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Thesis: GHOSTWALKER

Exegesis:

The voice of Autism; Asperger's Syndrome:

A human experience

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ABSTRACT

My thesis, *GHOSTWALKER*, is a contemporary adult novel. Its protagonist, Dylan has Asperger's Syndrome (hereafter called AS). In writing a novel based around AS, certain themes and questions have been created and represented around what it is to have Autism, how this is portrayed in adult fiction, and even more importantly, whether it is valid to portray AS as a disability in 2018. It is accompanied by the exegesis; *The voice of Autism; Asperger's syndrome: A human experience*. It unfolds as a creative work, drawing attention to relevant texts that have influenced the writing of *GHOSTWALKER*.

My novel is inspired and informed by other works of young adult contemporary fiction and adult fiction on the subject of AS including: *The curious Incident of the dog in the night time* by Mark Haddon, *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder* by Sarah J. Harris, *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, *Speed of Dark* by Elizabeth Moon, *Shtum* by Jem Lester, *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd and the non-fiction account of living with Autism from a Young Adults perspective, *Fall Down 7 Times Get Up 8* by Naoki Higashida.

Non-fiction works by Patricia Romanowski Bashe's book *Asperger's Syndrome: The Oasis Guide*, with a forward by Tony Attwood, PHD, and *My A-Z of Living with Asperger's Syndrome and Autism* by Lynne Watkins, *The Prodigy's Cousin* by Joanne Ruthsatz, and Kimberly Stephens, and *Seven Keys to Unlock Autism* by Elaine Hall and Dianne Isaacs, also contribute creatively and critically to *GHOSTWALKER* and the exegesis. With greater reflection, particular attention is given to questioning firstly, how the narrative of first person/protagonists has been used to draw the reader into the AS perspective from the inside out, secondly how using the third person subjective, can

be used for the inward voice, and narrative, giving an understanding of what it is to have AS.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signature:

Suzie Watt

Acknowledgments

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For their support and love, I would especially like to thank my mother, Stella Kinniburgh and Alistair Kinniburgh, David Charteris, Maartje Abbenhuis and Gord for their support through this year.

Dedication

I dedicate this novel to my mother, Stella Kinniburgh.

To my father, the late Don Watt; without his love for flying planes, writing, and singing,

I may not have heard the notes and soared up to the clouds to write myself.

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Exegesis:

The voice of Autism; Asperger's syndrome:

A human experience

Introduction

The voice of Autism; Asperger's syndrome: A human experience, is an exegesis motivated by my sense of passion and personal interest in Asperger's Syndrome (AS). In the first part of the exegesis, *Portraying the truth; The Asperger's experience*, I will look at the definition of Autism, and Asperger's Syndrome (AS), and how the DSM IV and V have been used in medical fields as a diagnostic tool for AS. With an AS diagnosis in mind, I will look at certain literary portrayals of how the AS experience of the protagonist is identified and narrated, with particular attention on the use of Synaesthesia within the narrative of YA fiction. An understanding of what Synaesthesia is, will help to identify certain ways in which AS is portrayed through the protagonist Dylan in *GHOSTWALKER*.

In the second part of the exegesis, *The Autistic Voice: Theory of Mind vs disability and impairment*, I will look at the meaning of disability and impairment, and how this is reflected and experienced through the AS voice in the narrative. It is important to gain an understanding of these terms, and turn attention to the definition of Theory of Mind (ToM) in relation to AS and whether (ToM) has validity in 2018. In searching for an answer I will discuss the idea of developing a new AS voice within the narrative.

In the third section of my exegesis, *The World and Me*, I will discuss shifts in internal and external dialogue, and how they are used to gain an understanding of AS. In *GHOSTWALKER*, the protagonist Dylan, shifts in his world, often through the use of third person subjective. His internal self is sometimes conflicted, but aware. It is through these internal shifts that we can see how Dylan's own awareness of self and the world is not broken at all. I will discuss other relevant YA fiction and the use of first

person subjective as well as how through this, the AS protagonist gives us insight into his/her world of AS, which undoubtedly is very real, and human.

Nature and duality –a transforming archetype in Autism concludes my exegesis.

I will discuss the ways nature is represented in Dylan's own inner world, and how this is transformed out into the outside world. Also by reflecting on Dylan's own duality in the world in *GHOSTWALKER*, we can see he is a very real human being, with inner emotions and awareness of self and others. This breaks down the barriers of old ideas of Asperger's, and how AS can be newly portrayed in contemporary fiction.

With a sense of passion and personal interest, I began writing *GHOSTWALKER*, a novel based upon a YA (Young Adult) with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. A selection of contemporary Young Adult fiction had already influenced my thoughts on how AS could be portrayed. The question I had was what would a young teenager with AS bordering on adulthood become or be like; what would his identity be portrayed as? This invariably led me to question what is AS, and beyond this, to wonder if there is a stereotype, archetype model to follow. In this, I wondered whether I would end up creating a character who was in fact unique.

One of the most influential books on AS in Contemporary Young Adult is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon. Although this novel is about AS, the protagonist Christopher John Francis Boone never states he has AS. However the novel portrays AS in an accurate way. Many of his traits can be seen as stereotypical of what we as humans believe AS to be: temper tantrums; difficulty recognising facial expressions of others; difficulty understanding interpreting word construction and/or sentences; groaning; Echolalia (repetitive speech); sensitivity to sound; interpreting sounds and words as colour (Synaesthesia); and anxiety.

In finishing this book, one question alluded me. That was the voice of the protagonist, and if he or she was really being heard as a human being. I realised that AS

characters in literature are sometimes portrayed as being somehow different from other 'human beings,' as having no emotions or feelings. To a great extent this is somehow parallel to the mothers distance and how her anxiety perpetuates Autism as written in earlier research by Bruno Bettelheim, in his book *the Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. This book was written in the 1960s. It remains a controversial book, that is now outdated in its research, as perpetuating the mother as the reason for Autism. Another idea that AS people have no empathy, and no feelings has floated around in literature perhaps since the 1940s. The interesting thing I have experienced myself as a Teacher aide and Support worker with AS clients (Children and Adults) is that this not the impression I received. People with AS are not cold and do not lack emotion. On numerous occasions, I have witnessed AS clients warmly opening up when listening to music, painting, in the car, with technology, with animals and with people. I have also (At Times), received hugs, and gifts of flowers, cards and comments that are sometime so insightful into myself, that I have been left thinking about my own self in the world.

Bashe (39) discusses how Theory of Mind (ToM), suggests that AS people have limited empathy. It seems to me that this is the problem. ToM is suggestive of something that is not actually the case. In developing *GHOSTWALKER*, I sought to discover if I could write something that went beyond the ideas of ToM. The idea of creating a character with AS that could demonstrate and show emotion in such a raw way within a human experience was compelling to me. I was charged with a task. To create a character who could show his feelings in an emotional way, break down the stereotype of AS. Which then brought forward the question; Disability; is there such a word in 2018? Or can it be replaced or deconstructed. To what extent is my character's voice in the narrative real? Do I need to use the term disability or impairment? Or perhaps in 2018 this is now outdated. And perhaps it is, in terms of AS.

Many questions arose when I began *GHOSTWALKER*. I was reminded of Christopher Boone in the *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* and his curiosity for words, combined with his own thought process (13) of listing the meaning of words. His literal take on words through the narrative, suggested to me, that Christopher was thinking on many levels far beyond the idea of a disability or impairment. On this basis, I could perhaps go beyond the basic construct of AS. In my own novel I could create something unique. Which then brings to mind, the question; how are other AS fiction constructing or deconstructing disability within narrative?

My protagonist Dylan is, for the most part, sensitive, intelligent, and slightly awkward, with social anxiety. He is moving from being a teenager to a young adult. The word impairment or disability was not at the front of my mind or thoughts as I wrote *GHOSTWALKER*. Should it have been? To me it was more important to express and create his journey through his own perspective and view of the world with AS. Interestingly if I removed the term AS from the equation he would still be Dylan. But would he be the same Dylan, no. His AS makes him a unique human being.

I felt a strong urge to provide a window into what it is to have AS in my novel. But also to give an honest emotional portrayal of a character that is human, emotional, real just like any other teenager.

If we look at *Mockingbird* in a more subjective way, we can see that the protagonist Caitlin sways between really looking into how people feel, contrasting this with her inner thoughts and emotions that are hard to understand at times:

'This is what I'm thinking: Mrs. Brook does not Get It. You're a very special person, Caitlin. I think you'll be a wonderful friend. Okay maybe she does Get It. I'm the one who doesn't. She lets me look up friend in her Dictionary. It says: somebody emotionally close. There's that evil word again. Emotionally. That is not one of my strengths.' (Erskine, K. *Mockingbird*, 7. 414. Kindle version).

The mere fact that Caitlin can identify her own thoughts, and recognises her own strengths and weaknesses suggests that she has an awareness, an insight into her own self more than we would have assumed. She reads into the teacher's emotions and thinks the teacher does not get it. A suggestive text that lets us view Caitlin's world which one could argue is actually emotional, she thinks and feels in an emotional way. Everything is processed from a state of emotion, although she herself thinks she has no emotion.

I began to realise that this sensitivity in the AS protagonists is slowly becoming increasingly popular:

Dale is there, by the coffee machine. He does not speak, nor do I. Dr Fornum would want me to speak, but there is no reason. I can see that he is thinking very hard, and doesn't need to be interrupted. (Moon, E. *Speed of Dark*, p. 7. Kindle Edition).

Such writing informed me with a desire to write something with my AS protagonist having a gift. Simply put the gift of Asperger's. The gift of sensitivity and heightened perception of the feeling realm. A human experience.

Thereafter, I felt compelled to break down the barriers and concepts of old, definitions of those with AS and Autism; which portrayed them as cold, detached. Not able to understand. A particular voice began to arise in Dylan as I wrote, one in which I represented him in such a way that he was aware of his families dysfunctions, his parents divide, the divorce:

*His dad's down a black hole in space. He could suck him in. Into the vortex. He quickly makes a giant **SPACE JUMP**, away off the back door step towards **SPACE**.* (*GHOSTWALKER*, 237).

Towards the end of the novel, Dylan uncovers how Noodle is the Mouse, an abhorrent abuse of his trust, his very best friend has portrayed him. Such dishonesty

throws him off balance, but it is through his awareness of the ever changing atmosphere around him that he discovers what Noodle is doing, ultimately who he really is.

GHOSTWALKER is the result of my questioning the idea of Asperger's and how it has been portrayed as a disability for so long. By deconstructing old connotations of AS, such ideas can lead to perhaps a new way of seeing the AS person in the world, as human, real, with feelings, having an awareness of things. Unique in the world, with a voice, an identity. I would transpire to say that Asperger's is a gift. The connotation that Asperger's people don't understand or have feelings is outdated. What perhaps writers can do, is begin to represent those with AS in a new light, a new voice.

Synopsis

GHOSTWALKER, is a contemporary adult fiction novel, which travels through the world of Dylan Willis a young adult with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). The contextual land of Christchurch post-earthquake, seven years on pervades the psyche and sets the tone for the novel. Dylan is found at a murder of a middle aged man, upstairs with his shoes off. How and why are subsequently unfolding within the plot. Dylan is sensitive to the world, through his eyes we discover his need and desire to discover the Mouse, a device that can log on and take data from any person using a computer. Noodle his best friend helps him search the city cafes for the Mouse. It is in their searching they discover that the Mouse is in fact a ghost, a person in cyberspace, who has a shifting identity or so Dylan thinks. Dylan questions who the ghost is, he is faced with the truth, his moral complexity is disturbed, and his awareness and insight of the world is conflicting within his own thoughts. Sophie, Dylan's sister runs parallel with Dylan's world, lost in her own tormented reality she has to decide whether to help Dylan or push her own needs in front. Along the way two detectives; one suffering from bouts of

depression, anxiety and alcoholic tendencies, the other wise, but tired of the job, push through the underground, trying to come to a decision on whether a boy with AS is capable of murder.

Portraying the truth; *The Asperger's experience*

Over the years, many different terms have been used to describe and define Autism. It is varied in its diagnosis, because there are a range of autistic traits that an autistic person may have. Among this there are different tools and diagnostic manuals and approaches that can be used, and sometimes this can lead to a misdiagnosis of Autism.

The terms that are most often used to describe Autism include; Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), atypical Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), Asperger Syndrome (AS), high functioning Autism (HFA), and Autism Spectrum condition.

In the last 20 years Autism has been referred to as a “spectrum,” an umbrella to incorporate all Autism traits within the one. Diagnostic manuals around the world that are used to determine if someone has Autism are now inclusive of this term ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD) as the means to understand the profile of an individual presenting with Autism. When diagnosing a person, there are other things to consider, the phrase ‘Comorbidities,’ is often used in medical realms, which refers to other disorders or conditions that run parallel to the Autism that a person may have. Such as Depression, Anxiety, Bi-polar, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, AD/HD; Inattentive, or Hyperactive, or Combined. Other disorders may include; seizures, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, Tourette’s syndrome, and tics, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).

Of the manuals that are present in the world. The one that is used the most in regards to Autism diagnosis is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). It is used to bridge the gap between medical terms and common language to help professionals

diagnose disorders. There have been many versions since its inception in (1952). In 2018, the DSM-IV and DSM-5 are in use as the manual to help guide medical professionals in defining ASD. The diagnostic manuals have become more user friendly and simpler to use. The latest manual, has also upgraded Autism to include sensory behaviour issues that Autistic people face in day to day living. Within this manual, Asperger's has been defined as:

'A triad of impairments affecting: social interaction, communication, and imagination, accompanied by a narrow, rigid, repetitive pattern of activities. Among the characteristics that are thought to distinguish Asperger Syndrome from other forms of ASD are the presence of normal to above-average intelligence, apparently normal language developmental and one or more special interests that may dominate attention, conversation, and social interactions.' (Romanowski Bashe, *Asperger Syndrome: The Oasis Guide*, 11.1. 2014).

With such a definitive diagnosis of what AS is, it is easy to see how it can be interpreted as just this. However it is broad, as one can understand the word 'spectrum' implies a myriad of things, not just one. In this sense I began to build up the character of Dylan with some AS traits, such as his attention to one particular thing; the computer, his laptop; his only world, his escape. From here he also has ADHD that affects his ability to concentrate. His conversations are stilted, and with this he is socially awkward, overlaid with very high anxiety.

However, the real essence of Dylan's AS experience is undoubtedly unique. He has a vivid imagination that turns his legs into moonwalking, with heavy baked beans weighing him down:

The final steep hill climbs closer. Mailboxes jumping towards him; little faces, sticking up signalling to him with smiles. His boots; giant cans of heavy baked

beans, drag him along the ground towards the front gate. (GHOSTWALKER, 183).

As he grows older within the chapters of the book he invariably isolates himself more and more into a world of sense perception, with sight and vivid colours.

To understand how AS is experienced and portrayed further in writing, it is useful to reflect on how the many myriads of the spectrum can exist within the essence of the being of a person. In the case of Dylan in *GHOSTWALKER*, he has extreme sensitivity that also correlates with the interesting connection between sound, light and colour. This is represented through his experience of sound with the association of the colour **YELLOW** (64). ‘Guppy girl’ pops another loud one. It spreads out, a **YELLOW** sun climbing higher.

This is known as Synaesthesia; described in *The Prodigy’s Cousin* as a phenomenon that:

‘Occurs when a certain stimulus, maybe a musical note or a number of a word, elicits a response, such as a colour or taste, usually associated with a totally different type of stimulus...The most common form of Synaesthesia involves the pairing of letters, numbers, or words with a particular colour.’ (Ruthsatz, J. and K. Stephens. 11.1.6.2016).

Later in *GHOSTWALKER*, Dylan describes his father as a red colour:

*Closing his eyes into little slits he looks at his dad’s face: = he’s **RED** today.*

AN ANGRY CRAB (*GHOSTWALKER*, 236).

He tries to read the expression of his mouth, but he has already picked up on the vibration of his father’s mood earlier:

‘Look Dylan, I’ll try to organise for her to come this weekend. I’ll take Sophie out so you can spend some time with her? How does that sound?’

Teeth grind. Lips suck in. RED.

Dad's mouth is turned down. Like a crab ... is he angry?

