uncle Benny's garden on a bright summer's day, looking across the lawn at his twelve year old self paying cricket with his twin sister, Kate and his Dad. Seeing his Dad in better, healthier times just compounded how ill he had looked the last time Charlie went to see him in that God awful hospital. He couldn't help but smile as his Dad bowled a tame underarm throw to his sister who was standing in front of the wicket holding the oversized bat awkwardly in both hands, she swung wildly and hit the ball, more out of luck than judgment.

"Catch it!" Young Charlie shouted from his place behind the wicket, but his Dad dived theatrically at what should have been an easy catch and just

missed as the ball bounced away and into a nearby flower bed. "Dad!?" The youngster protested as his sister squealed in delight and set off running.

"Oh, Christ," Charlie had to look away. The whole scene was just so hyper real, a waking dream the colours of which were a little too vivid, the sound, though clear was just a frame or two out of sync, slightly bassy and laced with reverb. It was like watching a dodgy DVD knock off of a favourite movie he had seen a million times before.

The sunlight filtering through the bright green trees felt real enough and Charlie hadn't realized just how warm it was on his upturned face until he felt a coldness creep up behind him and linger just over his shoulder.

"So, this is what you dream about so often?" Randall said, his voice like everything else here just the wrong side of real. Charlie nodded once more transfixed by the game being played out in front of him. "Quite the scene of domestic bliss," the American continued. "Only in dreams, huh?"

"No," Charlie protested. "All this really happened. This is... Was real."

"Real?"

"Yes!" Charlie finally turned to Randall, who looked like a dark shadow in this Technicolor landscape, and was about to protest further when he caught sight of two other people sitting on deck chairs on a patio by the house just behind the American slightly obscured, as if deliberately for effect, by his body.

Charlie was vaguely aware that Randall smiled seeing his reaction but his attention was focus on the spectators. Jesus God how could he have forgotten about them? Randall stepped aside, firstly to reveal his favourite Uncle, Benny clapping and shouting encouragement to the players, and then further still to reveal Uncle Benny's only sister.

"Mum." The word caught like a stone in Charlie's throat. Then an instant later he was on his knees in the grass before he even felt like falling, the shock taking his legs right from under him.

He heaved as the shock turned to nausea and tasted bile at the back of his throat. Of course she was here as she always was when he dreamed this place. But seeing her in such vivid detail robbed him of both balance and

breath in a broken heartbeat. He gasped and shook his head which made him swoon all the more, but still managed a curse. "You bastard."

"Why always this day?" Randall wanted to know, he was towering over Charlie now his features half drawn and colourless.

"We, we were happy then," Charlie gasped. It was all too real now, he could even smell the grass up close as he sucked in lungful after lungful of air.

"Don't you really want to know why this place and time?" Randall asked and drifted over to where Uncle Benny and his beloved Mother were sitting.

"Don't you touch her!" Charlie shouted, surprised at the venom in his own voice. He hauled himself to his feet.

"It's okay," Randall said as he knelt down in front of Charlie's Mother. "We're just observers here Charlie, I couldn't touch her even if I wanted to." The American smiled as Charlie's Mother burst out laughing at young Charlie's outrage at his Father's blatant cheating. At the time he remembered his Mother's laughter as music, but now, here with the memory of what was to come, it sounded like loss and left a bitter feeling in the pit of his stomach. A once beautiful sound decayed by her soon to be revealed on coming death.

Charlie felt his legs threaten to give way again but by sheer force of will he managed to stagger over to the patio and dropped to his knees next to Randall who seemed to be closely studying her beautiful face. She laughed again and Charlie was almost physically sick with grief.

"Do you want to know what I can see?" Randall asked Charlie as he leaned forwards until he was within a foot of his Mother's face. For a horrible moment, Charlie thought that Randall was moving to kiss her, but he just looked at her frowning. "Huh?" He added getting no response, but Charlie barely heard him. Now he was this close to her, he was lost in her brown eyes.

The collector let the moment play out, son and beloved lost mother so close together again, it was so bitter he could almost taste it. Then as the seconds bled by he actually thought he heard Charlie's heart break. Now that was a beat you could dance to.

"I can see what's really going on," Randall finally said, his voice as light as smoke. "Deep down, under the surface of all this bliss." Charlie let out a sob

and gave the slightest shake of his head. "Look at her face Charlie, smiling, so happy. Why this moment?"

The repeated question dragged Charlie away from his Mother's eyes, he turned to Randall and answered. "This is my happiest moment," he said, then added without thinking; "Before it all went bad."

The beginning of the end.

"Come on, look at her face, closely. What do you see?" Randall asked.

It was an easy demand to obey, he looked back at her. "There's nothing there. Just happiness."

"There!" Randall exclaimed. "That look, deep within her eyes."

"No!" Charlie suddenly felt chilled to the bone. He had caught the merest hint of something in her eyes, something he had never noticed before. Had he? Something... Desolate. "I didn't see anything," he lied.

"You saw it! Plain as day."

"Bullshit!" Charlie desperately wanted to turn away, to forget he'd seen anything but love in those eyes but he couldn't. "She's just a little tired that's all."

"Now who's bullshitting? Let's watch it again, then tell me she's just tired." Randall passed the palm of his hand over Charlie's Mother's face and for a heartbeat everything froze, sound, vision, it was as if he had hit the pause button on this nightmare movie Charlie was starring in. When Randall brought his hand away everything had skipped back a fraction.

"Randall, please," Charlie said weakly, he couldn't bear to see that look again, not so close, not from a million miles away. He bit down hard on his lip to suppress the fresh round of sobs that were bubbling up in his throat and tasted blood for it. But still he couldn't look away as that shadow bloomed deep within her eyes again, but this time it was clear, right in front of him in all its sickening high definition horror.

It was death.

"Please," Charlie breathed. "Stop this."

"Stop what?" Randall goaded. "You said you didn't see anything."

"Fuck you!" Charlie screamed and tore himself away from her. He rose unsteadily to his feet and stumbled away. "Bastard!"

Randall didn't move he just looked deeper into her eyes. "Come on Charlie, look into her eyes."

"No, God damn it." He looked away and across the lawn, anywhere but at her and the unmasked decay in her face. He saw his Dad pick up Kate and swing her around much to her delight. It almost warmed his frozen heart but then he caught sight of his young self still standing behind the wicket. The boy was looking at his Mother sitting there and could quite clearly see through the veil of happiness to that horrible darkness Charlie himself had just glimpsed. The kid could see the shadow of death falling across her face. He was frowning, all thought of the game gone for a moment. Charlie froze.

The boy had seen it, Charlie aged twelve had seen what was coming all those years ago. How could he have forgotten? Had he not known at the time what it meant but somehow buried it deep within his subconscious only for this bastard of a yank to unlock it here in this living nightmare?

"Charlie?" It was his Father, both of them, man and boy looked his way. "Come here Mate," he beckoned the boy over. Charlie almost took a step towards him his self, but stop as the boy, all thoughts of death forgotten broke into a grin and sprinted over to his Dad before rugby tackling him to the floor where they rolled about in a play fight.

"You did that on purpose!" the twelve year old protested as they rolled around on the grass.

"Jesus," Charlie watched all this though tears, he screwed his eyes tight shut and pressed his hands over his ears to block out the laughter which was cutting through him like a knife. "Get out of by head!" He screamed at the top of his lungs. But even with his eyes shut, those two devastating looks, his Mother's and his young self were seared onto his mind's eye.

So clear now. That was why he dreamt this moment, not the calm before the storm as he had always thought. It was the moment young Charlie Walker saw death in his mother's eyes. Saw the very instant the revolution in her cells erupted as the cancer was born. The battle for her life thereafter would be swift and decisive. She would be dead mere months later and

Charlie had seen it all begin. A long since buried memory he had been trying to suppress ever since. But it had taken a dark soul like Randall's to bring it to shattering life.

He opened his eyes again but already the scene was beginning to fade.

"Revelation is a wonderful thing," Charlie vaguely heard Randall say as he was swallowed up once more by the darkness. And this time he was thankful for it.

Sweet oblivion, the part of Charlie that had been ravaged by Randall's so called revelation didn't want the darkness to ever end.

"Just relax now Charlie, remember this is all just a dream."

This time he heard the words as clear as day, spoken by his tormentor not inside his head but somewhere close in the void just as he could hear his own ragged breathing. "Just a dream," he said.

In time the black became grey and the grey melted back into the relative reality of the hotel room. There was a moment of disorientation then as senses gradually returned he realized he was still laid on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. He swung his legs and sat up to see Randall sitting in the chair opposite.

"Fuck," was all he could say.

"How could you have known?" Randall asked softly leaning forward so the meagre light from the window caught his face again. "How could you have known that was the moment your mother got cancer?"

Charlie rubbed his throbbing temples, his head was pounding so hard it felt ready to split clean in two. "I couldn't have."

"Yet you did."

"For fuck sake, no!" Charlie got to his feet and turned away from Randall, he moved over to the window and pushed the curtains aside, dawn was still some way off and with it any hope of an end to this nightmare.

"And you know something else?" Randall continued behind him. Charlie heard him stand and move closer.

At that moment he gave half a thought to jumping straight out of the window, anything to avoid more of his questions. "Please," he pleaded, but Randall would not be silenced.

"You've seen it again. Haven't you?" The pavement, three floors down was looking more and more inviting to Charlie.

"That exact same look," Randall continued, his voice little more than a whisper, he no more than three feet from Charlie now. "This time in your dad."

Charlie suddenly felt faint, he had to rest his hands on the cold window pane.

"Call me a liar."

Fuck it! Charlie thought and swung out an elbow to smack the yank square in the face and to hell with the consequences, but even though he was sure Randall was directly behind him, his blow failed to connect with anything but thin air. He turned around, ready to dodge any counter attack, but was shocked to see Randall was still sitting in the chair, his features half masked by shadow with a look of mild amusement on his dimly lit face.

"For God's sake..." Charlie's shoulders sagged as the last of his energy drained out of him. "I can't take this anymore... If I'm asleep, for Christ sakes just let me sleep."

"You know deep down your Dad is going to die in that hospital." Randall finally got to his feet. Close to collapse as he was, Charlie wasn't going to take his eyes off him his time as he spoke, so he knew exactly where he was. "You saw it, didn't you?" Randall insisted. "That look in his eyes. That's why you don't like visiting him. That's the real reason you can't tell him you're not an estate agent."

"How...?" Charlie's voice trailed off, no need to ask how he knew, he knew everything, even his darkest dreams and what they meant.

"I know you," Randall said and slowly began to move around the sofa and over to where Charlie was standing. Charlie instinctively moved away matching him step for step to keep his distance. "And what would you say, if I told you I could stop it happening?"

"I'd say you were full of shit," Charlie spat back at him.

"Lesson number one, Charlie. The world is not quite as you thought it was. Some of us can change things. Inevitable things."

"I don't believe you!" Charlie gave a start as he felt his back touch the wall. He was quite literally cornered.

"I can help you Charlie," the tone of Randall's voice was seduction itself wrapped in the darkness of the room. "Or help you help yourself."

"Why would you?" Charlie was light headed, he felt like he was floating, he glanced at his feet just to make sure they were still on the floor.

"Maybe I'm an angel," Randall said and stopped three feet from Charlie.

"Well... Are you?"

"Of sorts, I guess," Randall said with a shrug. "Just not in the conventional sense." He paused, thinking then added. "I'm kind of a dark angel." He nodded to himself, Randall liked the sound of that.

Charlie slid down the wall until his backside hit the carpet. "Christ, I'm so tired." All he wanted to do now was sleep, or die, either would be better than this state of tormented limbo half way between both. Neither came, so tears would have to do for now.

Randall looked down at Charlie as he wept. There was no doubt he felt something in the kid, that 'spark' for want of a better word. He had undoubted potential but Randall knew now wasn't the time or place, or even if he could unlock that potential given a chance. But more than that he finally realized why it was he had come here tonight, to drag the kid through an emotional blender.

Not to recruit him, or even to cause him casual cruelty (Which under normal circumstances would have been reason enough). It was to find in him that moment; the one Randall had searched so hard and so far in vain to find in his own past.

That forgotten catalyst that had started him on this wild and surreal ride he was on. On many occasions Randall had doubted there was one, but this was vindication that his search wasn't folly. Charlie had one, a look and the knowledge of what lay behind it was all it had taken.

So somewhere, deep down Randall had his, lost for now in the darkest recesses of his mind, but one day, even if it took to the end of time itself he



would find it, and with it would come a meaning to all this, of that he was sure.

*"Randall!"*

The collector felt Ishrel enter the room behind him a split second before he spoke, which gave him just enough time to picture him once more as Sherlock Holmes in a cheap Halloween mask. He turned around and sure enough there stood the famous detective. Ishrel took a step, then looked down at himself and gave a sign of dismay that Randall knew he would never tire of.

*"Really?"* The demon said. *"Are we still doing this?"*

"You know you like it," Randall replied. Besides he thought it he always found it much easier than trying to concentrate on that floating heat haze form Ishrel favoured if left to his own devices.

*"What are you doing here?"* Ishrel asked nodding towards the prone Charlie. *"I thought you were leaving this one alone?"*

As Ishrel spoke, Charlie suddenly cursed. "Fuck!" he grasped his head, his face a mask of pain. "What was that?"

Both Randall and Ishrel turned to Charlie in astonishment. "You heard that?" Randall asked.

*"Impossible!"* Ishrel dismissed.

"Ow, fuck!" Charlie winced in pain again. "There it was again. What the hell was that?" He held his head as if it was going to split open.

"What did you hear?" Randall asked.

"Something," Charlie let out a sharp breath. He tried to make sense of what he had heard. It was almost a feeling more than a sound. "Sounded like... Hard to describe.. Felt more like, Christ I dunno... Felt like nails down a fucking black board." That was close enough. Nails scraped down a black board but heard through a thousand watt speaker stack.

"Hmm, interesting." Proof positive Randall was right about Charlie.

*"Randall..."* Ishrel fidgeted behind Randall clearly not happy about this latest turn of events, he was about to speak again, but Randall silenced him with the wave of a hand as Charlie flinched again.

"Nails down a black board? Couldn't have put it better myself," Randall agreed.

"Yeah," Charlie said weakly his face slick with sweat, he was so exhausted now he could barely speak. He looked fit to pass out from the pain Ishrel's words were causing him. Pass out or worse, after all his heart was only human.

"Except..." Charlie continued with great effort. "Sounds mad, but I could have sworn I almost heard..." He shook his head in disbelief, but still added. "Words."

"I knew it!" Randall exclaimed with a clap of the hands, he spun around to Ishrel who was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "I knew I was right about this one. He can hear you."

*"This is going too far, Collector,"* Ishrel said putting his hands on his hips rather campily. *"Even for you. I can tell you've shown this one too much already. Kill him and let us be gone."*

"Jesus!" Charlie yelled. "There it is again. Christ make it stop!" He tried to push himself up against the wall but half way between sitting and standing his legs turned to jelly and he slid back down. "Sounds like, sounds like a voice!" He scanned the darkened room for any sign of the phantom speaker but could find no one else. He looked up at Randall with blood shot eyes. "What's this?" He said bitterly through gritted teeth. "Another mind fuck, Randall?"

"No, not this time." Randall replied. "This one's quite real. Well, I say real..."

*"Randall, don't you..."* Ishrel warned but was cut off mid threat.

"Charlie Walker, meet Ishrel. Ishrel, meet..."

**"ENOUGH!"** Ishrel's voice exploded out of his comic form with real power this time, even laced with emotion, rage. And Randall knew he had crossed the line, he even thought for a brief moment the exclamation had made the floor vibrate beneath his feet.

The sheer force of Ishrel's voice may have startled Randall, but it damn near killed Charlie. He screamed in pain and covered his ears in a vain attempt to block out the cacophony.

Mental note, mused Randall. Don't push the little shit too far. If he could ever actually influence the outside world you will never hear the last of it. "Okay," he said holding out his hands in surrender. "That would be my bad as the kids say."

The demon pointed a bony finger at Randall. *"You do not mention my name in the presence of the likes of his kind."*

"Okay, take it easy Holmes," Randall said and was thankful whatever effect Ishrel seemed to have on the real world had passed.

Ishrel turned his masked face to the cowering Charlie, who was curled up in a ball now, all sanity seemingly gone. He was shaking his head and muttering incoherently to himself.

*"The other one has led me to Whitaker,"* the demon said. *"I have no doubt we can find McCulloch through him. Enough of your games, Randall. We no longer need this one. Kill him and the other when he returns."* Death sentence given Ishrel turned away.

"Shame," Randall lamented and knelt next to the shivering young man. "I could have taught this one."

*"No you couldn't!"* Ishrel said without turning back. *"It is not your place, or mine for that matter to choose or train potential collectors. Now get on with it. Make it quick or slow, it's your choice."*

"Huh, too kind," Randall said, but he had already made up his mind what he was going to do. And it had surprised and disturbed him in equal measure. Charlie flinched slightly as Randall gently pressed his hand on the back of his head, just at the base of the skull as he had done before. Randall bent close to the trembling man's ear. "Remember Charlie," he whispered. "It's all just a bad dream."

## TWENTY-FIVE

Stupid, stupid, stupid!! The further he got away from Tommy Whitaker's madness the more Bill Fraker cursed himself for the way he had reacted. He was just thankful Charlie or any of the other boys had not been there to

witness him stumbling away from the place like a scared teenager. So unprofessional, now he was in the familiar territory of his own car he was just plain embarrassed about it all.

Fraker pulled the car into a parking space in the hotel's underground car park and switched off the engine. Then he just sat there contemplating his next move. He kept going back to the Lawyer. It was as if he was radiating fear, and at the time Fraker had got a damn good dose of it, but now that he was away from him he could look at the whole situation through a calm collected, rational eye.

Whitaker was a grade A nut job, you could take that to the bank, but the real question was, Why? Was he simply a man driven out of his mind through fear for his life? That was understandable and above all (which Fraker liked) a perfectly normal reaction. Or was it as the man himself had put it; through the fear for his very soul.

No for Christ sake, that was just bollocks. Wasn't it? The yank was a hit man, nothing more. But in the end did it really matter? He had to get Charlie and get out of all this, and he was sure in a couple of days he would be able to laugh about all this heaven and hell shit Whitaker was spouting and it would make a great anecdote to bore the boys with, with the admittance of his stumbling exit or course.

First things first, he would have to slip the phone number Whitaker had given him under Randall's door and then get Charlie and get out, preferably without bumping into the yank, that was a conversation he didn't want, just in case (again he would laugh about this later) there was some truth in Whitaker's ramblings.

Besides he had no reason to come after them, not with Whitaker in the bag. Fraker and Charlie weren't important in all this, sure they were on the edge of something big, something weird, but it was like Whitaker had put it, it wasn't too late for them to get out of this unscathed, '*untainted*.' Fraker got a flash of the fear in Whitaker's eyes at the word, and it sent a chill down his spine.

Stupid, stupid, Stupid. Fraker smacked his leg and told himself to get a grip, then got out of the car. He cursed himself not for the first time tonight but put it down to tiredness this time. It was nearly four in the morning and the car park was deathly quiet except for his footfalls as he made his way

passed the rows of outrageously expensive cars and over to the car park's lift at the far end. Just a few more minutes now and he would be dragging Charlie back down here and the two of them could get gone and leave Randall to it.

It was then, just as he reached the lift, that every car alarm in the car park went off. Fraker cried out loud in shock and fell with his back against the unopened lift doors, barely managing to keep his footing. "Fuck me!" he shouted but the words were swallowed up by the deafening alarms bouncing off the concrete walls around him.

Suddenly he toppled backwards as the lift doors opened and he fell flat on his back which knocked the wind out of him. Then to add insult to injury hit his head hard on the lifts cold metal floor. Flecks of lights danced in front of Fraker's eyes as unconsciousness beckoned but the shock of the blow and the freezing lift floor on his back pulled him back from the brink of oblivion. A dark shape loomed over him and Fraker looked up and into Randall's face looking down on him.

Fuck.

The collector smiled and casually stepped over him and walked off into the car park carrying his suitcase. The moment he did so the alarms silenced. "Thanks for your help, Bill," Randall said without looking around. "I'll be stealing your car by the way, if that's okay."

Before the befuddled Fraker could muster a response the lift doors closed and it started to climb. Fraker patted his trouser pocket for his car keys and wasn't surprised to find that they had gone. 'Explain that one away, Mister rational.' "Fucking hell," he said sitting up. "Fucking Hell." Fraker glanced at the row of buttons next to the door, floor three, their floor was already lit. After a moment the lift stopped and the doors opened with a gentle 'ping'.

Back in the car park, Randall got into the car and fired up the engine, he adjusted the rear view mirror until he could see Sherlock Holmes wearing a cheap Halloween mask sitting in the back seat. "D'you think the car alarm thing was too much?" He asked.

*"Actually I thought that was rather good,"* Ishrel replied, much to Randall's surprise. *"I suppose scaring him half to death is better than nothing at all."*

"Complements Ishrel, from you?" Randall remarked as he pulled away and headed towards the exit, making sure he clipped an especially expensive Ferrari on the way out as he did so. "I must be slipping."

*"Hmm,"* The demon replied settling back in the seat. *"I still think you should have killed them both."*

"Yeah, I kinda surprised myself with that one." Randall replied truthfully, if he was honest he didn't know why he hadn't killed Charlie, perhaps there really was some connection between them, or perhaps the answer was just simply that he was getting soft, spending so much time in the company of mortals.

He shook his head clear of such thoughts and added. "But hey, don't worry, you'll have your blood before it gets light. Oceans of it." And with this Randall stomped on the gas and the car sped away through the sleeping city streets and one step closer to the elusive Larry McCulloch.

"Charlie, shit!" Fraker dragged himself to his feet and staggered out of the lift and into the corridor, he stumbled down it like a drunk man, using first one wall and then the other for support as he pin-balled towards their room at the end. As he got closer the breath caught in Fraker's throat seeing the door was ajar. He steadied himself as best he could before going in, steeling himself to what he might find inside.

"Charlie?" He called out but got no reply, "Shit," there was nothing for it he had to go in. Fraker nudged open the door all the way with his shoulder and not for the first time tonight he wished he had the Berreta, Christ only knew what the yank had left behind. He moved inside. The room was in near darkness, Fraker fumbled for the light switch on the wall to his left and turned it on expecting a blood bath.

Fraker sighed audibly with relief, Charlie was sitting on the sofa with his head in his hands. "Charlie?" Fraker came into the room which was mercifully all intact and walked slowly over to where Charlie was sitting, who was also mercifully in one piece and blood free.

As he approached the young man, Walker looked up, even though he was unscathed Fraker couldn't help but gasp at his pallid exhausted features. His normally ruddy cheeks were totally drained of colour and for a moment all Charlie did was look at him blankly as if he was a stranger, Fraker opened his mouth to speak but then a look of recognition floored Charlie's blank face.

"Bill?" he said weakly as if still a little unsure he was real.

"It's me mate," Fraker replied. And the moment Charlie heard his friend's voice he broke down in tears. Fraker rushed over and knelt next to Charlie and wrapped his arms round him. "It's okay, Charlie," Fraker said fighting his own tears. "I've got you, I've got you." He screwed his eyes tight shut and offered a prayer of thanks to any passing deity who might be listening.

"Oh, Bill... I," Charlie sobbed into Fraker's shoulder rendering the rest of the sentence incoherent. Fraker held him closer and let him cry it out.

"It's okay, let it out, I'm here, you're safe now. Just take a sec', let it all out." His voice cracked with emotion, tears streaming down his own cheeks now. He just couldn't believe how relieved he was Charlie was okay and in one piece. The kid was scared shitless and in shock, but a quick look over him showed he was physically at least unharmed.

"Phew!" Charlie gently pushed Fraker away and wiped the tears from his cheeks, he smile weakly obviously a little embarrassed but seemed almost relieved to see Fraker had been crying as well. The older man playfully rubbed his hair messing it up, usually that would have brought a howl of protest from Charlie but not tonight.

"Christ, Mate," Fraker said awkwardly. "I thought maybe..." Before he could finish Charlie smiled and nodded. Fraker didn't have to say it, both of them knew only too well how this could all have turned out.

"Shit," Charlie suddenly grew serious; he looked around the room frantically. "Where's Randall?"

"It's okay," Fraker patted Charlie's arm reassuringly. "He's gone."

"You sure?" Charlie got to his feet still taking in the room as if expecting the yank to appear from behind the curtains or something.

"Absolutely," Fraker said standing up, his knees crack alarmingly making him wince. "I, erm, I bumped into him in the car park."

"What happened?"

"Nothing, well..." He thought about telling about the car alarms but decided it wouldn't make any sense, besides he could see Charlie was shaking again. "Charlie, sit down eh?"

The young man didn't seem to hear, he rubbed the back of his head frowning and looked at his hand as if expecting to see something on it. "Fuck," he spat out, his teeth were literally chattering. It was a look Fraker had seen before, Charlie was still in shock and if anything had a look in his eyes similar to Tommy Whitaker, which almost broke the older man's heart.

"What did he do to you? Fraker asked.

Charlie finally looked at him and exhaled. He shook his head and took a moment to collect his muddled thoughts. "I, Christ, it's hard to," he kicked the table in frustration. "He was... He was here," he gestured around the room. "I think, maybe." He wrinkled his nose then forced himself to look Bill in the eyes. "But he was also... Inside my head, Bill." He shrugged knowing how weird that sounded, but Fraker just nodded.

Christ knew it wasn't the strangest thing Fraker had heard tonight.

Charlie wrapped his arms around himself, he was really shaking now, tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them away. "Fucking freak!" He said, rubbing the back of his head again.

"Well, he's gone now mate. Trust me."

"I hope you're right."

"Y'know?" Fraker said. "I really think we dodged a bullet here tonight, Charlie."

Charlie nodded. "Yeah, something's... Something's really wrong here, Bill."

"No shit." Fraker said, then he just had to ask. "Charlie, you said Randall was inside your head?"

The young man cringed, his eyes seemed to glaze over somewhat as he thought back. Fraker was about to tell him it didn't matter, anything to get that haunted look off his face when Charlie spoke. "Bill Mate..." He looked ready to spill it all but then obviously changed his mind an instant later. "Let's



just say, you wouldn't believe me if I told you." He shook the memory off with a shake of the head. "Even if I was only dreaming half of it."

In truth Fraker was thankful of Charlie's reticence. He he'd had more than enough strangeness for one night.

"Tell me," Charlie said, breaking the silence. "When exactly did we end up in the twilight zone?" He smiled, it was weak but still it lit up his weary face.

"Dunno Mate," Fraker replied. "But this yank seems to have that effect on a lot of people." With this he went through into his bedroom eager to be away from all this. "Get your gear together, Charlie. We're off."

"God I love you, Bill," Charlie shouted through from the other room. "But what about the boss?"

Fraker took his suitcase and put it on the bed. "Don't worry about that, I'll clear it with the old man in the morning." He began to unceremoniously toss his clothes into the case.

"Bill?" Fraker turned to see Charlie in the doorway. He was starting to look half way human again and Fraker knew that thankfully that meant the wise cracks wouldn't be too far away. He missed them, and that was proof positive about how messed up things were. But for now, Charlie was still gravely serious, it didn't suit him.

"Yes mate."

"Did you find Whitaker?"

"Yeah Charlie, I did."

"What did he say?"

"Like you said. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Charlie frowned, he knew only too well. It took him a few seconds before he asked. "What is he, Bill?"

Fraker closed his suitcase and snapped the clasps shut. "Randall?" Charlie nodded. "I really don't know. And right at this moment, I don't care. Whatever he is..." he paused at this. '*Whatever?* Poor choice of word William (Or was it?). "Whoever his is," Fraker corrected himself for sanities sake. "Whitaker was beyond scared of him. And we are best out of it."

He looked at the shadow that was Charlie Walker still standing in the doorway. He had never been what you would call bulky at the best of times but right now he seemed almost skeletal. "You okay Charlie? Really I mean?"

"Dunno," Charlie said plainly with a shrug. "But I'll be a lot better when we are away from here."

"Me too, mate." Fraker agreed and went through into the bathroom to collect his toiletries. When he returned Charlie was still hovering by the door.

"I, I gotta go see my Dad." He said. Choking back tears. "I've gotta tell him, everything."

"Christ, you sure?" Fraker asked and put his wash bag in the side pocket of his case.

Charlie nodded, his eyes glistening with fresh tears. He rubbed the back of his head again and his eyes drifted off into space, Fraker could see the beginnings of a thousand yard stare in them.

"Well that's good," Fraker said positively and a little louder than needed in an attempted to pull Charlie back into the present. It seemed to work.

"Yeah, it's time," Charlie said, then added barely audibly. "Before it's too late."

Hey, come on now," Fraker went over to him and put his hands on his bony shoulders. He tried to give him a reassuring smile, but something deep in Charlie's eyes slapped it right off his face. Now that he was up close he could see there was a kind of coldness to them. Something he had never seen in them before and it scared him.

"You okay?" He asked voice was trembling slightly.

"I really don't know, Bill." Charlie replied honestly. He blinked and the tears ran down his cheeks. "Randall really messed with my head. I can't remember half of what he said... But still, there's this feeling he left in me." He struggled to find the right word, but it wouldn't come.

Fraker squeezed his friend's shoulders. Charlie didn't need to say it. It was as plain as day in his eyes.

Dread.

He patted Charlie hard on the shoulders and tore himself away and back to his suitcase on the bed. "Don't worry about it," he said as nonchalantly as he could. "Trust me, it'll all seem better in the morning, when we're away from all this bizarreness. It's got us thinking all kinds of bollocks." He pulled his suitcase off the bed and together they both went through into the main room.

"Get your stuff, Charlie," Fraker said and threw his suitcase onto the sofa. "We are out of here in five."

"Yeah, will do." Charlie disappeared through into his room leaving Fraker alone. He sat down next to his suitcase and rubbed his tired eyes. One hell of a night he thought to himself and glanced over to the mini bar. A shot of whiskey wouldn't go a miss right now, and Christ it wasn't as if he would have to drive anywhere now that Randall had the car. He was still debating with himself when Charlie came back into the room with his case.

"Ready," he announced.

Now Fraker knew things had taken a turn for the surreal. It usually took Charlie hours to pack, and that was just his hair products. Fraker got to his feet and dragged his suitcase off the sofa. He took a final look around the room to make sure they had everything. "You know, I never thought I'd say this. But I feel damn sorry for Larry McCulloch and any other poor bastard who's on Randall's shit list."

Both men headed for the door.

"Just as long as it doesn't include us," Charlie said as they left the room, and hopefully this wonderful world of weirdness behind them for good.

"Amen to that," Fraker replied and closed the door on their part in the whole sorry episode.

## TWENTY-SIX

Mobile phones are bad for your health. It's a debate, with many well-argued pros and cons that has raged for almost as long as the device has existed. And one that will no doubt continue until they are long since

obsolete and the next technological wonder comes along to seduce mankind a fresh.

It's a question that may never fully be answered, unless you asked a certain out of favour lawyer if mobile phones are bad for you. Because, in the end Tommy Whitaker's mobile phone would play a pivotal role in his ultimate downfall, in more ways than one.

Firstly, it was the main reason he was still in his God forsaken hotel room, when by any measure of common sense he should have been well away from the place the instant Bill Fraker had left. And he would have been to were it not for his precious mobile phone's all but empty battery. It was so close to dying that he had to keep it plugged into the wall socket while he was booking his ticket out of this mess.

Tommy paced the threat bare carpet of his room, as best the wire to his charger would allow, and cursed out loud as he was put on hold for the umpteenth time as he desperately tried to book a plane ticket out of England and with luck to safety.

"Sorry sir," the thick Scottish accented kid on the other end said as he came back off hold. "But where did you want to fly to again?"

"Anywhere," Whitaker snapped. "Spain, France, Italy. Christ Timbuktu for all I care."

"Erm, we have an early morning flight available to Crete? I heard it's very nice, even at this time of year."

"Great, book that." Whitaker balanced the phone between his cheek and shoulder as he fumbled in his jacket pocket, which was hanging on the back of a chair, for his credit card.

"Do you require insurance, sir?" The kid asked helpfully.

That almost made Whitaker laugh out loud. He doubted a budget airline provided the sort of insurance he needed right now. "No," he told the call centre drone on the other end, finally finding his credit card.

"Return?" The kid asked.

"Christ no."

"I'll just get you our best price, sir. Please hold."

"No!.. Shit!" The kid was gone, replaced by what sounded vaguely like Vivaldi but played on a child's Bontempi home organ. Whitaker could almost hear the composer turning in his grave. "Fuck it!" He cursed and eyed his beloved credit card, his life saver. He had no friends left and even less hope, but one thing he would always have was money. Money didn't give a shit who was after you, didn't care what was in it for itself. It just was. Bucket loads of the stuff floating around in the virtual world of on line banking, just numbers really with pound signs in front, they were all he had left. And so be it.

Now that he had the makings of a plan, Whitaker allowed himself to believe he might just get out of all this with his balls intact. The near suicidal gloom that had descended over him, brought on by that fat bastard Fraker's visit, was starting to lift little by little and he could see a future, dim for sure, but getting brighter, starting to shine through. Jesus, who knows he might actually live long enough to spend some of his only friend money on something other than a desperate escape. He idly wondered, as Vivaldi deformed twin droned on, if they needed any lawyers in Crete.

That was when the phone went dead.

"Shit! What the fuck?" At first he thought he must have pulled out the charger wire with all his pacing but it was still intact, he lamely shook the phone and pressed the 'on' button again but nothing happened. "Fuck it!" He glanced around, the rooms light was still on so that ruled out a power cut. He tried the button again, his hand was so slick with sweat the phone nearly slipped out of his grasp, he wiped it on his trouser leg and pushed the on button once more, this time he kept it pressed. "Come on, come on," the phone was obscenely expensive but it could still be temperamental, especially when the battery was low.

"Yes!!" Whitaker let out a cry of relief as the display lit up. It had a full signal again and one bar on the battery meter, that was good enough. He pulled the wire out and grabbed his jacket. One bar was more than enough power to phone back the call centre robot and book that flight to Crete, and now he didn't need to do it from this dungeon.

He was about to hit the redial button when there were three heavy knocks on the door.

Whitaker spun and faced the door and just managed to stifle the cry that was escaping his mouth by literally clasp his hand over it. He held his breath and listened. Had Fraker returned? And if so, was he alone?

Silence, but for his heart hammering ten to the dozen in his ears. Whitaker slowly brought his hand away from his mouth, but only when he was sure he wouldn't just scream involuntarily despite himself. That was when he realized he could see his own breath misting in front of him when he exhaled. The room had been cold at the best of times but the temperature seemed to be dropping second by second. The sweat on his face turned to a thin layer of ice on his skin.

"Jesus," the word came out in a cloud. As he stood there shivering.

Bang, bang, bang. Three more impossibly loud knocks on the door shattering the frozen silence. This time Whitaker cried out loud before he had a chance to smother the noise.

"Oh, Jesus, oh Jesus, oh, Jesus." The room was so cold now he half expected the moisture in the air to turn to snow.

Outside in the corridor Randall smiled to himself. Ishrel however didn't see the funny side at all.

*"Oh Randall, for pity sake, won't you just smash the door in and get on with this?"*

Randall had his palms pressed against the paint chipped wood of the door. It was a simple enough trick to suck all the heat out of the room, but Ishrel's bleating in his ear broke his concentration. The collector pulled his hand away in frustration.

"Ishrel!" He rubbed his hands together, they were tingling from the power still surging through them.

*"Well. I don't see why you don't just get on with it,"* The demon complained.

"You really are a vacuous little turd." Randall turned to look at where Ishrel was floating. As a reward for following Fraker and leading them here, Randall had let the creature keep its preferred form, that of a shapeless heat haze type distortion which floated at head height when it wasn't skulking around his feet. A rare moment of charity he was already beginning to regret.

"Where's your sense of style?" He asked but it was a pointless question and one he already knew the answer to; 'I don't follow you.'

*"I don't follow you,"* Ishrel duly echoed, nothing if not predictable.

Randall turned back to the door, he could feel the waves of fear from inside radiating through the wood and it felt like sunshine on his face. He knew Ishrel was incapable of such subtleties of feeling, but he didn't care. Moments like this, moments to savour were lost on the demon. And Ishrel hated him for it. Which was a bonus.

Randall lent forwards slightly and closing his eyes he rested his forehead on the door, letting the fear wash over him.

*"Randall!"* said Ishrel.

"Tut, Okay." Randall said testily and stepped back, the moment now well and truly ruined. But in truth, Ishrel was right. Tommy Whitaker was only a stepping stone, nothing more. He hammered on the door three more times.

"Tommy Whitaker," he said in his best imposing voice of doom tone. "Open this door." He wasn't a hundred percent sure, but Randall thought he heard a whimper from the other side. Either way the fear was fair flooding through now.

Inside Whitaker's knees buckled and before he knew what had happened he was on the floor. He curled himself up into the foetal position and covered his face with his hands, like a child trying to hide from the boogey man. In a futile 'if I can't see you, you can't see me' gesture. He lay there shivering from cold and fear in equal measure when the boogey man outside spoke again.

"Open the door Tommy. I won't ask again."

The boogey man was angry and it knew his name. Whitaker dumbly shook his head 'no', and silently prayed for it to go away.

But tonight God wasn't listening to Tommy Whitaker. He had been a bad boy, and now it was time to pay.

The door exploded, silently, like all the sound had been sucked from the room along with the heat, but with the force of a hand grenade showering the room with a thousand splinters.

Outside Randall counted to ten, for dramatic effect, then stepped inside.

"Or don't," he said entering and almost ruined a perfectly good entrance by nearly tripping over the prone lawyer. He looked down at him. "Come on Tommy, get up, huh?"

Whitaker was gasping for breath, his grubby white shirt was flecked with dozens of tiny drop of blood from where the shards of door had hit him, they bloomed as the blood seeped through the material. He didn't know it but he was lucky he had been on the floor when the door exploded and not in the direct path of the blast, the tiny wooden projectiles would have surely taken his sight at the very least along with most of the flesh from his face.

"Oh, God... Oh, Jesus..." Was all he could muster in way of response to Randall that was until he uncurled himself and then let out a scream of pain.

"Here. Let me help you," Randall grabbed his collar and unceremoniously dragged Whitaker to his feet, causing him to let out quite an impressive scream especially from one so obviously exhausted.

Still gasping, Whitaker looked up at Randall in dismay as if only now realizing he was actually there and not some phantom of his fear addled imagination. "Oh, God," he choked out. "It's all true."

"Friad so buddy," Randall replied and without thinking dusted Whitaker off causing the wounded man to wince violently. His legs threatened to give out so Randall grabbed his arms to keep him upright. "Shit, sorry about that," Randall winced in sympathy seeing the pain on Whitaker's face. "That wasn't such a good idea." He gingerly let go of Whitaker's arms after he was sure he wouldn't just keel over. The lawyer swayed slightly but at least stayed on his feet.

"It's all true," Whitaker repeated his face was a mask of pain.

"All of it," Randall stated. "But by the look of you, you knew that already."

Whitaker nodded forlornly. Then his face suddenly straightened as if a self-preservation switch had just clicked on in his brain. "Randall, wait," he licked his chapped lips searching for the right words. "I gave Fraker McCulloch's number. That's all I have." Then he actually held up his right hand palm out. "I swear."

"On your life?" Randall asked melodramatically.



"God yes," Whitaker replied nodding like an idiot.

"Truth is Tom, the number on its own isn't any good to me..." How could he put this? "I need someone with a personal connection to McCulloch to make the call. That's how we trace him."

It was the truth, Ishrel could follow the signal but only if it was laced with emotion. Hate, fear worked best but something more than just a radio signal, after all they weren't the CIA. That emotional connection between the two ends would enable Ishrel to surf the ether from Whitaker and nail McCulloch's location.

"Sharks," Whitaker said somewhat obliquely.

"Huh?" It took Randall a moment but then he got the ripples analogy. "That's right," he said brightly. "Ripples. All I need is for you to call him, I have a colleague who can follow the ripples right to McCulloch. Then you can go."

Whitaker looked sullen. "I don't believe you."

"Hmm," Ishrel buzzed in Randall's ear. "*He's not as stupid as he looks.*"

"Hush now," Randall said still looking at Whitaker.

"Huh?"

"Not you."

Whitaker let out a slow breath and straightened himself up as best he could, the motion obviously pained him but he bit back any reaction in his face. "Will it be quick?" He asked, looking Randall firmly in the eyes.

"What? The call or your death?" He asked flatly.

The bluntness of the reply made Whitaker wince ever so slightly, more of a twitch of the eye than anything, barely noticeable really especially considering the subject matter and his hopeless situation. The man was struggling to keep what dignity he had left, and much to Randall's admiration he was managing to do just that. He must have been quite something in his prime, Randall mused.

"*Stop toying with him,*" Ishrel interrupted. "*He knows you are going to kill him. I can smell it on him.*"

It was true, they both knew clear as day only Randall would be walking out of this room.

"Make the call," Randall said softening his tone. "After that I'll send you on your way. And yes, it will be quick."

Tears filled Whitaker's eyes and he nodded.

The truth was, despite Whitaker's new found courage, Randall really wanted to make him suffer for all the running around he had made him do. But again as Ishrel had put it, Whitaker was little more than a stepping stone to McCulloch.

Larry McCulloch, now he was a different matter entirely. That particular meeting when it finally came wouldn't be pretty at all. Randall would get extra points for making him suffer.

"Will I..." Whitaker's voice broke for a second, he tried to clear his throat before continuing. "Will I go..." It was no good he just couldn't finish the sentence.

"To hell?" Randall finished the sentence for him.

For a moment it looked to Randall like Whitaker was finally going to break down into the quivering mass of hysteria he had been trying so hard to keep at bay these past few minutes. Now that he had heard those dreaded words out loud. So much for rumour and paranoia and now so much for hope. Now that it was said out loud that somehow made it a fact. *'to hell*. The Lawyer seemed to let the words sink in, then he nodded ever so slightly as if accepting his fate.

"You have sown my friend," Randall explained as Whitaker's shoulders sagged under the weight of it all. "Now it's time to reap. Just like in the good book."

Again Whitaker nodded, he was clearly fighting the panic that was wanting to burst out from every pore of his being, but still he was winning that fight. Just.

"Come on, Tom, you're doing great." Randall felt a sudden urge to slam him on the arm but remembered the multitude of cuts the man had suffered and decided against it, he would have to make do with words of encouragement for now. "Keep your dignity, just a little while longer. It's

really the only thing you have control of. Make the call, then you can lose it all you want. Christ knows no one will blame you for that. Least of all me."

*"Nor me,"* Ishrel chimed in. *"I'm even counting on it."*

Whitaker straightened himself as best he could. He even made a half-hearted attempt to smooth down his famous hair one last time. "Okay," he said firmly and crouched down to pick up his mobile phone which was laid amongst the debris of the door on the floor by his feet. He dusted it off and began to scroll through the address book.

Randall felt Ishrel move over closer to Whitaker and could just make out his heat haze of a form over by his shoulder. He was studying the Lawyer's face who of course felt nothing of the demon's presence.

*"Hmm,"* the demon mused. *"Interesting. I thought this one would be a beggar and a screamer. Just goes to show you never can tell."* Randall thought he detected the merest hint of disappointment in his colourless voice.

Then Ishrel drifted away to the corner of the room to prepare to follow the phone signal as only his kind could once the all-important emotional connection was made between Whitaker and the errant McCulloch. Then he added with a definite hint of mournfulness. *"Shame really. I'm all for begging and screaming."*

Oblivious to half his audience, Whitaker found the number and hit the dial button then held the phone to his ear. "It's ringing," he said hoarsely.

"Good boy,"

"What should I say?"

"Doesn't matter," Randall replied. "Just say his name when you're sure it's him who's answered. Then you can give the phone to me, and I'll say something ominous." He added with a smile.

*"Remember, it has to be McCulloch,"* Ishrel said from the corner, *"If one of those shit eating God squanders with him answers, I won't be able to find him."*

"He'll answer, just get ready." Randall told him.

Although Ishrel was the real expert at this, Randall could already see faint tendrils of cold blue light emanating from the phone as its signal drifted off into the ether. He could hear the demon behind him purring softly in anticipation as it tried to tune itself into the energy signature it would use to find McCulloch.

Randall had seen the little shit do this a couple of times before, both times with amazing success, it was all down to the emotional link between the two ends of the signal.

He knew this whole thing would have been over the moment the demon found McCulloch if the creature could inflict violence of its own. Ishrel would make the perfect assassin in that respect, no style or imagination but still it did have unerring instincts in such things, not that Randall would ever admit it to Ishrel. Besides he would be out of a job, dead in a New York alley all those decades ago. Whereas there were times when he wished that had been his final fate, but not today. Today he was enjoying this crazy after life of his.

*"Come on, come on,"* Ishrel hissed.

"Trouble?" Randall asked.

"No, the bastard isn't answering. I hope he still has his phone."

"Give him chance, Ishrel. It is four thirty in the morning." Randall said

*"Soundly sleep the damned,"* Ishrel said. And Randall liked the sound of that.

Soundly slept the damned, until they are so rudely awakened. Larry McCulloch was pulled out of the best dream he had had in weeks. He was laid on a foreign beach somewhere hot, perhaps Greece, but it didn't really matter. What did matter was that he was surrounded by a bevy of scantily clad local beauties and if that wasn't good enough, the best part was that he was being waited on hand and foot by that prick Lewis who he had running back and forth catering to his every whim, dressed in a winter coat and thick woollen trousers. The poor sap was almost drowning in his own sweat.

He had just sent him off running through the baking sand to fetch him another ice cold cocktail when a familiar ring tone cut through the serenity like a knife. He tried desperately to avoid the inevitable rude awakening but

to no avail. One second he was on the beach, the next he was sitting up in bed in his freezing room in the safe house. Still shaking off the effects of sleep he rolled cross the bed and grabbed his mobile from the bed side table. Why the hell hadn't he turned the damn thing off?

He contemplated doing just that when he was the caller ID flash up; '*Whitaker*'. Much against his better judgment he pressed the answer button but he swore that if the arse hole just started babbling on about sharks and shit again he would bin the phone and buy a new one in the morning.

"Tommy? For fuck sake man, do you know what time it is?"

Silence.

Larry covered the mouth piece, "Oh for fuck's sake," he said to the empty room, then he remembered who was on the other end, and repeated it into the phone. "Oh for fuck's sake, Tommy?"

Still nothing, but the faint sound of breathing.

"Whitaker, don't start this bollocks again!" He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "I know it's you, Whitaker, I can see the fucking caller ID!" He shivered and grabbed the duvet with his free hand and wrapped it around himself. He moved his thumb to the end call button.

"Larry McCulloch," Tommy said almost mechanically. "You are fucked."

"Tommy. What did you say?" Then Larry realized Whitaker had used his full name for some reason. Ripples? The word gnawed at the back of his mind, he tried to dismiss it as tiredness. Ripples? Bullshit!

There was a few seconds of silence again and Larry was about to speak when Whitaker said quite formally; "Larry McCulloch. I've got somebody here who wants to speak to you."

Larry's blood seemed to freeze in his veins as he heard the phone change hands. He was about to press end call when an American on the other end spoke.

"Did you say your prayers tonight, Larry?"

Then the phone went dead.

Larry let the phone slip from his hand and vaguely heard it hit the floor a million miles away. He tried to swallow but it caught in his throat, then finally he just managed to croak out. "Oh, bollocks."

Randall tossed the phone away and turned to Ishrel. "Well?"

"*Got him!*" Ishrel's shimmering form rose into the air, which was now thick with blue trails of light swirling around the ceiling and out through the window and off into the night. They were so vivid Randall himself could have followed them although not with Ishrel's speed. He knew they would fade all too quickly now that the connection was broken. The demon hovered close to the ceiling letting the light show wrap itself around him as he orientated himself to the direction it was leading. "*Oh, yes, yes I can use this,*" Ishrel purred. An instant later he was gone, riding the light stream like a roller coaster out the window and away.

"I knew I kept that guy around for a reason," Randall said. The light was already fading fast, plunging the room back into near darkness once more.

Whitaker of course saw none of this. "Is that all?" He asked tentatively.

"Yeah. Not much to see from your point of view, but it was quite a show from where I'm standing."

The lawyer looked around the room puzzled.

A moment later Ishrel was back in the room, bouncing around like a demented ball of black energy. "*Found him,*" he declared and Randall caught a brief glimpse of his cat like eyes as they flashed in the undulating heat haze that made up his body. "*And he's only some fifty or so miles from here.*"

"You sure you won't lose him?" Randall asked. He knew once the God squaders learnt that Randall had contacted McCulloch it wouldn't take them long to figure out the old crook had been traced. "What if they move him?"

"*Ha!*" Ishrel was as high as a kite, his usually vacuous voice definitely had a hint of excitement in it. In fact Randall couldn't remember the last time he had seen the thing so worked up, he seemed to be enjoying this field work lark. "*They could move him to the very gates of heaven and I could still follow. We have him collector, we have him.*"

"Good shit," Randall said with a nod. He turned to Whitaker who was looking at him apparently talking to himself somewhat perplexed. "Sorry Tommy. Very rude of me. I was just discussing matters with my associate."

*"Don't you dare name me, Collector,"* Ishrel warned. *"Not again."*

Normally that would be like a red rag to a bull to Randall, but he bit his tongue this time, not wanting to sour Ishrel's good mood. After all the little shit had finally proved useful and even demons deserve a break from having their balls busted once in a while. "Fair enough," he said.

"I, don't understand." Whitaker said with a shake of the head.

"Right, let's be off," Randall said with a clap of the hands. He turned to leave when Ishrel came buzzing in his ear.

*"Erm, aren't you forgetting something, Randall?"* He motioned to Whitaker as best as he could given his current ethereal form.

"Oh, Christ, Yeah." Randall spun back to Whitaker who had been watching him opened mouthed talking to himself again. "Shit, sorry Tom. I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on."

"Randall... wait..." Whitaker flinched but could do little else. "Listen..."

Not much for last words, especially coming from a man who had made his fortune talking judges and jurors alike senseless over the years. But his last they were.

Randall moved with lightning speed and before the lawyer could react he snapped his neck in one fluid motion with a practised efficiency. It was all in the flick of the wrists. Whitaker's vertebrate snapped and part of the jagged edged bone sliced right through his jugular and neck.

A massive gout of blood painted the ceiling and far wall a shocking red as it jetted from the open wound.

Whitaker let out a brief strangled cry before collapsing to the floor where he laid quite dead with a look of shock of his face and his head twisted at an odd angle to the rest of his body. Blood was still pumping from the ragged hole in his neck but with less and less force with each spurt as his veins emptied and his heart failed.

Tommy Whitaker was dead, and it had been quick as promised. If not clean.

"There's your blood Ishrel. Happy now?"

"*At last!*" Ishrel exclaimed with as close as he could get to genuine glee. "*A body count!*"

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Time, that great deceiver. One moment it moves like molasses. Minute hands on a clock face taking an eternity to rotate three hundred and sixty degrees. Then, while your guard is down, just as you have settled into its hypnotic arms and let yourself be carried along at its leisurely pace, in the blink of an eye it would flow like water through your hands and no matter how you protested this sudden change it would slip through your fingers until, before you know it, it was all but gone.

And so time had played its trick on Father Nichols over these last few days, lulling him into a false sense of security. It had slowed to a crawl, each minute seemed an hour, each hour a day. Until it had succeeded in convincing him it would stretch on for as long as he needed it to.

It was something he had grown used to living in the bowels of the Vatican. For time there was a law unto itself. As when it wasn't standing still, could always be counted on to run so slowly as to make no difference. The place had stood for hundreds of years hardly changing much at all, untouched as it was by the outside world where time played mischief with stone and bone alike.

When Nichols had first arrived back in England, he was still very much running on Vatican time, for he knew the bureaucratic wheels there turned as slowly today as they had down through the centuries and as thus it was pointless to will them to turn any faster now that he was here in the outside world. He knew this all too well and had tried to prepare himself for it, but still now that he was out here he couldn't quite stop himself from fretting.



After all, things were different when you were out here on the front line, out in the open and potentially at the mercy of God only knew what. Waiting, waiting as the Cardinals met in dusty rooms taking their time as they always did to discuss the fate of others. But this time it was Nichols' fate they were debating, his and the other poor souls charged with the care and protection of the main topic of conversation; Larry McCulloch.

But as the hours had stretched into days, time slowed out here in the 'real' world too. And Father Nichols was its fool. Believing as he did in its promise of never ending minutes, all the time he needed to save McCulloch from the darkness. One minute coming after the other until they made one bloated hour after another. For as long (it had seemed) the Priest needed it to tick on.

It was a seduction he willingly relented to. As the armies of damnation hadn't come to break down the door, to kill them all and drag Larry McCulloch off to the hell he so richly deserved. So the initial fretting had soon given way to unease which in turn had soothed into a comfortable tedium. Nichols, without realizing it, had let himself be seduced into thinking; Tick, as the saying went, would always follow tock, etc, etc.

It was a nice dream while it lasted, but one from which Larry McCulloch had been quite literally dragged from no more than an hour ago. And thus Father Nichols had awoken to find that time had grown tired of sloth and had, on a whim, opted instead for warp factor nine. And performing a deft sleight of hand trick, time had all but run out in the blink of a bleary eye.

And with it the sudden realization that time was now smoke, it had paralysed his usually acute senses into numbing inaction. His mind was awash with a million different thoughts at once. Each vying in vain for his attention, but with such fury that try as he might he couldn't grasp one.

All his semi-comatose state would allow him to do was just stand there with his heart in his boots looking out through a gap in the living room curtains to the approaching dawn outside, which was developing, as if for dramatic effect, into an ominous red colour. Time was a slippery thing now so he couldn't tell if he had been standing there, neither use nor ornament, for mere seconds or an hour or more. It was all a nonsense now but he just couldn't drag himself away from the window.

What was it he was looking for out there in the dwindling night? Was he keeping watch for death's imminent arrival? Would it really come so soon? Or was his vigil in some vain hope of divine intervention come riding swiftly on the dawn's coat tails to save the day?

He just didn't know.

Through the mire of indecision he was up to his neck in, Nichols became vaguely aware of Larry muttering something or other in the room behind him, but that could have been a million miles away for all he could gather as it barely registered here in his own little world by the window where only the oncoming blood red dawn seemed real.

Then a blur of movement in the shadows of the garden outside caught his eye, he looked down to see a scrawny black and white cat come darting out from behind the house, it ran across the unkempt lawn and cleared the hedge in one graceful bound and then sprinted off across the road before being swallowed up by what was left of the night.

"Someone's got the right idea," he half heard himself say then returned his gaze to the hypnotic sky above, still waiting for either death or the celestial cavalry to arrive. More movement behind him this time almost dragged his wandering thoughts back to the matter at hand. Ania Peroni this time, talking in her heavy Italian accent into her radio, each sentence punctuated by a burst of static, then Lewis answering but he couldn't quite catch what they were discussing.

At least Peroni, the seasoned pro that she was, had sprung into action when Larry had dragged them all out of bed with his babbling of the American's late night call. She had despatched Jeff at once to find the nearest petrol station and fuel up the car, ready for any necessary quick getaway. And Lewis to the kitchen where they had the CCTV monitors set up, he was there now on the lookout for any mischief brewing outside, but so far, deserting cats aside, all was well out there.

"Larry! Do us all a favour," Peroni pleaded. "Put some clothes on, please!" She just couldn't stand having to watch him pacing back and forth in his underwear any longer, which she had no choice in doing for the best part of half an hour now, which was thirty minutes too long in anyone's book.

The old crook hadn't been able to sit still for more than ten seconds since he had dragged her and Nichols out of bed after his call from the American, and in his haste for action he had neglected to put on any clothes. He barely seemed to notice her at all and just kept chewing his nails and muttering under his breath, all the while wearing out the living rooms already threadbare carpet with his constant pacing. Pausing only briefly to glance incredulously at Father Nichols who was still standing at the window staring blankly into the darkness outside looking for God only knew what.

Ania was concerned at the priest's reaction to this new turn of events, he had warned it might happen, but now it had he hadn't said more than two words to her since they all came downstairs, and it had been left to her to organise Lewis and Jeff, and try, so far without little success to get anything of use out of Larry.

She desperately needed a caffeine hit to settle her frayed nerves and more importantly clear her head, as so far she had twice asked Larry a question in her native Italian, which she always did when she was tired or stressed and not thinking straight like now. She had enough to think about without having to concentrate on speaking in English, which was causing a good five second delay in between thought and what eventually came out of her mouth.

She needed coffee and lots of it, but first she needed Larry McCulloch in trousers.

"Larry, put some trousers on," she tried again. "You'll catch your death..." This at least stopped him in his tracks, not the best choice of words she could have picked but at least they were in English and had got his attention. He looked down at himself as if only just now realizing his state of undress, then without a word left the room. Peroni heard him stomping up the stairs, and with him gone she turned to Nichols who was still meditating by the window. She was almost loathed to break the silence but knew it would only be a matter of a minute or two before Larry would be back down stairs, hopefully in trousers, and no doubt demanding action.

"Father?" She said softly, Nichols didn't turn away from the window but Peroni definitely heard him sign and then he gave a slight nod of the head. "What do you think, sir?" She asked and could already hear McCulloch making his way out of his room and onto the landing, he seemed to have

gone into the bathroom which at least gave her a little more time to get through to the priest.

"I think," Nichols replied after an age, his voice laced with fatigue. "I think we are in trouble, Ania. A lot of trouble."

It was a plain statement of fact, said without emotion and again to his reflection in the window as if he couldn't bear to say it to her face. Peroni had known it deep down, but hearing Nichols verbalize it still made her heart skip a beat.

"Well?" It was Larry, she hadn't even heard him come back down the stairs but there he was standing in the doorway now in a crumpled shirt and thankfully trousers. "What are we going to do?" He wanted to know.

Again Nichols didn't move to reply, it seemed to Ania as if he felt that turning around and actually facing the problem might just about make it all too real for the priest, and somewhere deep down she sympathized, even though it wasn't an option she could afford to subscribe to, if any of them were going to get out of here in one piece.

"Hello?" Larry said in a condescending tone. He moved into the room with a face like thunder.

More to break the tension than anything, Peroni asked; "Larry, you are sure that is all the American said?"

Larry stopped mid stride. "Yes, how many fucking times?" He replied looking annoyed. "Did you say your prayers tonight? That's all he said."

"And it wasn't Whitaker?" She asked.

"I told you," Larry spoke to her as if she were twelve. "It was a yank. *The* yank. The one you're all so fucking scared of, I imagine."

"Okay," she said defensively and waited for Nichols to wade in with something constructive, but instead he said obliquely.

"Well, did you?"

Peroni and Larry exchanged a look.

"Did I what?" Larry replied testily.

"Did you say your prayers tonight?" Nichols asked.

"Jesus!" Larry threw his arms up in dismay. "Are you actually going to come up with anything worth a shit, or are you just going to stare out of that fucking window all fucking night?" He turned away from the priest and aimed his tirade at Peroni. "Normally, I can't shut any of you lot up, but now I need answers? Not a fucking peep worth a shit. Now I asked what the fuck are we going to do now?" He took his mobile out of his pocket and waved it in Peroni's face. "The bastard has got my number!"

"He can't trace it, you weren't on long enough," she replied, trying to refrain from smacking him in the mouth. "I suppose he got it from Whitaker."

"Yeah, that twat!" Larry spat bitterly.

"So, about Whitaker.."

"Tommy Whitaker is dead." Nichols cut Peroni off mid-sentence, and with that finally came away from the window to face them, his weary features grey.

"He might have cut a deal with Randall," Peroni offered trying to remain positive.

The priest shook his head, his face was a mask of determination now. "No, Tommy Whitaker is dead," he stated again. "Randall has found him and now Larry is next."

"Great!" Larry exclaimed. "You know I'm standing right here?"

This won little more than a shrug from Nichols. Peroni studied the priest. How old was he? She wondered. It was only now she noticed just how fragile the man looked, almost ancient at the moment, with the weight of the world of his shoulders, and it was a burden he wasn't bearing well. She tried not to show it, but seeing him like this unnerved her more than the prospect of Randall turning up in the door step unannounced with the whole of hell at his back. This old man who she had trusted and relied upon seemed so brittle right now. He caught her perusal and could clearly see the disappointment in her eyes. They both looked away instantly with the weakest of smiles.

"Right!" Peroni said clapping her hands in an attempt to muster up some enthusiasm. "Larry, think about it, there's no way he could trace the call that quickly. Besides, he called you."

"Yeah," Larry said taking some comfort from the fact. "Of course, he was on five seconds tops." He shook his head at his own paranoia.

"That's right." Peroni confirmed.

"Normally I would agree," Nichols said, sucking the life from the room with his tone. "But I'm afraid we are about as far away from normal as it's possible to get."