DAD'S mouth is an angry crab:]]]

(GHOSTWALKER, 233)

In *Mockingbird*, the protagonist Caitlin experiences her own Synaesthesia:

'When I turn away from the fridge I see a puffy blue marshmallow wall in front of me. It smells of apple cinnamon Pop-Tarts and breathes noisily....Her hands are shaking. (Erskine, K. Mockingbird, 117-118. Kindle edition).

If we look at *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder* by Sarah, J. Harris, we can again see Synaesthesia displayed in connection with the protagonist, Jasper. His whole world is Synaesthetic, a world of colour, through which he identifies and understands his feelings, surrounding, objects, people and interactions:

'I screamed glistening aquamarine clouds with sharp white edges at Dad until he promised never to harm my notebooks or paintings. But the damage was done and I couldn't shake his threat or the colours out of my head; they mixed spitefully behind my eyes. I couldn't bear to look at Dad or think about the terrible things he was capable of doing.

Worse still, when I looked closer in the boot, I realized he'd put box number four on top of box number six. 'Number four's carrot orange and sneaky!' I said. 'It can't go on top of dusky pink and friendly number six. They don't even remotely belong together! How can you not know that by now?' I wanted to add: Why can't you see what I can see? There was no point, there never is. Dad's blind to a lot of things, particularly involving me. When I was little it was always Mum who understood my colours. But Mum's gone now and Dad doesn't want to know. (Harris, S.J. The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder, p. 4. Kindle Edition.)

In the non-fiction novel by Naoki Higashida, *Fall Down 7 times Get Up 8*, his AS experience of colour is interpreted into the sense of words giving us a compelling yet sensitive understanding and unique view of just how AS is for him:

'Spoken language is a blue sea. Everyone else is swimming, diving and frolicking freely, while I'm alone, stuck in a tiny boat, swayed from side to side.'
(28.97. 2103).

With the experience of colour in the description we can move towards an understanding of just how AS is for him. Similarly when Dylan tries to listen to his father we can gain an insightful sense of his remoteness:

'All set? I've rung the school to let Miss Atkinson know you'll be slightly late to class, we should probably leave about 8.45, how's that for you?'
*As if his legs are on a bike he spins around on the stool again, his dad's voice over a **PURPLE** hill somewhere by the seaside floating away, pushing at the tide, far far away. **GREY GREY GREY***
(*GHOSTWALKER*, 235).

The many varied experiences of the AS experience within each individual character with AS in contemporary fiction draws attention to the autistic voice, which can be varying in its narrative forms.

The Autistic Voice: *Disability and impairment vs theory of mind (ToM)*

In determining how the voice of AS is conveyed in contemporary adult fiction, the question of disability and impairment remains an interesting one. I found myself needing to address the terms disability and impairment to come to a greater understanding of how the AS voice is used in the narrative. In the realms of fiction there have been books that portray people with physical disabilities alongside people with 'normal' attributes. For example, *The Secret Garden*, by Francis Hodgson Burnett sees the main character, Mary Lennox befriend a disabled boy Colin, who's in a wheelchair. The metamorphosis of the garden brings about an emotional change in Mary and an awakening and rebirth of Colin. If we look at *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck, two men working on a farm; Lennie with a learning disability that is both confronting and emotional because we realise that human behaviour can just as easily be vindicating of the wrong person. In terms of Lennie, he makes us aware of the human condition, that a person can actually be taken advantage of because of their disability.

The term disability has been used interchangeably with impairment often. However the World Health Organisation (1980) and the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps defines both differently from each other:

'Impairment refers to a problem with the structure or organ of the body; disability is a functional limitation with regards to a particular activity; and handicap refers to a disadvantage of filling a role in life relative to a peer group.' (Emory University, Department of Paediatrics)

The difficulty in defining AS within either of these categories, is that AS does not physically appear in a person. In defining how AS people see the world, there has

been a term used in medical circles called; Theory of Mind (ToM) that has tried to put AS in a certain perspective and thought.

The term Theory of Mind (ToM) has been used to define the difference between a neuro-typical person's mind and an autistic person's mind, by suggesting Autistic people struggle socially with their emotions and thoughts and with understanding neuro-typical people. In the American Academy of Paediatrics guide book *Autism Spectrum Disorders, What Every Parent Needs to Know*, ToM is defined as:

'The ability to attribute mental states-beliefs, intentions and desires – to other people, a skill that most typical children develop and sharpen with age. Children who have autism spectrum disorder many not have well developed theory of mind skills, making it hard for them to be empathic to other people's experiences and feelings,' (223).

I feel a sense of ambiguity around the notion that autistic people lack emotion. If we look at further literature with AS protagonists we can see a very active imagination and emotion. If anything this is reflection of a mind that is aware of what is going on around them. As each human being is individual, and processes things within their cognitive understanding through emotion and intuition. In *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder* by Sarah J. Harris, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon, there has been an internal shift to show the different thinking pattern of the protagonist through the narrative. This is perhaps the key. The thinking pattern of an AS may be different, but this does not necessarily mean they should be deemed as disabled, and it does not necessarily mean their ToM is not working.

It is true that a neuro-typical person will find it easier to understand other people, which one could say is ToM working well. But one must also remember that even if an AS person finds it hard to read/relate or understand another person it does not

mean they lack emotion or desire. In *GHOSTWALKER* (203), I sought to have Dylan attempt to make contact and communicate to Noodle by stating some facts about his own computer. This is his way to express his emotion. He also feels the colour **YELLOW** (Synaesthesia) which is one of his exciting colours, that makes him feel happy, when he feels this he is less anxious and able to communicate. It is important to understand that emotions in the form of Synaesthesia are throughout Dylan's world extensively. He feels colour around and in people intuitively. This in itself shows his emotional state is alive and well, as he is able to interpret other people into a colour, a perceptive way for him to understand himself in relation to others:

'Damn it, stupid computer' the round boy says.

Dylan hovers, pulls at his jersey cuff ends, swallowing down his nerves. 'Maybe you don't have enough gigabytes? Or it could be the Wi-Fi here.' This time both boys look at each other.

Dylan quickly averts his eyes down; Paisley flower patterns swirl on the carpet with the geometric triangles right through the middle that splits the circle in half. 33 circles in 2 metres of the square carpet.

The round boy moves his arms to shut the laptop.

*Dylan looks up again. **YELLOW YELLOW YELLOW.** 'I ... I ... I have the latest mg80 pack, it gives me more data, it's really fast.'*

(GHOSTWALKER, 246)

Bashe, in the *The Oasis Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, (27) supports Theory of Mind, and believes it is at the core of being human:

'Being born with this ability allows us to glean accurate information about things that weren't even specifically addressed in conversation, things that we'd have no other way of knowing. It allows us to have some knowledge of what others are thinking; to predict in general terms –and with pretty amazing

accuracy- what they will say and what they will do....all of this is possible because most people possess “theory of mind,” which is essentially the innate capacity to understand people can have desires, ideas and feelings different from our own.’ (Bashe, R.P. 2001)

Bashe further implies that:

‘People with ASD do not know, automatically and instantly, what to expect or what is expected of them in social situation. They cannot grasp the gist of a situation or instantly sort irrelevant information and stimuli that they don’t need in the moment from the relevant cues they do need. Despite a high IQ and a loving, generous disposition, a person with AS may still find himself saying or doing the “wrong” thing or even worse, not being able to defend himself against being deliberately misled by others or from being misunderstood.’ (Bashe, R.P. 27. 2001).

Bashe suggests it is a difficult road for an AS to understand another person, but he does not say that they lack emotion. This is the important key to remember. And one in which I have tried to convey in my novel. Dylan has a voice, and it is emotional. His very essence is emotional, raw and compelled to move onwards in his journey.

In *GHOSTWALKER*, Dylan is taken advantage of by his best and only friend Noodle who turns out to be the Mouse, invariably the twist into his inner state and conflicting thoughts and values of whether to trust his friend leads to consequences that are irreparable:

‘Noodle ... he’s the one ... he’s the Mouse. I saw him on his bike the other night with a girl, the girl who works for him ... I know it, they’re in it together ... hacking peoples accounts, big firms you know, stealing people’s information, identities.’ (GHOSTWALKER, 293).

Is Dylan too trusting? Yes. But it is a very real experience of emotion that he is displaying and feeling. Which goes against the idea that ToM is not working in autistic people. Conflicting him is his own emotions and ideas, which is a very real crisis within the consciousness of every human being. He never doubted his best friend, even when Noodle has him running around the city looking for the Mouse. But Dylan, is also able to identify the complexity and inner state within himself, when he confronts his sister, arguing that Noodle is not to be trusted. His inner state of unease moves backwards and forwards. Which leads to look within the ambiguity of (ToM).

Dylan is perceptive, almost to the point that it is painful to live. Sometimes he is muddled, but his real essence deep down within, has a ticking mind that can actually identify things within another human being. Which again would have one questioning the idea of ToM. Dylan's awareness is not always right, but, sometimes completely accurate and indeed emotional:

*'Eventually he looks across the room. Guppy Girl is back. She moves her hand over her face, brushes her hair behind her ear, showing her elf like face, climbing studs up her ears. She briefly looks back towards him. Her eyes ... no air ... **green green green.**' (GHOSTWALKER, 181).*

Dylan knows deep within his own psyche that Guppy Girl is linked to the Mouse, but it is something he's struggling with deep in his own self as he follows her out into the dark streets, which leads to her rendezvous with the figure on the bike. Who also seems familiar, and yet he struggles to want to identify the truth. Could it really be the person he trusts the most in this world? How will he deal with this? In some ways, the jigsaw pieces of the characters are part of his mind, as he tries to piece everything together, and make sense of the fact that people are not always to be trusted. Was he naïve? Perhaps a part of Dylan is innocent, and too honest with those around

him. In a sense he is almost too familiar with how things should work in his world, but things don't always work to plan in the world of reality.

The world and me

This has led to another transformation in my development of Dylan as an authentic character with AS. I needed to ask the question, is his reality real? Further: at what point does the reality of the world meet the reality of Dylan's world? Or is his world the reality we see and perceive as the reader?

In discovering the essence of the voice of Dylan in *GHOSTWALKER*, I have used language that is largely an internal third person subjective voice. It is not only Dylan that we see through the lens of thoughts, Sophie is also in her own reality that at times runs parallel with the moving narrative of the outside world:

'Perhaps she's just imagining it. The trees swaying. She continues on. The adagio slowly flowing up her body through her legs where it rests in her stomach. She brings her left hand up to the keys, the bass clef joins in with the bright treble; a whisper of the wind in the trees.' (*GHOSTWALKER*, 162).

Sophie struggles, within her own world and the outside world. She is conflicted by Dylan, her father and mother, her traumatic childhood and her fears over her relationship with Daran. It is like a force of nature within herself that transforms out into the real world:

A single tear falls down on to the ivory keys, like a single drip from a leaf after the dew. Touching the key; one single note that rings outwards, into herself. But then a wave brings her back to the emptiness of the room. That's all there is now. Emptiness.

(*GHOSTWALKER*, 283).

In using the metaphor of emptiness in the keys, it is reflective of how she feels her life is almost ending, empty. She is struggling with what she knows about the murder, how to cope, her conflicted thoughts are reflected in her music. The music is empty in herself now. It isn't the same for her as she physically plays, but also on an emotional level she is distant, lost and empty.

If we look at the way Dylan uses language we can see he is sometimes bold and upfront in his ideas, thinking and language he uses, his words are often statements of facts to people; 'Your shoe has a hole about 2 inches wide. It will grow.'
(*GHOSTWALKER*, 63).

While at other times he is inhibited, anxious, removed, and reflective of his own self within the world.

'The coffee machine screeches like nails pulled down a blackboard. A young girl with green bits running through her hair nods, waits for him to speak.

'Ah ... a mocha pleaseeease,' Dylan says, tipping down a long corridor, no windows, just walls.' (*GHOSTWALKER*, 165).

He has an awareness of himself as removed from the physical on an emotional level and yet he is present, yet another reflection of how ToM is not justifiable in describing Dylan and his world:

'Out of the corner of his eye he traces her movements. Too much salt on his mouth, low groan, PURPLE. He reaches for the jug of water. The girl winks at him. RED' (*GHOSTWALKER*, 165).

If we look to other Contemporary fiction such as; *The Colour of Bee Larkham's Murder*, we can see another personal subjective portrayal of a very real experience for the protagonist Jasper. The narrative projects through the first person subjective, which delves deep into his personal experience of how he feels his father is treating him, but it also gives us a very real indication of his state of mind and consciousness. He is deeply

sensitive, which is represented by his feeling realm through colour, seeing everything in colour (Synaesthesia), to interpret his father and his environment:

'I attempt to block out the dark colours and harsh shapes of the lorries and cars rumbling past. Dad hasn't said a word since he turned on the engine, marmalade orange with pithy yellow spikes. Maybe he's not angry with me. Maybe he's thinking about Bee Larkham' (20).

While in *GHOSTWALKER*, Dylan remains in the subjective third person. Here, his thoughts are still very real. His questioning over reality is ever present and his attempts to understand people continue to haunt him:

'The far off cubicle looks safe, somewhere he can be alone. Maybe the girl was just being nice? Why did she have to talk so much? Why couldn't he just pay and leave the counter? He burrows down, hooks the tracker up to the laptop. Nothing comes up. The girl brings over the coffee, another wink. RED.'
(*GHOSTWALKER*, 165).

We can sense this is a painful experience for Dylan because he questions his feelings, asking himself if there is another way of seeing things. Also he feels the colour **RED**, which is his angry colour, his colour that projects out his feeling of separation from the world; yet there remains a part of himself that really wants to connect with people.

In an earlier chapter, when Dylan has his second encounter with the girl with green eyes, he transfers his feeling and interpretation of her image to equations. A set of green squares lined up almost at the perfect degrees (77), then he subconsciously thinks about her when he goes to sleep seeing her eyes in his dreams:

*'Nightland comes through the window.
Her green eyes lining up again.'* (*GHOSTWALKER*, 119).

In terms of how other people identify with AS, it's interesting to see an ambiguity at play. One can ask, do others see AS people as having a Disability? In *GHOSTWALKER*, Jed witnesses Dylan running down the road:

'He can just see the back of the person's head; shaven on one side with blue gelled spikey bits sticking up. There's something else but he can't put his finger on it.' (*GHOSTWALKER*, 116).

Jed can see something, untrained to the eye, and yet it is something within reality. It is perhaps his inner conflicting thoughts within his mind, transferring, and projecting out what he sees as normal and interpreting how Dylan appears as he runs down the street.

In many Contemporary fiction on AS, there is a divide between what AS see, and what non AS see. In other words, there is almost a Schema that is limiting, some would view that a schema does in fact change, by interpretation of experiences. While on the other hand a schema can conflict, judge and exclude new experiences. In terms of AS people, they are always developing and changing, but world views and people who are non-AS often view AS as having the same patterns as ToM.

If we look at Elizabeth Moon's novel, *Speed of Dark*, the protagonist, Julian Perel, is a scientist of sorts, in a confined world, and yet he is inherently aware that his relationship with his psychiatrist at the beginning of the novel is based on a schema. He is a certain way in her view, in her eyes he is AS with certain traits that are different to the norm. Julian is intelligent enough to play along with her projection of what he should be like in her room. Through the first person subjective we can sense his inner torment of how he has to be in her eyes, and yet we also can see how he really views reality, he actually has an understanding of her own emotions and mind, and how he must tick her boxes in order to carry on with his life:

'She doesn't want to know what I mean. She wants me to say what other people say. Good morning, Dr Fornum. Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Yes, I can wait. I don't mind. I don't mind. When she answers the phone I can look around her office and find the twinkly things she doesn't know she has. I can move my head back and forth, so the light in the corner glints off and on over there, on the shiny cover of a book in the bookcase. If she notices that I'm moving my head back and forth she makes a note in my record. She may even interrupt her phone call to tell me to stop. It is called stereotypy when I do it, and relaxing her neck when she does it. I call it fun, watching the reflected light blink off and on. (Moon, E. Speed of Dark. 3).

Nature and duality – a transforming archetype in Autism

The symbolic representation of the nature in *GHOSTWALKER* is used at various times to represent something that is uniquely around us all the time. That is Life. In coming to this awareness in the novel, that Dylan is one with the living source of all things we learn something about him, and in essence about ourselves. That is we are all part of the one. The whole:

‘The light streams through the trees along the street. It reminds Dylan of the mosaics of the middle-eastern mosques from one of his books; Egypt the Final Frontier Part 1 and Part 2. Patterns within patterns.’ (GHOSTWALKER, 210).

This is breaking the notion that those with Autism are separate and like to be this way. It is a shift away from the notion of the separate self. From the ego vs the unconscious. To the consciousness of being and oneness with oneself in the world:

‘With one eye on the teacher, Dylan looks out towards the trees across the carpark. The leaves appear to shimmer with brightness; the many layers of green illuminating the leaves as they float through the whispering wind, in motion; evolving simultaneously.’

(GHOSTWALKER, 248).

Early psychological ideas threaded the duality and divide into the psyche of people. They posited that Autistic people are in a world of their own. The movie *Rainman* is an example of a film where such myths identified and then dispelled. Two interesting things happen in this film. Firstly people question whether every autistic person is a savant. And people realise no, so on some level we have to ask is this film really identifying with the stereotype of AS? On some level, yes. Secondly the film reflects how AS people are treated. Raymond, the AS savant is locked away in an institution, literally and psychically in his own world within the world of people, and

people regard him as different. But by the end of the movie, it has reached a point where his estranged brother Charlie Babbitt understands that Raymond has skills that are of use; also that Raymond has emotions that are just as raw as him. This unfurls Charlie's own character, making him realise his independence and identity. It also makes him realise that his ego is not his real self – that, in essence, he is human. The question of disability and difference in this film leads the audience to think that maybe we're all as human as each other.

In the personal account by Naoki Higashida, *Fall Down 7 Times Get Up 8*, Naoki talks about how he feels, his sense of self in the world. He questions how others perceive him in terms of his AS to how he actually sees himself and would like to be:

'When the song 'The only flower in the world' by the J-Pop band SMAP was a monster hit, the message I got from the lyrics was that everyone wants to bloom in their own unique way. Speaking for myself, however, I don't want to be a one-of-a-kind 'Only flower in the World': I'd prefer to be the kind of flower you can find all over the world, in any old place. The title of the song drips with such melancholy! How beautiful it was, however much adoration it received, wouldn't the only flower in the world be unendurably lonely? Maybe the beauty of the flower exists when there's an observer there to admire it, but to my way of thinking it's actually the commonest wildflower, weeds like dandelions which you can find the world over and which nobody really gives a second glance to, that are the happiest.' (49. 177-178).

Naoki's sense of self is not what one would at first perceive. We can only grasp at his ideas about how he feels, his emotions and thoughts. On one level through the book he is suggestive of his world as lonely, one may assume this comes out of his own personal experience. This would suggest a duality within himself of having felt and experienced a detachment of self and also an attachment with the outside world.

Duality as an archetype within autism may have other names, the shadow self can be used, to describe the inner battle and outside idea that there is a separate world that he/she does not quite fit into. But in saying this there is always duality. It is whether you can identify this within your own unconscious and conscious actions within the world and self.

Dylan's strength is his ability to have and know his feelings. Yet again, this goes against traditional notions of AS in which AS people are supposed to not have or be attuned to feelings. The duality of the world and his world mesh in a dance. But at the same time he recognises the sense of oneness through nature, the leaf in his hand:

'The burnt amber leaf makes a soft whirling hum in the warm wind as it turns clockwise. A small shadow stems across his hand, its shape changing over and over ... he is becoming one with it.' (GHOSTWALKER, 257).

If anything it is his sense of self that is important within the novel as a transformation of himself into an adult. The question of trusting another person reflects his own ideas about whether the mouse is real, if it is in actuality a person, Stevenson, guppy girl, Noodle, or someone else. His sense of justice is threatened, his morals are conflicted, should he leave the city? He is already seen as an outsider by some. His world is threatened at the end, his life could vanish if he runs. The complexity of duality is enmeshed into his psyche. Should he trust people after his world has been crushed? His shadow self could easily reflect an illness transforming into his reality, and yet his reality remains his escape, his dreams and visions, nature, the reality he sees is his own inner self mirrored back to him in the world.

In this he finds himself. The labyrinth of the tree transforms into the reality of his self.

Towards the end of *GHOSTWALKER*, we are left with the idea that he has actually understood his sister all along:

'With an energy surrounding his entire body, like a brush dappling him in a light green like the swaying trees, he looks up into her eyes.

Yes. Yes. I can hear you. I could always hear you.' (GHOSTWALKER, 345).

Once again the entwined symbolic use of nature, the tree, the ever present life force, that makes Dylan reflect upon his life in the world and with those around himself.

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Autism Information and Resources/Free help and Advice

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GHOST WALKER

By

Suzie Watt

PROLOGUE

CASE 203 / DYLAN WILLIS:

Date: November 3rd, 2017

FULL NAME: Dylan Scott Willis

ADDRESS: 52 Ashgrove Terrace, Cashmere, Christchurch

DOB: 7/3/2002: AGE: 15 years 8 months

PARENTS: John Willis and Joanna Willis

SIBLING: Sophie Marie Willis

INCIDENT REPORT

On 2nd of November 2017, Dylan Willis has attempted to break into files that are legal property of the New Zealand Airforce.

CHARGES:

- 1/ Tampering with New Zealand Airforce equipment, and breaking into highly classified information and files. Directly related to the property of the New Zealand Airforce via the website and files over the internet.*
- 2/ Giving false name*
- 3/ Gaining entry to classified information of New Zealand Airforce*
- 4/ Obstruction of military information*
- 5/ Downloading Airforce property on to Cashmere High database and website*

OFFENCE UNDER THE CHILDRENS COURT:

Dylan Willis is sentenced to 50 hours community service, supervised by a probation officer.

***HOWEVER UNDER MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES:**

The following may be deemed the correct procedure to take:

STATED UNDER THE CARE OF CHILDREN ACT 2004:

Whereupon the offender is a minor and has been deemed as unfit for community service and probation, Social Services will be contacted whereupon a needs assessment and psychological assessment will be carried out to obtain the correct cause of action needed. As by a case by case basis regarding the special needs assessment carried out.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT: TO BE CARRIED OUT ON:

8th November 2016:

Psychologist and school social worker for the Southern Sector base of the Canterbury District Health Board: AMY WHITE

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR DYLAN WILLIS:

Contributing factors and Diagnosis:

ASD Autism spectrum disorder.

Other contributing factors:

Asperger's Syndrome. ADHD. Anxiety disorder, sensory overload. Cognitive functioning impaired by stress and anxiety.

Overview:

Referral:

Dylan Willis was referred to the Psychological and Educational Consultancy service (PECS) by Dr Robert Williams (general Practitioner) for an Autism Spectrum Disorder assessment, and a psychological assessment with Amy White.

Assessments were taken at; 4 years, 11 years, and 15 years and 4 months.

CURRENT CONCERNS

From a presented list, Dylan's parents have been concerned about Dylan's social skills.

Brief over view from parents on his earlier life ages 0-11years;

- *Dylan did not cry for 6 months from birth.*
- *Dylan did not crawl. He walked at 10 months.*
- *Showed no interest in sounds around him, nor stimuli from parents for first years.*
- *No major medial or neurological disorders present.*
- *In the normal range for auditory acuity (tested 2009).*
- *Dylan has trouble socialising/making friends with new people. He would like to have a friend but his interpersonal skills are poor.*
- *School has organised a buddy system for Dylan at age 9 to help him play and talk to others.*
- *In new settings and variances in daily tasks at school and home, Dylan becomes agitated and anxious.*
- *His class teacher for years 1-4 has said he excelled in Maths and Science.*
- *Dylan has a high reaction to over stimulation and his mood is sometimes elevated to aggravation when things aren't explained to him.*

Information from Dylan's form teacher for Dylan; aged 11years and 4 months

- *Dylan likes to repeat phrases and words, such as 'close to white' when he makes a discovery that is important to his understanding.*

- *Dylan sometimes uses inappropriate movements that are exaggerated like hopping to the other side of the room, clapping his hands loudly, scratching and fidgeting when the teacher or another class member is talking.*
- *Calming music and a high sensory room has been designed as a quiet room for Dylan to use when needed.*
- *Dylan still has difficulty with eye contact and socialising at school. Because of his exaggerated movements of wanting to run and hop in class other children are afraid they will be hurt.*
- *To improve Dylan's eye contact, social stories linking in with his own life have been used to help improve his social skills and eye contact.*
- *Dylan has a very fast mind and his recall is excellent. He is also able to relay what he has seen in books, movies and what people have said in the past with heightened accuracy.*

CURRENT ASSESSMENT 8th NOVEMBER 2017

- *Dylan engaged in verbal stereotypy. However at times he disassociated into his own world, also during the Analogical reasoning subtest he was very impulsive in his decisions.*
- *The scores on the WISC-IV Index are an accurate reflection of where Dylan is in his present cognitive functioning.*
- *With this in mind, it is important to understand that Dylan is particularly prone to impulsivity, when he is in a state of uncertainty and also when he is experiencing emotions that are uncomfortable to him and that he can't control. Such as noise and other people's behaviour.*

- *He has found Cashmere High School hard due to its large number of students. This and taking in information within his classes is overwhelming due to his sensory overload.*
- *For this reason Dylan has been having one on one teaching sessions structured around his needs for the last four years of high school, as well as ongoing psychological sessions.*
- *As a teenager, Dylan has become more isolated at times, exhibiting anti-social behaviour.*
- *In sessions, he has expressed that he does not need the outside world as much as 'other' people think he does.*
- *Regarding the events of the Airforce attempted code download, Dylan has stated that he was unaware that he was doing something wrong as the site was active and invited him to look.*
- *He does understand the word classified, however he does not understand that accessing files is a breach of ethics and unlawful. It was due to Dylan's alert mind and interest in codebreaking and computer software and his desire to find a code within the system that he opened the Airforce database. This is in my opinion due to Dylan's unique fascination with technology and computers.*

FINAL EVALUATION:

This decision is based on observations, and a psychological evaluation with Dylan concluding with a needs assessment.

The most recent Autism Spectrum Rating Scale – (ASRS-P-S) summary results are as follows:

ASRS-P summary

<i>ASRS TOTOAL</i>	<i>T-Score</i>	<i>Percentile</i>	<i>Classification</i>
	69	95	
<i>ASRS Scales</i>			
<i>Social/communication</i>	80	98	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Unusual behaviour</i>	62	95	<i>Elevated</i>
<i>Self-Regulation</i>	60	75	<i>Average score</i>
<i>DSM-5-Scale</i>	70	95	<i>Elevated score</i>
<i>Treatment Scales</i>			
<i>Peer Socialisation</i>	73	99	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Adult Socialisation</i>	60	72	<i>Average</i>
<i>Social/Emotional Reciprocity</i>	72	99	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Atypical language</i>	73	99	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Stereotypy</i>	48	75	<i>Average score</i>
<i>Behavioural Rigidity</i>	87	98	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Sensory Sensitivity</i>	89	96	<i>Very Elevated</i>
<i>Attention</i>	73	99	<i>Elevated</i>

**T-scores have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10*

**T-scores above 60 are deemed by the checklist authors to be clinically significant*

Summary of ASRS:

Dylan's high score of 58 on his ASRS, and combined with the DSM-5 treatment scale, reflect how closely Dylan matches the DSM-5 criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder. The DSM-5 T score was 61. The total score is used as a summary to measure the extent of the individual's behaviour and characteristics in relation to the behaviours of diagnosed teenagers with Autism.

As Dylan's child psychologist and social worker for the Southern District Health Board of Canterbury, I consider Dylan did not wilfully damage the property of the New Zealand Airforce.

Dylan's actions were without prior or any knowledge of the negative outcome that eventuated. He is a boy who is interested in technology. His ASD means he often

does not know the correct boundaries surrounding others property or human interaction.

In the interest of Dylan's future behaviour, Dylan should be seen in a Cognitive Behaviour therapy setting with his psychologist, myself Amy White. It will help him deeply, to be able to talk through his thoughts to process his behaviour, and clearly understand correct boundaries.

A follow up assessment will be carried out in the next six months. For the foreseeable future Dylan should remain on all medication for his anxiety, ruminating thought patterns and ADHD.

Signed Amy White 3/11/2017

CASE 204 / DYLAN WILLIS:

UNDER INVESTIGATION AS WITNESS

Date: July 4th 2017

NAME: DYLAN SCOTT WILLIS

ADDRESS: 52 Ashgrove Terrace, Cashmere, Christchurch

DOB: 7/3/2002: 16 years 4 months

PARENTS: John Willis and Joanna Willis

SIBLING: Sophie Marie Willis

INVESTIGATION REPORT

FATALITY: DECEASED: DANIEL NEIL SPADE

DOB: 22/8/1976: AGE: 42 years

ADDRESS: 52 Worcester Street, Linwood, Christchurch

CAUSE OF FATALITY:

Gunshot wound through right frontal lobe cortex through to the back of skull.

TIME OF DEATH: *Approximately between 12.00am and 3.30am 4th July 2017.*

Waiting on Autopsy and toxicology report to be completed by Robert Pierson, MDA Forensics.

SUSPECT: *Under investigation*

WITNESS 1: *DYLAN WILLIS*

DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT:

Deceased Daniel Spade, found in living room, gunshot wound to head.

Single witness Dylan Willis, age 17 years found in upstairs bathroom, no shoes, urinated on self.

No sign of forced entry

No gun in possession

Dylan Will was taken to Sydenham Police Station. Interviewed at 4.15am. Held in custody until father, John Willis came to collect him at 6.30am.

OBJECTS FOUND ON DYLAN WILLIS:

- 1/ Fidget Spinner*
- 2/ Mobile phone*
- 3/ Laptop*
- 4/ Bag containing can of coke*
- 5/ Notebook; written codes of computer descriptions*

Interview conducted by Detective Inspector PETER HADLOW of Sydenham Police Station and Constable ROBIN DAVIES.

In the absence of Chief Inspector DELL MACCAULLY

NOTE:

**CASE 204: DYLAN WILLIS: HAS BEEN DIRECTED TO CHIEF INSPECTOR
DELL MACCAULLY OF SYDENHAM POLICE STATION ON 5th JULY 2017.**

**PLEASE REFER TO CASE 203 FOR INCIDENT AND BEHAVIOUR REPORTS
ON DYLAN WILLIS**

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Dell walks along the top of the sandy peaks. The evening walls of light slowly spread upwards in the distant hills and mountains to the north. By the time she finishes her hour of exercise, turning towards home, the last of the light is fading over the tips of snowy mountains.

The car park is full of the usual South Brighton locals. They sit slumped over the edges of their cars, drink in one hand, ciggie in the other. Nearby a big frenzy of gulls swirl around a couple of large pacific girls. Dressed in leopard print tights and bright tops, they're perched on the old graffiti brick wall as they look out to sea and eat their greasy fish and chips. Enough for today, Dell mumbles as she starts her car, reversing out of the car park towards home.

Standing like a silent sentry, Snow waits by the front gate. He curls his slender body around her legs, making it impossible for her to get to the door properly. She trips, cries out, 'Blasted cat,' rebalances, grips the shopping bags tightly as her knuckles turn white. She squints her eyes to get the key in the lock then pushes the door open with a nudge. Immediately the cold air of the house envelopes her like a cloak. With a wobble, she makes her way along the hallway, the old wooden floorboards creaking under her feet. She just manages to make it to the living room, plonking the bags down with a sigh. As she does so, over on the table a mountain of folders stare back at her. A mess. A bloody mess. A small meow breaks the silence as Snow jumps onto the table. The folders scatter sideways onto the ground. Dell sighs, looks down at Snow then touches his head softly.

‘Yes I know, food time, let me start the fire first.’ A light rain begins tapping gently on the window, singing out a soft melody. Once the fire’s lit, the orange glow warms the room. A long shadow covers her as she bends down to feed Snow.

With her arm creaking outwards, Dell reaches up to close the curtains, clicking her tongue to the side with a tock; another day done. Then she turns towards the kitchen, presses the jug switch down. She taps her fingers along the bench as a thought enters her mind. The warmth of the steam billows upwards to her face as she squeezes the last of the deep red plum tea out of the bag. With a creak in her hip, she slowly walks towards the warm green sofa. There she slides down into her favourite position. Lying with her head on the oversized green cushion she reaches out to the table for the folder, balancing the tea in the other hand.