Peroni bit her lip as Larry's face dropped again, so much for trying to boost morale, she thought bitterly as a dozen different swear words raced through her mind, mostly Italian, but she choked them back, just.

"So?" Larry looked frantically between the two of them. "Can he trace the fucking call or not!?"

"I honestly don't know," Nichols replied, his voice a ghost.

Peroni's heart sank. What do you do? She thought. When the man with all the answers suddenly has none?

"Fuck this!" Larry exclaimed and threw the offending mobile down onto the floor. "I ain't taking any chances." He then proceeded to stamp on the phone repeatedly until it was in a dozen pieces.

"Larry!" Peroni snapped. Her nerves were so frayed she had to screw her eyes shut just to concentrate on speaking English. "It's a little late for that," she said in a softer tone when the pointless display was over. But Larry just kick the largest piece away which clattered against the wall where it broke in half again much to his obvious satisfaction.

"Saint's preserve us," Peroni said under her breath and unclipped the radio from her belt and brought it up to her lips. "Lewis, this is Peroni. Get Jeff on the radio, I want him back ASAP. We are leaving."

Lewis' voice cracked through the radio in response. "Roger that boss."

"Finally!" Larry said with no little relief. "Where to?"

"For now, anywhere but here. Just to be on the safe side, since no one really knows what we are up against." The remark was aimed at Nichols, in the hope it would sting him out of his stupor, she looked at the priest who nodded to her conceding the point perhaps but still had nothing to offer.

She didn't care it felt good to be taking control of the situation at last herself, someone she knew she could rely on.

"Larry moved towards the door but stopped mid-stride. "You sure about Tommy?" He asked Peroni. Not that he cared in particular it was just that the priest had said he was next in line. "I mean," he continued, more to convince himself that anyone, "That guy can talk himself out of most things." Sure he knew he was fishing for a life-line, but if he thought the lawyer could talk himself out of a death sentence, then maybe he could do the same. It was a pretty thin straw, but he was going to grasp at it all the same.

"What's this?" Peroni asked with raised eyebrow, "A guilty conscience, Larry?"

"Bollocks," came the inevitable reply.

That's more like it Peroni thought. "Tommy Whitaker is dead, or worse." She said sounding just like Nichols.

"Oh, for Christ sake!" Larry looked to the heavens in dismay. (No help there Peroni mused.) "Will people stop saying that!" His tone edging towards the desperate again. "How many times? Dead, is fucking dead, and you won't convince me otherwise. Now can we secure the mumbo-jumbo bullshit and get out of here?"

"We will," Peroni replied, "just as soon as Jeff gets back with the car." Then she couldn't help adding; "And on the 'dead is dead' part? Let us hope you never have to find out."

McCulloch was about to reply when Peroni's radio sparked into life. "Boss, this is Lewis, I can't raise Jeff, over."

"Perhaps he's driving," Nichols offered.

"Maybe," she said and switched the frequency on her radio to Jeff's channel. "Jeff, this is Peroni, do you copy? Over."

The radio spat back static in reply. She tried again with growing unease. "Jeffrey, this is Peroni, do you copy? What is your twenty? Over." But got nothing but more static.

Had time run out so soon? Nichols felt a wave of fear rise up from his guts which had been twisted in a knot since he'd got up. Peroni was listening to the dead air coming from the radio with gritted teeth. Nichols so

desperately wanted to help her but the fear had robbed him of any cogent thought, he cursed his inaction but was a slave to it never the less.

It was Larry who spoke first. "We need to get out of here, now!"

"No, just wait," Peroni said gathering her thoughts. She brought the radio back up to her lips to speak, then with a shake of the head she changed her mind and switched channels once more. "Lewis, keep trying to raise Jeff. And I want you to do a quick sweep of the outside of the house. Once around, gun drawn. Do you understand?"

There was a long pause, no doubt as Lewis digested this new turn of events, then. "Roger that, Lewis out." And with that they heard him jog out of the kitchen, through the hall and to the front door. "Jeff, this is Lewis, come in mate, over," then the front door closed with an ominous bang and was locked.

"Larry, get your stuff together." Peroni instructed. "Father, you too."

"You don't have to tell be twice, sister," Larry said as he darted out of the living room and upstairs to pack.

Once again this left Peroni alone in the room with Father Nichols. Both of them knew there had been a power shift in their relationship. Nichols, for all his knowledge of what they might be facing had to relent that they had clearly strayed into her territory now and she was handling it far better than he. The priest felt a twinge of guilt, not for his impotence but for the fact that he was a little grateful to relinquish the responsibility of leadership to another.

"You once said to me Father, that things could get very bad, very quickly if he found us. Is this what you meant?" Peroni's tone was harsh, almost accusatory.

All Nichols could do was nod in was of response. But that wasn't good enough for her. "Could he have found us so quickly?"

"I... I really don't know, Ania..." His voice faltered for a moment, what could he say? That this was precisely what he had warned the Vatican would happen if they didn't move fast enough. He could have told her this wasn't his fault for all the good it would do. That if he had more time to prepare, he wouldn't be so useless to her now. He was caught in the grip of that same



fear that had taken a hold of him all those years ago and he felt just as helpless in the face of the unknown. "I needed more time," he finally added. "To prepare."

"Prepare what?" Peroni wanted to know.

"Our defences. You know as well as I do guns and Lewis' coffee aren't going to stop Randall if he gets here before we get out."

She almost cracked a smile. Lewis coffee was notoriously bad, especially to her Italian taste buds.

"If only I had a little more time..." he said again.

"Well you don't. Whatever you had in mind, you'll just need to wing it." She paused her mind whirring then said. "If we don't get out of here in time... Do you have something that can help us?"

Nichols exhaled and looked away from her. Trapped here, cut off from help that was the nightmare scenario he had so successfully put out of his mind ever since they had arrived. If only they had listened to him, they could all be away safe with Larry in the Vatican, safe from the collector and on familiar ground.

"Father?" Peroni pressed him. "Do you have a plan if this all goes wrong?"

"Perhaps, no... I don't know." He said to the floor unable to meet her gaze.

Before Peroni could press him further her radio burst into life. "Boss, it's Lewis." Even over the radio they could both hear the relief in his voice. "I'm out front in the street. Everything's clear and guess what? Jeff's car has just appeared at the top of the road, he should be here in a mo'. Hope he's remembered my doughnuts, over."

"Oh, thank god," Peroni's shoulders physically sagged, she raised the radio but didn't take her eyes off the priest. "I want both of you inside, the moment he arrives, nothing has changed, we leave in ten minutes,

out"

"Roger diddly dodger that, Lewis out."

She let her hand holding the radio drop to her side and she gave a slight smile at Lewis' unconventional radio manner, under the circumstances she'd let it go.

Hard and professional as she was, Nichols wasn't surprised to see she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm going get us into the Vatican," he told her, even if I have to speak to his holiness himself. He'll get us on the next plane back home, I'm sure of it."

She nodded and tapped her shoulder holster. "I'll hijack one if needs be," she said.

"Let's hope I doesn't come to that." He paused for a moment desperate to say something to make amends for his inaction, but could only say. "Ania, look I'm sorry."

"No need," she replied with a shake of the head. "I was more than a little panicked there myself for a while."

"But still..."

He was cut off as Lewis' voice came over the radio. "Oh, shit, of fuck me!"

"Lewis, what is it?" Peroni asked.

"Erm, oh no, no, no way." Was all she got in response.

Fear tightened Peroni's throat, she keyed the radio to speak but nothing came out. She exchanged a look of panic with Nichols.

"Ania, get him inside, now." Nichols said firmly.

"Lewis?" Peroni finally found her voice. "Lewis, what's wrong?"

"Ania!" Nichols moved forwards and gently took her arm, "get him back inside."

She looked at him blankly and said. "Lewis never swears,"

"Something is wrong," he told her. "Get Lewis back inside. Now!"

She winced at the sharpness in his voice and the indecision in her face fell away. "Yes." Then into the radio. "Lewis, get inside, now."

"But Jeff..." Lewis said.

"Now, I said!"

The both heard the front door open then slam shut. A moment later Lewis appeared in the living room doorway, his face white with shock. He looked at them both unable to speak.

"Lewis?" Peroni prompted, her voice trembling. "What happened?"

"There was somebody in the car with Jeff."

## TWENTY-EIGHT

Strange. Jeff felt strange like he was drifting through some kind of waking dream, or nightmare. Or would have felt strange, he suspected, if he could actually feel anything at all. Was feeling numb, the absence of feeling actually feeling at all?

He pulled the car over to the curb in front of the safe house and switched the engine off. And in doing so had the nagging doubt at the back of his mind that in doing so he was in some way collaborating with the enemy. His clouded brain tried in vain to wrestle with the problem. He was on the good side, wasn't he? So why did he feel like a traitor?

Jeff shook his head but it didn't clear. Strange, surreal, not quite with it. Any of these would do fine to describe his present state. His memory of recent events was fading fast, he tried hard to remember just what exactly had happened over the last half an hour that had led him to this point.

Parked outside the safe house, that in itself was normal enough, he had done it countless times over the last few days. Nothing strange or surreal about that. It was just that this morning something was different, about him, about the whole world around him. But his befuddled state of mind couldn't unravel what it was. Jeff had never done drugs, he'd never even been drunk, but it was easy to imagine they both must feel something like this.

"I feel..." He said out loud, but couldn't think how to articulate further. The shadow man in the passenger seat next to him summed it up better than he ever could.

"Discombobulated?"

"Yeah," he replied his lips feeling more numb by the second. That was as good a word as any.

"It's my new favourite word," said his passenger.

Jeff rapped his knuckles on the steering wheel, quite hard, but what little sensation he had left was diminishing moment by moment. It was as if his nerve endings just about remembered how to register feeling, but that the memory was fading fast until. As he got out of the car and into what should have been the freezing early morning air, he felt nothing at all.

Mind you, he counted this his blessings as whenever he moved his head the back of his skull where it was connected to his spine made the most alarming grating sound. He rubbed the back of his neck and suspected if his fingertips could feel anything the back of his neck would feel jagged.

For all his disorientation, Jeff's passenger was the only fixed point, the world was hazy at best, the sound muffled, but when the shadow man moved he was in sharp focus against the gloom, when he spoke it was crystal clear. In fact, hadn't it been the shadow man who had told Jeff to get out of the car just now? Just has he had told him to drive here, he also seemed to recall telling his passenger all about the safe house, who was in there and what protection they had.

Normally he would have rather died than impart that information to an enemy, but something about the man made it all okay. He was a traitor but that was okay to, as long as the shadow man was the one asking the questions, he was glad to answer them. Strange. The shadow man was the puppet master and Jeff the willing marionette dancing to whatever tune he called.

He stood there by the car as the puppeteer got out and joined him on the pavement and they both looked up at the safe house. Although now that he was here Jeff couldn't quite remember what was so safe about the place. And the faces of those inside, faces he once, not so long ago called friends were fading into the darkest recesses of his dying memory until they too would soon be shadows like his passenger.

Best not to try and think too much he told himself, so he waited there for the puppet master to tug on his strings. Then suddenly out of the gloom in his head came a flash of realization. He turned to the shadow man who was

smiling, he seemed a pleasant enough chap to Jeff, and even though he hadn't been instructed to speak, he needed to voice the realization before he forgot it all together.

"I'm dead, aren't I?"

"Sort of," came the reply in a soft American accent.

American. Somewhere buried deep at the back of his fading mind Jeff knew that little fact was significant somehow.

## TWENTY-NINE

"I think the bastard's got Jeff," Lewis said breathlessly. He and Peroni looked at each other for a full five seconds, then:

"Shutters!" Peroni said sharply, "Lewis, you get the ones in the kitchen and dining room, I'll secure in here."

"Right," Lewis' pale face flushed with purpose.

"You sure you triple bolted the front door?" She asked before he disappeared.

"Hell yeah," he replied and then was gone.

Peroni moved swiftly over to the living rooms large window and with great effort pulled down the heavy steel shutters that had been installed throughout the ground floor for emergencies just like this. Once the latch clicked home she threw the bolt across the lock sealing it tight. She tugged at it to make sure it was secure then satisfied it was safe she pulled out her pistol from its shoulder holster and with cool efficiency chambered a round.

"Very bad, very quickly," Nichols said and she nodded.

A moment later Lewis was back in the room breathing hard.

"Secure?" Peroni asked.

"As it can be," Lewis replied grimly and seeing Peroni had drawn her pistol, did the same.

"Poor Jeff," Nichols breathed as an empty felling came creeping over him. He saw Lewis wince at the mention of his young friend's name.

"This doesn't make any sense," Peroni said. "How in God's name did he find us so soon? And how could he have possibly known Jeff was with us?"

"Could have been watching the house?" Lewis offered. "He could have called Larry from right outside."

"True," Peroni had to agree, much preferring that rational explanation to any supernatural one.

By the look on Nichol's face he was more inclined to go with the supernatural. But then again, Peroni mused, didn't he always?

"I imagine you can ask him that yourself soon enough," the priest said bleakly.

"Jesus! What's with all the guns?" Larry came into the room lugging his hastily packed suitcase, to see everyone waving guns around.

"Change of plan, Larry," Lewis told him. "We thought we'd hang around for a while."

"Shite," Larry eyed the steel shutters. They made the place feel like a fucking tomb to him. "What's going on?" He said nodding towards the shutters.

"Randall is here," Nichols said and Larry felt like someone had just kicked him in the stomach.

"What?" He just managed to choke out.

"And he's got Jeff," Lewis added.

But Larry only had eyes for the priest. "Here? How?"

"I don't know," Nichols replied with a shake of the head.

"You don't seem to fucking know much anymore, do ya?" Larry said. Nichols didn't reply to the accusation, what could he say? This idiot was worse than useless Larry thought, and was about to tell him so when Peroni stepped forwards.

"Enough of that," she said firmly, then turned to Lewis. "Lewis, with me. Father, stay here with Larry."

She moved to leave with Lewis but Larry caught her arm. "Where the hell are you going?"

"We have CCTV cameras outside," she said snatching her arm away from Larry's grip. "I need to see what we are up against out there. And how Jeff's doing."

With this she darted past him and out of the room. Lewis moved to follow but just couldn't stop himself; "Now don't go anywhere," he told Larry and was gone.

McCulloch looked at Nichols for an explanation, but the priest had his eyes closed, his lips moving as he silently recited what might have been a prayer. This made Larry's blood boil. "Hardly a time for that now padre, unless you can miracle us out of here."

But the priest ignored or didn't hear him.

"Fuck!" Larry spat at the fool. Was it him or did the room seem to be getting smaller around him?

In the kitchen, Lewis and Peroni huddled around the flickering black and white monitor which was connected to the cameras outside. On it was a TV show neither of them wanted to see, but still couldn't take their eye off. It starred their friend Jeff, who cut a solitary figure standing by the gate at the front of the house. He looked like a lost soul standing there and seemed to sway slightly as he looked up at the camera positioned over the front door.

"Jeff," Lewis whispered.

"He's alone," Peroni said, and tapped the keyboard hooked up to the CCTV system and the picture flicked in quick succession from one camera to the next so she could see all around the safe house but there was no one else visible on any of them. She stopped when the picture came to rest back on Jeff.

"But I saw someone," Lewis insisted.

"I believe you, but I can't see anyone now." She tapped a code onto the keyboard again and the screen split into four boxes each with a view from a different camera, all empty but one. "See?"

"I could have sworn..."

Peroni shut off the other cameras so the whole screen showed Jeff again standing forlornly by the gate. She felt a pang of guilt, it always seemed to be poor Jeff that got left outside in the cold, or sent on some errand or other.

He was the youngest of them so they had unconsciously made him the gopher. She drummed her finger tips on the table chewing her lip.

"Maybe we should let him in?" Lewis asked.

She turned and gave him a look and didn't need to say a word.

"Okay, okay," Lewis relented. "But, it's Jeff Ania."

"I know," she said softly.

"Hang on, what's that?" Lewis leant forwards and tapped the screen at a slight distortion of the picture next to Jeff who kept glancing at it and mouthing something.

"Fault with the camera?" Peroni offered.

As they watched the distortion it was clear now that Jeff was actually talking to it.

"Weird," Lewis said as Jeff silently chatted on. "I wish this damn thing had sound."

"We were lucky to even get this set up," Peroni reminded him." The system was twenty years old at best and that alone was testament to how their mission was regarded in the back rooms of Whitehall by way of the Vatican.

As Peroni watched Jeff, something about him just didn't seem right, but at this distance and with the antiquated camera she couldn't make out what it was. She was grateful when Jeff opened the gate and began to walk unsteadily down the garden path and towards the front door so at least she could get a better look.

"What's wrong with him," clearly Lewis had noticed it too. "What's that on his forehead?"

"Wait a sec"" Peroni deftly moved a small joystick which control the pan and tilt of the camera and moved it so the camera tracked Jeff as he walked. Now he was closer she could see what looked like a square piece of paper stuck to his forehead.

"What is that?" Lewis asked.



She shook her head, but that wasn't what was bothering her about Jeff. She squinted at the grainy image and as she did so it slowly dawned on her what was amiss.

"Oh," she suddenly felt sick, that gnawing feeling something was wrong crystallized into horrifying realization. "Oh, Jeff."

"Ania?"

She shook her head.

"Ania, what is it?"

It was freezing outside, and even though the equipment was less than state of the art, the picture was all too clear enough.

"Jeff's not breathing."

"What?" Lewis leaned closer still to the monitor.

"There's no breath coming out of his mouth. If he's talking and breathing..." Her voice finally failed her.

"We'd be able to see his breath in the air." Lewis said grimly finishing her sentence for her.

They both stared intently at the screen each of them willing a small cloud of breath to plume out of Jeff's mouth and into the early morning air, but nothing came.

The distortion that had been hovering by the gate came slowly down the path and stopped next to Jeff. Now that it was closer, Peroni could just about make out a shifting human form in its mist.

"It's him," she said almost reverentially. "I'm guessing the CCTV can't pick him up properly, but that's him alright."

"The collector," Lewis said grimly.

## THIRTY

Larry cried out in shock as someone began hammering on the front door. "Jesus!"

A second later Peroni appeared in the doorway looking grim. "Jeff's dead," she said numbly.

"Then who the fuck is that hammering on the fucking door?" Larry asked with growing panic.

"Jeff," she replied. "And Randall's with him."

Although he knew that was coming, fear punched Father Nichols in the stomach and he wasn't sure but the way Peroni looked at him he might have gasped out loud. He barely heard Larry as he spoke again over the roar of the blood in his ears, no loss though as it was probably just another profanity. Then he realized they were both looking at him now.

Had he spoken, offered some practicality to help get them out of this? The answer was no of course because he had nothing to offer. After all, when a dead man comes knocking at your door. What can you say? Except perhaps a prayer.

In the hallway behind Peroni, Lewis appeared, pistol gripped tightly in both hands, he pointed it off towards the front door, his face was set like stone, his eyes had narrowed to predatory slits.

"Father?" Peroni was at Nichols' side before he realized it, and when he didn't answer she took him by the shoulders and shook him hard, he was surprised at her strength but one look into her eyes told him it was born of fear, she was terrified but trying desperately to fight it. And it was that struggle more than anything that dragged him out of his stupor.

"Upstairs," he said. "We'll have to trust the door will hold, for now."

She nodded, relief flooding her features. "Agreed," she said, then shouted over her shoulder; "Lewis, we're moving upstairs, cover us then get yourself up there too."

"Not much of a place for a fucking last stand," Lewis said, eyes still locked on the door as the hammering continued.

"It'll have to do for now," Nichols said moving forwards and taking Larry by the arm. "Come on Larry," he added firmly.

As he passed Peroni in the door way she gave him a

thin but genuine smile. "Good to have you back, Father." He answered her with a nod and pulled Larry through the door. His adrenaline pumping at last he felt like a man with a purpose, things were clearer now, he was scared, yes and things looked bad for them all, but he swore to himself then and there that he would die before he would be so useless to Lewis and Peroni again, and yes even Larry McCulloch.

He pulled Larry passed Lewis, who raised his pistol so as not to aim at them then returned it to the door after they passed, Nichols paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs and glanced at the door. Jeff was just a few feet from him but may have been a million miles away. "Sorry, Jeff," he said under his breath, then half led, half dragged Larry with him upstairs. As Jeff hammered on.

"Everyone into Larry's room, it's the biggest and we can see the front door from the landing there," Peroni instructed close behind Larry and Nichols now.

The three of them sprinted up the stairs taking them two at a time, then when they reached the top, Peroni ushered Nichols and Larry into his room then spun around on the landing to aim her pistol down the stairs and at the front door at the bottom.

"Lewis, up." She shouted. Not needing a second invitation, Lewis bounded up the stairs and joined her on the landing, where they both stood side by side aiming. When nothing came bursting through the door, Peroni turned to Lewis. "Stay here," she told him, "You can see the door just fine. And if anything comes through it..."

"Shoot first, yeah I got it."

"Good man," she patted him on the shoulder and moved to go through into Larry bedroom but stopped for a moment. "Say, Lewis?"

"Huh?" He said without turning around.

"What's with the swearing all of a sudden?"

His grim face relaxed for a second and he shrugged. "Didn't realize I had been."

"Fuck yeah," she replied impishly and after just catching the utter shock on Lewis' face, went through into Larry room where the old crook was in full ranting mode.

"This is fucking insane! What the hell are we going to do now?"

"We remain calm," Peroni told him as she holstered her pistol. "We need to think."

"Calm? Bollocks! Someone has led that bastard here, someone has grassed." He held his head in his hands, all thought of outward appearance gone. He was scared shit less and he didn't give a damn who saw it.

"Larry, please." Father Nichols said and went over to the window, he pulled the curtain aside and looked down into the street below, half expecting to see hell itself outside, but it was just the same sleepy urban scene that had always been there, seemingly oblivious to the drama playing out right at its heart. He scanned the street from end to end, there was no sign of Jeff or Randall. They were probably both by the front door which was obscured by the side of the house from this vantage point.

Bang, bang, bang on the door. It seemed impossibly loud from up here, and it was fraying Larry's nerves one by one with each blow.

"Christ! Can't somebody do something about that fucking noise?" He pleaded.

"You can go down there and answer it if you like," Lewis called through from the landing.

"Shut up!!" Larry screamed back. "You people are supposed to be protecting me! You're supposed to be keeping me safe!" His voice was edging towards the hysterical now.

"Larry!" Peroni snapped, Jeff was dead and McCulloch's bleating was cutting right through her, so much so she couldn't stop herself saying through gritted teeth; "It's you he wants. Maybe we should let him have you?" She instantly regretted the remark, but mostly because it felt damn good to say it. She saw Nichols out of the corner of her eye, turning to her no doubt in shock, but didn't meet his gaze.

"Here, here," Lewis added from his post out on the landing.

"Fucking try it," Larry retorted.

"Enough," Nichols said keeping his tone as soft as he could.

Bang, bang, bang! On the door downstairs, as loud as gun shots echoing throughout the house. That alone was enough to send them all insane given time, let alone the threat of violence it promised, Nichols thought. Or perhaps even drive Ania and Lewis to throw Larry out of the window. He looked at the Italian, no she wouldn't, there might come a time when all of them would wanted to, but she would be first in line to stop anyone. Lewis too wouldn't although he would never admit it, he was as committed as they all where to saving McCulloch, the ingrate that he was.

So where was the collector? Nichols knew he was out there, lurking somewhere in the darkness conducting this little nightmare. Also, he wasn't sure if it was his imagination but the priest thought he caught the faint feel and smell of static in the air. *Things could get very bad, very quickly.* That phrase was rattling around in his head again.

Then the hammering stopped, leaving the room pin drop quiet apart from their fearful breathing. They all exchanged a glance. What next?

A loud burst of static from Peroni's radio broke the silence and the Italian cried out in shock, she fumbled with the radio almost dropping it as if it had just tried to jump right out of her hand.

"Hello?" A weak voice said through the radio. "Hello... This is Jeff... Come in, over." The voice was laboured, the each syllable slurred but it was Jeff.

"Oh, No," Peroni closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"Hello?" The voice came again.

"Bastard," Lewis cursed from the landing.

Not this, Peroni silently pleaded, anything but this.

"This is Jeff, over. Please come in... Lewis? Ania? Please come in, over."

"Oh, Jeff," Peroni fought back tears, she looked at her radio.

"Don't Ania," Nichol's warned. She looked at him and he flinched at the pain in her eyes. So much pain everywhere. He shook his head and she nodded back.

"But it's Jeff," Lewis called through. You can hear it's him. He sounds..."  
But could not finish.

"That goes for you too, Lewis," Nichols said, remembering he also had a radio.

"But what if that bastard has got a gun to Jeff's head?" Lewis asked desperately.

"Jeff's gone." Nichols said it as plainly as he could but it wasn't easy dismissing someone's life like that, the words stung him with guilt. "That's not Jeff, or at least not the Jeff we knew."

"Oh, fucking hell!" Larry exclaimed. "Have a word with yourself Father. You can hear it's him, plain as day."

They all jumped as one as the hammering started again.

"Please..." Jeff's tinny voice pleaded through the radio. "Please guys, let me in... For pity's sake. Lewis? Lewis I know you're there, let me in mate, please!"

Lewis let out a sob and through the door Peroni saw him take a step towards the top of the stairs, his face a mask of indecision. "Lewis." He turned to her with tears in his eyes and she shook her head.

"He was just a kid," Lewis said but came away from the stairs never the less. He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes, then re-aimed back down, his hands remarkably steady.

"I'm so sorry," Nichols said although he wasn't sure who to.

"Please!!" The radio speaker distorted making Nichols wince at the harshness of it as Jeff begged. "Please! Lewis, Ania... Anyone, Father Nichols?"

The priest drawn in a sharp intake of breath hearing his name spoken by a dead man.

"For pity sake, let me in! Please, anyone, just talk to me... Oh, guys I'm so scared. He said he's going to hurt me again. Do you hear?"

He was sobbing now, Peroni screwed her eyes tight shut. "Please. Stop," she whispered.

"You don't know what he's done to me," even through the small radio speaker the accusation was clear in his strained voice. "It's... It's horrible... He only wants McCulloch... He says we can all go free if we just give him McCulloch."

The old crook instinctively glanced at the others in the room, looking for any sign they might relent to this. Christ knew he would in a humming bird's heartbeat if the roles were reversed. A quick mental calculation showed he was clearly screwed if any of them did.

Nichol's wouldn't but that still left two guns and nothing but a priest to protect him. Peroni was distracted, so if he was going to take matters into his own hands, now might be the time, but he would have to be damn fast on his feet to disarm the Italian before Lewis waded in. And he hadn't been fast on his feet for over fifteen years.

"I know it's hard, but Jeff is already dead," Nichols said breaking the silence.

Normally, Larry would have made some quip at this ludicrous remark, but as the priest had said himself, things were about as far from normal as they could get. No, this time Larry was counting on them all swallowing this voodoo bullshit, it just might be the only thing keeping him alive.

But the dead man at the door hadn't finished just yet.

"Why I'm I always the one left out in the cold? Why do you always leave me on my own?" Jeff asked, still hammering on the door. "This is all your fault!" He screamed. "All of you!!"

"Turn the fucking radio off," Larry demanded.

"Why don't you all come down here and see what he's done to me?" Jeff shouted. "Open the fucking door!! Then I'll show you what you've done. Let – me – in!!"

"For Christ sake," Larry was pleading now. "Turn it off."

Peroni turned her radio off and threw it onto the bed. She let out a sob, but bit back before more came.

"God damn him!" Lewis shouted from the landing. "Why doesn't he just get on with it and come through that fucking door?"

"Lewis, please," Nichols moved over to the bedroom door where he could see the man aiming down the stairs and to the door beyond. He was rocking nervously from his front foot to the back, his jaw clenching and unclenching. "Lewis..."

"Hey!" Lewis screamed downstairs ignoring Nichols. "If you are so tough. Why don't you let Jeff go and come in here yourself and see what I've got for you?"

"Lewis!" Peroni said sharply, she was at Nichols' shoulder now. "Calm down!"

But Lewis was growing more agitated by the second and for one horrible moment Nichols thought he might actually go storming down the stairs all guns blazing.

"Father Nichols?" Lewis finally said only fractionally calmer for Peroni's order. "That, that creature you told us about, the one the other collector created in your church? Why doesn't the bastard send one of those things in here now? If it was half as strong as you said, it could make kindling out of that door."

Unless it was all bullshit, Larry thought, but didn't say it out loud like he would have normally done, remembering his precarious situation. Then to his shock Lewis said it for him.

"If it is as real as you said."

"Lewis, enough." Peroni snapped.

"No, Ania it's alright," Nichols said quietly. "It was real enough, Lewis," Nichols' hand went instinctively to the scars on his chest.

"So you say," Lewis replied not looking around.

Peroni pushed past Nichols to join Lewis on the landing, she placed her free hand on his shoulder and he flinched at her touch.

"Ania..." Lewis said, his voice faltering with emotion. "You really sure about all this?"

"Yes," she answered. "And so are you."

"Jeff... I can't believe he's..."



She squeezed his shoulder. "He's gone. Whatever is outside, that's not Jeff. You know that, you know he wouldn't say those things." Lewis nodded and screwed his face up, he glanced at her, the fresh tears welling in his eyes made them sparkle from the landing light above them. And Peroni had to fight the urge to pull him close so they could mourn Jeff's loss together, but that would have to wait for another time. Instead she just reached forwards and turned off Lewis' radio which was attached to his belt.

"All those things... All those things Father Nichols told us. About what Randall is, what he's capable of." Lewis said fighting more tears. "I didn't believe any of it, not really. But Jeff always did."

"I know," Peroni said softly and rubbed his shoulder reassuringly. "But in the end that doesn't matter. You stayed all the same, for us. So did Jeff."

"Yeah," he replied, his voice hoarse with emotion and gave he a smile that nearly stuck to his exhausted face then returned his attention back down stairs.

Nichols watched the exchange from the doorway with growing despair. Jeff was surely dead, but far from at rest thanks to that demon out in the cold who was playing with them, biding his time no doubt enjoying the grief he was causing. And they were here, in this tomb, and it was all Nichols' fault, he had been so sure of himself and his self-righteous crusade that he had doomed them all to God only knew what fate.

"What have I done?" He whispered and thought of the contingency plan he had stashed away in his room. The box he had so easily 'borrowed' from the Vatican and never truly believed he would need. Was that lunatic course of action really their only hope now?

If so, then God help them all.

## THIRTY-ONE

It had been a relatively simple matter to locate the exact whereabouts of the house Larry McCulloch was holed up in, once Ishrel had made the psychic

connection between Whitaker and Larry. Then it had just been a case of following its ethereal trail until it led them to their destination.