Brushing her hand over the page, she sighs. The file slips from her hand. Her eyes gently close. The soft glow of *Madame Monet with her son* flickers beneath her eyelids, guiding the dappled softness of brushstrokes outwards from the light of the fire. The young girl, her gaze stretching up to the air in a daydream, gently twirls her umbrella into the sea breeze. She opens her eyes suddenly. This isn’t a daydream. It’s a murder. She pushes her tongue to the side of her right cheek. Where does Dylan fit into all this? Who is he? And why was he found hiding in the bathtub with his shoes off? So many questions to think about... ‘Christ Almighty!’ she suddenly yells as Snow jumps onto her lap. ‘Ah well time for bed, Mr. Snow.’

Taking one last look out into the black night, another thought slowly rises. A boy of 17 doesn’t end up in the bathroom of a 42 year old man for no reason. But how and why: These are what she needs to figure out. Nodding to herself, she bends down to pick the files up from the floor. A wave of tiredness hits her like a truck going sideways. She just manages to place the file back on the table in a dishevelled heap before she lets out a rattily cough from her chest. Bloody hell, this is not a good sign!

She shakes her head, turns to cast a final look on the dimly lit room. The fire spreads its last arms up the walls then die within the ashes.

This case is going to be a long haul.

No doubt about it.

She'll have to call in Jed.

CHAPTER TWO

The rain pours into the gutters as Jed stands hunching up against the wall outside Sydenham Police Station. He pulls his jacket up over his shoulders. His un-ironed shirt pokes out, roughly put on from the night before. He inhales one last puff of his cigarette. A cough, immovable penetrates up from his lungs. Fuck this. He throws it down to the ground, the wisp of smoke seeping sideways along the pavement, down into the vent below the police station.

This better be important. God, so many other levels of enquiry to follow up. What could old Dell want with me now? Too many deadlines, little time, Sarah. Soon she will be gone. A darkness is hovering. It's almost a tragic tickle. What's it all about? Dark nights over bodies. People who have all met untimely moments that have taken away the light from them that can never be replaced. Fuck. The ruminating begins again. Thoughts speeding up, round and round like a merry go round. A horror movie on rewind.

The sound of a horn suddenly brings him back to the rain pissing down above his head. He looks up, his eyes blinking into the grey water. The old drain is about to break through the Police Station roof onto his head. Fuck.

Another honk, he looks over to the curb. Dell is waving her hand in a chaotic frenzy towards him from her car. She yells something like she's underwater. He signals like an exhausted clown doing a mime act, suddenly feeling stupid, he stuffs his hands in his pockets making a run for her car. His thoughts almost tip off the edge again. Is she going to give him her usual incessant rub at his own self? Maybe he can avoid the barrage of questions today. Bash his ego around a bit. Imagine a better life.

Shit. He pushes his hands into his pockets further and further down; arching storm clouds are lengthening under the stretched sky, moving off, east bound. Lurching for the car door, the lights suddenly turn green, he glances one last time back to the police station, its walls bending inwards. Like a crinkled leaf withering from the storm he folds into the front seat. Water drips run down his face like a melodic clown. He tries not to breathe. Fuck it. He lets out a squeak, his tight lungs about to burst. The smell of tobacco swings against the wall of clean air floating from Dell's Vanilla Orchid breeze oil. Dell sighs, rolls her eyes towards him.

'You took your time!' she pushes her foot down accelerating the car swiftly into the Monday morning traffic without indicating.

CHAPTER THREE

The hum of people deep in conversation reminds Dylan of a swarm of bees. He has nothing against the insect. In fact the bee is on his favourite list of species. A list he started when he was 8. There are **7 honeybee species** with **44 subspecies**. Although there are **20,000** bees known in the world. More importantly the honey bee is a survivor. The most original fossil was found in Nevada predating human existence. If anything could live that long and survive, it was a genius species. The bee is also a very independent creature, maintaining its survival as part of the whole. Perhaps this is why Dylan's sitting in the café, deep inside, further back from the front bay window, with its fashionable wide yaka hiding him. He is amongst the bees.

He leans against the booth wall, looks outwards, scanning the businessman in the table diagonally opposite him:

1/ the pinstripe pants

2/ the maroon tie

3/ his shirt neatly pressed with perfect lines that run vertically down approximately **2 cm** apart.

4/ there is a **5 cm** pocket on the left side of the shirt that has **3 cm** lines that also go down vertically.

5/ two silver shiny shirt buttons on each sleeve cuff, that are approximately **1.5 cm** apart, they may be out.

He grinds his teeth together, scratches his head at the possibility for this:

1/ he is a large man with large arms

2/ his arms are bigger than the rest of his body

3/ the shirt has shrunk in the dryer

4/ he gets his shirt dry cleaned at Xu's Chinese laundry on Sutton Street, where they use a soap detergent and washing powder called Sparkle Breeze, which causes shrinkage because they add a cheap starch to it. It's displayed in their window as a miracle cure that will take away stains. It doesn't.

Dylan had read about it in the Press. Mrs A. Willow disputed it. She said her blouse was ruined, a blue silk one from Ballantynes, that she had taken it there for dry cleaning before Holy Easter. She couldn't offer the wafer up to the waka, her outfit was ruined. Xu the proprietor had counter sued, saying she had ruined his business. Mrs A. Willow was now taking it to TV land for more attention. She wouldn't back down, she was a Fendalton lady, money to max out. This businessman obviously has Sparkle Breeze shrinkage on his shirt.

Looking past the man's legs, he scans his bag on the floor. **ANZ BANK**, or **ZAN**, which isn't really a word, but it could be and the word **BAN**, and **NAB** which are too boring to be interesting. He looks at his watch: **8.02 am**. Then he grinds his teeth together again, calculating that if the man starts his work at **8.30 am** at the ANZ bank he will have to leave in **3** minutes to walk to the CBD down Colombo Street to the square where the ANZ headquarters are.

The walk itself is precisely **12 minutes 13 seconds**, having walked it **355** times both ways in the last **5** years of his teenage life. This leaves **7 minutes** to get to the ANZ Bank from the **4 sets** of lights at the edge of the square, assuming the lights turn green for the pedestrians to walk in a **2 minute** period. If so, the man will be on time as the ANZ building is in the eastern corner of the square beside the Lebanese Kebab shop that doesn't open until precisely **12.15** on Monday through till Friday, but opens at **10.00 am** on Saturdays and 1pm on Sundays.

Dylan glances once more at his watch. **8.03 am**; The businessman raises his head from his newspaper towards him. Dylan blushes, quickly averting his eyes down

to the computer screen in front of him. The screen flickers with a blue wave, annoyingly he has to reach around the back of the laptop to fiddle with the cord so that the battery lights up.

8.05 am; Dylan lets out a slow sigh, the air leaking from his top upper lip. The man folds his paper, rises from the table towards the door. His shoes tap with staccato steps on the floor. It causes him to look down at the shoes. He can immediately see the problem. It's the right sole.

The man's shoes are a green lizard skin leather with tiny little patterns of semi circles almost like the dots found on a fly screen of a back door in summer to keep out flies. The hole in the man's shoe has the potential to grow to the size of a **20** cent coin. This is irritating. He raises his hand above his head, and flaps it in the man's face.

'Your shoe has a hole about **2** inches wide. It will grow.'

The man looks down into Dylan's face, a puzzled bemusement descending. Dylan stares back. Suddenly remembering what his father has said to him about staring... that it's rude to stare. Smiling is better. Creating a smile is like a crack in the pavement. It's not smooth. He smiles, his teeth protruding awkwardly, long legs of silver scissors back at the man. The man waivers, scratches his chin, then continues to walk out the door. The doorbell ding's, sending another wave to his brain; a flash of white light ripples, expanding onwards.

He blinks a couple of times, scans the room once more, his eyes finally rest on a girl sitting on the couch beside the window. Pink bubble gum pops in and out of her mouth like a guppy fish from the documentary series; ***Number 5: Caribbean Sea Creatures and Beyond*** that he watches every morning after his shower at **8.15 am**. She seems to be kissing the air with little pops that reverberate like a candy gun going off in his head. Just like when he went to the circus, he was 6 years old. His parents said it

would be good for him. A social experiment. His hands were set on a right angle up to his ears the whole time because of the irritating sounds around him.

‘Guppy girl,’ pops another loud one. It spreads out, a ***YELLOW*** sun climbing higher.

He pushes his lips forwards then out, blowing bubble gum motions in time to her mouth. Has he meet her before?

A sudden light on the computer screen draws him back down to his computer. In the corner. A new message flashes from Noodle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Although technically Dylan and Noodle are not at school anymore, Dylan still considers Noodle his best and only friend. He visits Noodle's den every day. They scan computer systems throughout the inner city, tracing codes and conversations to find information.

In the last few months Dylan has come across a device called the Mouse. It has a locked Encryption that can open private secret knowledge to do with higher sequential knowledge of how information is processed in the world.

A land of codes, as Dylan calls it. Just like the Egyptians. They had it right. Dylan had read all about it when he was 6 years old. His first book, *Ancient tombs of the Early Earth* by A.H, ABRAHMS, showed the Rosetta Stone and the **1,419** hieroglyphics that corresponded to the Greek words. There were **486** Greek words. Not bad for back in ancient times. The thing that sat curiously in Dylan's mind way back when he was 6 was that the language was both symbolic and real. A code within a code. Alphabet and symbol represented much more than people first imagined.

Just like the Mouse.

CHAPTER FIVE

<On my way>**D**. Dylan flicks the message back to Noodle.

He gets up, scoots around the tables. A chair falls loudly to the floor. By the entrance ‘guppy girl’ blows up a notch. A heat creeping up his neck. Desperate for air, he hurries for the door, pulling at it.

The bell dings. The wooden bottom bit of the door is stuck on the old green carpet with a worn out black flap. Another go. ‘Guppy girl’ burrowing around him, her eyes digging inwards to him in a long thin line of steel telegraph poles sticking upwards. With one more yank the flap finally flips up off the floor, giving way with one last enormous ding. He spirals forwards, out into the freezing air, the pavement zooming upwards.

With his head down, he speeds up his pace, pulls his hood up. A **ZOO** of people. **TOO** many possibilities. **RED**. His limbs tight, teeth knock, grinding down into his insides. A low groan rises upwards. He can’t stop it now, it’s sliding through the gap sideways into the air. A shallow thin air, a **GREY** ruptured puncture.

GREY

GREY

GREY

Zig zagging. Bouncing thoughts. He can’t stop. **RUN**. No time to sit or eat. No time to stay in one place. The computer. His one zone. Totally.

His zig zag turns into a wide stride to the left, bouncing to the curb. The unknown bit of territory, off the grid. The flashing blue bus signal's ahead. A large group of people are swaying like a gathering cloud of migrant godwits.

RED

RED

RED

The road parts. Space jump complete.

The group clumping together. Ugly mesh.

There is a world of people.

Then me.

Dylan.

CHAPTER SIX

The early morning light begins to crack through the beech trees that line the fence of the house. Dell yawns. Her eyes like little slits as she turns to face the crime scene. The frozen grass crunches beneath her feet. She struggles to get the sterile gloves over her little fingers, her white knuckles staring up at her like frozen sausages. She sighs. The cold air escapes out of her mouth, creating a white mist like she's a magician about to perform a spell. She looks around the scene at the group of policemen, standing huddled together quietly murmuring over something that reminds her of a party that is trying desperately to redeem itself over a table of party food laid out in front of them.

The photographer, Brian waves at her. He rushes towards her, his camera clanging around his neck.

'Should we go upstairs Dell?'

Dell nods, turns around to scan the scene again. 'Ok, I just need a word with DC Henry.' She then walks around to the red tape and listens to Henry's directive tone over the phone.

'Yes that's right, everything we can get as far as texts and phone calls. I better go... I have Dell with me, cheers.' Henry hangs up, clearing his throat. 'Hi Dell, we found a mobile beside the body. The last call has been traced to someone using it at 12.36 pm Friday night. From our records there was also a call made to the police around 1pm Saturday morning from this suburb. An unidentified number'

With a twitch to the side, Dell tilts her head back like a bird about to find a worm. 'Was it a man or a women?' she asks.

Henry turns towards the house, his lips pursed together. 'A women. Dylan Willis was found upstairs in the bath. He may have made the call on the mobile, then bolted upstairs, tried to get outside but couldn't. We better check for fingerprints'.

'Hmmm ... Jed's inside doing that. Well we better go and look at the body I suppose,' Dell says, her head tweaking to the side again.

The living room door creaks as they enter. The coldness giving way to the body of Spade hunched over the couch. Two half glasses of wine sit on the table, while a laptop still flickers half alive on the floor. The screen splattered with blood.

Kneeling closer Dell squints her eyes together peering into Spades head. The bullet has smacked right through the pre-frontal lobe cortex to the back of his head leaving a hole around his singed red hair. It has then struck the wall behind his body, narrowly avoiding a china vase with fake white peonies flowers sitting on a little oak table.

'Righto, here we go.' She bends down towards his head, propping herself on a 90 degree angle, her sterile gloved fingers hovering above the wound. The bright red blood reminds her of the cheap cherry red wine usually used at staff Christmas parties. For some reason it seems unreal as it crumbles off into her fingers.

Inhaling the cold air in the room, she steps back, her eyes dart back to the table with the wine glasses. She then moves around the room, her birdy brain firing off in all directions. Why have two glasses half drunk?

Walking to the window, her shoulders stoop as she looks out at the bleak grey day. A long line of Prussian cloud hovers over the city like an ominous scowl. She can feel a Southerly looming. Snow is on the way.

Turning back into the room, the body of Spade has taken on an amorphous blotch of decay. Her stomach does another flip, up to her gut this time. Keep an open mind. A boy with Asperger's using a gun? Maybe. Probably not. The sound would

have been a deterrent to him. Plus the psychological evaluations she read last night put him in the highly unlikely category. He was a delinquent who hacked computers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The cold air reaches around the wooden door, curling up its arms with a soft creak. Jed enters the room, his eyes wide like a possum.

‘Upstairs is pretty much clear now, the finger prints all done. I’ll do a total evaluation ... at the lab. I thought I might head off, ok?’

The urge for a cigarette runs through his brain. A ticking clock, it won’t stop. Fuck. With a jerk, he shoves his hands in his coat. Out of the corner of his eyes, he can see the obese stiff body splayed on the couch, now looking glaringly at him. Fuck it never ends, death and more bloody death.

His fingers suddenly vibrate against his phone. The message pops into his eyes.

<We need to talk>S

Fuck not this again. He stuffs it back in his pocket then glances over at Dell, lost in a deep train of thought staring out the window. ‘Ah Dell ... Dell? I really need to go. When the bodies at the lab I’ll probably have more to go on ... ok?’

He twitches again, like a wound up toy, his feet can’t keep still. He makes a move to leave, the floorboards creak under him stirring Dell out of her trance.

With a forced smile, she tilts her head. ‘Righto then, you go ahead. I’ll be finishing here soon anyway.’

Almost gagging, he walks away down the hall. The smell of damp wood mixed with Spades decomposing body rises up into the tips of his nostrils like rotten fish churned over with garbage in a blender.

The long walk down the driveway curls around him, a hovering question mark over his head. Why would Dylan come here? A loud grunt rises from the neighbour’s dog almost simultaneously with his thoughts; gyrating music thumps in spasms from the

speakers of the black windowed Holden parked in the driveway. A descending chorus; the sudden scuttle of bottles heave heavily as they are dumped into a nearby bin, a muted lone cry from inside the neighbour's house cascades outwards, but ends abruptly. He shakes his head as he finally reaches his car, lighting up the cig.

Having been on so many cases Jed's awareness of possible scenarios is still in his mind set. In the early days of his training as a junior forensic policeman, he had learnt that suspects often revisit sites; to get a whiff of how the police are handling the case without any sightings by police. Some murderers like to get off on the fact that they have done the crime. They get a sick satisfaction of seeing it all again. The psychopathic mind.

During his early days as a detective, he interviewed many murderers; a certain pattern of behaviour lay in the minds of the killer. Most, if not all were loners and outcasts, sad, disparaged by life.

Many had been conditioned into a life of crime and abuse by a parent or relative, creating patterns of behaviour; an existence that urged them to offend; then repeat offend like a drug. Getting high on the fix.

The other thing that always stuck in his mind was that sometimes people who killed had no choice. It was in their blood, in their DNA. Simply put; if that's all you've ever known, well that's what you do and that's what you become.

But there was always a second path available. An exception to the rule. A person could break the cycle. Get off the wrong track and walk away. Almost like flipping coin. From heads to tails.

But that takes courage, guts and sheer determination.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The impulse to sprint for it runs through Dylan's mind. **8.40 am**; Peak hour traffic at its worst. His eyes dart around. The press truck that delivers the papers is backing out of the central station warehouse. The second round of paper deliveries to the outer suburbs:

OPAWA

SOMERFIELD

CASHMERE

HALSWELL

Then through to the West side:

ROLLESTON

HORNBY

RICCARTON

It's a 2 hour round, back by **11.30 am**.

The next shop **MAPS** is just putting out its blue sign onto the pavement.

8.48 am. The sign is covered with a tight semi-gloss plastic that makes it shine in the morning light. The image on the sign shows a map of the earth. Technically it's not correct. Greenland is at the bottom. It should be at the top. Dylan had already gone into the shop three months ago to tell them of this mistake.

'Your map is wrong. Greenland is part of the North Atlantic and Arctic circle. The correct place is at the top. You have placed it at the bottom rising into Argentina, with Chile to the east, which is in the South Atlantic Ocean. Greenland navigates the Baltic Sea, with the Arctic Sea. This accounts for the extraordinary lights of the Aurora which is only seen in high latitude areas. Which accounts for the summer's midnight

sun and the northern lights in winter. Also the degrees are set at a latitude of **71.7069397**, longitude **-42.6043105**. It's part of the northern Hemisphere. It's also relative to the equator. If it was pushed into the Southern Atlantic Ocean it would be a different country completely. This is not possible.'

The poor uni student, Dave, in his green corduroy trousers, cardie that had the brown top button undone, hole in the cuff of the left arm, had sniffed behind the counter. He said it was a copy of a copy, and nothing could be done about it. Dylan groaned quietly as he left the shop. The sign penetrating into his eyes, its earth tilting to the side. He had thought about taking the sign, but that was technically stealing. Illegal. He would just have to walk on the other side of the street, away from the odd earth.

The green walking man flashes. Unnerving to his eyes. A long line, almost a sea of people walk across the intersection towards him. He swallows, his mouth dry. The concrete mass below his feet could swallow him up. He scans ahead. The hotness rises, he quickly averts his eyes down; she is too **CLOSE**. A mum with her baby pram is heading straight for him into the centre line. He jerks out of the way, narrowly avoids a head on collision with her as he bends his body up in the sky like an air bender. With a pull to the left he jumps over the sign: **DO NOT ENTER** rising up to him. Bolting faster with the air whistling past his face he picks up his pace making a run for it through the CBD around the road works. The orange land of cones sticks up from the ground towards him, his eyes zoning in on the brightness:

54 cones

3 stop signs

2 sets of lights up ahead.

He quickly makes a turns south then enters the alleyway towards the den.

The warehouse door creaks ajar, sending the skeleton into an amorphous cry, its eyes lighting up red above him. He walks two metres into the second bolted entrance, pins in the code DW.AKA, pushes hard at it until it opens just enough for him to squeeze through. The stairs ahead sparkle down, a twilight of numbers ahead; **1,2,3,4**. He stops then repeats the count; **1,2,3,4**. As he reaches the top of the stairs he looks down; **24 / 4 = 6 =Even**. He grinds his teeth then groans quietly.

Noodle crouches over his computer screen typing furiously at the keyboard. He looks over his shoulder with excitement.

‘YOW man, there’s been three hits today in the chat room “Widow’s door,” Noodle says, his eyes wide.

With a low groan, Dylan slumps back onto the couch.

‘Really? So the Mouse is moving in the same circles as us then?’

‘Yep, we’re close,’ Noodles says, spinning round in his chair.

In a frenzy, Dylan reaches into his bag, opens his laptop and begins to type a code. ‘I’ll go into Widow’s door now, see if I can get some sort of conversation going.’

With another spin Noodle replies. ‘Yep, no worries, I got your back.’

The room goes silent as Dylan stares down into his laptop. Finally he raises his head and speaks. ‘Anything?’

‘Na nothing yet,’ Noodle mumbles as he stretches his arms out reaching for some chips on the table.

The crunch bolts into Dylan’s ears. **RED RED RED** *fuckin’ chips*.

‘Hang on!’ Noodle yells. ‘Someone called Galileo has just come into the chat room.’ He crunches another full mouthful of chips in excitement as he spins around in his chair.

Dylan groans, his voice narrow down a long passage. ‘I’ve never heard of him? It could be the Mouse coming in as a new person though.’

‘We got this man!’ Noodle shouts as he looks back towards Dylan.

The room quietens again as Dylan averts his eyes back down to his laptop screen. Suddenly he sees something unusual in the chatroom. ‘I think I got him Noodle. He’s logged on in the CBD. It’s the lower end of Moorhouse Ave. Hang on ... the signal is coming from the South City shopping mall. Level 5, where the business block is.’

A cloud covers Noodle’s face. ‘We have to do this properly though. Tonight we get in there and find out who this Mouse is for real.’

‘I’m on to it,’ Dylan hears himself say, his voice sinking somewhere.

‘Dylan ... Dylan ... you ok man?’

With a jerk, a pop whacks through Dylan’s ears as Noodle shakes his left arm.

Dylan jolts, stands up and pushes past Noodle to the door.

‘Seven sharp at the spot,’ he says back over his shoulder to Noodle.

He then pulls his hood up, tipping forwards with a rush of adrenalin towards the stairs; numbers fly up to his eyes; **16, 14.....8....4...2....1.....**

With a thud he lands loudly on the tiled floor, the vibration shooting upwards to Noodle spinning in a circle.

The Skeleton cries.

CHAPTER NINE

With one last puff of his cigarette Jed walks up the gravel driveway to his house. Fuck. Better get this done. Emptiness invades the hallway. The barren coat rack stands silently beside the door, where Sarah put all her colourful scarfs bags and coats. All Gone.

An intermittent thought pushes to the front of his temples. Pressing tightly, he closes his eyes, wonders if she will come. Whether her new boyfriend will be with her. What's his name Yanni? Or some shit, stupid therapist. He sighs. Opens the fridge, the wine looks up at him. It won't hurt. Just the one. He hovers over the glass, staring down into the yellow pool of liquid. Not sure what to do with himself he takes a large gulp and waits. What was she doing anyway? He's twice her age ... at least, isn't he? Fuck.

The ringing of the doorbell cuts into his thoughts. He glances at his watch, wipes his hands on his jeans, the streaks of moisture implanting wet patches on the denim.

'Hi,' she says, without even a half smile as he opens the door.

Jed tries to smile. She still looks hot. 'Um, hi.' Lost for something else to say he pulls back the door and allows her to walk past him. Lulu wafts up his nose. God she's still wearing that. I gave her that. Doesn't she remember?

He turns to face her in the living room, scratches his stubbly chin. She sits on the couch with her skirt flowing over her legs.

He swallows, his voice cracks. 'Um yeah, sorry about not getting back to you sooner Sarah ... you know how it is ... work and all.' He turns towards the kitchen

searching for his drink, finds the glass. Another gulp of wine. The silence in the room grows wider.

Eventually she sighs, reaches her hand up to her face, pulling her hair back over her shoulders.

‘I see you’re still drinking.’ Her lips tighten as her eyes circle the room then fall back on him.

He spins around to face her with the glass of wine in his hand, his face turns pale. ‘It’s not as easy as you think ... my job drives me crazy, murder after murder ... bodies, morgue visits ... case after case ...’

She stands up, pulls at her skirt, the hemline falling back below her knee. With a flick of her fingernails against her hand she then walks towards the window that looks out on the back patio.

‘I have the papers ... anyway I think you need to sort yourself out ... don’t you? I mean you never dealt with anything ...’

He stares back at her, his face about to fall in, his heart thumps to his mouth. ‘I did face things, you had a miscarriage, it ... I tried ... we could have tried again ...’

She turns. ‘Jed come on! Where were you ...? I mean all you did was drink ... all you did was fucking drink drink drink ... I needed you ... you either had a hangover or you were at work, or you were drunk ... I was under stress. If you had been here for me like you said you would be. I mean you turned up drunk to every counselling session for fuck sake.’ She sweeps her arm up over her eyes.

He sighs, walks towards her, his hand out, reaching to touch her shoulder. He stops. His eyes move back to kitchen bench, the bottle, he thinks better of it then turns to look out the window. Still silence. ‘Ok. I’m sorry, what more do you want me to say? ... Sorry ... I fucked up ... big time.’

She lets out a sigh, puts her handbag on her shoulder as she begins to walk towards him. 'Here are the papers Jed, sign them please. I'm moving on Jed. It's the best thing for me ... for us ... you need help ... I need to get away from here.'

He turns to face her, his face contorts. The beads of sweat forming on his upper lip. 'Ok, I'll look into it ... I'll get some help.' He folds his arms defensively, looks down at the floor avoiding her look of despondence.

She sways in the silence of the room as it grows again for what seems an eternity. A single tear forms in her eye.

'I better go. Just do it Jed. Sign the papers, and get some help.' Silence cuts the room, the refrigerator chimes into action humming in agreement. She turns, her high heels tipping off the edge of the cliff away from him.

Where did it all go wrong? He wonders as he leans back on the couch, his old shoes staring up at him, worn and tired of all this shit just like him. The glass of wine tilts to his lips. A lingering taste just enough to bring back a memory. High clouds gather.

CHAPTER TEN

Dell wraps her blue merino scarf around her neck, bracing herself against the cold sea air. A swirling song of seagulls rises high above in the sky. They glide over the dunes on an angle towards the easterly. Surfing with a whisper on the wind, before dropping back into the soft low light from the afternoon sun, ebbing against the shadows into the deep curves of the land.

There's nothing like fresh air to clear the mind Dells mother used to say when she was a child. She pulls her body across the beach. Her hip gives a twig every so often as she bends down to look at the sea lapping softly on the sand. A myriad of shells dance across her path. The patterns in each shell seems to mirror the structure of life. With a gentle look back out to the sea, Jed crosses her mind. Maybe he needs to take time off.

She could tell he'd been up half the night when he got into her car this morning. Probably drinking, puffing away on the cancer sticks over work and thinking about Sarah. The cracks had been beginning to show.

Jed had once worn patterned paisley shirts with Italian designer shoes. That was when he and Sarah first got married. Their love was new. Dell could see the problem now, he lived at the station, literally. When Sarah had her miscarriage, Jed had confided in Dell, saying his life was in pieces. There was a big block there. He turned to the bottle.

The deterioration in their marriage was slow. They had counselling over the miscarriage; but it didn't last; Jed went to three. He developed so much anxiety. He simply couldn't face it all.

When Dell first asked about how Sarah was, he would say she was visiting her sister. About six months after this he said she was staying with family. Finally she moved out. For half a year Jed never gave up hope. But now he knew emphatically that she wasn't coming back. He lived on the local cheap takeaway bar "Lucky Duck" down below the station on the corner.

The takeaways were scattered around his office, a broken remnant of his past. Now when Dell asked about Sarah his eyes looked like a possum in headlights. By the tone of today, she knew he was at breaking point. But he really needed to pull his head in for this case.

A distant muffled bark draws Dell back to the beach. The walk has taken her right up to the South Brighton Surf Club. She draws her body inwards, curling back into the fall front of the easterly.

Her small car is up against the hump of a caravan. The backpackers have left their lights on. Not her worry. She squints out to the sea. Her eyes settling on the horizon. The sea remains quiet, a still greyness.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

From the top of the South City Complex, the lights of cars are mesmerizing. Some people are scared of heights. They would freak out at being so close to the edge. With a slow breath out Dylan shifts his gaze up towards the silence of the stars. The endless possibilities in the universe. He bends his head downwards. Zooms his phone out to capture a picture of his boots with the traffic below. Another click. Off to cyber world, tagging it < *“over the world”* >

What would happen if I just let go? Jump off the ledge? Fly out over the city to the stars above?

With a sudden jerk his thoughts crash him back to reality.

<LEVEL FIVE>N

He sway's on the edge, leaps off, space jumps his way across the rooftop to the door.

The three flights of stairs rush up to his eyes. The fire rising within him, his coat tails fly, arching seraphim wings guiding him down. Finally, he lands at level 5 stairwell.

Noodle appears, his body morphing from the shadows. With a stiffness in his neck he bends his shoulders forward then nods.

Dylan quietly groans, pushing the scanner against the door. The green light flashes. Another groan, he opens the door, scanning the room quickly:

26 desks

4 CANON printers

2 inner desks

1 oval board room

12 chairs

6 highball glasses

1 filled half with water

1 can of lemonade **ZERO**

A **NESPRESSO** coffee maker

1 bowl of orange pods: **12** = total **78**.

‘We have 45 minutes to do this, before the security camera re-loops and we will be seen by the guys down stairs,’ Dylan whispers.

‘Ok,’ Noodle whispers back as he walks into the room.

Dylan sits at the nearest desk, opens his bag, attaching the tracker to the computer. With a nervous twitch, he begins the countdown; **10, 9, 8, 7...** Finally the computer hums into action. ‘Got it. I’m linking in now.’

The first screen opens to a set of numbers. A code that attaches itself to the firewall to prevent people like him getting in. It’s a binary code. The familiarity of the numbers fly through his brain as he links them into each other.

‘Ok. I’m starting to track who the Mouse is through the address file that’s here in their database. The last user to enter the Widow’s door is coming from user 23.’ He continues to type furiously then waits. ‘Almost done.’

The heat pump suddenly kicks into action. Dylan looks up, his lips slightly part as he makes a low groan. The heater is too hot.

‘Hmmm, it’s a separate account though, linked to a user 23,’ Dylan blurts out as he rubs his blurry eyes. ‘Ok, I think I get it. It’s coming from someone called Stevenson, hooked on at 6 pm last night. This could be our Mouse. They have used this account twenty six times in the last four weeks. It’s coming from a different search engine though. I can’t get any more info as the logs only go back a month. We would need more time to go back months ... Shit we have another problem now.’

‘What’s that?’ Noodle asks, his eyes widening.

‘Well the person “Stevenson” doesn’t work here, they are a separate identity to this company. There are no records of him or her.’

‘What?’ Noodle asks.

‘It’s a ghost in the system,’ Dylan says as he begins to explain, his lips feeling dry and cracked. ‘I’ve seen this before. Usually they are a person somewhere out in cyberspace using a real business as their place to hook in. I don’t think anyone will be aware of what’s going on here ...’

‘Fuck. Someone is coming ...

We need to exit. NOW. Zero’s tomorrow 9.00am,’ Dylan whispers as he runs for the stairwell.

RED RED RED

DOWN

DOWN

DOWN

124 steps

SIGN. STOP. >FIRE EXIT> *RUN*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dylan remembered very clearly his second week in Class 2. It was a **Monday**. **March 23/2007**. The date stuck in his head because there were three things that happened that made it a **YELLOW** day. Number **1**/ he saw the purple bus. The purple bus only did the Sumner/Airport route, which made it a special bus. Every other bus was red.

On this particular Monday, he sat in the car waiting at the traffic lights with his dad. The heater in the car was pumping out warm air. Heat always made him feel tired, fuzzy **GREY = A STONE, A TABLE, A TELEGRAPH POLE**. Dylan never moved if he was too hot and **GREY**

Up to this point he was turning **GREY**. Surprisingly he noticed the purple bus:

34 children +

2 teachers = **36** +

1 driver = **37**= **A PRIME NUMBER**.

He particularly liked odd numbers more than even numbers, because there were a couple of prime number that were brilliant. Also the interesting thing with prime numbers was that they could only be divided by themselves. Dylan felt like this sometimes. He could only be himself. Like a -0- a zero with two minus hands. Or an envelope with sides that are licked and folded inwards. Inside to a warm cornered space by itself. This would be a nice place to live.

Number **2**/ reason he remembered **Monday, March 23/2007**, was because Mrs Anderson his teacher for year two, had asked him to give her a hand. At first he scratched his head, lifted his left leg off the ground, hovering it there, because he was

confused by her question. He realised that he didn't have a spare hand, but he held out his hand anyway because she had asked, and she was the teacher.