Randall had been driving across town as Ishrel directed when quite by accident the demon had picked up young Jeffery's own trail crossing their path as they drove to McCulloch's location. The demonic twosome then followed the tendrils of power like some kind of hellish SAT NAV to an all-night petrol station where the young man had stopped for gas.

Even Randall could see the residual aura on Jeffrey from prolonged exposure to their intended target. It clung to him in orange and grey swirls of vapour, much in the same way the smell of smoke would cling to your clothes long after a night spent drinking in a bar, back in the good old days when you could still actually light up in one without fear of prosecution.

Then all it had taken was a quick calculation and Jeffrey's fate was sealed. They could kill the young man, then Randall would use the resurrection charm he was so fond of to bring him kicking and screaming back to half-life. Then Randall would have him drive them all to the safe house and help them gain access with the minimum of fuss before any of the guards would have a chance to wonder how the hell they just went from alive to dead in the blink of a demon's eye.

It was a good, if simple plan, but simple would do just fine at this late stage in the game. Randall knew better than to complicate matters with anything more theatrical. He had learnt from bitter experience in the past that you can quite easily over play things given all the power at your fingertips. So simple it was, for now. Boring, for sure but there would be time to play with McCulloch once he was in their hands. Then and only then could Randall indulge his more creative side.

And it had all very nearly worked too. He had followed the poor sap into the bathroom and snapped his neck before he knew anything about it. Quick, effective, painless. Then he had rustled up a hastily prepared resurrection charm and stuck it to the dead man's forehead. The initial power release which jump started the man's fading nervous system had blown out the bathroom's windows but it was late enough that no one noticed or cared. It all worked, well, like a charm. So they had then ditched Fraker's BMW and caught a chauffeur driven ride with the deceased, but still very animated body guard, who much against what little will of his own he had left had dutifully

filled Randall in on the security set up they had in place at the house, (woefully inadequate as it turned out. Metal shutters on all the downstairs windows, and just three guards in total and one of those a priest!)

But as misfortune would have it, one of the guards, (Lewis, apparently) just happened to be conducting a sweep of the house's perimeter when they turned onto the street and had spotted Randall in the car with Jeffrey, and had as a result dashed back inside and quite literally pulled down the shutters.

Normally, this wouldn't have been a problem for a man of Randall's resources, a welcome challenge in fact. They were all trapped in there, McCulloch was definitely with them, and they all had nowhere to run. However, something about the place wasn't quite right. The house itself was ordinary enough, (metal shutters and armed occupants aside) but somewhere at its heart, there was power in there.

Ishrel had sensed it first the moment they drove onto the street and now refused to come any further to the house than the front gate. Randall had dismissed this as cowardice until he had joined Jeffrey on the doorstep, and now that he was within touching distance of the house he too could feel a low pulsing energy coming from somewhere inside, it was sufficient to make his head hurt and his skin itch at this distance but nothing more, so far. But it was more than enough to prick his interest and as he had never felt anything like it before, it awoke a sense of, if not fear, then certainly caution.

Randall turned a demon charm over in his hand mulling the problem over, he could spark the charm and send it bursting in all teeth and claws to kill everyone except McCulloch, that would be easy enough, but for the nagging doubt gnawing at the back of his mind that whatever was in there radiating that faint but sickeningly real power, might be unleashed in full and Randall didn't like the idea of not knowing what that power might bring with it. He considered this for a moment then pocketed the charm for now.

He glanced across at Jeffrey as the dead man brought the radio back up to his blue lips. "Please," he wheezed. "Help... Me."

"Good boy," Randall praised. This wasn't quite as much fun as having his foes inside ripped to shreds by a rampaging demon, but it would have to do for now. And judging by the waves of fear he could feel coming from those inside it was working a treat. "Keep it up, you're doing great."

Having him plead pitifully to those inside through the radio had been a nice piece of improvisation in lieu of bodily dismemberment. Although if they had any brains between them they could just simply turn the radio off. But he knew humans had an irrational attachment to fallen comrades and he imagined they still held out the vain hope in there that Jeffrey was somehow still saveable.

"Tell you what," he instructed. "Hammer on the door some more." And the reanimated young bodyguard dutifully obeyed. Randall nodded appreciatively and looked back down the path to where Ishrel was still hovering by the gate. He had let the demon keep its beloved heat haze form as a reward and had promised to let it stay that way for a while, (or at least until the collector could think of something more amusing.)

"Ishrel, come on old man," he called down the path. "You might be of some use over here."

"No." Ishrel was adamant. *"Can't you feel it?"*

"It's nothing," Randall lied. "Now come on, if things kick off, you can always hide behind me."

Reluctantly, the demon moved closer, muttering under its breath as it floated down the path to where Randall was waiting. Then said louder. *"Don't think I won't, either. You're the foot soldier."* The heat haze of his body undulated fitfully now he was closer to the house. *"There's something in there."*

"Yes, our target."

*"No, something else... Power."*

"Any idea what it is?"

"No."

"Could it be a problem?"

*"I can't tell,"* Ishrel drifted a little closer to the door and shuddered as if touched by a light breeze. *"It's faint, like nothing I've ever come across before, but I can tell you this much, it sickens me."*

Randall left it too and didn't relish going inside. "Could be nothing," he offered hopefully.

*"It's weak, might be hidden, but if it is something more..."*

"Then it could be a problem," Randall finished the sentence for him.

*"Hmm."*

Jeffrey slumped against the door like a drunkard, but still managed to keep hammering away. Ishrel gestured to him with a shimmering limb.

*"This approach isn't going to work."*

"Maybe. But it's fun and it's scaring them shitless. Can't you feel it? Give it a few hours and you never know, they might be begging us to take McCulloch."

*"A few hours?"*

"What's the rush?" Randall asked. "You're not getting any older. Neither am I come to think of it."

*"I insist you do something now. Get me McCulloch and slaughter the others. All this, this humanity sickens me."*

Jeffrey was wheezing hard now, trying desperately to fight this nightmare he was in, he took a faltering step back away from the door and made a vain attempt to lift his leaden hand up and rip off the charm stuck to his forehead, but his hand fell away lifelessly. He just about managed to turn stiffly to face his tormentor, his broken neck grinding sickeningly as he did so. "Hell spawn," he choked out.

"Sticks and stones," Randall replied.

*"Randall, now!"* Ishrel insisted.

Randall let out a sigh. "You're no fun at all Ishrel, you know that?" And with that ripped the charm off Jeffrey's forehead.

"Oh, thank God." Jeffrey just managed to say before the unnatural spark behind his eyes vanished and he crumpled to the ground finally, thankfully dead.

"Shame," Randall lamented looking down at the corpse. "Waste of a good resurrection that. Could have kept him going for days. Hey! Remember that guy in New York a few years back?" He smiled at the

memory. "Kept him going for over a week. Began to stink up the place though."

Good times.

*"Now Collector, do something."*

"Okay, okay. "Randall rummaged in his coat pocket and took out a mobile phone, then with a wicked grin began to randomly punch in numbers.

## THIRTY-TWO

A mobile phone ring tone went off to the aptly morbid tune of the 'death march'. Peroni instinctively looked at her phone but it was quite silent, besides, who would have a ring tone like that?

"Well is somebody going to answer that or what?" Lewis shouted from the landing. "It isn't mine."

"It's not mine, either," Peroni confirmed.

"Well it sure as shit isn't mine," Larry said remembering his destroyed phone down stairs. He plonked himself down on the bed making the springs complain at his weight.

"It's mine," Nichols said and took his phone out of his pocket, it was ringing alright but the ring tone wasn't one he had ever had. He looked at the caller ID and couldn't help but smile, albeit grimly.

"What's the number?" Peroni asked seeing Nichols reaction.

"Six, six, six." Nichols replied and held the phone up for her to see.

"Jesus," Larry snorted in disgust. "Just what I need, another fucking comedian." And the jokes on you Larry my boy he lamented to himself.

Nichols hit the answer button. "Satan's lap dog I presume?"

"Ha! Actually," the caller replied. "He prefers cats. I take it you are the lead holy man in there?"

He didn't know what he expected but the American's voice was so normal Nichols forgot to answer, after all what it's not every day you are on

the phone to a demon. It wasn't until he caught sight of Peroni and Larry looking at him expectantly that he faded back in again.

"Is it him?" Peroni mouthed and Nichols replied with a nod. "Put him on speaker, Father," she added.

He nodded again and put the phone on speaker so they could all hear the American. "Waste of time asking how you got my number, I suppose." Nichols asked as nonchalantly as he could, although his heart was threatening to burst right out of his chest, and he did his best to keep the tremble building in his stomach out of his voice.

"It's all smoke and mirrors, Father," Randall replied. "Now, I've got another little trick up my sleeve. I want to come up and talk. Just talk, so tell your goons... What are they called? Lewis and Peroni?"

Peroni shuddered at the mention of her name and Lewis cursed out on the landing.

"Tell them to watch what they are shooting at," Randall continued through the speaker. "They wouldn't want to hit Larry now would they, in all the confusion?"

"Depends on which one of my goons you asked." Nichols put his hand over the mouth piece. "Heads up, Lewis."

"Fucking A," came the reply.

"Hey!" Larry interrupted. "What the hell are you talking to this guy for? Hang up the fucking phone you moron." He turned to Peroni. "And you, call the fucking cavalry, for Christ sakes."

She held up her phone. "No signal, my phone is dead."

"Shit!" Lewis called out. "Mine too, I had three bars a minute ago."

"Mine too," said Nichols looking at his phone, not that the demon outside needed a network. He uncovered the mouth piece again and swallowed hard before asking, "Where's Jeff?"

After half a minute of dead air, Randall finally replied. "In a better place than any of you."

Even though he knew that was coming the finality of Randall's words made Nichols wince inwardly. He took a few seconds of his own before replying in which time he could feel his blood boiling. "Right," he said firmly. "I'm going to lay this out simply for you. I've got protection in here, big protection and I'm not talking about guns. We can stop you before you can get anywhere near Larry."

"That sounds like a threat," Randall replied with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"It's a promise," Nichols stated. "We aren't going to give up Larry to you or anyone..."

"I'm not just anyone holy man," Randall interrupted.

"You're nothing," Nichols said with a sneer. "You want Larry? Try and take him. That's all."

Nichols heard Randall breathe to speak on the other end but hung up before he could get a word out.

"Yeah! Nice one Father," Lewis said clearly impressed.

"Really? Not too much?" Nichols' hands were sweating so much now that he nearly dropped the phone. He pocketed it and rubbed his palms on his sleeves.

"Nar," bang on I'd say." Lewis said, loitering by the bedroom door and beaming like a kid.

"Lewis, watch the stairs," Peroni ordered, all business. "God only knows what might come through the front door now." She said this without taking her eyes off Nichols, who although was looking pale from his confrontation with the demon he was definitely back to his old self now as far as she was concerned and despite their situation this helped steady her own nerves. "Protection?" She asked.

He just exhaled deeply in response.

"Yeah, What protection?" Larry wanted to know. "If you've got something up your sleeve, now's the fucking time, padre."



The priest was trembling now and had gone white as a sheet. Seeing his growing terror, Peroni moved forwards and took a hold of his shaking hand, which was clammy to the touch.

"Father?" She ushered him over to a chair, intending to get him to sit down before he fell down. "Father?" She said again, suddenly fearful herself. Not of that unknown menace outside but of losing Father Nichols to that paralyzing fear again and that this time he might not return from its grip just when they needed him the most. She was about to guide him onto a chair when he suddenly pulled away and looked at her as if she had just slapped him in the face.

"God, Ania I'm sorry." She was grateful to see his eyes focus once more and he squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'm alright," he said softly and let her hand go. "I'll be back in a moment," this said he moved over to the door. "It's going to be okay," he said more to himself than her it seemed then was gone.

"Were where the hell is he going?" Larry wanted to know.

She just shook her head in response, and tried to convince herself he was coming back. In mind as well as body.

### THIRTY-THREE

It felt so good to get out of Larry's room, with its almost overwhelmingly oppressive atmosphere, its air heavy with such stale fear. When Nichols stepped into his own room he motioned to turn on the light, an automatic reflex, but caught himself mid-action, deciding instead to stay in the gloom. There was more than enough light filtering through the closed curtains from the street outside for him to do what he needed to do in here, then it would be back into Larry room once more to face the consequences of actions taken what seemed like half a life time ago when he was back in the Vatican, plotting this impending meeting with the collector. This was what he had wanted, what he had lay awake at night dreaming of.

This is what he had wanted all along, isn't it? So then, it was time to step up and face it head on. There was no turning back now that the demon was here, even if he wanted to.

He stood in the near darkness for a moment meditating on his next move. He was sure Randall could have no idea what he was planning, and as such would be full of brash over confidence, ready to make a move against them and would soon make a move and enter the house to take what he had come for. Larry McCulloch and to hell with the collateral damage that would be Ania, Lewis and himself.

Unless. Unless this lunatic game plan of his actually worked. Nichols shook his head at the absurdity of it all. By rights they should have no hope of stopping the multitude of dark creations Randall had at his beck and call should he choose to unleash them. Assuming that he had something like the power Sofia had at her disposal that night half a life time ago.

The image of that darkness dripping nightmare that had scarred him so deeply inside and out came crawling unbidden and unwelcome into his mind's eye. The memory made him physically shudder as he pictured it all too vividly creeping down the aisle towards him.

He had been nothing more than a spectator that night, and even though that was the reason he had survived, he was determined not to be one this time around. And to do that, to be a protagonist in this little vignette of horror he would have to keep his nerve and draw upon an, as yet, untapped reserve of courage he wasn't sure he even had.

Only one way to find out old man. Now was the time, to either curl up in a corner some place safe and hope against hope that the conflagration that was coming on the heels of hell left him untouched. Ashamed but alive. Or he could stand his ground and fight. And to hell with the consequences, if that was the right choice of words given his present circumstance.

He smiled at this, gallows humour. That was a good sign if nothing else. He took a deep breath as the bitter smile faded.

This was it. This was the nightmare scenario made flesh, the one he had secretly dreaded since first arriving here, the moment he had prayed would never come. But it came all the same. Proof positive that sometimes even priests, no matter how righteous or just their cause may seem, don't always

have their prayers answered. A sobering thought and one, given that might very well, given time to fester, lead a lifelong religious man to the brink of atheism. But that was a theological debate for another day.

He thought of his cosy little life back at the Vatican, where he was securely buried away deep in the archives. Safe and snug for over twenty years in a world of theory and myth. *Be careful what you wish for.* Nichols had spent night after endless night down there cursing the place and dreaming of facing the darkness once more, stepping up to the mark, a man without fear.

He was a fool, and worse still a fool who had now got exactly what he had wanted. He was back in the real world with a real fight on his hands, and so far he had equipped himself far less than well. And this time his folly had dragged others into harm's way. Good people, faithful and loyal to him (well, and McCulloch). People who had looked to him for guidance and who he, so far had let down so very badly. Tears of shame stung his eyes as he thought of Ania and Lewis but mostly the tears came for Jeff. So young, your early twenties was no age to die, not for someone so full of life.

"Jesus, protect me," Nichols whispered and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Not an atheist yet then?" He said out loud and crossed purposefully over to his bed where he knelt down and reaching under it pulled out his suitcase. He gently lifted it up and placed it carefully onto the bed.

Such an ordinary case a little battered from his years of travel but otherwise quite unremarkable. What it contained however was anything but ordinary.

His little theft from the Vatican. A small container no bigger than a shoe box, priceless in itself, but what it was made to contain was more remarkable still, and something that could save, or just as easily damn them all.

When the priest returned to the room carrying what looked to Larry for all the world like an ornate jewellery box, his first thought was that Nichols had finally taken leave of his senses and was going to spend the rest of this sorry siege wearing drag and dripping with Demonte diamonds. Whist also insisting everyone calls him Sister Mary or some such. The thought, despite the desperate situation he was up to his neck in actually brought the first real smile to Larry's face in what seemed like weeks.

"What the hell is that?" He asked with a smirk, nodding to the box. "Is there something you want to get off your chest padre?" There was an audible gasp from behind him.

"Is that what I think it is?" Peroni asked with nothing short of reverence in her voice.

Nichols placed the box on a table avoiding her gaze.

The tone of Peroni's voice set Larry's teeth on edge. More religious bullshit. "What are you gonna do?" He wanted to know. "Bribe him?"

"Is it?" Peroni asked again her eyes like saucers. The naked awe in her voice unnerved Larry almost as much as that lurking bastard outside in the street.

"If you two are gonna play dressing up or whatever." Larry said. "Peroni, give me your fucking gun. I'm gonna shoot myself and save us all the trouble."

"Another great idea," came the inevitable response from Lewis outside.

Peroni looked at Larry with annoyance. "It's not a jewellery box," she said and returned her gaze to the gaudy box as if it were drawn there magnetically. "It's the one thing that could keep us all alive."

"Perhaps," Nichols said a little too quickly.

"Well?" Larry said testily. "What the hell is it?" He got to his feet with a grunt and approached the table, but Nichols stepped between him and the box. "Hey!" He protested as Nichols put his hand on Larry's chest to keep him back.

"Don't touch it!" Nichols snapped. Then lamely added, "It's old."

"I thought they never let those out of the Vatican archives?" Peroni said still so transfixed by the box that Larry half expected her to fall to her knees and prostrate herself in front of the thing.

"They don't," Nichols replied. "I... I..." His voice fell away.

"You fucking stole it!" Larry said with delight. "Well Father, I must say I'm impressed."

"It's not like that," Nichols objected his face flushing.

"Sure," Larry replied sarcastically. "So, apart from being gaudy as hell. What is it?"

"It's not the box," Peroni said. "It's what's inside."

Larry waited for the big reveal but neither Peroni or Nichols made to speak. "Well?" He said impatiently.

"Mynor's poem." Nichols said softly.

"Mynor's what?" It was Lewis, who was standing in the doorway poking his head into the room took the words right out of Larry's mouth.

Larry nodded in agreement, he was expecting the holy hand grenade from Monty Python at least or something a little more substantial than some dusty old poem.

"You must have heard of it." Peroni said.

"It's a myth isn't it?" Lewis replied.

"No," Peroni insisted. "I saw one once, well a box like this, when I was training, on a visit to the archives. That was where I first met Father Nichols."

"Always asking questions," Nichols said smiling at the memory. "Couldn't shut her up."

"Yeah," Peroni said blushing. "But Father, how did you get it out of the Vatican?"

"We've already had this discussion." Larry said and turned to Lewis. "And aren't you supposed to be watching the front door?"

"Shut up, Larry," Lewis retorted not taking his eyes off the box, but unlike Peroni he was frowning. "It's not real, is it?"

"Lewis," Nichols interrupted. "Larry's right, please go back outside, keep an eye on the stairs."

Lewis glanced across at Peroni. "It's a myth." He said and ducked back outside.

"It's real," she called after him. "This changes everything," she said excitedly to Nichols who was sweating profusely now.

"Alright, alright!" Nichols said, it came out harsher than he'd intended and made Peroni start in shock. But he just couldn't keep his growing frustration out of his voice. "Please, just calm down Ania. It's not that simple."

"But you do know how to use it?" Peroni asked with a hint of fear in her voice.

"Yes, of course... I've studied it you years... It's, it's just not that simple." He said again.

"This is great news!" She added before Nichols could continue.

"Okay, okay," Larry cut in. "When you've all finished debating. Can one of you lot tell me what's so special about that fancy box? Huh? And what the hell is Mynor's poem when it's at home?" He waited but neither Peroni or Nichols moved to answer. "Well?"

"Nobody really knows that much about it," Nichols tried to explain, he was already regretting revealing the box. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing. "From what we have been able to piece together over the years. Records show that Mynor was a eighteenth century alchemist who lived in France. Although we cannot actually find any, it is said that he wrote book after book about the existence of evil or what he called the demons that walk among us, the bringers of chaos and misery. We are pretty sure he was talking about collectors. Some say he actively fought them. Other clam he may actually have been a collector himself, but one who have rebelled against the darkness. The devil if you will."

"Oh, come on," Larry said rolling his eyes. "Spare me the history lesson, Father," he gestured to the box. "Cut to the part where that thing can save my arse."

It was Peroni who spoke next, seeing Nichols hesitate to continue. "That box. If Father Nichols is correct, contains one of Mynor's poems. He was supposedly, somehow able to create this..." She stopped, her English failing her for a moment as she searched for the right word, one that didn't sound too 'fantastical' considering her audience, but could only come up with one. "Spell, I guess you would call it."

"Spell? Christ on a bike!" Larry grimaced.

She shrugged apologetically but it really was the only word she could think of that summed up what it was. "From what I've heard, it's a scroll, with a short but powerful incantation written on it, by Mynor himself." She was struggling now and glanced desperately at Nichols for validation.

It took him an age but he finally nodded. "That exactly what it is, Ania. Well done. Go on, you're doing great."

She beamed, the perfect pupil. "Yes, thanks, well, anyway, if you recite the poem correctly..."

"And in the presence of evil," Nichols added.

"Yes, in the presence of evil, then it is supposed to create a type of... Energy I guess you'd call it?" She turned to Nichols once again who knew much more about this than she ever could. After all she had only ever seen one of the boxes from a distance during her time at the Vatican, and that was in a bullet proof glass case.

"I've heard it called the poem of the cleansing fire," Nichols explained. "In theory, once it is recited in the presence of anything born of darkness, a collector or such, it burns the creature out of existence, with a flame greater than the fires of hell itself."

"So, you've studied this thing for a while?" Larry asked.

"Decades," Nichols answered.

"So, have you tried it?"

The priest shifted nervously from foot to foot, much to Larry's amusement. "No one has, not for centuries, there hasn't been a recorded case since they started keeping records, and that's a long time. I've studied one of the poems, spoken it many times, I know most of it backwards... But," he faltered. "But obviously never in the presence of evil."

Without thinking, Nichols covered the box with a nearby towel as if suddenly embarrassed by it.

"Obviously," Larry said sarcastically. "Convenient, wouldn't you say? The thing won't work unless in the presence of evil. So no bugger knows if it actually works."

"It will work," Peroni said defiantly.

"But you don't know. More blind faith?" He goaded.

She was about to answer when Nichols cut her off. "Listen, I honestly don't know if it will work," he eyed the box. "Let's just hope we never have to find out."

"Then what's the fucking point?" Larry shouted with growing frustration. "Why steal the thing anyway? You don't sound very convinced, Father. Sounds like more religious bullshit to me," he added bitterly.

## THIRTY-FOUR

The sound of screaming metal, hot on the heels of shattering glass from below them ended the argument in an instant. For a heartbeat everyone froze, it was Lewis outside who reacted first.

"That's the living room window!" He shouted.

"Oh, no," Peroni rushed to the door. "See anything?"

"No, not yet." Lewis replied, his voice surprisingly calm given the circumstances. "But I'll sure as shit let you know when I do."

Despite everything Peroni paused. More bad language, she was about to say something, when reality kicked in, with all that was going on, did that really matter? She shook her head at the madness of it all. She knew it was a running joke behind her back that she didn't like Lewis or poor Jeff swearing. Such nonsense now, Peroni let out a little laugh at herself.

"Ania?"

She turned to Nichols, still smiling as the demolition of their defences continued downstairs. "So much for the metal shutters," she said.

Suddenly the whole side of the house seemed to shake as something huge slammed against a wall downstairs. Peroni looked up to see the light fitting above her head swaying.

"Jesus!" Larry shouted his eyes wide with terror, he back away until he hit the far wall and would have gone further if physics would have allowed him



to. "Nichols, for Christ sake, use that thing now!" He pointed to the box on the table, suddenly a believer.

Whatever had torn through the shudders could be heard now shifting its considerable weight around the living room downstairs. It sounded massive.

Out on the landing, Lewis edged closer towards the top of the stairs and leaned out over the bannister for a better look.

"Stay here Father," Peroni instructed. She had the over whelming desire to go over and touch the box for luck before he moved out to join Lewis, but resisted. She caught a worried look on Nichols' face as he too looked at the box. She frowned, even with all that was going on he was clearly hesitant to use the poem's power.

Perhaps he feared it wouldn't work. Or perhaps the exact opposite. After all no one knew what would happen once you unleashed the *cleansing fire*. It could very well engulf them all, innocent or not along with the collector and his corrupted creations. Perhaps the entire street of innocents would be lost too.

Not wanting to dwell on that scenario she gladly ran out on the landing and joined Lewis' side. He nudged her shoulder in welcome. "See anything?" She asked and peered over the bannister to the hallway below.

"Not yet, boss. But listen to the thing."

Out here she could clearly hear the creature now, moving around in the living room. Slowly shifting its bulk over to the doorway, which would bring it out into the hall and into view. Steeling herself to what she might see, Peroni aimed her pistol at the point just beyond the living room doorway, where the thing should appear any second.

"Guess, you are a believer now," she whispered impishly to Lewis.

"Ha! Something like that..." He replied and was about to add something when the breath caught in his throat.

A long spindly shadow fell over the doorway down stairs and at first Peroni thought it was cast by the thing inside the living room, so she braced herself for the grand entrance, she rested her elbow on the bannister to steady her aim and silently wished she could do the same for her racing heartbeat. But doing so she immediately realised her error. What she had first

thought to be the shadow of the thing was actually the long spindly limb of the creature itself, which came stretching out into the hallway uncurling a full six feet in length but only two inches or so in width. It was followed by another limb, then another as the thing began to force its way through the doorway. It put Peroni in mind of the legs of a giant hermit crab emerging from its shell, but one made of shadow itself.

“Mother of God,” she uttered as it squeezed itself through and almost fell into the hallway. Although the hall light was on down there, the form of the creature refused to give the observer anything but the merest fixed detail of its texture, it was a mess of geometry and Peroni struggled to make out even the most rudimentary form within its bulk.

The thing was a mass of swirling smoke and shadow somehow bound into the vaguest of forms that could, with some imagination, lay claim to being its body. But the only truly recognisable elements to the beast were its legs, which unfolded from its 'body' much as the legs of a spider might as it emerged from the darkest recesses of its web to slowly crawl along towards some poor trapped and struggling insect.

As Peroni watched it creep down the hallway and over to the foot of the stairs, she thanked God she couldn't make out anything but the slightest detail in the dark and undulating mass that was its body, because she knew for certain if she could, it would send her screaming off in blind panic. As it was the growing horror welling in her stomach was threatening to overwhelm her, so she focused on the barrel of her pistol so the thing was just an out of focus blur beyond, but still her eyes refused to be misdirected.

The thing slowly began to crawl up the stairs now like something ripped from a sick child's arachnophobic fever dream.

“Fuck this,” Lewis spat, breaking the creature's hypnotic hold on Peroni and he opened fire, five shots in rapid succession into the thing's body, but as Peroni watched, the bullets simply passed through its body as if it was indeed just made of smoke, and ripped into the stairs sending up a shower of splinters into the air. The monster didn't so much as shudder as the bullets passed through its form, nor did the assault slow its ascension. Step by terrifying step it just kept coming.

“Jesus!” It was Larry from the room behind. “What the fuck is going on out there?”

Peroni chanced a glance over her shoulder to see Larry and Father Nichols were in the doorway, wide eyed and pale faced. Larry said something else but the thunder of her heart beat in her ears drown it out.

"Stay back," she warned and jumped as Lewis fired off three more rounds. The report of the shots bounced off the walls around her impossibly loud and the smell of gun smoke stung her nostrils.

"It's not stopping!" Lewis screamed.

"What's not stopping?" Nichols shouted.

"Believe me," Peroni said suddenly nauseous. "You don't want to know." She took a deep breath but it tasted of cordite and fear making her gag.

"Ania?" Nichols moved to help her as she staggered but she ushered him back.

"No! Stay in the room," she ordered, her head swimming and was grateful to see Nichols step back inside as she wasn't sure she had the strength to stop him if he had come out. She turned back to Lewis, the sudden movement made her head spin all the more. She rested her elbow on the bannister and looked down.

The thing was still only half way up the stairs, taking its own sweet time, when it moved she caught glimpses of the stairs through its squirming form. How do you shoot something made of darkness itself?

Lewis fired two more rounds into its ethereal form which as before just struck the wood of the stairs beneath it causing little more than a ripple in its insubstantial flesh.

"It's not stopping," Lewis shouted again.

She nodded weakly, the smell of gun smoke making her nauseous.

"Ania, I have to see," it was Nichols, behind her again.

"Why?" She asked, he was at the door again, this time he took a step onto the landing. "It's nothing you haven't seen before," she said remembering Nichols tale of the beast in his church all those years ago, that fateful night which had led them all here, to God only knew what end.

Nichols took another step and Ania moved falteringly over to him, she was about to tell him to get back in the damn room when the beast behind her screamed.

It felt and sounded like a stun grenade filled with a thousand Banshees had gone off at her back and she was hit by a physical shock wave from the unholy sound which pitched her forwards and into Nichols and sent them both sprawling to the floor of Larry's room. Peroni rolled off the priest but could only get to her knees, gasping for breath she tried to shake off the shock but the bells in her head only grew louder with the sudden movement.

"Lewis! Get in here!" Nichols was screaming but he sounded like an old record heard through busted speakers.

She was vaguely aware of shaking her head 'no', but couldn't swear to it, she might just have easily have shouted the word for all she knew. Peroni swooned and before she knew it she was on her back on the floor again staring dumbly up at the ceiling. She rolled over and got slowly to her knees again but the room kept on spinning, she gulped in lungful's of stale air. All hell was breaking loose around her but she couldn't do anything but flounder.

Gunfire behind her now, Lewis bravely blasting away at what much surely now be his last stand. The reports of the shots should have been jarring, but seemed a million miles away. As she fought hard against the growing tide of hysteria that was threatening to over whelm her senses, the thing must be at the top of the stairs now in all its horrific glory. Larry was in the corner of the room, deathly white staring in horror across the room to the door which was behind her.

She thought Lewis shouted something, was it her name? Then he fell silent. First Jeff, now Lewis, lost to the darkness. Peroni screwed her eyes tight shut, in a vain attempt to block it all out, she knew she had to do something, anything but she just couldn't get to her feet and turn around and face the end head on. If it was coming she would just have to keep her eyes closed and pray it would be quick.

Something brushed her shoulder and despite herself she opened her eyes, Nichols staggered into her field of vision, his mouth gaping open. He reached down and dragged her to her feet. She could feel his breath on her face, he was shouting something at her but her fear addled brain refused to process the words. She swooned a little again and her vision darkened. Was

that catatonia's approaching blackout? Or was the monster on the stairs finally in the room, at her back, ready to claim her?