'You can have my hand, but I need it back,' he said.

Mrs Anderson had looked just as confused as him as she spoke back to him. Her lips were a straight long thin line like a – minus sign without arms. She wasn't really breathing that much either.

'No, no Dylan, can you help me write the date on the board?'

He was very excited about this because he had been learning all about Roman History from his Junior Discovery books at home. He wrote **2** dates on the board; firstly the real date in numerical order **23.3.2006**, then the Roman date **XXIII. III. MMVI.**

Number **3**/reason he remembered **Monday, March 23/2007** was because it was "show and tell day." He had brought his special coin to show and tell. He took out his coin from his pocket and looked down at it, the coin was something he liked because of its shiny surface. Also the texture was slightly raised with the face of a woman who was Queen Elizabeth the **II.**

He had been going to bring a book on birds, but it was fair to say his special thing was the coin. He slept with it under his pillow each night. It was very important that the head faced towards him because it had more smoothness than the other side of the coin which was bumpy. The bumpy side irritated him. It was **RED** if this happened.

The coin made him happy. It reminded him of a green tree. Trees didn't talk. Also the smoothness of the coin reminded him of the time he climbed a tree and fell asleep among the branches when he was 7 years old. It was so peaceful up there. No one could find him for 3 hours, until the lady next door Mrs Lemond who had a very red face, due to her Scandinavian genes, had spotted him and knocked on the door, telling

dad that he was up the oak tree at the back of her house. Sometimes he would run his fingers over the coin as he lay in bed, wondering about where they were made.

It was very strange listening to the other children talk about toys. He couldn't see how the idea of having a toy would be as interesting as a coin that was made from metal.

He stood there in front of the class as he spun it in his fingers.

'This is my coin, its silver. The surface is smooth on one side which is Queen Elizabeth the seconds head. It can spin on a flat surface. I would like to find out where they make these coins in the world. And also how many coins have been made in the last hundred years.' Some of the children began to laugh, whispering to each other. Dylan wondered what was so funny. Mrs Anderson coughed which was also very irritating as she was sitting on a round stool with three white painted legs that splayed out like a triangle right beside him. Dylan looked at her sideways, and wondered if she was getting a cold. 'Tell me Dylan, why is the coin your favourite thing?'

The problem, Dylan thought, with the question was that the coin was just one of many favourite things he owned. The coin had a smoothness unlike other textures. It could also be spun fast. Then he thought maybe Mrs Anderson wants more information.

'It's one of the most used coins in the world,' Dylan said with great seriousness. His eyes zoned in on the octagon pattern of the carpet. He wondered if Mrs Anderson would like a go at spinning it. Maybe later he thought, because she had a strange expression on her face and her right eyelid was twitching now.

Mrs Anderson then said that everyone could look at the show and tell items. Did she mean everyone in the whole school? That would take all day he thought. The children got up from the mat, into a busy circle. Dylan put his coin back in his pocket, feeling the smooth surface of the coin run through his fingers. He could see that the

bookshelf needed a new system, the books were all in a mess, so he went to the back of the class. They needed to be sorted numerically. Someone needed to do it he thought to himself. Mrs Anderson would like that he thought.

By the age of nine, Dylan had been called weird either to his face or behind his back by other children in his school. He thought about the word weird a lot. He had played with goo, sand and textures that didn't mix together well. That was weird. Also, when you put vinegar in water inside a bottle it separates because both parts don't mix together due to each substance having its own temperature with different chemical properties, now that was weird. Or how his mother said 'The sun is hot today.' That was a weird statement for her to say because:

A/ the Sun is a hot planet and has extremely hot temperatures.

B/ technically it is the hottest planet in the solar system and the universe. It would never **NOT** be a hot planet.

C/ another interesting fact he thought about, was that the sun is not like the planet Pluto, because:

A/ it is a dwarf planet.

B/ it is a cold planet made up of ice and water, and oceans.

C/ it is the ninth planet and most distant planet from the sun.

In 2009, his parents sat him down on the special couch with diamond buttons in the front room. The gold oblong glass clock in the corner had a swaying motion from the right to the left each second. It was an antique. They said he had a "special difference." They called it "Asperger's, this was an interesting word. He thought about the word Asperger's just like he thought about the word weird. But Asperger's wasn't quite the same as the word weird:

1/ it started with the letter **A**.

2/ it also added up to **108 = 1,19,16, 5,18, 7, 5,18,19:** Not a prime = **BROWN**.

3/ 5 of the letters were prime = **YELLOW**.

2/ it was number **1** in the alphabet.

3/ number 1 was a positive divisor only by itself. Which technically made it unique = **YELLOW**.

He felt like a tree then, with his envelope sides folding inwards where he could sit for a while. So he agreed with his parents, it was a special thing. But it wasn't weird.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The tall hooded figure runs towards the café, slanting into the southerly wind. Reaching the window, a long finger taps on the glass towards Noodle. The door opens swiftly. Dylan spins on to a chair, yanking his laptop out of his bag.

With a slow drag of his cigarette, Noodle rests his eyes on the homeless man across the road, arguing with a driver who has parked his car beside the man's bundle of belongings in a sad heap.

'Any clues?' Noodle finally asks as he exhales another circle of smoke, drawing his eyes back into the café.

'Give me a minute,' Dylan murmurs staring down into his laptop. The lines on his forehead furrowing. Another few minutes go by. He jerks, looks back up. 'Ok, I think our ghost is using this ACG Finance, as I said last night. The problem is, it's not that easy.'

'I don't get it?' Noodle replies, squinting as the smoke rises above his head.

'Yeah, um, let me explain,' Dylan slowly whispers as he rubs his left ear with his fingers. 'The Mouse is forever moving right. It changes when we change. So it's basically altering its whereabouts and database as it goes. The only thing that stays the same is the person.'

'Really?'

Dylan nods, lowering his voice. 'Yep. Well, we know it's a ghost. The physical address here is fake. We found that out last night. We have to go behind who the ghost is ... If we can determine who the person is, then we may have a chance of catching the Mouse in the network.'

'Shit, so how can we do that?' Noodles asks.

Drawing his body inwards, Dylan's eyes whip around the room, then land back on Noodle. 'It's been staring us in the face. The ghost is using places like this to log on. I've been trying to activate a recognition phasor on my laptop. I'll have it working in 24 hours. Then we can identify the ghost, plus the exact spot they are working from. Our ghost could be anywhere, even here right now.' With a quick glance around the café then back out the window, he narrows his eyes as the sun breaks through the clouds. 'Places to be.'

Noodle sighs, then watches as Dylan disappears into a tiny dot down the street. His eyes settle back on the homeless man squatting on his mat for the day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The waves of bright Brandenburg flutes are too fucking cheerful. Shit. Jed turns to the alarm clock. 8.15 am. Dell will be waiting. Jed's tongue, a dryness scraping the bottom. Shit. He tries to move. Nothing. Another go. This time he slowly bends his neck down to his crumpled half buttoned shirt. A red blotched stain. Fuck ... Underwear on, socks on ... no trousers. His foggy brain presses in, a migraine beginning in his temples. 'Fuck, god!' Sarah ... the call ...

The empty merlot looks sideways at him as he runs to the shower. Without looking his foot stubs the edge of the bath. 'Fuck, Jesus Fuck!' A sudden memory rises. He tries to push it away, smashing his face up to the water pressure.

*

When they met in 2009, the beginning had been great. Sex twice a night, hours lying in bed together, eating, drinking, not getting up until midday. Then lazy afternoons lying on the couch sprawled across each other, eating strawberries, chocolate cake, sipping champagne.

Slowly Sarah had moved her stuff in. First a few pairs of jeans, a sweatshirt, a book, a pile of clothes. It became a suitcase. Eventually they married. Something they wanted. Ten months later Jed became head of department at work.

Sarah spent cold nights alone. He would come home at 1.00am, by then she was sound asleep. She would creep out of the bedroom in the morning and make her way to work without a word. When Sarah told him she was pregnant, Jed realised he needed to man up. Change things about himself. The sky clouded over. Sarah was half way out the door by then.

The phone vibrates. With a leap to the phone, his towel half hanging, Jed looks down; three missed calls from Dell; two missed calls from Sarah; two text messages; five new emails. Shit. He presses Dell's number.

'Where the hell are you!?'

'Sorry Dell, yep I'm on my way. Twenty minutes.'

He pulls the phone away from his ear as she yells something else down the line.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There is a small stick in the beak of a greenfinch. The bird hops brightly along a branch outside as it aims for the middle of the tree. Its female partner is waiting, dancing around in a frenzy of excitement. Dell sighs, looks at the bird then wonders about its habits - do they have a nest nearby, who does all the work?

A door slams in the hallway adjacent to the room. Dell shivers, instantly regretting the early morning start. Elongated steps draw closer. Sniff. Pierson. A long willowy man, with a year round allergy. A blue Bic pen, with the 5 inch ruler, always in the right top pocket.

Sniff.

‘Well, shall we get started?’ Pierson says as he bends over, extending his arms to the body of Spade lying stiff and blue.

Sniff.

‘Righto,’ Dell nods back.

The first cut goes down the middle of the lungs. Air sizzles out. Pierson smiles, pushes up further, with a little grunt he then goes around the back of the stomach.

Silence.

Sniff.

Dell can hear herself breathing. She squints out of the corner of her eye. Pierson is tightening his grip over something. With a pop, his fingers come free, he then swiftly moves his fingers up to the gunshot wound. Silence. Dell looks down to her shoes, the cold floor, the varnish worn from people standing in the same place.

Sniff. The instruments glide back onto the tray. Sniff.

Pierson smiles, his arms extending like he's about to perform King Lear. 'Well, he's a 40 year old male, gunshot wound to the head, through the pre-frontal lobe cortex. No apparent other causes ... of death as yet. Sniff. His liver is overly large for his age. Cirrhosis of the liver to be precise. Sniff. And the yellow tinge of his skin around the eyes and dark patches and the liver spots, all quite evident of liver disease. What else, oh yes, he's had pasta, a cheesy mushroom one, one of those cheap sort from the countdown, the packets ... with the red wine which has caused his digestive track to cause a bit of a blockage. Roughly five hours before the shot to the head. Hmmm ... Maybe he had an allergy to the pasta, unless something was put in the wine. Sniff. I'll do a toxicology report.' Sniff.

Dell nods, 'Righto, well, shall we call it a day then, and I ...' The door suddenly opens with a loud scrape.

Jed lurches towards them, his shoes scuffling along the laboratory floor.

'Ah... er, sorry I'm late everybody.'

Sniff

Dell half turns, eyeing his creased shirt, bloodshot eyes. 'Well now you're here, Pierson can go over things with you. I have to follow up on young Dylan.'

Jed shakes his head apologetically, looking down to the floor. 'Er ... sorry Dell.'

'Hmm,' Dell presses her lips together. 'Righto, keep in touch today Jed.' She swiftly turns towards the door. 'Thank you Pierson.'

The door slams.

Sniff.

Swaying, his hangover pounding, Jed stares down at the blue body.

'Um, so Pierson, what can you tell me?'

Sniff. Pierson smiles as he uncurls his long arms again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The slender black cat weaves its way through Dylan's legs, almost knocking him over.

'Yeah yeah, give me a minute,' he says, feeling amongst the potted geraniums. Eventually the silver key sparkles amongst the dirt. He leans over, nudges Thunder's head. 'Are you hungry?'

The warm air of the house envelopes him. A sweet smell of a coconut shampoo. Sophie. He quietly tiptoes through to the kitchen. Where is she? He opens the fridge. Hunger stabs at him. A pizza glazes over his eyes. He grabs it, gulping it down. The remnants of her bowl of cereal lay on the table beside a half done Sudoku from the Newspaper. 4, 5, 9 will work.

With a jerk, he looks down to his phone. **RED**. He runs to the stairs. Number's fly forwards. Not enough time. Finally he reaches his room, pulls his laptop out, linking it into his desktop computer. It clicks into place as the scanner begins to download the decoder information from the desktop onto the memory card.

Sigh. A sudden vibration. His phone. Fuck it. He pushes it down his jeans pocket. It can wait. Groan. A light glimmers through the window, catching his attention. Silence. Another vibration. **FUCK**. A message.

Narrow **WALLS** press in. Gritting teeth. **GREY**. Another beep. It won't stop beeping. Who would be leaving a message? His parent no not to. **RED**. His lips suck in.

'Hello Dylan, I hope this is Dylan Willis? This is Inspector Dell MacCaully from Sydenham Police Station. I'm following up on your statement from Saturday morning. Just hoping I can come and have a conversation with you regarding some

more information you can give me. I'm actually really close to your home now... if it suits. Please get back to me on my mobile number 027 ...'

BLACK hovers over his head; A fantail dances through the window, light refracts back; semicircles shatter.

His eyes flash to the top of the screen. **75** percent done. This is taking too long. The MacCaully women will be here soon. He jerks the scan card out, stuffs the laptop in his bag. **2,4,6,8 ... 16**, down the stairs, out to the kitchen, where thunder meows at him impatiently. He spins around, doc martins screeching on vinyl. The cat biscuits spill outwards over the bowl.

'Gotta to go Thunder.'

10.33 am.

SPACE JUMP

GREY ROAD. CARS. RED

Bus stop 30 metres.

20 metres.

STOP.

WHITE HONDA. MacCaully. She gets out of the car, looks down the street.

Her eyes settle on him for **6** seconds.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The only thing moving is a black cat. It meows at her.

‘Where’s Dylan eh?’ Dell says as she peers through the kitchen window. With slower steps she walks around to the front side of the house, down the path to look in the letterbox. There are four letters. Three addressed to Mr J Willis, one to Sophie Willis, dated almost one week ago.

The overgrown path almost covers the entire entrance. With effort, she pushes her little arms out, stretching them to push the vines away. Finally she reaches the end of the path leading to the garden. With a click of her tongue she looks up to the solitary white birch tree in the corner of the garden; swaying in the southerly, leaves tumble through the air. They curl, twist in a spiral to the earth, facing upwards at the last moment.

She pauses under the tree. Her phone screen looks blurry. Blasted phone. She search’s inside her handbag, finally finds the glasses stuck to her handkerchief. Sigh. She attempts to disassemble them. Another Sigh. She raises the glasses, the handkerchief draping down over half her face.

An old wooden chair lays low in the grass, almost level with the ground. It will have to do. She clicks her tongue, balancing the phone. The cat impatiently weaves in and out of her legs as she wobbles down into the seat.

The little icon on her phone lights up as she selects Dylan’s file. Under contacts she finds the parents. Joanna Willis goes straight to voice mail. No luck with Mr Willis either. The cat senses the pause in her movements, clawing her leg. She tugs her skirt away, clicking her tongue again as her fingers hover over her phone.

< Jed: Find where Dylan’s father works. ASAP >**D**

So many questions run through her mind: Where are the parents? Sister? She glances back through the file. The sister is studying music at University. Well, she should be easy to find.

Sigh. She tries to lift her body up off the chair just as the phone beeps.

< Will follow up on Dylan's dad later today.>**J**

<Righto. >**D**

Another attempt. A sharp crack.

'Oh blast!'

She clicks her tongue.

Mental note: Walk more. See doctor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Lucky Ducks fly to the floor as Jed slumps further into his chair. Slowly he peels his eyes open, cramming his neck upwards to look at the screen. His pocket vibrates. Sigh. Another text.

< You're a bloody mess>**S**

He slides even further down into his chair. Maybe the floor will open up and swallow him. The long list of emails descends down. Fuck. So many requests, another enquiry up north. Maybe.

A new email. Pierson. The toxicology report; nothing in Spades blood. Low blood sugar count, copious alcohol. The angle of the gunshot wound appears to suggest that the killer was standing approximately three metres away from the victim. A mediocre job. 2-inch bullet used. Suggestive of a new gun.

Suddenly Jed remembers ... a cold case, way back. The killer had shot from a three metre range, almost point blank into the head. His fingers race across the keyboard. *Pierson, do you think this was planned or is it suggestive of someone in a surprise mode and the gun going off?? URGENT.*

<Hi Dell. On way back to Spades>**J**

*

The first rush of tobacco hits his fogginess. God. What the fuck did he say to her last night? Midday traffic crashes around his head. His stomach lurches, dry reaches. Nothing. Fuck. Now what.