Tears sprung into her eyes blurring what little vision she had left. Nichols gripped her shoulders hard and began shaking her. Or so she thought, or perhaps it was that creeping death's spidery embrace, ready to drag her to hell.

"I don't know what to do," she sobbed at Nichols, finally finding her voice.

The priest's mouth was moving again but no sound that she could hear was coming out, even though he was only inches from her.

Then they came, quiet as a whisper even though he was screaming at her. "He's here!" He shook her hard and looked over her shoulder.

*He's here.* That was what he had said.

But who?

Peroni felt herself slipping again despite Nichols' screaming in her face, black blotches in her vision threatened to take her sight altogether.

Was this the end?

## THIRTY-FIVE

Father Nichols slapped Peroni hard across the face and a split second later all her senses came rushing back.

"He's here!" Nichols repeated, clear as day.

"Who?" She said numbly.

"Ania," Nichols said desperately. "Snap out of it!" He took a hold of her shoulders and physically turned her around to face the empty doorway. Lewis was gone, as was the creeping nightmare. Then came the sound of movement from the landing just out of sight. Peroni instinctively raised her pistol, aiming at the doorway.

"Thank God," Peroni felt a rush of relief, it was Lewis, his voice sounded muffled and the words were choked out and with some effort, but at least that meant he was still alive.

Then Lewis was dragged into the doorway by a smartly dressed man of no more than thirty, his appearance caught her off guard somewhat, she had been expecting the demon, or another diabolical creation. Not a... Well stock broker. He had Lewis in front of him so he could use him as a human shield. Lewis struggled wildly causing himself more discomfort, but the man, despite his somewhat slight frame hardly seemed to need to exert himself at all to maintain his grip.

"Randall," Nichols breathed from behind her.

Randall raised an eyebrow at hearing his name and a slight grin snaked across his face. Peroni aimed as best she could at the collector. But even though he was a good foot taller than Lewis, she couldn't get a clear shot, deep down she was grateful for this having never actually fired her weapon in anger at a person before.

Perhaps in the safe surroundings of the police firing range she may have taken the shot, but here, with her nerves in tatters and a dear friend's life on the line she hesitated and eased her finger off the trigger a little. A small but significant action (or inaction) she hoped she wouldn't live to regret.

"Easy now, sweetheart," Randall said casually wondering if she could actually hit him from behind his human shield. She had fear in her eyes, but the gun in her hand was steady enough. He slipped his arm around Lewis' neck and stooped slightly, just to be sure.

"Shoot him, Ania," Lewis managed to choke out. He tried to pull away to give her a better shot but Randall had him good and tight.

"Now that kind of talk is going to get your neck snapped, buddy," Randall warned, and just to make sure he got the point he squeezed his neck harder.

"Okay, okay," Lewis spluttered and Randall relaxed his grip a little.

"Careful where you're aiming that thing," Randall told Peroni, motioning to her pistol. He still couldn't tell by her demeanour if she was going to take the shot or not.

"Lewis, you unharmed?" She said with a pained expression on her face, seeing his discomfort.

"Sorry Boss, he came out of nowhere. That thing. That thing on the stairs..." He paused gasping for breath. "It was an illusion, a fucking distraction."

"I thank you," Randall said giving a little bow of the head. "Some of my best work, and all improvised I might add." He studied them with something akin to disappointment. Was this it? Super cop with the gun, Larry McCulloch, who was cowering in the corner looking like he was about to shit himself, or already had. Lewis here, and a priest?

So where was that power coming from? He had felt it when he came into the room, something in here was making him sick to his stomach not to mention raising the hairs on the back of his neck. He gave the priest the once over, which made the holy man cringe under his scrutiny. There was something about the man that Randall couldn't quite pin down.

Then it came to him.

"You've been touched," he said in an almost accusatory tone.

The priest took a step back, what little colour left in his cheeks draining away, and his hand came up to his chest. Yes that was it. The priest had met one of his kind before. He practically reeked of it now. Fear, plenty of that, but then again the room was swimming in it. But tinged with something else, that residue of familiar power. Very weak, but there all the same.

Randall was sure that wasn't what he had sensed outside, and what Ishrel had been so afraid of. No, this one had the smell of an old school demon about him. Randall concentrated on the man's chest, where his hand had strayed and could see the faintest trace of dark energy where the beast had made contact with his flesh.

And the hint of something else, the scent of a collector, it had all but faded over time but some still clung to the priest's skin, like the lingering scent of an old lover's perfume.

"Interesting," Randall said absently.

"Let him go," Peroni ordered and made a point of re-aiming at Randall's head.

"Don't think so," Randall replied. "Now, come on, put the gun away. You could hit your buddy here," he squeezed Lewis for effect, making him grunt. "Or worse still, me."

"Shoot him, for Christ sake!" Larry shouted from his pathetic hiding place in the corner, where he had pressed himself against the wall as if trying magically to pass through it and away.

"Larry, shut up," Peroni said through gritted teeth, not taking her eyes off Randall for a moment.

"Smart girl," Randall praised.

"Jesus!" Larry shouted. "Do something!"

"Everyone calm down," Nichols said with surprising authority. Then to Randall in a softer tone. "Please, let him go."

"Okay," Randall agreed and slowly loosened his grip on Lewis. "Now, Lady. Ania, right? Put the gun away and I'll release him."

Peroni narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"I just wanna talk," Randall continued. "Besides, shooting me won't do you any good. Sure, it'll hurt like hell, but it won't kill me."

Peroni didn't move and despite herself was giving serious consideration to shooting the American anyway. "Causing you pain would be start," she said to the collector, which raised a smile from the American.

"Ania," Nichols coaxed, and moved to her side. "Please."

After a moment she relented and reluctantly lowered her pistol. Randall nodded for her to holster the weapon which she duly did and took a step back.

"There ya go," Randall said and released Lewis who staggered over to Peroni rubbing his bruised neck. "Hey," Randall called after him and Lewis glanced back at the American with a look of impressive contempt in his eyes. Randall tossed him his pistol which Lewis caught awkwardly. "Don't hurt yourself with it."

Lewis turned the weapon over in his hands, obviously contemplating murder, but then gave a sigh of resignation and holstered it, his face like thunder.



Peroni put her hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he replied hoarsely and rubbed his neck again. "Look, I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," she told him and turned her attention back to Randall, who was smiling broadly. He folded his arms, clearly enjoying himself.

So this was the famous Randall. A collector of souls. If she hadn't have seen that horrible thing on the stairs, she would have found it hard, looking at him now to believe he wasn't anything more than just a smart arsed American. But then again what had she been expecting. Horns and a forked tail?

"Alright," Nichols said after some time. "So, you are here. What do you have to say?"

The collector took his sweet time he looked at each of them in turn, still smiling that smile of quiet confidence. Despite the odds of three to one (and Larry but he surely didn't count if it came to a fight) he was in control here, he knew it, they all did. So why rush?

Nichols found himself gawking at the man. He was not what he had expected at all. Nothing about him pointed to him being of the same species as the tramp McCready. McCready had been sick and tired of the game he had been paying for what Nichols had come to understand as over a hundred years. He had crossed paths with an old man at the end of his life, eager for the end. Whereas Randall here looked like he was just setting out on his journey of terror, and by the looks of things was clearly enjoying every misery filled minute of it.

The priest had to fight the urge to bombard Randall with questions. Lame ones like; What was it like being a collector? What recollection did he have of his former life? Did he think of himself as truly evil? All lame, and all leading to one inevitable subject. Most of all he wanted to know about her, the dark Goddess, *Sofia*.

Did the collector know her? Was she still alive? Nichols so desperately wanted to know, but he found himself actually biting his tongue to keep the questions at bay. Not the time, not the place.

After what seemed like minutes, it was the collector who finally broke the charged silence. "Well, well, well. What a motley bunch you have hooked up with this time, Larry."

"Have we met?" Larry asked. He was trying to keep his cool, which he was just about managing to do. Still, he glanced furtively past Randall and to the stairs beyond, and gave serious thought to making a very undignified run for it. He even thought about making a lunge for Lewis' gun while the man was still flustered from Randall's attack. No, he was past such heroics at his age.

Instead his gaze came to rest on the box under the towel on the table. Christ, I must be desperate he concluded grimly.

"Go on, Nichols," Larry said.

"Shut up, Larry," the priest snapped, his face reddening, eyes locked on the American.

"Show him," Larry insisted.

"I said shut up," Nichols repeated, this time with real venom.

This won a bemused look from Randall. "Show me what?"

"Let's just say, it would be prudent for you to leave." Nichols warned, although there was no conviction in his voice.

"Prudent?" Randall mocked. "No, I don't think so. We all know this is going to end one way. Larry McCulloch in bloody pieces. The only variable as I see it is if you three God squaders join him or not." He met each of their eyes slowly and deliberately in turn as he spoke to make sure they all got the point, they did.

The fear in the room now was almost overpowering, and might have been if not for that nagging feeling something in this place was amiss. He dismissed it as best he could and took in the room again. Yes he may be an agent of the Lord of Lies, but what he had said was fact, and they all knew it. It was just a matter of how they would react.

"Look..." Nichols voice cracked and he silently cursed the growing fear in it. He cleared his throat and carried on as best he could. "This will not go the way you had planned. You must let Larry be. You will have other chances, I'm sure. But not today." He was as surprised as anyone as his voice grew

stronger with every word, but it did. It was now the collector who frowned. Which gave Nichols more confidence still.

Strange, this one. Randall thought as he studied the priest. There was something about him. He had the feel of someone who had been in this type of situation before, to a greater or lesser extent. The man had hints of darkness about him from whatever brief encounter he had once had with his kind.

But what possible fight could he hope to put up in the face of such power? In the end, words were weak and actions were power in Randall's world and it was time to show his. He dug into his jacket pocket and took out a demon charm he has scrawled on the back of a playing card.

In response, both Lewis and Peroni instantly drew their weapons and trained them on Randall, faces set in grim determination. Nichols held his breath and closed his eyes in anticipation of the blaze of gunfire to follow.

"Take it easy," Randall said, staring down the barrels of the two pistols aimed at his face. (And got a massive sense of deja vu) "This is just a par-lay, nobody needs to get hurt, just yet. Okay?"

And Nichols opened his eyes again when thankfully the demon's question was punctuated with silence and not the loud report of two hastily drawn pistols.

"It's okay, Ania, Lewis." They both glanced at him and he nodded reassuringly before gesturing for them to holster their weapons. This Peroni did instantly, but it took Lewis a few more seconds and a withering look from Peroni to do the same.

"Very smart," Randall said still holding up the card. "After all," he added. "You may have the guns, but I hold all the cards."

Until now, Nichols had deliberately been standing between Randall and the box to obscure it from his view, all the while hoping he wouldn't have to reveal it. However, that option, if it had ever actually been one, was long gone now. So he steeled himself for the unknown and stepped to the side of the table, revealing the box under the towel.

"Not all the cards, collector," he said and whipped the towel away rather more theatrically than he had intended.

The sight, finally, of the source of that nagging power nearly froze the blood in Randall's veins. He felt a surge of panic the like of which he had not felt since the night of his death, rise up from his bowels, and it took all his powers of self-control to stop himself gasping like a frightened school boy.

A gaudy looking box, so typical of the Vatican sat on the table. Expensive and interesting perhaps to the casual observer, but to a collector it had the same impact of being in a room with a live, ticking nuclear bomb. Now there was no doubt where the source of that power he had first felt outside was radiating from.

The one Ishrel had been so afraid of.

As a box it was remarkable enough as an artefact. But as with all boxes interesting or not, it was what was inside that counted.

Mynor's Poem. Shit.

"Hmm... That's an interesting looking box you've got there, Father." Randall said as nonchalantly as he could, however there was no way he could totally disguise the fear in his voice. He cursed himself seeing that the priest noticed it to, but carried on regardless. "Is that?" His throat was as dry as dust. "Is that what I think it is?"

The power in the room had shifted in an instant and they both knew it.

"Yes it is," Nichols answered with new found confidence.

"You know, amongst my kind, it's said that famous poem of Mynor's is nothing more than a myth. Dreamt up by the Vatican to scare us."

"For a demon, you are a bad liar."

"Technically I'm not a demon, but I'll let that slide for now," Randall replied. He kept the priest's gaze as best he could, looking for any sign of a bluff. Did he really know what he had there? But Nichols held firm under Randall's scrutiny, if he didn't, Randall thought, then it was he who was the liar, and a damn good one at that.

Peroni stepped to Nichols side, taking strength from his courage. Lewis did the same, still rubbing his bruised neck.

"Well," Lewis croaked. "That'll be the tables well and truly turned then."

A good old fashioned standoff.

Finally, Nichols spoke. "So, what now?"

The priest was bordering on the cocky now, Randall thought and he didn't like it. "Nothing's changed," he said. "I want McCulloch." Randall looked menacingly at Larry, who was still cowering in the corner behind Nichols and the others. It seemed that despite himself, the old crook had chosen his protectors better than he had first thought. 'Lucky' Larry indeed. "Larry has a long overdue date with a very bitter end."

"I can't let you have him, Randall." Nichols stated.

"I know it," Randall said returning his attention to the trio. "I just thought I'd give you a chance to save yourselves. Just walk away."

"Because you are such a nice guy?" Peroni sneered.

"No," Randall replied. "Just lazy. So is it to be the easy way, or the hard way?"

The Italian could see the veneer of confidence fading from Randall by the second at this new turn of events, clearly a man used to being in charge, he was hiding it well but the whole air of him had changed. And for the first time in hours she felt a glimmer of hope.

"I think I speak for all of us," she said, pressing their advantage. "When I say it has to be the hard way, demon." She took out her pistol and held it by her side, just in case he tried to make an ill-advised grab for the precious box.

"Here, here," Lewis agreed and he too drew his pistol again and made a show of cocking back the hammer.

The collector straightened at the threat and raised an eyebrow. "Really?" He said.

"Really," Lewis replied.

"Or," Nichols interjected before things escalated. "You could just turn around and leave. Tell your people, or whatever they are, you couldn't find Larry." Nichols suddenly shuddered at an unseen presence in the room, it felt like a dozen demons dancing on his grave. It felt like he was back in St James' just before that creature appeared, he looked to the door but it was empty as was the landing beyond. Still it made him uneasy.

Randall watched Ishrel's shimmering form creep in to the room on his tip toes as if he was stealthy enough no one would notice. Randall shook his head. Clown.

"Yeah, yank," Lewis said taking a step forwards little suspecting he was now face to face with Ishrel. "What are they going to do, fire you?"

This new found bravado was spreading like swine flu though the do gooders.

Ishrel scrutinised Lewis face, then tuned to Randall. "*Don't you even think about it, Randall.*"

"I wasn't," Randall replied. And just out of malice Randall made the demon turn back into a school girl wearing a Halloween mask again. He was disappointed it didn't make him feel any better about this new turn of events. Ishrel for his part didn't even seem to notice, he was so transfixed by the box.

Randall watched as Ishrel took a tentative step towards the box on the table, then begin to shake so much Randall thought his mask would fall right off his face, then after a moment the demon/school girl scuttled back behind Randall, shielding himself from the poem's power.

"Coward," Randall said and wished he could kick the little shit in the pants.

The three of them looked at Randall quizzically as he seemed to zone out somewhat and say 'coward' over his shoulder. They exchanged a look of bewilderment followed by a round of shrugs.

Ishrel peered from behind Randall's leg. "*Randall, grab the box,*" he whimpered.

"Ha! Yeah, right." Randall snorted in response.

Nichols cleared his throat and Randall looked at him as if he had just appeared out of thin air. "Oh, sorry," Randall said. "Now, where were we?"

"You were just leaving," Lewis said.

Randall took in the room and weighed up his options. The truth was nobody, not the priest, he suspected, not even himself or Ishrel knew what would happen if he was able to unleash the full power of the poem right here in this little corner of suburbia. He cursed his lack of preparation, the demon

charm he had in his hand was just a bluff, the spent one he had used to summon the demon on the stairs, which in itself was nothing more than a mere illusion he had conjured to mask his arrival and scare the shit out of everyone in the room. It had worked perfectly but had no real power of its own. It couldn't attack or defend Randall, which was why it had not been affected by the power radiating from the box.

If only he had prepared another, something with a bit more bite so to speak. He doubted it would have done much once it felt the power of the poem's presence, but it may have caused just about enough blind panic to allow Randall time to take the box, or at least try to destroy it. If that were even possible.

But this was all conjecture anyway, in the presence of the box any of his creatures would just turn tail and run, if his brand of magic would even work at all this close to the poem. Also would one of his kind even be able to touch the thing?

He had heard the stories of course, of the mythical Mynor's poem and its potential, but it had always sounded like so much horse shit to him. Until now.

Anyway, he told himself, there would be time enough to worry about the poem later. This was just a recce a prelude to the end game but that was all. And it had born fruit. McCulloch was here for sure, if not for the taking just yet. But at least he wasn't going anywhere, poem or no poem he wasn't going to leave this place with body, let alone soul intact.

Ah, the poem. Just what did the priest know about its potential? What did anyone? Certainly not Randall. He smiled, and just couldn't help himself saying, "How do I know that thing is even real?"

*"Randall! Don't provoke him!"* Ishrel pleaded and scuttled away to the doorway, ready to beat a hasty retreat.

Nichols moved around the back of the table and slid the box over to himself, slowly and deliberately. "Ania, Lewis. Cover me would you please?"

The two of them made a great show of re-aiming at Randall as the priest carefully opened the box.

The effect was instantaneous, an almost physical blow to Randall's chest.

Ishrel screamed like a girl and was gone in a heartbeat.

The pressure in the whole room seemed to become oppressive as the sickening power emerged from the open box. It felt like a stun grenade has suddenly gone off, but in extreme slow motion. A wave of power pulsating out from the box. It hit Randall, almost knocking the wind right out of him, and he had to fight the urge to just turn tail and run. An urge which increased with every passing second the box was open.

Randall was the trigger, if he hadn't been in the room he was sure the effect would be negligible at best. The presence of evil had kicked the scroll into life. Wave after wave of pulsating energy broke over the collector and it took all his will not to stagger back a pace or two. It was like standing close to a massive bass speaker. Boom, Boom, Boom.

By the surprised look on the faces of the others, they felt it to, but not as acutely as Randall. Then a look of sheer terror flashed across Nichol's face as he prepared himself to read aloud. He glanced up at Randall, his face ashen now. He was terrified of what he was about to unleash. It could make the whole city burn for all the priest knew. Randall grabbed onto that terror with both hands gladly taking it as a cue for a ceasefire.

"Okay, Okay. Point taken," Randall blurted. "Take it easy holy man. I believe you."

There was a tangible feeling of collective relief around the room as Nichols gently closed the lid and Randall felt like he could breathe again. The priest slumped slightly and had to brace himself against the table with both hands to avoid collapsing.

"Now," Nichols said breathlessly. "Get out, or do you want me to continue?"

"No need for that," Randall said. This wasn't his finest hour, but the priest had given him a get out where he could keep at least a little dignity intact. "I'll go," he conceded.

"See Mister Randall out will you, Lewis?" Nichols asked.

"That would be my absolute pleasure," Lewis replied. He gestured towards the door. "After you hell spawn."



"I'll see myself out, thanks," Randall replied testily, then turned to McCulloch who was still cowering in the corner with an almost comical look on bemusement on his face. "I will see you soon, Larry."

McCulloch just gawked at him, so Randall turned and walked off, out of the room and down the stairs. He was glad no one in the room could see the look of shame on his face. If his entrance had been triumphant, his exit was quite the reverse. He was just thankful Ishrel had beaten a retreat first. He could not have lived with himself if the little bastard had seen this.

For a full twenty seconds everyone in the room just stared after him in shock. Peroni snapped out of it first. "Father, you did it!" She said excitedly and rushed over to give him a rib cracking hug."

"Thanks," he said meekly and marvelled at just how strong she was.

"Yeah!" Lewis shook his head in disbelief and went over to the door just to make sure Randall was really gone. "That was something else."

"It was too close," Nichols replied as Peroni finally released him. "Too close."

Now that the immediate danger had passed, Larry leapt up and into the centre of the room, his arms flailing. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why didn't you cream that bastard?" He wanted to know.

"Larry, please..." Nichols barely had enough energy to slope over to the bed, once there he sat down hard holding his head in his hands, exhausted. Tears were close but he fought them off.

"Never mind that," Larry continued. "Don't you see him? He was shitting himself. You could have ended this there and then."

Nichols had neither the strength nor the desire to argue. He stared down at his hands that hadn't stopped shaking since he'd opened the box. He shuddered inwardly at its dark horrible power. How could such a thing created to fight evil feel so malevolent. He could smell it on him. Pure dripping evil.

"Well?" Larry insisted.

"Larry, leave him alone, can't you see what it's done to him?" Peroni said.

"Bollocks, he lost his nerve."

Before Larry could react, Peroni lunged at him, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. "Can't you just be glad he's gone, you ungrateful..." She bit her lip and pushed him away. Larry staggered backwards until he hit the wall.

"Fucking bitch," he blurted and was about to lay into her when Lewis moved in between them both.

"Now, now, folks, let's all just calm down, eh?" He gently pushed Larry back, but keeping his eye on Peroni. She nodded and turned away. "That's better." He straightened Larry sweat soaked shirt. "No harm done."

Larry knocked his hands away and moved to curse Peroni again but the way she snapped her head back around and the look of murder in her eyes suggested discretion was the better option as he clearly might just get a smack in the mouth for his trouble. That and she had a gun.

## THIRTY-SIX

When Randall got outside, he had managed to regain most of his shattered composure. As he stepped out into the bitter morning air he found Ishrel at the gate at the end of the over ground garden path. The demon had managed to shed the humiliating form Randall had chosen for it and had instead of the normal heat haze it had in fact reverted to the form of a deformed imp like creature which Randall hadn't seen for a good long while.

It looked to Randall like a cross between a lizard and a skinned ape with its black scaly skin and arms and legs just too long for its body, like they had been put through a wringer. Ishrel hopped up to sit precariously on the gate and slapped his spindly hands together excitedly, a toothy grin ripped across his hideous face.

This incarnation was Ishrel's own creation, he knew it took the demon quite a bit of power to conjure. Out of spite Randall briefly contemplated changing the demon into something more comical again to lighten his mood, but the truth of it was this form suited Ishrel and although he was loathed to admit it, for all Randall longing for human company, recent events showed all too clearly that it was company he no longer belong in.

There was something strangely comforting being around a good old fashioned looking demon again. He was with his own kind around the creature and maybe he should just accept that fact and stop pining after a life long since lost.

"Lucifer in a night shirt," Randall said approaching Ishrel. "Did you feel that thing?"

*"And that was just from him opening the box!"* Ishrel said still clapping and nodding his head vigorously like a nightmare version of one of those cymbal clashing old monkey toys. *"Imagine if the priest has actually recited the verse!"* Ishrel's cat-like eyes flashed with perverse excitement.

"Yeah," Randall replied and lent against the gate next to him. He looked up at the house. "Mynor's fucking poem. Who would have thought it?"

Ishrel nodded and began drumming his hands on his legs as he sat. *"Hmm,"*

"You could say it complicates things." Randall said mulling over his next move. At last a challenge, well he had wanted things to liven up and they certainly had.

*"It changes everything, forget McCulloch,"* Ishrel ordered. *"It is now your duty to get that poem."*

Randall cringed inwardly, he knew that was coming.

*"It is a prize worthy of the fallen one himself,"* Ishrel continued eyes wide as he imagined the potential glory. *"We must get our hands on it."*

Our hands? Randall thought there was only one of them who was going to have to get his hands dirty and it wasn't the lizard monkey boy perched on the gate. "Forget it, Ishrel," Randall said firmly. "My brief is to get McCulloch, that's all. You can keep your ancient games.

*"I insist!"* Ishrel said and jumped down from the gate. He did his best to square up against the six foot collector, but barely came up to his chest. *"I am ordering you to get that poem."*

It was all Randall could do not to laugh down into Ishrel's crumpled face. "I don't care," he told him in his best condescending tone. "Put it out of your tiny little mind. Now why don't you slide back up there out of the way, and let

me think." Randall said patting the gate. "Better still, pop off and get me some info on how I can fight that thing or at least get round it."

The demon folded his arms and pouted like a petulant child and waited for Randall to relent. Randall just looked down at him with raised eye brows, until finally Ishrel snorted and spun away in a huff.

*"There is no way to fight the poem,"* Ishrel said with his back to Randall.

Randall couldn't tell if Ishrel was just being obstructive or if, as he suspected no one really knew how to fight a poem. Myth or no myth that power was real enough, and its presence in the house caused Randall a major headache. Any creature he sent in there would turn tail and run at just a whiff of the power of the poem. He couldn't help but smile, impressed. "Clever, clever priest." He turned to Ishrel. "Y'know I think I like this guy."

*"Huh! You never were much of a judge of character."* Ishrel said and actually stamped his foot although it made no sound.

"Must be why I like you so much. Still, I can't believe they would let one of those things out of the Vatican with only a three man protection team and a priest. And all for a nobody like McCulloch."

A conundrum indeed.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

In the hours since Randall had left, an uneasy truce had descended on the occupants of the safe house, though the mood was still one of grim uncertainty. Lewis was back at his post on the landing after looking downstairs from which he had returned to report that yes the living room window, steel shutters and all, was no more, gone the same way as half the side of the house. No one knew how the hell the waking street beyond had not notice the demolition as they made their various way to work of on the school run. But they had all soon decided that was the least strange thing that had happen this morning.

While Lewis kept his vigil, Peroni and Nichols were discussing their next move in hushed whispers and Larry McCulloch was pacing the room excitedly. He felt like he had dropped twenty years in as many minutes and as if to mirror this change in fortune the sky outside had brightened as the new day, one he now knew he might actually see the end of, finally took hold and the night was banished for another day.

"Did you see that bastard's face?" Larry said for what must have been the fourth time since Randall's exit and as before to no one in particular. "Not so smug when he scurried out, was he?"

"We are far from out of the woods yet Larry," Peroni reminded him and moved over to the window.

"See anything out there?" Nichols asked and adjusted the towel he had put back over the box, feeling the shape of it under the material made his head pound.

"I can see him, he's out in the street, bold as you like, by our car."

"Well as long as he stays out there, that's fine with me." Lewis shouted through.

"Indeed," Peroni agreed. As she watched Randall seemed to be talking to himself, or more likely to some creature he had conjured. Try as she might she could not make out so much as a slight distortion in the air that might indicate the thing's location. The collector seemed to be fiddling with something in his hands, it was difficult at this distance and in the early morning light. Paper perhaps?

Larry briefly joined her at the window. "We should move," he said watching Randall. Even at this range the bastard gave him the creeps. "While we still can. He's not going to try anything in broad daylight, is he?" He moved away from the window again as a chill ran down his spine. "Besides, we've got the big guns now." He motioned to the box.

"Hate to admit it," Lewis said. "But Larry's right. He can't do anything in the middle of the street. We should get gone. Get Larry to the Vatican and hopefully never see his ugly mug again. No offence Larry."

"Huh, don't worry about it, the feeling is mutual." McCulloch replied.

Could it be this easy? Nichols wondered, biting his nails. Just a whiff of the poem's power and Randall, the great terrible Randall is defeated? No not defeated as such, just a stale mate. But their one true chance lay in the fact that Randall and his kind thrived on secrecy. Surely even with all his power Randall couldn't risk an all-out battle right in the middle of this sleepy suburbia. He prayed he wouldn't have to open the box again, there was riding your luck and then there was suicide. He tried to put the thought from his mind.

"Father?" He turned to see Peroni had come away from the window and over to where he was standing deep in thought.

"Yes Ania?"

Her gaze was strangely skittish "May I see the poem?" She asked sheepishly.

"Not a good idea, Ania," he replied softly. He smiled as reassuringly as he could. "We don't really know the potential of the poem, no one does. Even what prolong exposure to its power might do to us, what it may have already done."

Lewis poked his head into the room. "If I get cancer, I'm suing the Vatican." He said impishly then disappeared once more.

Nichols laughed. "Good luck with that!" He said, but the smile faded as he turned back to Peroni who frowned up at him, always so serious. He sighed. "Ania, look. That box is lead lined, and that has to be for a reason. I don't want to risk any of you, getting..." He shrugged unable to finish the sentence.

"I understand," Peroni said clearly disappointed. Then after a moment's thought said. "I just hate to think of what you happen if one of Randall's kind got a hold of it."

He took her hands in his and smiled reassuringly. "Let's hope it never comes to that." He squeezed her hands gently and she forced a smile.

"Heck of a night," she said.

"Heck of a night, Ania," he replied.

"Strange bastard," Larry said. He was back over at the window looking down into the street below.

"What is it?" Peroni asked and moved over to the window where she stood next to Larry and looked out. The car was still there but Randall was nowhere to be seen. "Where is he?"

Larry ran his hand through his thinning hair. "He just looked up at me, waved, then walked off."

"Walked off, where?" She asked.

"Off down the street," Larry said and slapped her hard on the back. "He's gone!"

"Peroni looked less than convinced. "Oh, I don't know."

"Gone," Larry repeated and nearly danced into the middle of the room. "He's had enough. He knows there's no way he can't get to me here, thanks to that box thing."

Still at the window, Peroni frantically looked for the collector. But the scene was just one of bland suburban normality. Someone was walking their dog, two school children were running down the street chasing a football. Just a normal Monday morning. She kept desperately trying to find some crack in the illusion, some misplaced dark shadow, a look of malevolence on a passing pedestrian's face, but there was nothing. Larry clapped his hands behind her in delight.

"Can't be over," she said to herself, but her eyes didn't lie no matter how hard she tried to disbelieve them.

"We should go," Nichols stated firmly. "While we can."

Peroni spun to face him. Can't be this easy she said to herself, but Nichols eyes had real hope in them. He nodded to her. "Okay," she said.

"At last, some sense," Larry remarked. "I'm already packed."

Ignoring Larry, Peroni checked her watch. Something wasn't right but as yet she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She peered up into the sky, which should by her calculations be nearly fully light by now. It wasn't. The street lights were off, as they had been for a good half an hour now and she could see the sun, which had come out from behind the thin layer of clouds stretching across the sky. So by rights the last of the night should have been chased away by the oncoming day. But it still clung on.

Then as she watched, the sky began to darken, slowly at first but growing darker by the moment. She screwed her eyes shut and rubbed them with the balls of her hands. She took a beat to compose herself, after all she had been up all night, scared, on adrenalin overdrive waiting for an attack to come at any moment. So it wasn't hard to believe her tired eyes could deceive her. She told herself to remain calm and opened her eyes again. She gasped out loud.

It was now twilight outside and getting darker. "Wait..." she said half-heartedly, to the approaching darkness or her companions she didn't know. They ignored her, scurrying around as they were preparing to leave. The surrounding houses in the street outside were shadows now, by rights, if this were a natural darkness their lights should be on, as should the street lights.

Darker and darker, this was no normal night, the sun was now nothing more than a dull brown stain in the sky, until as he watched on horrified it disappeared altogether, swallowed up with the rest of the outside world.

The light bulb in the room dipped and the room was suddenly pitched into hear darkness before it slowly faded up again, but it's light couldn't penetrate the pitch black outside. So much so that Peroni found that she was now staring at her reflection in the window.

"What the shit was that?" Larry cursed and dropped is suitcase so the contents spilled out onto the floor.

"Outside," Peroni said.

"What the hell's going on out there?" Lewis cried.

Nichols rushed over to the window. "Now what?"

Peroni pointed lamely to the nothingness outside.

The sound of electrical sparking came up from below them, followed by a loud bang of something exploding.

"Shit, the lights are out down stairs," Lewis shouted, he looked up as the bulb above his head in the landing flickered then died. "Shit,"

"Power cut?" Larry asked. Then remembered the bedroom light was still glowing dimly, now they only source of meagre light.

"It's him," Nichols said grimly still looking out into the void outside.



"It all just went, dark outside," Peroni told him. "Right in front of my eyes."

"What's going on?" Larry wanted to know, he followed their gaze out the window.

Lewis retreated from the darkness of the landing, gun drawn and lent against the door frame his eyes wide with terror. "Black as pitch downstairs now," he said.

"Darker," Nichols said. It was as if someone had thrown a thick blanket over the whole house. "That's no natural darkness." He added.

A loud crash from downstairs drew them all over to the door. Lewis held out an arm to stop them getting past. "Wait, no point in crowding me, can't see anything beyond the top of the stairs out here. Stay in the room."

He aimed into the nothingness beyond the weak light coming from the bedroom's solitary light, which barely reached the top of the stairs.

Peroni cocked an ear to listen as more crashing came from downstairs. "Shh, everyone, that's coming from the kitchen. The sound of smashing glass and splintering wood thundered up though the floorboards under their very feet. Directly below them, the kitchen was being taken apart.

"Nichols!" Larry grabbed the priest by the sleeve and pulled him away from the door. "What are you waiting for? Use that thing, all hell's breaking loose down there!"

"No," Nichols pulled his arm away from Larry desperate grasp.

"They're down stairs," Larry pleaded. "They could come up here at any second. You saw how Randall reacted when you just opened that thing." He made to grab Nichols again but he stepped back, shaking his head vigorously.

"No," the word came out of Nichols throat as a shrill cry. "Get away from me!" He demanded.

Seeing Nichols panic, Peroni took a step towards him, but he staggered away with his head in his hands. "No, No, No!" he screamed.

She dragged herself away from the scene and moved past Lewis and onto the landing to the very edge of the light.

"Careful Ania," Lewis warned.

"Cover me," she said approaching the darkness.

"Cover you? Lewis exclaimed. "There could be a fucking huge monster an inch in front of your face and I wouldn't see it!"

She peered into the void. Good point.

Back in the room, Larry spat a curse at Nichols and took a step towards the box on the table. "Fucking coward!"

He made to grab the box.

"Don't you touch that!" Nichols warned through gritted teeth, his voice was almost a growl now. And he pointed an accusing finger at Larry.

"Fuck you," Larry pulled away the towel to reveal the gaudy looking life-line. He moved to pick it up but Nichols flew at him and before McCulloch could react the priest shoulder barged him away from the table with the strength of a mad man. The blow caught McCulloch sharply in the ribs and sent him sprawling to the floor.

"Larry..." Nichols looked down at McCulloch, his face set in shock at what he had just done.

"Fucker," Larry snapped and rolled on his back to gawked up at him in stunned outrage. "You bastard!" He screamed and tried to get up but the priest was looming over him like a lunatic, and for one horrible moment, Larry thought he was going to kick him square in the face out of blind rage, and he had a look that said if he started kicking he would not be able to stop himself until he had stomped Larry brains into mush.

He desperately looked for support from Peroni or Lewis but the Italian was nowhere to be seen and Lewis had his back to them aiming at something out side. "Shit," Larry brought his arms up over his head to protect himself from the anticipated onslaught and closed his eyes.

Seeing Larry cowering below him, the rage that was threatening to overwhelm him fled from Nichols in an instant and with it went every ounce of energy he had left. "Oh, dear God, Larry I'm sorry..." He moved to help Larry up but McCulloch flinched.

"Father!" Peroni came back into the room to see Nichols standing over the prone McCulloch. Both Nichols and Larry stared at her in disbelief, she was about to ask why when she realized she was aiming her pistol at Nichols.

She looked down at the gun in her hand as if it were being held by someone else, then holstered the weapon.

"Jez," Lewis was next to her now with a look like a school teacher who had stumbled in on a fight between his best three pupils. "Don't we have enough problems?"

"Jesus!" Larry screamed and kicked out at Nichols finally regaining his senses. "You fucking hypocrite," He shuffled on his back over to the wall and clambered up it until he was back on his feet, he had to lean against it to stop himself from falling back down in a heap. Nichols instinctively moved to help him. "Don't you fucking touch me," Larry spat.

"Larry..."

"Jesus," Larry winced in pain as he straightened his back and cursed to himself. Nearly getting the shit kicked out of him by a priest. Now that was a new low, even for him. "Just leave me alone," he warned and half walked half stumbled over to his bed and sat down.

Nichols desperately wanted to say something, some words of apology, not only to Larry but to Peroni and Lewis, anything just to get their eyes off him. The crushing disappointment in them was worse than any bile that came from McCulloch's mouth. But what could he say? He was spiralling out of control again and just couldn't stop himself. Finally he sank down into a chair by the table and held his head in his hands.

A scurrying sound, not unlike half a dozen rats, albeit ones the size of cats drew Peroni and Lewis away from the pitiful scene in front of them and back onto the landing. Peroni was almost glad of the distraction and one quite awkward glance to Lewis confirmed he felt the same.

"Now what?" Lewis said.

She shrugged and drew her pistol making a mental note not to aim it at any priests again. "God only knows," she replied.

They slowly approached the void which was as black and endless as before. But now it was radiating a bitter cold that instantly misted their breath. The temperature close by was dropping noticeably by the second. They both stopped three feet away as new twist assaulted their senses. Along with the sub-zero temperature came a smell not unlike a rancid meat locker.

"That's new," Lewis said. "Smells like..." He searched for the right word in the cold. Peroni found it.

"Death."

"Yeah," Lewis shivered and made a face. "Can almost taste it."

It was as if the darkness itself was rotting and sucking the heat out of their very marrow.

The scurrying was suddenly louder now, an incessant scratching and scraping that set Peroni's chattering teeth on edge. It was close, perhaps right in front of their raised pistols ready to leap out of the blackness and into their faces. She shuddered, not wanting to think too hard about what something created by Randall and called this nothingness home might look like and what it was capable of. She offered a prayer that whatever it was would stay there. It wasn't the most hopeful prayer she had uttered today.

"Maybe, they're not real," Lewis whispered. His voice sounded tinny in the dead atmosphere of the landing, but still it gave her a spark of optimism.

"Like the thing on the stairs," Peroni said and he nodded clearly glad of the validation. The image of that seething nightmare flashed into her mind's eye unbidden and she quickly shook it away before it got too tight a grip on her already shaky psyche.

"Christ!" It was an almost shriek from the room behind them. They dashed through just in time to hear something huge, and thankfully unseen clamber its way across the outside of the house and over to the window, which rattled violently as it passed.

"What the fuck is that?" Larry said.

The thing scuttled along the whole side of the house and then back again over to the window. As a shadow somehow darker than the void passed the window, Peroni took up a shooting stance and aimed at the glass. The thing was gone in a second and she was left aiming at her own reflection in the window. She could hear it stomping its way down the side of the wall. Then double back up towards the window once more.

"It's going to come through," Lewis shouted and brushed past Peroni and aimed at the window. He cocked his pistol preparing to fire as the thing got close.

"Don't fire!" Peroni warned him, once again her mind went back to the creature on the stairs and how their bullets passed through its body. "That's what he wants. It won't come through."

"God I hope your right," Lewis said clearly unsure.

Larry darted over to where Nichols was still sat in the chair by the table. "Use that thing!" He pointed to the box.

Nichols had his head in his hands he shook it vigorously. He could hear the thing as it moved around outside. Finally it stopped. Waiting.

"Father," Lewis moved over to him and rested his hand on the priest's shoulder and held it there until Nichols looked up at him with blood shot eyes. "Larry's right," Lewis said.

"No," Nichols insisted.

Larry made to speak, but Peroni held a hand up to stop him. "Larry, please." She turned to Nichols, he was crying. "Father?"

He tried to answer her but the words came out as sobs, he swallowed hard in an attempt to compose himself but it was too late to stop the flow of tears, they just kept coming, until finally they over took him completely and before he knew it he was sobbing uncontrollably.

This must have been music to the massed creatures down stairs and outside as they drummed their terrible feet in unison. The noise shredding every live nerve in the room.

## THIRTY-EIGHT

The collector and the demon sat together on the garden gate once more, their legs dangling off the ground as they enjoyed the devilish tattoo coming from the various creatures scaling the outside of the house. They smiled at the noise, music as it was to them and exchanged a knowing look as the anguish radiating from inside swirled around them like a sweet aroma. The cacophony sounding all the sweeter accompanied as it was by the pitiful sobs of the priest.

It was an almost intimate moment between friends.

Bliss.

*"How long can you keep this up?"* Ishrel asked kicking his feet absently.

After the ignominy of his exit from the house, Randall felt good about how the power had once again shifted back in his favour. "I don't know to be honest," he confessed. "Maybe a day or two. But the important thing is they don't know how long I can keep it going. As far as they're concerned, I could keep it going for weeks."

The truth was, creating a void like this was simple enough. To the outside world the house appeared normal enough. Any of the people casually passing by this morning would only see the normal house they saw every day of the week. No massive hole in the wall where the window used to be, no dead bodyguard sprawled by the door. In fact no more than half an hour previously a postman had delivered a pile of junk mail to the house, blissfully ignorant of the siege taking place all around him, he hadn't batted an eye lid as he passed Randall and Ishrel or any of the creatures crawling all over the side of the house. The postman had even stepped right over Jeffery's body to reach the letterbox. Perhaps he thought it was just an unusually high door step.

Randall wasn't a hundred per cent sure how the freezing void incantation worked but whatever it did to the minds of any human in the vicinity, it was working a treat. And that in the end was all he needed to know, after all you don't need to know the intricate workings of the internal combustion engine to drive a car.

*"Now I'm all for the suffering of others,"* Ishrel said after listening with great amusement to the latest ear splitting screech coming from one of the smaller creatures. *"But what good is all this doing us?"*

"Use your head old man. If they go without food, water and sleep for long enough, they won't be in any fit state to put up much of a fight if I do decide to attack the place full on. And hey, you never know, they may end up going so crazy that they kick Larry out of the front door themselves. It's been known to happen."

*"True," Ishrel agreed. "But I'm concerned about the woman, she seems a bright one. She may figure out what you are doing. Perhaps persuade the priest to use the poem."*

"The priest won't use the poem."

*"How can you be so sure?"*

"He looked as terrified as I felt in there when he opened the box. He doesn't know what will happen if he recites the verse. No one does, it could take them all, and half the street with us."

The demon nodded as he idly watched a young mother pushing a baby in a pram down the street passed them. She was oblivious to the horrors around her but the baby, which had been happily crewing on its grubby fingers, suddenly burst into tears as she passed where Ishrel and Randall were sitting. The demon cocked a grin at this as the flustered mother tried in vain to comfort the distressed child.

"Smart kid," Randall said, as the mother hurried away down the street with the still wailing infant.

*"Hmm," Ishrel mused. "I wonder how it tastes."*

How long had it been? Peroni wondered to herself as she sat on the floor of the isolated bedroom. She was by the door with a thin bed sheet wrapped around herself in a pathetic attempt to keep warm. How long had they been trapped in this sub-zero nightmare. Hours? Days even, since that unnatural heat stealing darkness had entombed the house. It was impossible to tell with no point of reference. The power in each of their mobile phones had gone the same way as the power to the house. All save Father Nichols', which was still working but the clock had remained at 00:00 ever since. And the solitary light bulb still burning above them.

Her empty stomach told her it had at least been many hours since her last meal, and no hope of foraging for food down stairs, stumbling through the darkness would be suicide.

Then there was the cold. It seemed impossible given how cold it was now, but the temperature still continued to drop with each passing misted breath she breathed. It was so cold now that a thin layer of frost covered

everything in the room formed from the frozen moisture in their breath the moment it escaped their lips.

Across the room, Larry was laid on the bed curled up in the meagre luxury of his duvet, muttering something inaudible to himself, probably more obscenities no doubt. He had obscenities and sins to burn that one. Or was he even now, with all hope of escape slipping away, plotting his next great escape, at our expense, Peroni thought bitterly. Writing another chapter in his life story, unable to accept it would be the last, before the inevitable epilogue where he died, trapped in a frozen room with three fools who tried and failed to save him.

Lewis was on his feet again now, pacing the room trying to stay warm. His face which had never been fleshy was gaunt and pale, she could see the sinuses in his hollow cheeks tighten as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. She couldn't think where he got the energy to keep moving like that, she had long since used up any reserves she had herself and even watching him as he began to stamp his feet and rub his arms made her head spin. She felt so detached from her body she feared she may just fade away altogether.

Then there was Father Nichols, he was sitting on the chair by the table with a bath towel draped over his shoulders, Lewis had practically had to force him to take it to at least try and keep warm.

The priest was just staring blankly at the blackness outside the window. The precious and as yet unused box was on his lap where he gripped it so tightly the whites of his knuckles showed. He had barely moved in the past few hours, (or days for all she knew) Except to check his mobile phone, perhaps in the hope the Vatican cavalry would call and bring this misery to an end.

She knew that chance was thin at best. They were lost, but then again maybe they always had been. This whole thing had a grim inevitability about it. The only real surprise was the manner of their defeat. Hordes of demons coming crashing through the wall, she could accept that. Going out all guns blazing as they were overwhelmed. But this? Starving to death, if they didn't freeze first?

Such an ordinary way to die.



Peroni took in the room and shivered, it wouldn't have looked out of place in some far off Arctic research station instead of here in the middle of suburban England. She pulled the bed sheet tighter around herself and pulled her knees up under her chin. Being from southern Italy, Peroni had always thought the weather was bad in this country, especially at winter time, but this was ridiculous. This made her smile which in turn made her chapped lips crack and she tasted blood. She would have cried if she had the energy.

Then Lewis spun on his heels to face her. "Wish we had some music," he said obliquely.

"Come again?" Peroni said.

"Music, y'know, so we could dance to keep warm."

She looked at him as if he were speaking Martian.

"Christ!" Larry muttered in disbelief and rolled over and pulled the duvet over his head.

"I didn't know you could dance," Peroni said and Lewis gave her a look of bemusement.

"You never asked."

It was only now that Peroni realised she knew next to nothing about Lewis outside of work. He and Jeff used to talk all the time, about this and that, always shooting the breeze. But she had felt the need to keep an emotional distance between herself and the others. It seemed so stupid now, such a waste of time now that time was drawing to an end for all of them. She was about to ask Lewis what type of music he liked to dance to, when Father Nichols spoke.

"This is all my fault," he said still facing the window. "I should have known..." He got to his feet, suddenly animated, clutching the box to his chest like a child. The bath towel fell to the floor but he scarcely seemed to notice. He looked from person to person wild wide, wild eyes tainted with a hint of madness in them.

"I told them," he continued. "I told the Vatican what to expect, what Randall was capable of if he found us before we got to the holy city. But would those pompous bastards listen?" He laughed bitterly, the spark of madness in his eyes igniting now into full blown lunacy. "Pompous Bastards!"

He shouted to the heavens as if trying to make God Himself hear him. "If I ever get out of here, I'll tell them to their faces! Then I'm done with them!"

Larry sat up in bed. "Well it's a bit fucking late for that now, holy man. Save all that crisis of faith bollocks for someone who gives a shit."

"My faith is still intact," Nichols told him. "Just not in the Vatican, that's all."

"Whatever, you fuckin' lunatic." Larry threw a dismissive hand at the priest.

"I've as good as killed us all," Nichols added.

"Not yet you haven't," Larry replied with contempt.

They both suddenly looked to Peroni like two drunken derelicts shouting at each other in the street. She got to her feet and the action made her head spin. She leaned back against the wall for support and waited for the room to come back into focus. Nichols was clutching the box so tightly she half expected it to shatter.

"Father, you saved us," she said, her voice sounded miles away. "Randall could have killed us all, but now he knows you have the poem, he can't send anything in against us." It was valid argument up to a point she knew, just so long as you didn't mention the whole freezing and starving to death development.

"I haven't saved anyone yet," Nichols said and looked down at the box. "Not yet." He whispered.

"All this must be taking its toll on Randall," Lewis said as he picked up the bath towel and put it back on Nichol's hunched shoulders. "I'm sure he can't keep this up forever."

"True," Peroni said nodding, she gave Lewis a smile of thanks and he winked.

It was Larry's turn to jump up now, he leapt out of bed. "He doesn't fuckin' need to keep it up for ever, just until we are fucking dead!" His ragged breath clouded the air around him. "Now I'm not waiting around here to starve to death just on the off chance that bastard is going to get tired. Jesus, I'd rather take my chances outside in that black shit."

"Larry, come on, you wouldn't last five seconds," Peroni told him.

"Yeah? Well why don't you give me your gun and we'll soon find out, won't we?" He said.

"That's not an option Larry," she replied. "That would be just like handing you over to Randall."

"Now that," Lewis said with a sneer, "sounds like a plan."

"Fuck you," Larry shouted.

"Oh, yeah?" Lewis took a step towards Larry.

"Lewis, back off," Peroni ordered but Lewis stood firm eye balling Larry, who also wasn't backing down.

"Maybe he would then just let us go," Lewis taunted. "After all it's you he wants."

Watching the confrontation, Nichols backed off slightly. Things were coming to a head, and the realisation shook some sense back in to his fatigued brain. Lewis looked genuinely ready to throw Larry out of the window, and Nichols just couldn't blame him. Even with the best of intentions, Larry McCulloch was a nasty piece of work.

He could see that now as the crook began shouting and swearing at Lewis a man he barely knew but one who had agreed to lay down his life for McCulloch even though he obviously hated the man. But Larry just didn't care about anything or anyone except how he could use them for his own selfish ends.

Nichols' heart sank at the scene, at Larry. He had always believed everyone, no matter what their past deeds, deserved a chance at salvation. That was why they were all here, and now it just seemed so dangerously naïve. He watched with growing despair as Larry leaned into Lewis face provocatively.

"Yeah," Larry sneered. "You'd do that too wouldn't you? Throw me to the fucking wolves at the first sign of trouble, just to save your own fucking skin."

Peroni shook her head exasperated. "Larry..."

"First sign of trouble?" Lewis said incredulously. Then he took a breath and added in a more measured almost condescending tone. "Larry, Larry, Larry. You are just not fucking worth it." With this he turned his back on McCulloch, which just infuriated him more.

"Yeah, that's right. Just walk away." Larry said.

"I wish I could!" Lewis replied.

"Well, well, well," Larry continued. "The truth will fucking out."

"Larry..." Peroni started to speak but Larry cut her off with a dismissive wave of the hand.

"I knew I'd be better off on my own," Larry said and gave them all a look of disdain, then he spat on the floor. "Fucking amateurs."

"What did you say?" Lewis spun back around, the look of fury on his face made Nichols wince. "I should fucking shot you where you stand."

"Huh, you'd probably fucking miss," came the reply.

Nichols was about to intervene when his mobile suddenly went off. He had set it to ring out loud but all the same it just vibrated. He moved away from the confrontation just as Peroni moved forwards. She pointed at Lewis but he ignored her and squared off against Larry once more.

"You are one ungrateful bastard," he said taking a step forwards, but Larry stood his ground. Lewis was about to continue but Peroni moved between them both.

"That's enough," she said sternly and pushed the men apart like the referee at a boxing match. She looked so frail to Nichols compared to the two men but still she stood firm between them with a no nonsense look on her face.

Nichols admired her so much, he always had but even more so now things were so grim. She was half dead on her feet but she was still standing strong. His shoulders slumped. She deserved so much better than this. So did Lewis and poor Jeff. He put the box back down on the table and pulled the mobile out of his pocket as Peroni spoke again.

"Look at us," she said. "If this is what we are like after a few hours. What are we going to be like after a few days, if it comes to that?"

That was a very good point, Nichols noted.

She pushed them away from each other. Nichols could tell that even that small exertion sapped what little strength she had left.

"Sorry boss," Lewis said suddenly ashamed. And she nodded weakly. And Nichols could have sworn he saw Larry eyeing the pistol in her holster.

He open his phone to read the text he had just received. It could of course only have come from one person. He read the text, it was from the collector. He punched in a reply but could not bring himself to send it, not yet. Not ever if he could help it, so Nichols just saved the text with a heavy heart and prayed he would never have to press send.

## THIRTY-NINE

It was generally understood amongst Randall's kind that all but a few of the stuffy, pious, overfed, overdressed population of the Vatican hierarchy believed (if they knew of them at all) that the collectors were nothing more than a left over myth from the good old days of witch trials and inquisitions.

Their numerous and largely unread records from that dark period in the church's turbulent history showed that an unfortunate individual could just as easily be accused of being a collector of souls as of being branded a witch. At the time they were considered to be one and the same evil, just a different label on which to pin unmentionable horrors to.

As the years past and civilisation and reason took a grip of the righteous, the activities of the collectors grew more and more clandestine, until finally it was assumed by the soldiers of darkness and their own hierarchy that none but the most vigilant of believers even knew of their continued existence. And that even today they still walked the earth causing chaos. That was evil's greatest weapon in the war, the ability to carry on its work unmolested by the church.

They were predators in a world with no equal, natural (or unnatural) foes. Free to do as they wished without fear of interruption. The truth of them lost

somewhere in the dusty Vatican archives, lost along with the means to fight them.

Mynor and his poem (or at least the poem's potential power) fell into this lost category along with the collectors and their like. Myth, nothing more than rumour to any but the staunchest believer. So why had the priest been allowed to take such a valuable artefact out of the Vatican's secret Museum? Even if taken just at face value, the relic was a priceless piece of the church's history. Most there believed it was the ravings of a religious madman from an age where man believed that evil walked the earth.

If no one at the Vatican truly believed that the darkness was a real and present threat. Why had they let it out of their vaults, to be taken to a nondescript place like this, with minimal protection. For the sake of a low life criminal like Larry McCulloch?

It was a brain teaser alright, and more importantly to Randall it was a welcome kick in the pants. For far too long now he had gone about his work unchallenged and it had made him bored, which in turn have made him sloppy.

Coming here, he had expected, like always just to waltz in and take McCulloch and if needs be kill anyone foolish enough to get in his way. But not this time, Randall had felt something standing in that room he had not felt since that fateful New York night when his old life had so abruptly ended and this new one had begun. Fear.

It was his first real strong emotion since coming back. Everything else had been a breeze, too easy. Thinking about it now, he had almost sleepwalked through the last twenty years since the novelty of his new existence had worn off. They called it 'the game' and that was how it had felt.

But not any longer, now in the presence of such power it felt like life and death. This was a new dawn and he couldn't wait to see the day that followed. It would be a shame to rid the world of this new found threat, but Ishrel was insisting they had to get their hands on the poem and thus tip the scales back in their favour.

Usually Randall would have expected Ishrel to go running off to his superiors with the news, then things would escalate and Randall would be pushed to the side lines. But Ishrel hadn't left his side, he was a coward but

he was also ambitious, and Randall suspected he wanted all the glory for himself. And thus the little demon wanted Mynor's Poem more than anything, even more than Larry McCulloch's tainted soul.

And there in lay the dilemma, he couldn't storm in all demons blazing, the priest was scared of the poem's untapped power but he would unleash that power if handed no other options. So what to do? This solution to soften them up with the freezing void and its noisy inhabitants was a good enough start, but what if it pushed the priest over the edge?

"Ishrel, what if the priest destroys the poem?"

Ishrel, who had been laid on his back in the over grown garden leapt to his feet. "*No!*" He glided through the knee high grass to where Randall was leant against the gate. "*He wouldn't... He, he couldn't! It's their only chance of survival.*"

"I just can't see him giving it up. We've pretty much got Larry, that's a given. But I think he'll burn the poem before letting us get our hands on it."

"*No, no, no!*" Ishrel protested, he approached Randall and even though he was a good two feet shorter than the collector, he did his best to square up to him. "*That is not acceptable,*" he warned, stabbing a scaly finger at Randall. "*We must get that box. Don't you realise how important it is?*"

To your career, Randall thought and looked down at the diminutive demon with mild amusement. "Ishrel, relax."

"*No I will not relax! We have never been this close to actually getting our hands on one. Not for a hundred years!*" Ishrel made a small fist and shook it comically up at Randall.

"I say let the priest burn it, if he wants to," Randall said more to vex Ishrel further than anything else. "One less of those things floating around can't be anything other than a good thing, if you ask me. What will that leave if this one's destroyed? How many copies was Mynor supposed to have made? Two, maybe three? I say burn away preacher boy, burn away."

Ishrel pulled at his leathery face in disbelief, raking his brittle nails over the scaly skin and then stamped his feet like a child on the verge of a major tantrum. He made to speak again but was so mad that he couldn't get a coherent word out.

"Relax," Randall said before the demon's head exploded. The truth was he knew how important the poem could be. Only one of those things could allegedly take out a collector, so was best in their hands than the enemy's. And Randall was sure that if they did get a hold of one intact, that Ishrel or one of his kind could then set about deciphering its power, perhaps come up with a counter incantation as a defence against its formidable potential. After all, as far as most players in the game, on both sides, knew. A Mynor's poem was the only sure fire way of killing a collector. So even if taken only as a self-preservation exercise. He had to get his hands on that dusty scrap of paper.

So Randall had sent the priest a text with the offer of a get out clause for him and his team (McCulloch was fucked, that was a given). One which, so far Nichols had refused in no uncertain terms. What he needed was a little more motivation.

*"Randall! Time is wasting,"* Ishrel said and the collector drew his attention back to the demon. First things first, he had been nice to the creature for too long, Ishrel might think he was getting soft on him. So Randall decided that he could keep his current form, it just needed a little modification.

"Nice tutu, Ishrel."

The demon looked down at the bright pink fluffy tutu he was now wearing around his waist. *"Really collector, really? I thought we were past such immaturity."*

Randall cocked a grin. "Never, besides it suits you."

He dug into his jacket pocket and brought out a piece of paper he had already torn into a three inch square and also a small Swiss army pocket knife. He selected the sharpest blade and cut into the palm of his left hand and once the blood came he spat into it, then using the tip of the blade as a pen, he mixed the fluids together and drew a crude picture of a spindly old woman onto the paper square. The design was little more than a glorified stick figure with wild hair, but it was more than detailed enough for what he needed.

Ishrel peered around him to see the picture. He grunted with approval.

A Banshee charm. That should liven things up in there no end.



## FORTY

Not like this. Larry McCulloch silently vowed to himself as he shivered in his next to useless duvet, which he had wrapped around himself in a very vain attempt to ward off the now sub-zero temperature of the room.

No. He would not go out so, so pathetically. That idiot priest had supposedly survived an encounter with one of Randall's kind, and a woman at that if Nichols was to be believed. So surely, he, Lucky Larry McCulloch could come through this rapidly deteriorating situation.

He eyed Nichols with contempt. The priest was huddled in a corner sat whispering with Peroni and clutching that box of his like a lover. What were they plotting? After more whispered words, Peroni crawled on her hands and knees across the room. None of them had the energy or desire anymore to do much else, and over to Lewis, who was slumped on his arse in the doorway, still clinging to the pretence he was somehow standing guard.

If only Randall knew the state they were all in he would just waltz in and take Larry without so much of a whimper in response. The Italian shuffled up close to Lewis and they exchanged words in hushed tones, Larry strained to hear but couldn't make out a thing. Plotting, those bastards were plotting something. Christ if only he had a gun.

His attention was drawn back to Nichols who was checking his mobile phone again, which he had been doing on and off for hours now. The old crook's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Was Randall sending him clandestine messages? Little texts of seduction offering him life and liberty in return for giving up Larry?

The priest seemed to be struggling with indecision. He put Larry in mind of an alcoholic desperately fighting the urge to take that first sip from a freshly opened bottle of cheap whiskey which would send him spiralling back into drunken oblivion.

Finally Nichols tucked the phone back into his pocket, mumbling something to himself as he did so. A prayer perhaps, the brainless zealot. But a prayer for what, Larry wondered? Guidance, or forgiveness for what he was about to do?

Nichols glanced furtively around the frozen meat locker of a room until he caught Larry's gaze. The priest started in shock as if he feared Larry was reading his mind, then he tore his gaze away, the look on his face something akin to shame, or was it guilt?

What are you up to Holy man? That look seemed to confirm all of Larry's suspicions. It was all so crystal clear to him now. If he had any chance of survival he would have to take control of this shitty situation, and fast. Shaft them before they could do the same to him. He knew now that for all of Nichols words of assurance, now that the shit had hit the fan he would sell Larry out half as fast as Larry would do the same to him if the roles were reversed.

So be it. What was called for now was a touch of the old McCulloch magic. And he would gladly put that up against anything these saps or that fucking yank outside could conjure up any day.

It was a bold statement that, little did Larry know, would soon be tested.

## FORTY-ONE

Shrouded in the foul smelling vapour of its birth, Randall looked down at his latest creation, which was laid, curled up in the foetal position, half hidden amongst the foot high straw like dead grass in the house's jungle of a front garden. He staggered slightly from the excursion of the creature's protracted birth.

The energy it had taken out of him, coupled with the constant drain from sustaining the freezing void, (once the process had begun, Randall immediately did away with the creatures wailing and clattering within it, both to conserve energy and to give those trapped inside a faint glimmer of hope) was now threatening to overwhelm the collector. Time was short.

The Banshee had taken longer than Randall had anticipated to reach something close to maturity, a full two hours of concentration. And even now the creature was only partially complete, but it would have to do.