<Dylan Willis not home ... can you organise to bring him in for questioning>**D**

He hunches over, staggers to stand up straight. The tango coffee cart looks so far away. Tired eyes, pins for pupils, he pulls down his sunglasses.

The coffee hits the back of his mouth.

Where is he?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The small inner road of the University runs parallel with the river. A white wooden bridge off to the right of the music block overlooks a rectangle carpark, where dozens of students have put their bikes.

With a wide sweep of her steering wheel, Dell comes to sudden stop almost hitting the first mountain bike. The path to the music block is a good fifty metres. As she walks she finds herself oddly up against a wall of girls, laughing in hysterics, leading into strawberry vapour trails.

Finally she reaches the music block, where a line of notes spirals downwards from a high window. A memory floats. Not the one she wants. She was only Seventeen.

Inside, a small office leans against the walls. Folders bulging within the shelves. Dell taps on the glass window, sliding the screen across. The lady behind the glass, her hair in an enormous pulled back bun, looks slightly startled.

‘Hello, I’m looking for a student. I think she’s here today. Her name is Sophie Willis.’

The lady pushes her red framed glasses back up her nose. A badge shines Sharon back at her. Sharon swirls a peppermint lolly around her mouth, it clicks a couple of times against her teeth, as her Yorkshire accent pushes through.

‘Oh. I think she may be around, up on level three practicing her pieces. She has her performance exams soon. You know, she is such a talented girl, we believe she’ll go far.’ With this Sharon swings her chair closer to her desk, raising her head to the screen. ‘She should be up there. I saw her only an hour ago heading that way. Whom can I say you are?’ Her husky voice swishing away within the syrup.

‘Oh ah, I’m an Aunt on her Mother’s side ... Helen.’

With a syrupy smile Sharon dials the phone. ‘There doesn’t seem to be any one picking up the phone in the room. Oh well, I’m sure its ok for you to go on up. She’s probably playing so intensely that she can’t hear the phone ring, Ha Ha Ha Ha!’ Sharon rolls her eyes, as the oblong peppermint pokes through her stained teeth.

‘Just punch in this code here to access the level,’ Sharon explains as she writes down a scribbly line of 2323. ‘We’ve put a lock up there, in the past few months we’ve had vandals. They came through, stomped around the rooms. You know they made such a mess. One of our very beautiful Wagner’s s was damaged. The strings were pulled out, we actually had to get them replaced, which costs a fortune to fix ... Thank god they didn’t go down the hall further, we have a beautiful collection of instruments that we store for students and guest musicians. One of them is a Steinway ... as you know ...’

With growing impatience, Dell finds herself quickly replying, ‘Oh yes, I know a bit about pianos, but I haven’t got much time today, so I’ll just say go on up to her ...’ Dell says extracting herself from the window frame. Sharon quiffs her hair, then walks back to her desk. Poor lady, Dell thinks, she’s starved of conversation in her fish tank.

The music crescendo’s as she reaches the top of the high arching staircase. In one of the rooms there is a couple of young men playing on violins. In another room a group ensemble are playing something reminiscent of Bartok to her ears. The last door has a little glass window; a thin girl sits on the floor, her head down in deep concentration over a music score. Her fingers quickly dance over the sheets as she turns the page.

Dell gently knocks. The girl looks up towards the door. Her long pale face, almond eyes searching. A shadow of something seems to cross over the girl’s face. Maybe Dell’s imagining it. She waves at the girl, motioning the word ‘talk.’ The girl

looks back perplexed, then lightly gets up off the floor, her feet barely touching the ground as she reaches the door.

‘Hello?’

‘Oh hello, my name is Inspector Dell MacCaully,’ she begins to say as her birdy head twists to the side. ‘Are you Sophie Willis? I wonder if I could talk to you ... about your brother Dylan?’

The girl’s eyes widen briefly then fall back to the floor. ‘Oh ... I suppose, I wasn’t expecting anyone ... come in I guess.’ She lets out a sigh as she walks around the back of the piano, clasping her bony fingers in her hands. She turns, nervously runs her fingers across the edge of her sweatshirt, pulling at a loose blue thread.

Her almond eyes slowly rise to meet Dell.

‘What’s this all about?’

CHAPTER TWENTY

A sudden blanket of rain pelts down over the bus. Using his left hand, Dylan wipes away the moisture from the window. His eyes glaze over the busy world outside. The gentle hum of the engine rises up over his head. *blue blue blue.*

A sudden jolt propels him forwards as the bus jerks to a halt. His brain kicks up a notch. *RED.* He looks down to his phone.

< **Forsyth Web Coding Development**>N

He opens the link. A list of people under contacts for the company crawl along the page. **Stevenson**; company development coding manager.

He quickly glances up towards the front of the bus. Maybe there is a connection after all between the ghost and Stevenson. He clicks the name. A middle aged man appears. Bald, wearing a grey suit, a navy cotton tie.

<We need to survey this>D

<Yep, onto it>N

The bus suddenly swings inwards to the Moorhouse Ave Corner opposite the canary yellow Pak and Save, with its pointed chimney roof. Brakes. Grating granite. People clamber off and on. He decides to quit it, striding down the middle of the bus, his coat tails swinging like a pendulum clock.

With a quick turn to the left onto Colombo Street, the down town market flashes ahead. A large crowd is gathering around some circus street performers doing artistic acrobatic manoeuvres on bikes with fire.

The swirling mass of people gyrate. Laughter rises high up above into the air, while the performers continue to dance with their colourful objects. Flying flames sweep the crowd up in more excitement into another gigantic roar.

He ducks away through a hole in the crowd. Pulls his hood up further, as he scoots down the middle of one of the stalls; food searing against the sides of the hot woks; ‘**FRIED RICE, FRIED RICE! WITH YOUR CHCIKEN?**’

FASTER FASTER through to the edge of the square. A way out; **70** degrees north east.

*

A circle of smoke rises above Noodle into a sea of fog. His eyes slowly watch as the Download completes. He zaps it away.

With an exhausted sigh, Dylan throws his bag down, then stares into the computer screen.

‘Hey, just checking out that Stevenson guy,’ Noodle says, blowing out more smoke. ‘The company is out of town, kind of on the outskirts of the industrial area. You think we should go?’

Unblinking, Dylan glances down to his doc martins. The right foot is scuffed where the metal toe bit is, kind of like the shape of the Sirius star in one of his astronomy mags. He raises his head up to Noodle briefly. Teeth grind. Stevenson flicks through his mind. ‘Yeah. He might be the head guy. I dunno. I need to get the device loaded, otherwise I can’t catch the ghost.’

Another cloud of smoke rises up around Noodle.

Quickly Dylan attaches the scanner to Noodle’s computer. ‘It’s nearly done anyway. About twenty five percent to go,’ he murmurs, flopping down on the couch, reaching for his phone from his jeans pocket.

A new message. MacCaully. **RED.**

Lips suck in.

Silence.

Finally Noodle speaks. 'So what do you think they have to gain by having a ghost in the system?'

Dylan slides back onto the couch. 'Like I said, the Mouse can't live without breathing so to speak ... like a Rubicon. It needs the ghost as the portal to get into each database it comes across in the chatrooms ... once it's in, it attacks.'

'Shit man,' Noodle replies, his eyes settling back on the screen to the hundred percent pie. He stubs out his cigarette. One last smoke cloud rises up over the computer, falling down to all the plugs below.

'Ok,' Dylan groans, as he pulls the scanner out from the computer, stuffing it in his bag. His eyes dart around the room. 'I'm off.'

'Ok, do you need money?' Noodle asks, as he wizzes around in his chair.

Half hovering in the shadow of the doorframe, Dylan quickly turns. 'Nah, dad gave me some money. I'll look for Stevenson.'

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The tiny cracks on the pavement stretch out sideways, spiralling out wide to a larger concrete mass. One of the cracks extends further down the street, its fork splitting then rounding back on itself. Just like a maze.

For a slight second Dylan glances up from the cracks. People are walking faster than before. Their eyes and faces seem to be blurring, contorting in towards him. He quickly looks back down to the ground.

12 cracks +15 lines+ 1 hole+3 stones = 31 PRIME. 31 x 31 = 31squared. =961sq

root

JOLT

BLACK

BLACK

BLACK

Glimpses of fractured light are slowly filtering through. Tiny speckles of dust through long telegraph poles. **JOLT**

'FUCKING IDIOT!' the man screams

SLIDING *down*

down

down off the bonnet.

RUN

The angry man. His eyes digging in.

RUN

The café; 40 metres

+ **52 people ahead**

+**6 bicycles in a row**

=**10 metres to go,**

5,4,3,2,1 0 = 31 steps between the last bus and the café.

Relief. He opens the door. Launches himself down into the last booth, flipping his laptop open. With his eyes cast down he plugs in his scanner. The screen vibrates outwards, a softness enveloping him. *blue blue blue*

Slowly he looks up, realises there are very few people in the café. One man on a stool, two other people at a booth. He begins to scan the internet usage for the last three hours in the café, but there's nothing, only ten people have used their phones, one person has used a laptop.

Impatiently he clicks on the mouse, flicking the scanner back to earlier in the day. Slowly the names begin to peel onto the screen one by one. Stevenson. **9.05 am** in the chatroom '**BIRO.**' Too late. **X** floats on the screen. All data wiped. Gone. The victim; a clothes company in the Philippines crashed. All stock. Zero left.

<**N.** One bite, **9.05 am** Milton St. We're close> **D**

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The counting thing started when he was three. He was fascinated with numbers. Obsessed with the need to have things in a certain order.

The child psychologist, Amy White had said he would possibly have OCD tendencies towards certain things.

Dylan's father began to take him for long drives to the sea. It was always at night. Dylan would count the rows of lights from the back seat; *Blurred Shapes zoomed by.*

At the age of seven he discovered a new thing. Electric waves. With the help of his father he created his very first electric running lightbulb.

It was simple; two wires:

negative charge + positive charge.

The bulb was attached to the power source of the old red generator in the downstairs garage that sat in the north-west corner.

Ab +Cb = A/b= C = It was like a fireworks display going off in his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

‘I won’t take too much of your time Sophie. I just need to ascertain the whereabouts of Dylan after the incident this last Friday night, Saturday morning. So your Father John Willis came and picked Dylan up from the Sydenham Police Station after he gave a statement to the Police. Were you home at the time?’ Dell asks, her birdy head tilting to the right.

‘Um yes, I was,’ Sophie begins to say, feeling her hair with her long fingers. ‘I was home asleep. The police rang, then I rang dad ... told him that he had to pick up Dylan from the police station.’

“Father?” Dell scribbles in to her black book.

‘So your father wasn’t at home? At 3.00 am?’

‘Um no, he has an apartment in the city ... he stays there for work,’ Sophie replies as her eyes slowly settle on the car park down below.

‘I see,’ Dell clicks her tongue. ‘Can you tell me in your own words what happened on the 4th of July?’

Sophie pulls her eyes back into the room. ‘Um, well like I told the police in my statement. I was asleep then the police rang, um, before that I was at Uni, here, all day until four ‘O clock. Then I walked home, made some dinner, watched TV ... Went to bed. You know, nothing unusual.’

‘Hmm,’ Dell underlines 4 pm. ‘Sophie, did you see Dylan at all on Friday? In the morning or night. Did he txt you at all?’

Sophie bites her lip, looks down at her phone. ‘I’m not sure. I think I may have left some pizza for him in the fridge, sent him a text. I’ll just check, see if he texted

me.’ She opens her phone. ‘Um, yeah, he did reply, he said “OK,” that’s actually really unusual for him. Normally he doesn’t reply at all.’

‘Sophie, I need you to be absolutely clear. What time did he send you the message?’

‘Um, I sent him the message at 6.45 ... He replied at 8.04, see here’s the txt,’ she answers holding her phone up to Dell’s face.

Dell scrunches the phone up to her glasses peering at the txt. ‘Righto. I just have a few more questions. How would you describe Dylan and his autism, is it hard to communicate with him?’

With a sigh, Sophie looks back down to the carpark, her face clouded once more. ‘It was very difficult at the start. Things were so rigid growing up. Meals were exactly at 5.30 or he had a meltdown. He washed his hands endlessly; some stupid OCD pattern. There was the flicking of lights when he entered certain rooms. The worst thing was that he didn’t sleep at night time. So dad would take him for these long drives to calm him down.’

‘Ok, so what about your mother? Do you have contact with her?’

Sophie turns back into the room. ‘She’s living in Sydney. Some stupid bay area. A posh place with her partner. She left seven years ago ... It wasn’t just Dylan though. Dad had someone ...,’ she stops abruptly, her hair falling over her face as she shakes her head. ‘Dylan can’t be helped. He’s in his own world. Even if you think you’re making a connection you’re not, believe me. I’ve tried. It’s not worth going down that track with him.’

‘I see. And your relationship with Dylan now?’ Dell clicks her tongue.

‘I dunno ... to be honest, we just get by,’ Sophie mumbles, sliding down onto the piano seat.

‘Ok, well thanks for this Sophie. Here’s my card, if you need to contact me feel free to give me a call. I may need to touch base with you again. Oh, one last question does Dylan have any friends?’

Sophie’s lips tighten as she looks up. ‘Um yeah. Noodle, his best friend, they went to school together. I think he has a flat somewhere in the city.’

Bingo. ‘Righto, thanks again love.’

Reverie floats, the delicate notes dapple across the keyboard. Lightly reaching out to touch her.

She hovers, almost turns.

Then continues out the door.

.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The tired looking weeds poke up from the dry earth. Up ahead on the front porch, a worn two seater couch slumps; cigarette butts overflowing from a yellow jar to the rotten boards below. A large crack extends from the tall window at the end of the porch. It could shatter if Jed gives it one last poke.

He pauses in the hallway, his eyes feeling into the dark. Jesus fuck its cold in here. Slowly he walks to the back of the house. Yellow police tape extends from the back door through the kitchen; an “X” next to a foot print found by the squad team. The sneaker print is unusually small.

The “Desert Rock, Merlot” sits beside the sink. Not the most expensive, but average enough to spend if you were having a guest over. In the living room, an enormous computer stretches up against the wall. A large hard drive protrudes from under the desk. Two large speakers on each side of the desk, dust collecting on the top.

With a flick of the switch the computer hums into action. He runs his hands along the vanished surface of the desk, reaches down to the top handle of the third drawer, pulls at it. Exactly as he thought; a little black notebook stuffed in amongst folders and crap. The back of the book displays a long list passwords and codes.

“INCORRECT PASSWORD” flashes back repeatedly. Fuck, now what. Impatiently he opens the last drawer, feels around, his fingers swipe outwards, sticking to a piece of gum with a screwed up piece of paper. An invoice for a computer store.

He stuffs it in his pocket then opens his phone.

< Hi Mary, Jed here, listen I need a favour, can you track down the place where Dylan's father works, to do with case 204 ... number 027 668582 ... just get back to me when you can. >Jed

*

A middle-eastern rug hides most of the worn out floor boards. An ornate lamp shade sits on a little table across the room. Antique? Egyptian? Assuming all this is true, why would a man with such good taste be living in such a slum?

The yellow tape almost seems too bright and happy around the body shape. The angle is all wrong. He walks to the couch where Spade sat. Something curious, the glass points in the same direction on the table. The intruder entered from the right, stood beside the guest. Not a forced entrance at all.

The second story smell's strongly of Dettol. A shiny sink shines back up at him, with a used razor; a bottle of blue Listerine three quarters used; a packet of dental floss with tartar control. A police tape extends around the bath and up the wall, then back down to the rim. The shower has slight dirt around the bottom from where Dylan stood, but no blood.

He walks out onto the landing, turns towards the bedroom. Surprisingly the bed quilt has a peacock design with blue turquoise and pink elaborate paisley designs like a garden running thought it. There's even some cushions on the bed. The Business suits run along the rack smoothly all fairly expensive, a few ties, a couple of jackets. A duchess stands alongside the bed; drawers of stylish Calvin Kline, Bond. The bottom drawer is heavy, some bulky thing stuck in between a woolly jersey.

With a tug, the gold framed photo falls out onto the floor. Spade amongst a group of people; some sort of party, a girl of about 16, with another young man maybe 18. One older man behind the group staring off into the distance.