Randall stumbled again, suddenly light headed and he took a faltering step or two back until he rested against the bramble infested hedge. Ishrel was standing nearby, transfixed by the old hag as it lay like a dead dog amongst the weeds.

*"Beautiful,"* he hissed.

Randall nodded in agreement, the proud father. She was not perfect by any means, but still, given the circumstances, some of his best work. "Rise," he ordered leaning back into the hedge like a drunkard.

The Banshee slowly unknotted itself from its foetal position and with great effort stood up in all its glory. As it straightened, it's newly formed brittle joints popped and cracked in protest, and even Randall couldn't help but wince at the noise, but the thing itself left no pain. Its rasping breath clouded the air as it hissed through its rotted teeth.

For a new-born, the Banshee looked ancient. Its leathery skin stretched too tight and too thinly over bone and sinew. Its long jet black matted hair steamed in the darkness, its eyes, set deep within its death mask of a face, flashed with raw lunacy. They darted fitfully around its unfamiliar surroundings until they finally came to rest upon its creator.

Randall met her desolate gaze as best he could. Though she wanted nothing more than to serve him, Randall saw nothing but raw madness in those black eyes. They were so cold that it chilled even the jaded collector to look into them.

It was such a shame that she didn't have more time in her to torment those in the house. Randall could hardly imagine the terror she could induce in those zealots in there given more time. Ishrel had called her beautiful and she was, in her way. The perfect nightmare standing there unashamedly naked and impossibly thin (there wasn't one of her limbs thicker than five inches in diameter). She stood there panting; taking in great lungful's of air to prepare herself for what was required of her. She knew her terrible life would be short, and was glad to give every second of it in service of her creator.

"Go," Randall glanced up at the house and to the solitary light source shinning from the upstairs bedroom window. The creature knew instinctively what it was to do and without a moment's hesitation turned and half ran, half

staggered over to the house. Once at the wall, she leaped six feet up and clung onto the brickwork by her fingernails and then began to scuttle up the side of the house and towards the room above her.

What the hell just happened? One minute Peroni was catching up on some much needed sleep. Courtesy of the continued silence from the unseen creatures outside. She had curled up next to the bed, which Larry still steadfastly refused to vacate, and sleep had soon claimed her.

She had no idea how long she had been out, but had just now been rudely awakened by what had felt like a kick in the backside. The next thing she was aware of was sitting up and staring straight down the barrel of a pistol. It had taken her a few moments to shake off sleep and tell herself she wasn't still dreaming, then she was able to focus on the figure on the other end of the weapon aiming at her.

"Larry! What the hell are you doing?" She instinctively reached across her chest to her shoulder holster which was empty.

"Stay sat down," Larry ordered and she saw her own pistol tucked in his belt. It took a second to register, then it hit her like a slap in the face. Larry had both their guns! He was standing over her ready to shoot if she looked at him wrong. She turned to see Lewis, his face like thunder, standing close by with his back against the wall and his hands in the air. Nichols was sitting at the table clutching the box, watching the scene, his eyes wide with fear, but at least everyone looked unhurt for now.

"Don't you hurt her," Lewis warned.

"Shut it, dick head," Larry responded meanly, keeping his aim on Peroni to make sure she did as she was told. Ania held her hands out in submission. "Smart girl," he said and swung the pistol between her and Lewis.

"Larry, you stupid bastard..." Lewis began but didn't get time to finish as Larry took a step towards him and slapped him hard across the face with the back of his free hand. Lewis' face reddened in fury and he looked ready to lunge at McCulloch, but the old crook took a swift step back again and aimed the pistol at Lewis forehead.

"Steady now, sparky," Larry warned. "I will shoot you just for the fucking fun of it."

"Cock sucker," Lewis spat.

"You wish," Larry sneered, and drew Peroni's pistol from his belt. He kept one aimed at Lewis and swung the other in Nichols direction and the priest flinched. "Right," Larry continued firmly. "Nichols, give me your phone."

"Larry, for pity's sake stop this," Nichols implored. "Are you losing you mind?"

"You think I don't see what's been going on here?" Larry said shifting from one foot to the other over and over. "I've heard you all whispering. Yeah, that's right. I know you're been plotting against me." He had an almost manic look in his eye now.

Peroni stiffly moved to get up, but Larry aimed from Nichols back at her forehead. She winced bringing up her arms to protect herself, for what little good it would do against a bullet if it came. "We're on your side!" She said desperately and waited for the shot that thankfully didn't come.

"Bullshit!" Larry shouted and then took a breath to ensure his twin aims were good. "Right, this is how things are going to work." He felt on top of the world now that his destiny and the means of his salvation were finally in his own two hands. "Nichols, you are going to give me that box."

The priest just looked at him with weary resignation and perhaps a slight shake of the head.

"You all saw the way Randall reacted to that thing. And I'm willing to bet he wants it more than he wants me," he continued. "So I say, let him have it. If he lets me walk that is."

"And what about us?" Lewis asked.

"You think I give a shit? You live, you die, it's all the same to me." Larry replied and turned his attention, if not his aim, back to Nichols. "So, do I start shooting or are you gonna give me your phone and the box?" He took a step towards where Nichols was sitting and re-aimed at the priest with his left hand gun, all the while keeping the right swinging between Peroni, who was now on her knees and Lewis. It wasn't ideal but no one in their right mind

would try and jump a man with two guns. "Well?" He said to Nichols and was surprised when a look of relief crossed the priest's face.

"You are a smart fellow, Larry..." Nichols sounded like he was fighting back tears as he spoke. Perhaps everything had finally caught up with him, Larry thought and half expected him to break down mid-sentence. But Nichols struggled on. "Always one step ahead, always ready to make a deal with the Devil..." He faltered and tears finally sprang to his eyes, his bottom lip trembled like a child's. "Always looking out for number one... No matter who gets hurt."

"You had better believe it, padre. You may want to die for some shitty piece of paper in a tacky old box, but I sure as shit don't." Taking another step, Larry rested the barrel of the pistol on Nichols' forehead and gave serious consideration to shooting him anyway. "We give him the box, he lets me go" he said slowly and deliberately. "That's the deal."

Nichols sighed deeply as the tears ran down his face, but he had pity in his eyes, not hate, certainly not fear which unnerved the old crook. "Thank you Larry," Nichols choked and had to clear his throat before continuing. "This is probably the nicest thing you have ever done for anyone in your life. Even if you didn't mean it as such."

McCulloch frowned, hardly the response he was expecting. The tears, yes, but thanks? "You really are a fruit cake, Nichols. Y'know that?"

"Perhaps," Nichols replied with a slight shrug of the shoulders. He wiped his tear stained cheeks with his hands. "But my conscience is clear... Now"

"Give me the box," Larry said trying to remain calm.

"No," Nichols replied softly, his eyes downcast.

There is nothing worse, Larry knew from all his years as a villain, than for someone you are trying to intimidate to either; one, think you are bluffing. Or two, simply didn't care if you carry out a threat or not, as they have no regard for their own life. The priest it seemed fitted firmly in the latter, which was a problem. But it was one he had the perfect answer to.

If he didn't care about his own life...

Larry turned his head slowly, and without a word shot Lewis in the stomach. Lewis shuddered slightly and just stood there for a moment with a

stupid look on his face, part shock, part outrage. It was the first time Larry had actually shot anyone before. He had threatened the deed many times before but had never pulled the trigger, until now. And he couldn't think of a better man to start with than that sarcastic bastard.

"Oh, no," Lewis spluttered comically, then as if remembering he had actually been shot with a real bullet, clutched at the ragged hole in his shirt and slid down the wall still gawking at Larry.

Christ that was loud, Larry thought as his ears began ringing from the report of the weapon, he looked at the still smoking pistol, then turned to Peroni, who had an equally stupefied look of shock on her face. Larry had expected screams of horror from the Italian, but she just stood there opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish. Strange, he thought. The priest however was more vocal.

"Larry!" He shouted. "What have you done?" He struggled to his feet still cradling the box. "Oh, dear God, Lewis."

"Oh, Jesus..." Lewis breathed as blood began to trickle through his fingers.

"Sit down," Larry ordered and pushed Nichols in the chest with the other pistol until he fell back to sit on the chair once more.

"Oh, God, God, Lewis," Nichols went on distraught, his eyes fixed on the wounded man. "Why, why?"

"For the hell of it," Larry replied, cruelly.

Suddenly, Peroni seemed to come to her senses and with a wail of anguish she crawled quickly over to Lewis on her hands and knees. The wounded man could do little but just look at her dumbly.

"Where are your fucking quips now Lewis, huh?" Larry jeered. The guns felt good in his hands, like weapons of the Gods, giving him absolute power over the cowering mortals. But as good as they felt, one in each hand wasn't practical, so he pushed one back into his waist band and convinced Peroni and certainly not Lewis weren't an immediate threat, Larry returned his attention back to Nichols.

The priest was shaking almost uncontrollably his eyes locked on his two comrades. "No, no." He said over and over.

"Give me the box," Larry ordered and Nichols tore his gaze away from Lewis and Peroni to look up at Larry. Then much to Larry's surprise, Nichols held out his mobile.

"God help you." Nichols said.

"God helps those who help themselves. Isn't that right, padre?" Larry snatched the phone from Nichols. Movement from the mobile's illuminated screen caught his eye. It was a spinning envelope icon, indicating a text was being sent. Followed by the words; 'Text sent'. "What have you done?" He shouted.

Suddenly from behind him, Peroni screamed with rage and Larry just had time to turn to her when she flung herself at him. Her shoulder caught him hard in the chest and despite her size knocked the wind right out of him. Larry gasped and stumbled back a step or two as she rained punch after punch at him. "Bitch!," He cursed and brought his elbows up to protect himself from the onslaught until his back hit the window behind him making the glass rattle in its frame.

"You bastard, you bastard!" She screamed in his face as she continued the assault, pummeling him repeated with her fists. One blow connected hard against the bridge of McCulloch's nose and he felt blood spatter his face and was blinded by stars for a moment.

That was when he decided to shoot her then and there. "You fucking bitch!" He pushed her back with all his might and tried to aim the pistol at her face but she grabbed his hand by the wrist just as he squeezed the trigger. BOOM! The bullet went high and wide of its target ripping a hole in the ceiling. The deafening report of the shot made Larry's ears ring, the barrel was so close he saw Peroni's face light up from the muzzle flash and felt the heat from it on his own face.

"Jesus!" The shock made him stagger back again, which gave Peroni just enough time to twist his wrist awkwardly until he felt a sharp pain shoot up his arm and a sickening snap. "Fuck!" He screamed in pain as she wrenched the pistol from his hand.

Breathing hard, she aimed at Larry, who spat a mouthful of blood at her but she didn't so much as flinch. This was it, he could make an attempt to



reach for the other pistol in his waist band with his one good hand but he knew he wouldn't even get close.

"Go on then," he hissed defiantly through bloody teeth and waited for the end.

Then Peroni inexplicably let the pistol drop to her side. It took Larry a moment to take in what she had done, his senses dulled from the duel pain coming from his broken nose and wrist. Was she really that naïve? If so then she was easy prey.

Larry was about to reach for the other pistol when he saw the look of absolute terror on her tear stained face. Her wide eyes were focused, not on him, but on some horror out of the window directly behind him. And even though he had no idea what she was seeing, that look on her face made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. He so wanted to turn around but dreaded what he might see.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," Nichols uttered. Larry glanced at him to see he too was transfixed by the nightmare at his back.

'*Tap-tap-tap*' on the window behind him, followed by nails scraping on glass. *Fuck*, Larry screwed his eyes tight shut. His broken nose throbbed in time to his racing heartbeat.

'*Tap-tap-tap, scrape, scrape, scrape.*

When Larry opened his eyes again, Peroni was aiming the pistol again. He tensed only to then realise she was aiming over his left shoulder.

"Fuck it," Larry drew the pistol with his good left hand and in one movement stepped away from the window, over to Peroni's side and turned to aim with her.

His breath caught in his throat and he let out a rasping breath of disbelief at the horrible wizened creature clinging to the window frame outside, peering in at them. The emaciated old witch's face leered in at them, illuminated by the meagre light. Her rancid breath fogged the window intermittently with each rasping breath.

Despite everything, Peroni, McCulloch and Nichols stood numbly transfixed by the vision of wretchedness at the window. Even the sickening

sound of Lewis gurgling his life away on the floor behind them couldn't break the spell.

The Banshee flushed with pride, seeing the look of utter terror on the faces of her captive audience that she herself had so exquisitely induced. The moment was so utterly perfect, even better, surely than her beloved creator could have imagined. She was proud beyond words to be chosen as the instrument of their destruction. How foolish these mortals looked, gawking at her terrible beauty like doomed fish in a bowl.

The Banshee smiled, exposing a set of jagged rotten teeth, and cooed out loud at the response this won from those wide eyed imbeciles inside. Her smile grew impossibly wide now, across her whole face literally from ear to ear, a gaping razor slash of a smile splitting her face in half.

Her life was short, her purpose clear.

Inside, Larry took a faltering step back as the witch outside opened its maw, exposing a darkness in it even deeper and more terrible than the void it had emerged from. He stepped back and his heel inadvertently slipped in the very blood he had spat at Peroni only moments before. His leg shot from underneath him sending him sprawling to the floor in a heap.

It saved his live.

The Banshee had only one purpose and that purpose was death.

The Banshee screamed.

A split second later the window and the Banshee itself exploded simultaneously from the sheer force of the blast.

The Banshee to dust, the window, frame and all into the room like a hurricane of deadly shattered glass and splintered wood.

Peroni was directly in the path of the murderous debris as it flew into the room in the blink of an eye. She didn't even have time to scream before it ripped mercilessly into her.

Nichols turned away in horror as it did. He was hit himself, caught on the very edge of the icy blast that followed the witch's scream which filled the room like a shriek straight from hell itself, tiny fragments of glass and wood

stung his face but little else, the wounds they inflicted wouldn't even leave a scar in a day or so, unlike Peroni.

With a scream of his own, Larry rolled around on the floor and began to shout and swear, little flecks of blood appeared through his grimy shirt where he had been grazed by shrapnel. But it was Peroni alone who had taken the full brunt of the damage.

The priest had to force himself to look back at her and it made him sick to his stomach with shock and guilt. Peroni had fallen to her knees now with her head bowed as if in prayer, her hands clasped over her ruined face in a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood that was flooding through her fingers. Her choking, muffled screams barely audible to Nichols above the ringing in his own ears from the explosion of sound the witch had unleashed.

Then as he watched on, unable to drag himself up to help her, she fell forwards hitting her lacerated head hard on the floor, making her scream all the more.

The pitiful sight finally shook Nichols into action, he got to his feet, but before he could move to help her, Larry scrambled back to his feet, blood streaming from his nose and stood unsteadily in between Nichols and the prone woman.

"Gimme the box!" Larry screamed, blood spitting out of his mouth with the words.

"God Man," Nichols implored. "It's too late for that now. Let me help her for pity's sake!" He came at McCulloch but with no real energy and tried desperately to push him aside so he could get to Peroni, but Larry side stepped him and then with surprising speed, pistol whipped Nichols hard across the face sending him crashing to the floor with fireworks exploding in front of his eyes as he went. Somehow he managed to keep a tight grip on the box as he did so, like a rugby player going down from a heavy tackle but refusing to give up possession of the ball.

McCulloch aimed down at Nichols, determined to put an end to his pathetic life once and for all. He was about to squeeze the trigger when he caught a flash of light out of the corner of his eye and for a brief moment half expected it to be followed by a clap of thunder. But there was no storm

brewing outside, far from it. He chanced a look out of the hole in the wall where the window had been.

The void out there which up until his point had been nothing more than a pitiless black, now seemed to Larry to be lighter somehow, a dark grey. As he looked on a crack of searing bright light snaked across the gloom, flashing like folk lightning before being swallowed up by the darkness again. Larry let out a howl of triumph as his eyes adjusted to what he was seeing. He could see glimpse of the street outside, shadowy outlines of houses, trees along the road disappearing off in the murk, but there nevertheless.

"It's failing," he said breathlessly, hardly daring to trust his tired eyes, but it was true, he could now make out things more clearly. The tree lined street outside flashed briefly into view, clear as day for a split second before it faded from sight. "Jesus, it's failing." Larry took a breath then drew his attention back to the priest, who was now, quite fittingly on his knees.

He waved the pistol at Nichols. This was the real power here, this was the glory. Faith had never stopped a bullet, not in Larry McCulloch's world. He shook it so the gun parts jangled together, but the priest was oblivious to the threat, lost as he was in the carnage of the room before him. Lost in the suffering of his fallen comrades, those fools who has followed him so blindly. And where had it gotten them?

Larry almost pitied Nichols as he took in the horror around him. Almost. The priest was weeping now, huge great sobs racked his body like a child. Because he was the cause of all this. Not Larry, who, as usual had barely a scratch beyond the superficial. Nichols was to blame and he knew it. It was written all over his tear stained face.

"God forgive me," Nichols sobbed, still clinging to his misplaced faith.

"Maybe he will," Larry told him and aimed at his forehead. "You can ask him yourself face to face soon enough." It was a good line to end things on, Larry mused.

But Nichols barely heard him, he was lost now to overwhelming despair. In that wretched moment, he would have gladly welcomed a bullet, to end it all. Anything was preferable to the soul crushing survivor guilt this suburban slaughter house would bring. A quick, painless end to it all.

It took all his remaining will not to look up at his would-be executioner and begged him to do it. But Nichols couldn't tear his tortured gaze from Lewis and Peroni, twins as they were in misery and certain death. Twins he had fathered with this whole sorry affair. Better a bullet than to endure another moment of this.

Enough was enough. Larry squeezed the trigger and braced himself for the weapon to kick, spew fire and death, not to mention the mess it would make of the priest's head.

The hammer came down with a dull click. "Fuck it!" Larry cursed, hell of a time for a misfire. He pulled back the slide which ejected the dud round, sending it spinning cinematically over his shoulder, and then brought the slide back again chambering a fresh bullet into the breach.

A shaft of bright orange sunlight broke through the rapidly fading void and warmed the side of Larry's face, raising a smile as it did so. It hit him like a spot light on the lead actor standing centre stage having just delivered a masterful soliloquy. The off stage cue for the grand finale. Boom. Close curtain and fade up rapturous applause. Take the plaudits and then off to the after show party.

The smile on his face gave way to an almost maniacal grin. After all the shit he had been through in the last couple of weeks. And somehow it had all turned into another fine chapter in the life of 'Lucky' Larry McCulloch. Full of drama and tension but one where our hero came through in the end, blooded but not bowed. Larry felt nothing short of blessed as he prepared to pull the trigger again.

## FORTY-TWO

"Jez, Larry," an American said from behind him. "I wish you'd decide who's side you're on."

Each word felt like a bullet in Larry's back and knocked the wind right out of him. Despite the brightening sun on his face a chill ran through him, he gasped his mouth suddenly dry.

It was now that Nichols finally looked up at him, he looked almost disappointed Larry hadn't been able to finish him off. Yes he looked many things, but surprised wasn't one of them.

"What have you done?" Larry asked his voice tinged with accusation, but heavier still with fear. He turned slowly and sure enough Randall was standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the frame taking in the room with a look of mild amusement on his face.

Throwing caution to the wind, Larry swiftly aimed at the yanks chest and pulled the trigger. The hammer came down but again he was treated not to a deafening roar but a mute click as the gun failed to fire once more.

Impossible. He quickly went through the motions again, pulling back the slide, dud round spinning off until it rattled off across the floor, then slide it back chambering a new round. Click.

"Fuck," Larry took a step towards Randall and repeated the action. Click. His head swam. Again, Click, Impossible, another step, click. Impossible, he could almost hear the Gods laughing at him, laughter that was fading moment by moment as they deserted him. Click, click, click. Finally he stopped the pointless display and looked down at the weapon in his hands as though it had purposely betrayed him.

"It's a neat trick, huh?" Randall said nodding to the useless pistol. A wry smile crossed his features. "Wish I'd known it a few decades ago."

"*Oooh, I like it in here now,*" Ishrel whispered peeping around Randall and into the blood splattered room. Ishrel was feeling braver by the moment Randall noted, but not so brave yet not to make sure Randall was between him and the poem. "*Quite the blood bath.*"

The one called Lewis was staring blankly at the Italian woman, his breath shallow, his half close eyes twin pools of grief. What was her name? Pretty, in a stern way he recalled, but that was before she had felt the Banshee's breath, and all that came with it, on her face. She was still screaming, her mess of a face in her blood drenched hands curled up in a ball. Lewis' breath, such as it was started to come out in short sharp bursts, shallower with each one. They would both soon be dead.

That reminded him, he looked past the disbelieving McCulloch to the priest who was dragging himself to his feet. He had all the appearance of a

beaten man, but Randall knew never to take a priest at face value, and especially once with a Mynor's poem tucked under his arm.

His gaze met the collector's. "Randall," he implored. "Please."

Randall gave him the slightest nod in recognition, then screwed his eyes tight shut, weary as he was this would take some effort to pull off. He reached into his pocket to activate the charm he had previously prepared hidden there.

The room went black. Larry, still grasping the useless pistol in his hand cursed under his breath and waited for the floor to open up and send him plummeting straight to hell, if that's how things like this worked. But a mere heartbeat later the room reappeared around him, only brighter, the void outside now completely gone. He had to squint against the daylight flooding in. He almost patted himself down to make sure he was still in one piece.

He was still intact. Lewis and Peroni however were gone.

Nichols stumbled forwards close to Larry. "No, wait. Randall what have you done with them?" His voice was high with panic.

"Relax," Randall said holding up his hands as if to show he had nothing up his sleeves. "You'll see them soon enough."

Was that a threat or a promise?

"A deal's a deal," Randall added.

"What?" Larry almost choked on the word. He made a half-hearted grab for Nichols' arm but the priest pulled away, his gaze dropping to his feet. "What deal?"

A deal's a deal. Words to be damned by. Larry suddenly remembered the text Nichols had sent as he grabbed the phone from him.

"What deal? He repeated weakly, jabbing an accusing finger at the priest. "Nichols," he said firmer. "What's he talking about?"

"Larry..." Nichols said faintly, he hung his head unable to stand the accusation, the fear in McCulloch's eyes. Then after a full ten seconds of contemplation he looked up with blood shot eyes. "Believe me or not," he continued hoarsely. "I... I really am sorry it's come to this." He gestured down to the gun still in Larry's hand. "Even after you did what you did. Which I

suppose I can't really blame you for." He met Larry's eyes a little firmer now. "You are what you are," he stated then he looked away again deflated. "It's such a mess, such a bloody mess."

He clearly wanted to say more but could find the words.

"You set me up." Larry said in naked disbelief.

"I had... No choice." Nichols turned away and placed the box, which seemed to have gained a thousand pounds in weight, on the table.

"But, but, Jesus Christ, you're a priest!" Larry stuttered. "You swore to protect me. To the death, you said. You were all supposed to die to protect me."

"There's still time for that," Nichols replied bitterly and turning he rested his backside against the table to avoid falling over all together. "There's still time," he said again and glanced at the pool of blood where Peroni had been.

"No," Larry told him. "No."

"I'm sorry," Nichols said and ran his hand over the bejewelled box on the table by his side. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

Quite the Shakespearian scene of betrayal Randall thought watching the two of them go at it. He was feeling more energised by the minute now the void was gone and seeing Larry's dismay buoyed his spirits no end.

"Oh, shit." Larry said as if the realization of his situation had just hit him. He spun to face Randall and let the pistol drop to the floor. "Oh, shit. Look Randall, wait a sec'."

"You're shit out of luck, Larry," he told him and finally stepped into the room. The presence of the box still weighed heavy on him, its power was no less potent for his approaching possession of it. He forced himself to move closer even though it made him sick to the stomach.

"Randall, please... Listen to me," Larry pleaded, his voice cracked as he spoke.

"Come on now, Larry. Calm down, you've had a good run..."

"No!" Larry snapped at him his pale face reddening. "This is bullshit! This is bullshit! No, no!" He insisted as if it would make any difference. Then he turned on Nichols. "You sold me out! Fucking Judas. Judas!!"



It was as good a description as any Nichols had to admit, and impressively Biblical coming from McCulloch. He concentrated his attention on the congealing blood on the carpet and couldn't imagine it were possible to feel any worse about himself, or about this whole Godforsaken situation. Larry was easy to hate, even easier to betray as it turned out after what he'd done to Lewis, but still his heart felt like it was being ripped out of his chest.

The only meagre consultation was that Lewis and Peroni were out of this, and that from what he knew of Randall, the collector would kill him also, he just prayed, selfish as it was, that he did it before Larry, so he wouldn't have to witness the fruits of his treachery

Ishrel poked his head around the door and wrinkled his stubby nose, then caught sight of the box. "*There!*" He exclaimed pointing to it and then skipped into the room with surprising grace. Must be the tutu Randall thought as he watched the demon pirouette through the human slaughterhouse. Very balletic.

Ishrel danced around McCulloch, who suddenly dropped to his knees as if he could sense the creature and began sobbing into his hands. Ishrel sniffed the air around him as he passed, taking in the sweet aroma of grief, then with a hideous grin spun off to where Nichols was supporting himself against the table. The freakish ballerina, although still clearly weary of the box, put his skinned monkey face up close to the priest's and tried in vain to lick his nose.

"Ooph," Randall shuddered. "Just be glad you can't see what I can right now, Father." But Nichols was lost somewhere close to madness and didn't hear him.

*"Kill the fucking Priest!"* Ishrel screamed into Nichols' face. *"Kill him and all the others. What are you doing letting those other two stuck pigs go? No survivors! No survivors."*

"My companion wants me to kill you, Father. Would that be bad form?"

This caused a flash of something close to amusement on Nichols' face and his mind came back from where ever it had been teetering. "I suppose you could," he said softly to the blood stained floor. "After all you do hold all the cards now. Don't you?" His voice was full of fatigue but still held a hint of defiance.

Ishrel studied the priest's face as he spoke. *"He's not afraid anymore this one,"* he noted with disappointment.

As if he had heard Ishrel, Nichols turned his head stiffly towards Randall and said with a raised eyebrow, "It wouldn't come as much of a shock, would it? You being a demon and all."

*"Do it!"* Ishrel jumped a foot in the air clapping his bony hands wildly. *"You know it's good luck to kill a priest."*

"No," Randall said with finality. He took a step to one side and gestured to the open doorway. "Be on your way Father. A deal is a deal."

*"Huh?"* Both Ishrel and Nichols said simultaneously. It was impossible for Randall to tell which of the two was more surprised.

"I've no quarrel with you, Father" he continued. "Apart from the whole good versus evil thing of course. But I think that can wait for another day, don't you think?"

Nichols couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. His best and possibly only hope had been that Peroni and Lewis escaped with at least the chance of survival considering their horrible wounds, but at no point did he think that Randall would spare him once he was allowed in the room. He looked at the collector with disbelief and waited for his face to break into a demonic grin, shout 'only kidding, you're doomed,' and unleash the hounds of hell upon him.

But again Randall gestured towards the door. "Please," he said politely. "I'm a man of my word."

Nichols stood up straight and smoothed down his crumpled shirt. His dog collar suddenly felt tight around his neck and he loosened it with his index finger, he then heard a snap and the collar split and fell to the floor at his feet. It seemed somehow apt as if the church he had so steadfastly believed in had forsaken him, cast him out for literally doing a deal with the Devil.

What had happened here over the last few days would haunt him forever, he knew that. Jeff, the betrayal of McCulloch and God alone only knew what had become of Lewis and Ania, even if they were spirited away

somewhere safe as the collector had promised, they were so close to death anyway, could they possibly survive?

Yes he knew all this would stay with him forever. But as for the church itself? The Vatican had more than enough power to fight Randall and his kind, they just didn't have the will or the belief in what was right in front of their faces to use that power. The collar breaking was a sign, he must carry on the fight, but without the handicap of Vatican rules. As he had said before, he was done with them now. He touched the broken collar with the toe of his shoe, and so it seemed the church was done with him also.

So be it. Nichols made a point of stepping on the collar as he walked over to the doorway, he was tempted to give one last look to the box left on the table, but the truth was it had done the job he had brought it here to do, plus it was another symbol of the Vatican and all that brought with it, so he just kept walking. Passing Randall he said, "We will meet again collector."

"Oh, I'm counting the days," Randall replied. "Now get gone before I change my mind."

Ishrel was at Randall's side in an instant. "*What are you doing?*" But shut up when Randall snapped his fingers and his old tacky Halloween mask clamped itself to his face again. His shoulders sagged in resignation, but did manage to add. "*God I hate you, collector.*"

"Father, please," Larry made a final desperate lunge towards Nichols and tried to grab a hold of the priest's trouser leg, but ended up pitching forwards and landing flat on his face. "Please," he pleaded. "You can't leave me here with this thing."

His voice cut into Nichols like a knife, but he held firm. "You've chosen your own path, Larry," he said without turning around, this scene would haunt him long enough as it was. Instead he focused on the swirling darkness still lingering half way down the stairs. He couldn't make out the merest hint of the foot of the stairs or the hall beyond.

Was this Randall's final joke? Was he damned after all? He took a tentative step out onto the landing, then another to the top of the stairs. It was still cold out here, so cold he could see his breath again.

"Nichols, Please!" Larry screamed pitifully from the room behind him.

"You've sown, Larry," he said to the darkness and took another step down. "Now reap it." And with that he gritted his teeth and walked down the steps and into the darkness itself.

"No," Larry struggled to get to his knees as the priest disappeared from sight. "No, you can't. Come back, you're a priest... A man of God," his voice broke as he reached the doorway. "You can't... you can't do this!"

But he was gone.

"Gee," said Randall from behind him. "I guess he can."

McCulloch was gasping for air now, the shock of it all robbing him of his breath, he half crawled, half shuffled back over to where Randall was standing in the middle of the room and began to claw desperately at Randall's trouser leg. "Please," he wheezed. "Randall, please I don't want to die, not like this... Please!" He began to sob with growing hysteria. "We can still cut a deal, there must be something you want. Oh God..."

Randall looked down grimly at the pathetic display. The once great Larry McCulloch sobbing like a child, snot and tears streaming down his face, begging for his worthless life. Randall actually wished he could have seen the man in his prime, not like this. It seemed to be his lot in life to interact with humans only when they were at their worst. Tommy Whitaker, the once proud Father Nichols and his team, and now Larry McCulloch. He almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Larry, come on," Randall said softly and pulled his trouser leg out of McCulloch's grubby hold. "Show a little back bone, huh?" But Larry was deaf to this and Randall had to dodge out of the way as he made another desperate lunge of his leg.

Meanwhile, Ishrel was tiptoeing slowly towards the box on the table, as if stalking a rabbit in the wild, his spindly fingers trembling as he reached out to touch it. A foot away his nerve gave out and he snatched his hands away as if they had been burnt. "*Randall, the box,*" he hissed. "*Open the box, let's see it.*"

Distracted by the demon Randall was almost pitched over when McCulloch wrapped his arms around his legs. "Please, Please, I won't go out like this," Larry pleaded. He squeezed tight, holding on for dear life. "Randall," he wailed. "What can I do? Please tell me what can I do?"

"Nothing."

McCulloch was suddenly grabbed by a dozen icy claws and was wrenched away from Randall. He curled up in a ball screaming in terror as the invisible horrors swarmed all over him knocking him to the floor, their legion of bodies pinning him down. Their touch froze the blood in his veins as they set about pulling and tugging at his clothes and hair, ripping into his skin here and there, they were everywhere, squirming all over his prone body, scratching and biting like a pack of wild animals.

He opened his mouth to cry out but a barbed hand snatched at his exposed tongue, ripping off the tip of it in an instant. Blood pumped from the wound right on the heels of searing pain and threatened to drown him in his own blood as his mouth filled with the stuff. He spat out mouthful after mouthful but swallowed half as much again which made him retch. McCulloch gasped for breath as best he could, his head swimming.

After spitting out another mouthful, Larry just about managed more vaguely coherent pleading.

"Larry," Randall said testily, the endless begging was getting on his nerves.

"Oh God, please... Please!" McCulloch gargled.

"Larry!"

"Jesus, Jesus, oh God please help me."

"Hey!" Randall snapped and the old crook finally fell silent as the unseen onslaught began to overwhelm him. "Larry, hush." Randall continued softer this time he could see the end was nigh for Larry now, as he squirmed on the floor, naked with hundreds upon hundreds of cuts and gouges over his entire body. "Just let it happen." This said he left McCulloch to his fate and moved over to the bonus prize on the table.

P...Please," it was barely a whisper now.

"Save your breath," Randall told him. "You'll need it for screaming."

A shudder strong enough to register on the Richter scale ran through Nichols' body as he took another blind step through the darkness and further down the stairs. Down, to God, or more aptly the Devil only knew. It felt like an electric shock down his spine, which was suddenly amped up to a thousand volts when he heard a distant scream from behind him. Unmistakeably McCulloch's it rang out for a moment before being cut abruptly short.

The darkness he was enveloped in was endless and absolute. A physical malevolent presence which seemed to seep into the very pores of his skin, filling him up with an emptiness to match the nothing around him. He felt as dark on the inside as the world was outside.

It was almost too much for him to bear, he could feel it clouding his judgement as it engulfed his brain, flooding it with thoughts too horrible to dwell on for too long or he knew he would be lost to the desolation that came with them forever. All through those terrible days and nights trapped in that God forsaken room, never even at his lowest moment had Nichols felt such a sense of despair and utter desolation as he did now.

Nichols took another blind step down and tried to clear his mind enough to calculate how many steps he had taken so far. Was it four? Five? Impossible to tell. It half occurred to him that perhaps he was trapped in an endless descent into hopelessness. That he would remain in here forever.

Voices now, all around him, some shrieking, others raised in panic. Cries of the damned?

Another step, no end or anything else in sight, just the voices, louder now, close by, seemingly so close that Nichols reached out his arms in front of him like a blind man but touched nothing but more blackness. He moved his arms to the side where they should have touched the walls either side of the stairs but again there was nothing there. Nichols bit back a cry of fear and instead concentrated as best he could on the incoherent chatter all around him in hope of making out some recognisable phrase, a word or two even.

After an age, he managed to tune out the throng to make out a woman's voice, high pitched almost screeching in panic. Then others, lower seemingly

trying to calm her, trying, and failing. Their tone was soft, too soft to cut through her harsh screaming.

Then a word; "Daddy!" It felt like a punch in the stomach to Nichols, it was so heart wrenching, some poor forlorn soul crying out in the darkness for her father. Nichols took another step, close now although he was numb to most outward feeling in here he could feel the tears pouring down his frozen cheeks. "Daddy!"

The other voices offering words of cold comfort rose up. "Ssh, lay still," they were saying. "It will be alright," they lied.

"Daddy!" It was so close now and clearer than before. Nichols suddenly froze in his tracks and cursed his stupidity. The word wasn't 'Daddy' he was hearing, it was 'padre' and not in the sarcastic way Larry used the word. Padre, the Italian word for Father.

"Calm down miss," someone said.

"Jesus, "another voice now, harsher, tinged with shock. "Gotta stop the bleeding! Get her inside for Christ sake."

"Padre!"

"Ania?" Nichols breathed in disbelief.

"Where's that gurney?" The first voice demanded.

"On its way." A Woman said her voice calm, professional.

"Jesus, fuck that's a lotta blood." A third exclaimed. "What about that other one, the guy? Someone said he's been shot or something?"

*Lewis*

"Looks like it," the calm Woman replied. Think he's D.O.A anyway. They've already taken him inside for what good it'll do. He's going straight in to surgery. Anyway, concentrate on the woman."

They were so close, Nichols flailed his arms around like a madman. Why couldn't he touch them? "Please," he cried in the dark. "Please help them!" But got no response.

"Shit," One of them said.

"Yeah," the woman agreed and Nichols could hear struggling. "Please, miss, don't move."

"Marlon! Where's that fucking gurney?" The first voice shouted, then softer. "She's cut to ribbons, gotta stop that bleeding Sadie or she's had it."

"Padre..." Much weaker now.

"Jesus, God. Ania." As the words came out Nichols raised his foot to take another step but as he brought it down it just kept on falling until he pitched forwards, and just when he thought he would go tumbling into the dark forever, Nichols landed hard on his hands and knees.

Pain shot through his joints and the palms of his hands stung from the impact. He had fallen onto solid concrete. He ran his hands over the sharp stones, concrete, no tarmac he had fallen onto a road.

Then the world exploded into sense shattering life all around him. It felt like a reality thunder flash had just gone off right in front of his face, instantly obliterating the darkness.

He sucked in a lungful of cool clean air, the first in days and the shock of it made his head spin, it felt like he had just done a double tequila slammer, straight down no salt or lemon. Bright flashes of multi-coloured fireworks blossomed before his eyes as his brain threatened to over load altogether.

Nichols looked up from the tarmac and took in his new surroundings. The first thing he made out from his prone position was the large white and red sign above him which read: *Accident and Emergency*. To his right as if to back this up he saw a row of three parked Ambulances, the closest one to him had its back doors open, inside sat a bewildered looking elderly woman in a pink dressing gown gawking at the commotion going on by the A&E's entrance.

It took Nichols a full ten seconds for his addled brain to process the sudden influx of new information. He was on his hands and knees in front of a hospital's Accident and Emergency department. He followed the old woman's shocked gaze over to see Peroni laid on the ground directly in front of the double automatic glass doors, which were opening and closing intermittently as if deciding whether or not it was prudent to let anyone else in at this time. But in fact the doors were activated by the flurry of activity around Peroni.



She was screaming and thrashing in pain like a mad woman against two blue uniformed paramedics and a nurse in white who was desperately trying to press a wad of white gauze to her face in an attempt to stem the flow of blood still pouring from the numerous lacerations on her face.

"Oh, Ania..." Nichols dragged himself to his feet just as two more nurses came hurtling through the automatic doors wheeling a hospital gurney between them. "Help her," Nichols said breathlessly, "Please..." Fighting growing nausea and a creeping unconsciousness that was gnawing at the back of his aching head, Nichols got two unsteady paces closer when his eye caught a body to the left of the doors. Half covered by a pink hospital blanket, just laid there.

"Lewis," Nichols clasped his hand over his mouth in horror, barely managing to suppress a howl of despair. Then, NO! He wasn't thinking straight, whilst he was flailing through the darkness he had distinctly heard someone say Lewis was already inside, taken straight into surgery. Although the woman had added; *think he's D.O.A anyway.*

Despair fought with hope for control of Nichols' heart. No he told himself again, get a grip. Don't give up on Lewis just yet, he was strong, badly hurt but oh so strong. That wasn't Lewis under the blanket. That was...

Nichols suddenly stopped like he'd just hit a glass wall. "Jeff..." The blanket barely reached to the young man's knees so that his lower legs and feet were sticking pathetically out of the bottom. Somewhere in his final moments Jeff had lost his left shoe which revealed a hole in the sole of his exposed sock. One final indignity in his all too short a life. Nichols cried out in anguish and turned away, before he broke down altogether. He staggered over to the entrance where the nurses had just lifted Ania onto the gurney.

"Ania!" He shouted.

"Father?" She sobbed blindly, and tried to sit up before being pushed back down again by one of the nurses.

"Hey, hey, lay still," the nurse said.

"Father! Is that you, please..."

"Oh Ania," Nichols bumped into the gurney and took her hand which was slippery with blood. He winced, her face was a mess of torn flesh, blood and

bits of white gauze stuck to her wounds. There were so many he stopped counting them at double figures which was about the time his heart broke.

"Oh, Father. Is that really you?"

"Yes, I'm here Ania, I'm safe."

"It's a miracle," she sobbed. And squeezed his hand with remarkable strength.

"Please, we have to get her inside," the calm female nurse insisted.

"Of, of course," Nichols said.

"Father! Please don't leave me!" Peroni pleaded.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said.

They moved as a group into the A&E reception where they were met by a young pale faced looking doctor. "Straight into room two please." He pushed in past one of the nurses and gave Peroni's face a quick once over. Nichols was surprised and heartened to see the young man didn't even flinch. He nodded then collared the calm nurse. "Sadie, put a call out for doctor Parsons. The other guy has gone straight into surgery."

"Yes doctor," and with that she was off into action.

"He's alive?" Nichols asked the doctor in astonishment.

"So far," the doctor replied bringing his attention back to Peroni. Then as if he'd just seen him, he looked up at Nichols "Who are you?"

He was about to answer, when one of the nurses said, "Her father." Of course, his dog collar was gone.

Nichols felt a lump in his throat. He would have been proud to be.

Someone behind Nichols shouted, "And will someone get that body outside onto a gurney and out of sight, please! What is this, a fucking war zone?"

Not far off, Nichols thought.

"Ok, move!" The young doctor ordered and Peroni's hand was suddenly wrenched from Nichols' as she was pushed away.

"Father!" She screamed flailing her arms around blindly trying to find him.

"I'm here..." Nichols made to follow but a large paramedic appeared out of nowhere and stood in his path. Peroni was gone through a doorway and out of sight before he could protest.

"Sorry, sir, you can't go any further, not just yet. Let them see to your daughter, someone will be out very soon to give you an update." Nichols looked up at the man dumbly. "Please, she's in good hands." The paramedic indicated to a shocked looking security guard who was watching Jeff's body being wheeled in and off down another corridor. "Hey, Trent!" He waved him over to them.

"Everything okay?" The security guard asked.

"Yeah, this is that woman's father, keep an eye on him, until I can send someone over. And don't let him back there whatever you do," He hooked his thumb over his shoulder to the treatment area.

"Okay," He nodded and took Nichols gently but firmly by the arm. "Sir..."

"I'm not going anywhere," Nichols tried to pull away, his eyes fixed on the door Peroni had disappeared through, a nurse in blood splattered scrubs exited and rushed off giving him a fleeting glimpse of the flurry of activity going on inside then the door snapped shut again.

Then it hit him, the shock of it all. He began to shake and the tears came again. The shock just snuck up from behind him and overwhelmed him in a heartbeat. His legs gave way, but thankfully the security guard caught a hold of him and half carried half ushered him over to a nearby seat.

"It's okay, I've got you," he gently sat Nichols down and pulled over a seat for himself and sat down next to him.

Nichols stared down at his trembling blood soaked hands, then around to take in the reality of his surroundings. He was out, alive as were Peroni and Lewis (for now at least). Then the second wave of shock slapped him hard in the face. "Thank you, thank you," he sobbed and wrapped his arms around himself. "Oh, thank you."

The security guard put a hand on his shaking shoulder, but it wasn't the security guard he was thanking, not even the medical staff. It was his sworn enemy. Randall.

What a paradox the collector was, he had kept his part of their secret bargain, more so in fact. He had promised to get them all out of there, which he had done. Nichols had written the text but not sent it before Larry had pulled his lunatic stunt with the gun, it was written more in catharsis than anything, at their desperate situation, a guilty little pleasure but one he had never intended to action and actually send.

Until of course McCulloch had showed his true selfish colours (in truth he had never tried to hide what he was or what he would do given half the chance so it came as no surprise, when he turned the gun on them all.) So Nichols had sent it without really contemplating how the words could be interpreted, especially by an agent of the Devil.

He had no way of knowing how Randall would choose to interpret the text. He would have been well with in the spirit of the deal if he had just dumped them all in the middle of the street outside the house, or miles from anywhere, where Ania and Lewis would have surely bled to death. Or Randall could have simply gone back on his word altogether once he had Larry and the box, but he hadn't.

This soldier of darkness, Nichols sworn enemy had effectively saved Ania's, and God willing, Lewis' lives, and spared Nichols. Wasn't he supposed to be the 'bad man'?

Tears came again, this time in floods and Nichols didn't even try to repress the sobs that followed. The security guard next to him tried his best to comport what he thought was the grieving father, but Nichols was barely aware he or anything around him was even there. The world around him had turned to mush as the tears drowned out his vision.

Tears of relief, for sure, tears no one would begrudge him after so many days on the edge of life and death. But equally these were tears of shame.

He had betrayed McCulloch and worse still in the end he was happy to do so.

The guilt would pass in time, Larry was an easy man to betray with a clean conscience. But wasn't Nichols the 'good guy' in all this? The one on

the side of righteousness? Yet it had been Randall, the demon who had delivered on his oath to Nichols, above and beyond what had been expected of him. And Nichols? He was the cheat, for the right reasons perhaps, but he was the cheat in all this nevertheless. The one time priest, the 'righteous man'.

Randall was a man of honour, for all his foul deeds, he knew how to conduct himself. He had a job to do, get Larry McCulloch which he had done and so had no need for petty actions like killing a priest. Besides he had a bonus prize. The Box.

Ah, yes the box. Made to hold Mynor's poem. Priceless, ancient. Stolen.

The box. Nichols had promised Randall the box and McCulloch in exchange for his life and the life of his friends.

The box.

The collector had Larry McCulloch and the box made to hold Mynor's poem, as agreed but also one final hidden extra Randall hadn't bargained for. Nichols' gift to him. A lesson and one Nichols knew he would have to pay for if their paths ever crossed again.

One thing you should always remember, collector.

Never play poker with a priest.

## FORTY-FOUR

*"It's empty!!"* Ishrel shrieked as he stared down into the open box with his mouth gaping open in shock.

He mouthed something Randall didn't catch through the mask and shook his head. He put his hands on his hips, and action that nearly made Randall laugh out loud. What with the mask and the tutu he looked just so damn camp. Like a reptilian ballet dancer who had just discovered there were no more cookies left in the jar. Still he was right, no getting away from the fact. The box was empty.

*"That, that priest, the fucker!"* Ishrel shouted to the ceiling then began pacing. *"He lied to us. That cocksucker lied to us!"*

"It's getting so you can't trust anyone these days." Randall picked his way through the bloody remains of Larry McCulloch that were strewn all over the room. The soul extraction had been a particularly messy and painful affair, as requested by his bosses. That and perhaps due to the fact the man's soul was probably so shrivelled and black that the demons who had torn him apart with such glee had trouble locating it.

He peered into the offending empty box again. Damn clever trick, he had to admit the priest had pulled off a masterful burn with this one. He would make a good collector.

*"But, but,"* Ishrel stammered with such frustration that Randall considered making steam come out of his pointy ears. But decided not to add insult to injury. *"He didn't take it with him,"* Ishrel said, his tiny brain working overtime. *"We would have sensed it."*

This would have been true, if there had been a poem in this room to start with. "Don't you get it?" He said. "It was all a bluff. Christ, that priest must have balls the size of a bull's." He nudged the box, but had to pull his hand away. It was empty but still omitting a nauseating amount of power despite its lack of contents.

*"But he spoke some of the words..."* Ishrel's voice trailed off. *"Didn't he?"*

"I seem to remember you were just a blur heading for the door when he opened it." But no, now he thought back the priest hadn't uttered so much as a word from the text. Randall shuddered. "This box is real enough, must have held a poem for hundreds of years to absorb that amount of power from it."

*"I dread to think what it would have felt like if there had have been a poem in there,"* Ishrel said.

"Exactly," Randall agreed and wrapped the box in the same towel Nichols had used. This was a watershed moment and Randall knew it. He could only imagine what power the poem possessed, just a few faded lines on an ordinary piece of paper, so legend had it. Simple ancient words written in Mynor's own blood. Left dormant for two centuries locked away in some Vatican archive. Its power seeping through to the very wood of the box until

his kind couldn't even tell an empty one from the real thing. That was real power right there.

If the Vatican ever realized the potential of the weapon they had right under their noses. That would be a day of reckoning alright. But if they had, they would have surely allowed the priest to bring the real thing, even if only to test its power in the field. The fact that they hadn't gave Randall hope, he doubted they believed in any of this. All the same, it would be prudent for Randall and his kind to continue to conduct their war in secret.

The priest for one couldn't have known what would happen when he opened the box while Randall was in the room. That the box had so much residue power, power Nichols himself was oblivious to. So it was nothing more than a slight of hand trick he had up his sleeve if Randall got to them before they escaped with Larry to the Vatican.

One last throw of the dice when all else was lost. No wonder the priest had looked so scared. Randall had assumed he was fearful of what effect the poem's power once unleashed would have on mere mortals within its range, let alone the bricks and mortar around them. But in truth Nichols couldn't have known if Randall would feel anything at all, that is was just, as in fact it was, an empty box.

It was a master bluff, and one Randall himself would have been proud of. The priest had pulled it off beautifully despite that fear. Randall was impressed and hoped they would indeed meet again as the priest had prophesised.

Randall was impressed with the priest. Ishrel was not. *"I told you we should have slaughtered them all,"* the demon spat. *"I demand you get him back here, now! For a right royal fucking."*

"He's long gone. Besides, a little cheating aside, a deal's a deal. Don't be such a sore loser."

*"Feh!"* Came the reply.

The truth was they had what they came for. Larry McCulloch had pulled his last double cross and had paid dearly for it. It was mission accomplished as far as Randall was concerned. He and the priest, he noticed the broken dog collar on the floor, or whatever he was now would meet again and when

they did he would gladly shake the man's hand before ripping his cheating heart out.

The collector took in the room and nodded at a job well done. Then they were away from here the full extent of the damage caused to the house, not to mention its contents, would be revealed, so he decided a good old fashioned gas explosion would cover that up nicely.

It would appear to a forensic team like a deliberate act to cover up the remains of McCulloch they would also find here but that was fine. No doubt the old crook's death would be put down to one of his numerous enemies. One thing was for sure though, no one would mourn Larry McCulloch.

He turned to the table and the box, the thing was useless now and being in its proximity was making his skin crawl, he tipped the table so the box slid from under the towel and onto the floor, it was priceless, sure but Randall had no need for money so took great pleasure in kicking the box hard against the wall where it splintered in a dozen pieces.

"That's all she wrote," he said and was about to head for the door and a well-earned rest when he caught sight of Ishrel. The demon's crooked back straightened and he turned his face up as if sniffing the air.

*"Wait, wait,"* Ishrel said concentrating.

Randall let out a sigh, this could only mean one thing. Ishrel was getting a message through the ether.

"Ishrel..."

*"Ssh!"* Ishrel held up a hand to silence him as he listened. *"Hmm,"* he said nodding. *"Another assignment, collector."*

"So soon?"

*"Yes, and a big one by the sounds of it."*

"Oh, well," Randall said with resignation. "No rest for the wicked." Then he got the joke. "Ha! Get it? "

Ishrel hung his head and gave a sigh of disgust.

"Get it? That's us, no rest for the wicked."



*"Really?"* Ishrel gave him a look of pity through the mask. *"Is that the best you can come up with?"*

"No rest for the wicked," Randall laughed out loud again and looked at the demon. "I can tell you're laughing on the inside, Ishrel."

*"Come on,"* Ishrel swung a hand towards the door and the pair of them strolled from the room together. *"And Randall?"* He added. *"Let us try and play this next assignment by the book, please. Just this once, for me?"*

Randall would have slapped him on the back if he could. "Never going to happen little buddy. Never going to happen."

## EPILOGUE

It felt like a dream. So much so that as he lent against the stone pillar close to the entrance to the famous St. Mark's square here in Venice, Peter Nichols lightly banged his head against the masonry in lieu of pinching himself. His heart swelled and tears came to his eyes, not an unfamiliar state for them by any means, but for the first time in so long, these were tears of joy.

The woman sitting at a table outside one of the many cafés that lined the famous Venetian tourist attraction, took a sip from her espresso and closed her eyes as she listened to a small orchestra which was set up on a stage in front of the café. It was playing an old Italian love song, Nichols vaguely knew from somewhere, a film perhaps. Although the woman was in the afternoon shade she positively glowed to Nichols.

He moved around the outskirts of the square, dodging a gaggle of school children window shopping nearby. Two of the boys couldn't resist racing out into the square to chase off the million or so pigeons that had taken up permanent residence there. The birds exploded into flight much to the boys delight but the joy on their faces turned to grimaces as one of their teachers, a stern looking middle aged woman shouted at them in French to get back in line or she would feed them to the pigeons as punishment.

Now that he could see the woman's face more clearly he gave a prayer of thanks, even from where he was standing, he could make out a thin network of scars snaking across the skin but they looked superficial enough and considering the state she was in the last time he saw her, she looked perfect to him. He walked across the crowded square and over to her table. She was still leaning back in her chair, eyes closed taking in the music, with a thin but contented smile on her face.

Nichols paused by the table to compose himself and had to fight the urge just to grab a hold of her and hug the life right out of her. Instead he just said her name. "Ania?"

The smile grew hearing her name but she didn't open her eyes straight away, a fact that Nichols was grateful for as the scars deepen as she did so, which made Nichols wince briefly, then thankfully they faded once more and she finally looked up at him. "You're late," she said gently and got to her feet. They embraced warmly and Peroni kissed his cheek. "It's good to see you Father..." She stopped mid-sentence and wrinkled her nose looking at his plain shirt collar.

"It's just plain Peter now, Ania," he said with a shrug.

"That's going to take some getting used to," she gestured to the seat next to her and they both sat.

"God, you look great Ania," tears threatened once more and he had to compose himself before continuing.

She took a hold of both his hands. "I'm fine," she said. "Almost good as new."

"It's a miracle," he said and it was. The scars would always be there he knew, but would fade by the year. She had escaped not only with her life, but thanks to the quick thinking doctor on duty that day, her sight too. Now he was close he could see both her eyes had a faint discolouration from the damage they had sustained but she could see well enough. A miracle indeed.

"I heard they gave you a pretty rough time afterwards," Ania said.

"You know that Vatican, they love a good inquisition."

Her face grew grave. "They wouldn't let us testify, said we were too weak." She frowned bitterly.

"Hey, come on," Nichols lifted her chin. "None of this was your fault. I took the blame because it was mine to take."

"Rubbish,"

"It's true, and don't worry about me, I'm fine."

"Was it pretty rough?"

He shrugged again and gave a dismissive wave of the hand. "We've survived demons you and I Ania. What could possibly be rough after that?"

It had been over six months now since Nichols had left the Vatican, he had been allowed to leave, bizarrely with a hefty pay out and he was still on the official Vatican records as a 'consultant.' In exchange, or so Nichols believed for his silence.

Those at the highest levels at the Vatican, those close to the Pope, but not the man himself who was always shielded from such matters as these. Knew the knowledge he had was dangerous to the much prized and ferociously guarded equilibrium of the establishment.

And they didn't want him walking the corridors shouting his mouth off and disrupting it. Not that he would, but Nichols gladly took the money and the limited access he still had as a consultant to the archives which aided his continued search for Randall and his kind. And of course, for her. Sofia.

But first those who had long mistrusted Nichols and his colleagues in the archives had to have their day, if not in court, in inquest. And oh how they loved it, reducing his reputation to tatters. The whole inquest into the fateful events that took place in that nondescript house in the north of England lasted little over a week, but it seemed like months to Nichols and on more than one occasion he thought he would drown in all of their bullshit.

Peter Nichols knew the score and took it all. He was blamed out of hand for the death of Jeffrey Sullivan and the near fatal woundings of Peroni and Lewis, not to mention of course what had happened to Larry McCulloch. He took the accusations and the thinly veiled threats and even a bogus psychiatric report which labelled him borderline paranoid.

Throughout all this there was unsurprisingly no mention of his repeated requests to be allowed to take one of Mynor's poems with him to England (apparently Nichols found out later that the requested, written in triplicate,

was still gathering dust in Cardinal Binoffis' in tray). Or that he had been repeatedly refused permission to take Larry to the Vatican where he could be better protected.

After the inquest was over, the three Cardinal panel had concluded that Peter Nichols (formally Father Nichols) was nothing more than a paranoid malcontent with his head full of soul collectors and demon creations (none of which they smugly noted had ever been proved). The mysterious Randall character was simply a mob Hitman, who had easily overwhelmed Peroni, Lewis and Sullivan and it was a miracle that two of them had survived. (The only point Nichols agreed with.) An assault, they pointed out, that Nichols alone had emerged from unscathed.

The whole investigation had been a travesty, which came as no surprise, a whitewash of ass covering and scapegoating. Nichols was an easy patsy, and despite his growing hatred of the establishment he had spent over half his life serving, deep down he could not shake the feeling that for all their bullshit, on the count that he was ultimately responsible for Jeff's death and Larry's betrayal, they were right, and it was eating him up inside.

But he chose to use that guilt, which could have consumed him, to spur him on all the more. It was the fuel to the fire in his belly, he would find Randall, somehow get his hands on one of the real poems and end the collector's reign once and for all. Then move on to the others however many there were.

That was what had brought him here to Venice, although they were strictly forbidden to speak, Ania had managed to contact Nichols through a mutual friend in the archives. She had information he had to see. Both Ania and Lewis now worked directly for the Vatican under the ambiguous title of research and protection. They were now on the front line of this clandestine war, this wasn't news that Nichols had welcomed but next to himself they were the only ones truly experienced enough to know what they faced, and both were far less vocal than Nichols had been, they knew how to play the Vatican politics game so were left pretty much alone to do as they wished.

They were indispensable allies, as Ania now proved. She took out a brown file from her bag and placed it on the table between them. "Things have been quiet on the collector front since our little fracas with Randall. You know, I saw the CCTV footage taken outside the hospital he took us to?"

"Really?" Nichols sat up straight. "Anything useful? You know we never really have had him on video before, the odd photo, but nothing proved."

"It didn't make enjoyable watching I can tell you," she said. "What with Jeff and all." She opened the file before continuing. "But no, nothing of our Mr. Randall. The picture just cuts out when each one of us appears, there's nothing, just a security shot of the front of the hospital, then static and when it cuts back Lewis, Jeff and I are there, cuts to static again when you appear. The footage was leaked to the internet, but most people thought it was a hoax."

"Yeah, I'm used to that reaction." Nichols said ruefully.

She nodded. "However," she pushed the open file over to Nichols who saw two photographs. "When we were researching reaction to the tape, blogs, conspiracy chat rooms and the like. We came across one user's search pattern, which we linked to many of the cases we ourselves were researching online, sightings, unexplained incidence that sought of thing."

Nichols just looked at her blankly. She laughed.

"Modern technology, Father," she didn't even realize she'd used the word and Nichols wasn't going to correct her. "Search patterns, it's strictly illegal, but we can tap in on what certain users are looking at online." She saw his eyes were glazing over now. "We can see who's been looking at what sites, obscure ones, like those we look at, not the much travelled ones. Anything with word on the collectors, whether they know what a collector is or not, which ninety-nine times out of a hundred they don't. Most blame Aliens."

"Those guys again," Nichols rolled his eyes and took out the two photos. "And these?"

"We know the collectors and their kind often use criminal activity as a cover or support." Nichols nodded looking at the photos, candid shots of two men, one in his early twenties, the other mid-forties, maybe younger. "The older one..." She scanned a page of information in the folder. "William Fraker. He has been repeatedly logging into these conspiracy sites, some very obscure ones we thought only ourselves knew about. We think he's been researching Randall."

"And the other one?" Nichols asked.

"Charles Walker, Junior. His partner. They both work for a... Harry Lyne, middle sized gangster in Leeds, England."

"Leeds?" Nichols perked up. "That's close to the safe house we used. And besides, why would two criminal types be interested in Randall?"

Peroni puffed out her chest in pride. "We did some digging on these two. Strictly small time, mostly protection racket work. Until Larry McCulloch decided to turn Queen's evidence. When that happened was half the criminal underworld went looking for him, he had a six figure bounty on his head. The police assumed this was to stop him testifying. But we know that was only part of it."

"These two were looking for Larry?" Nichols asked.

"These two were apparently babysitting a Hitman, who was looking for Larry." She made inverted comma quotations 'Hitman'.

"An American Hitman?"

She nodded. "They're the ones who found Tommy Whitaker, and after that..."

"Us." Nichols put the two photographs back in the folder, he suddenly felt cold.

"We have tracked the pair down. They still work for Lyne, but after Larry was killed, they were moved away to Spain, to one of Lyne's few legitimate ventures, a bar in Barcelona. Lewis is there already, keeping an eye on them."

Nichols could only imagine a job in sunny Barcelona was only part of the pairs reward for leading Randall to Tommy Whitaker, then on to the safe house. Still, the thought of Lewis enjoying the Barcelona night life made him smile.

"Lewis is still on light duty, so I told him not to do anything..." Peroni paused, opened her purse and took out two plane tickets, one of which she tossed on the table in front of Nichols. "Until we get there." She told him with a smile.

They call it a game, the collectors. And for so long it had been a game they have happily played with the odds stacked well and truly in their favour.

But what would they call it when one by one they started to fall, sent kicking and screaming back to the hell from where they came? And they would fall, Nichols vowed as he and Peroni walked through the pigeons, across St. Mark's square and to a meeting they both hoped would tip the scales forever in their favour for once.

As they walked, Nichols glanced down at Peroni's large shoulder bag and couldn't help himself. He gently dug his elbow into her ribs.

"You don't happen to have a Mynor's poem in there as well do you?" He would have laughed but for the look of mischief on the Italian's face. Then she winked.

Game on.

E N D

If you enjoyed reading this book please leave a star rating and send some feedback via the author's obooko.com [download page](#).

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.