He zips the bag shut, peels off the gloves. Done.

*

The traffic is at a stand-still. Never get home at this rate. Fuck.

< Afternoon Jed. Most probably deliberate, intent to kill, if the gun had gone off by accident the bullet would have stayed lodged in the brain. Feel free to pop by, I can explain it all. > Pierson.

He throws the phone back on the seat, pushes his body backwards as he leans over to the inside of his jacket feeling for a cigarette. A thud. What the fuck? He peers through the windscreen, the rain pelting down now. Something or someone is out there on the bonnet. The figure continues to catapult forwards away from the car towards the footpath. Swaying briefly on the ground, the figure gets up, runs away down the road dodging the traffic.

‘Fucking idiot!’ he cries out the window.

The lights turn green, as he lets out a deep breath. Fuck, now what? The rain is making it barely visible. He can just see the back of the person’s head; shaven on one side with blue gelled spikey bits sticking up. There’s something else but he can’t put his finger on it.

A horn honks three times from some guy right up behind.

‘For fucks sake! Give me minute!’

<Hi **D.** Going home sick.>**J**

*

With the fork of chicken in one hand, the glass of red up to his lips, the doorbell rings. For fucks sake. Who the hell could be ringing the bell at three in the afternoon.

Dell presses her lips firmly together as she walks through to the kitchen.

‘I’ve just spoken to Sophie Willis. I need a drink.’

Jed’s eyes widen briefly. ‘Oh, Ok.’

‘Well, Sophie is unsure of his whereabouts right now,’ Dell says with a sigh, taking a large gulp of merlot. ‘There relationship is bordering on non-existent, which

leaves us in a hole. Unless we can interview the father. I tried to ask about the family, the bloody mother lives in Australia for Christ's sake!

Jed leans further back into the cushions, one eye on the TV the other on Dell.

'Do you want me to follow it up?'

She sighs again, this time slumping down into the couch. 'Yes, all of it. Try to find the father, and get a story together of Dylan, someone must know something for Christ's sake. How did today go?'

His eyes stare back at her blankly. 'Oh ah, yeah a few things to follow up on. Um, Pierson has come up with some info on the bullet shot, which suggests it was with intent.'

'What do you think?' Dells asks, taking another gulp of wine.

'It doesn't look good, someone wanted him gone,' he mumbles, scratching his chin.

'Righto, well there's certainly some digging to do.' She stands, looks out the window to the small spits of rain.

'Looks like a storm is coming.'

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The slow river reminds Dylan of a volcanic lava flow. It reaches out into every pocket of the river bed as it moves. The bridge lights catch in the reflection of the water, blurring in and out, in an orange haze. He closes his eyes. Muffled traffic decreasing far back into a distant room.

<Hey> **S**

With a low groan, he stuffs the phone into his pocket. Takes one last look down at the dark river, turns, then walks to the end of the bridge. He jerks his head quickly, looks back towards the bridge then crosses the road into the alleyway, his long shadow lengthening into the cracks.

The low lighting of the Milton Street cafe creates an ambient mood. Light trance music hums in the background. With slow steps he makes his way to the back booth, sliding down into the seat. The scanner searches. Nothing. He begins to relax his head back onto the leather seat, one eye watching the list of people peel onto the screen. **Stevenson** slowly appears.

With a jolt he lunges forwards. **RED**. He stares back at the screen. The ghost. **RED**. There are eight people in the café. None of them match the description of Stevenson. **RED**

He stares back down at the laptop. **10.55 pm**. Stevenson has gone.

A thin blue line ripples the screen. Nothing.

He sucks his lips in, pulls the scanner out. As he walks towards the door he sees 'Guppy girl' with her red hair out of the corner of his eye. He quickly glances at her table:

1 coffee cup = ¾ empty. Black.

1 red notebook.

3 Sharpie pens: purple, blue, yellow.

1 Apple I-pod.

1 purple set of earphones.

She suddenly looks up at him. There's nowhere to go. He is caught in her direct gaze. Her green eyes line up:

87 degrees; 3 degrees off a direct hit.



$$= 3a+87=90b=ab+2b=180$$

*

Tiredly he opens the back door, his legs solid planks of wood. The potato in the fridge with the 'Eat me' note hovers in front him. He stuffs it in his mouth. Cheese with corn squishes to the sides, almost escaping. He scoops it up with his hands pushing the rest in.

The stairs seem like mountains to climb, numbers blurring into matchsticks. Finally he reaches his room, tips his bag on to the floor. With a low groan, he flops on the bed, slipping his shoes off with a clump to the floor.

Nightland comes through the window.

Her green eyes lining up again.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Winter, 2005. A siren sound pierces the sleeping house. Sophie stands at the door of her bedroom crying. Screams grow louder from Dylan's room. Joanna runs in to find him jumping on the bed holding a torch. The light flashes on and off as he hits it against the wall.

'Fire there's a fire!! Fire!!fire!! whoohoo whoohoo!!'

'No, no, Dylan no fire, come and sit down,' she cries. Instead, he races around the room, then out into the hall way banging the walls with the torch.

John runs out of the bedroom half-dazed by all the commotion.

'John!! We need to do something to calm him down!' Joanna yells.

He scratches his head, as the bangs echo down the hallway from the other end of the house. Suddenly there's a large crash.

'Jesus,' he murmurs, running down the passage way to the front door entrance to find Dylan lying amongst the smashed china of a fern pot plant scattered across the tiled floor. A low groan comes out of his little body as he pushes himself further back, barricading himself into the corner under the stairs.

'John, this isn't what normal four year olds do is it?' Joanna whispers. A single tear forming.

'Listen I'll take him for a drive ok? That should calm him down ... it will calm everyone down. You and Sophie go back to bed. I'll sort it, ok?' he says with his smooth Scottish accent, rubbing his hand up and down her arm.

Suddenly Dylan runs down the hall again, banging the walls, a louder groan rising. John makes a run for it. With his fingers outstretched he grabs a hold of Dylan's pyjama top, squatting down to talk to him.

‘Woohoo there. Ok, listen Dylan you’re going to come with daddy for a drive, you like drives, don’t you? Come on.’

‘Ooh, lights?’ Dylan yells, flashing the torch quickly up into John’s eyes. John gently guides him towards the garage as he rolls his eyes toward Joanna.

‘Yes we’re going for a long drive,’ he says quietly, wrapping a blanket around Dylan as he guides him into the internal garage to the car. With a quick glance down at his own pyjamas John realises it’s too late to get changed. He grabs an old jacket from the coat rack hanging in the garage, and piles it on.

*

The motorway winds itself along the coast line out towards the northern countryside. Green paddocks race by, amongst the few farm houses dotted along the sides of the road. John glances in the rare view mirror to Dylan; His eyes wide open, counting the lights as they zoom by with a smile on little face, the orange blanket wrapped up around him.

Soon the sea runs alongside the car. Peaceful, yet John can feel his stomach squeezing. This is crazy, what parent drives a kid around at 3.00 am.

Finally they reach the beach front, the mini wharf jutting out to the sea. Dylan flies out of the car, making a bee line to the edge of the sea. He pushes his hand down to the water, fanning out his fingers, to the gentle waves folding in on themselves.

‘Ooo,’ he sings, extending his hand up. There’s a small pebble in his fist. John tries to smile, as he sits down alongside him. He watches Dylan systematically begin to put the stones into piles of white and black.

‘Are you ok now, Dylan? No fire is there ...’

‘The black ones can’t touch the white ones,’ Dylan says, sucking in his lips in concentration.

‘Hmmm,’ John answers with a sigh, his stomach squeezing again.

A small crack on the horizon begins to form.

‘Ok, will we go for another drive? What do you think Dylan?’

With a quick look along the shore, Dylan sucks his lips in, looks down to his stones, gently picking both piles up in each hand.

As he reaches the car, he suddenly stops. ‘Arrh, NO NO!!’

‘Why don’t you put them in your dressing gown pockets?’

He sucks his lips in again as he begins to carefully put the black ones in the left pocket, the white ones in the right pocket. Finally he lets out a sigh, a small smile on his face, his eyes slightly heavier than earlier in the evening.

John reaches for the radio, the static pops.

A loud voice rips the air. ‘NOOO! Too loud!!’

‘Ok, ok, just silence.’

*

The house is quiet, the only thing moving is the pendulum clock on the wooden side cabinet. Peace restored to the Willis house. With light steps John tiptoes into Dylan’s bedroom, laying him in his bed, covering him with his trains and ships duvet. He turns over innocently in the little bed, as though the whole night has just been a bad dream. Slowly with even lighter steps he creeps into the bathroom, looks at himself in the mirror, his eyes; smudged silver spoons. He yawns silently glancing at his watch. Jesus. Two hours till work.

Joanna slowly turns her warm half-naked body pressing into him. The warmth and softness of her skin flickers a desire, but a wave of tiredness suddenly hits him. ‘Hmmm, I just need a bit more sleep.’ Unable to say anything else he falls into a deep dream of trains and ships shooting across the sky.

Half an hour later, Joanna pulls herself out of bed, her head pounding. She sleepily attempts to put on her dressing gown, shoving her feet into her slippers, walks down the hallway to Dylan's room, all quiet, then to Sophie's room.

'Hello miss sunshine, what a night we had...', she says as she watches Sophie jump up and down on her bed like a wired up toy.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

6.00 am: already restless, Dylan throws back the duvet and sprints straight to the shower. The coldness of the water hits his skin sending jolts up his body. He quickly lathers the shampoo round his head with a low groan, watching as the water swirls anticlockwise below his feet.

Back in his room, he falls onto the bed as he tries to pull his jeans up. He pushes his feet down into the doc martins, leaving the shoe laces to run wild. In a chaotic spin, he searches his desk. The pill packet sticks out from under a book. He stuffs two tablets hurriedly into his mouth, almost choking on the dryness.

With another spin, he heads out of his room, tiptoes down the hallway to the top of the stairs. He pauses, glances back at Sophie's room. A shadow extends from under the door.

The "Eat me" note looks back up at him from inside the fridge. He picks the thin pizza up. The pineapple bits smooch to the front as he holds it in his fingers and walks to the edge of the couch. Slowly he slides down into the comfy cushions, just as his phone vibrates.

<STEVENSON? >N

RED

He pushes down on his teeth. Flicks a text back.

<The ghost is not the guy in the picture.>D

He pushes his body further down on the couch, takes another bite of pizza.

Groan. **PURPLE** crunchy jagged edges push inwards. **RED**. He rushes to the bin.

Crusty brown bits of pizza slowly slide out of from his tongue down into the bin.

Thunder follows ferociously behind meowing for more food.

‘Yeah, yeah I gotta go,’ he says as he picks his bag up, hurriedly walking to the door.

6.59.5 am

55 seconds. He sprints to the stop just in time to fly up the stairs of the bus as it comes to a swaying halt. With speed he scans the bus.

1 African women;

1 baby;

1 old man;

1 teenage girl; 5= BLUE

= 33 empty seats= PRIME

= *blue blue blue*

*

Malt Café doesn’t look the same as it did last night. A darkness pushes through the windows. The closed sign hangs on an angle. Reluctantly he carries on, finds himself crossing the empty square. The common pigeons; the sole occupants this morning, stand in a large cluster. Instead of flying away, they just open up silently parting, then gently closing up behind him, bobbing their little heads in and out with a warm cooing.

The pavement sweeper truck glides around the outskirts of the square in the dim morning. Its orange lights flicker above, round and round. It catches in his eyes. He tries to look away. The little man sits on a large green chair, steering it along. It’s an automatic. Most city council cars are. Battery run would be the preferred option.

Low groan. His last school project was the projection of the car battery; a hybrid model for a regular family. Before he got kicked out of school.

The science teacher Mr Allen, had entered him into the national competition after he had won the regionals with his solar energy model. But since he was busted

entering the Airforce web base satellite, it was a no go. It didn't matter anymore. It was a school system.

Everything was a system within a system of some sort within the bigger picture of the universe. It was an end to an end. The inevitable was going to happen. By mere physics the likelihood of something happening in the present had a **98.5** percent chance of it occurring. Because everything that was now happening had once been a probability, but could also be a possibility. Thus it could occur.

Not many people understood his viewpoint. Or could understand his probability of calculations. He wasn't at all surprised when the school suspended him. Nor was he surprised that he didn't actually miss school.

There had been so many attempts by councillors, teachers, parents, groups of experts in psychology fields that had tried to make him like school. By his own standards he already knew that nothing would change the way he was. The probability of this happening was **1.5** percent. Because he was in the **1.5** percent of his own hypothesis.

He was on the outside of everything. The exception. But the irony of this, was that if anyone was going to get remotely close to him, it was a boy called Noodle.

Noodle stood out at school for being in that **1.5** percent. This caught his attention. Although he hadn't been expecting it.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

In 2002, Nathaniel Newton entered the world. He was the penultimate child amongst a long line of garishly ghoulish brothers that all had opinions about everything. Growing up in a family of five boys and one sister was not the easiest thing.

Doug, the father of the brood, spent his days in the Lyttelton shipping port driving a crane operation rig and truck shifting coal. The hours were long and hard. He had little knowledge of what his family did apart from the days off, usually three in a row. By the second day, he would re-surface into the family, drowning himself in the cheaper grants scotch whiskey. Arguments ensued, a constant tug amongst his sons. Like in his work, delegation was key. He barked at work and barked at home.

The older boys, Christopher and Jerome, sometimes came home late at night, or not at all. They said they were at their mates place. Nathaniel was nearly as big as them, although he was only twelve. They teased him because of the size of his large head. It wasn't that it was enormous, it just seemed large for a 12 year old. At first it was a joke. They called him Nads. But this eventually became "Noods with the big brain" because he read so much. It stuck and by the age of 13 he was known as "Noodle brain," which eventuated into "Noodle brain."

When he entered Cashmere High, everyone called him Noodle, from there it just stuck. This didn't help matters, no one wanted to hang out with a boy called Noodle, who also just happened to look like a thug. He couldn't help that either.

He had his father's build. The stocky large neck that went straight into his shoulders. A body that was built like a tree trunk. His legs showed promise, even though sport was non-existent in his own world. They were perfectly formed hard looking curvy calves. People would often assume he played a rugby. While his rosy

cheeks were bright red most of the time, which often gave the impression that he had exerted himself at sport. None of this was the case. Noodle was a misfortunate product of all the wrong genes.

Doug was a large man that practiced lifting weights far beyond his capacity in the garage when he wasn't doing nightshift. The regime consisted of drinking and puffing away on Pall Mall Red's 25s, in between lifting 110kg weights. Rolling Stones mixed with Def Leopard bashed out across the empty petrol stained garage, as he pumped and spitted copious adrenaline out.

Noodle would often think about how to talk to his father. But whenever he tried his father would get this look of contempt on his face like he really didn't care anymore about what his children did, or more precisely what Noodle did. There was something deeper though. Noodle hated to admit it. The mirror reflected it. He was an irritation to Doug. He had produced a perfect son in his eyes, who just happened to be more of a weirdo than the rest of his kids.

Noodle was a reader. He had a gift for numbers and computer technology far beyond the rest of them. He spent hours in the library at school. By his own admission, he knew he wasn't normal. His brothers played rugby on the field. Sometimes they threw the ball his way, it fell, slipping between his hands like butter because no one had taught him how to throw or catch a ball. They jeered at him, laughing, calling him a clown, a real stupid Noodle brain.

His sister, Stacy was in the cool gang of girls. She avoided Noodle. Stacy had her father's build, very broad shoulders but with a waist that went in surprisingly. Her red hair went with her fiery personality. She was tall for her age. Her calve muscles shone out making her exceptionally popular with the boys. She also played every sport, albeit in a masculine way. Because of her exceptional talents with sport and boys she

was the favourite at home. Doug gleamed at her, almost blushing when she came in the room.

Marion, his wife was a fiery red head. She would swipe the heads of the boys if they said something unruly, while Doug would yell across the table, his face turning redder into a beetroot pulp until all his muscles in his neck were popping. The mashed potato would fly from his mouth, like a spray of spitfire rounds.

Christopher and Jerome would laugh from the other end of the table. They were just as bad, throwing peas and carrots at Noodle's face. Beyond discipline at 16 and 17 years old, both brothers thought their father was the man. They looked up to him, but at the same time pushed the boundaries. Stacy sat beside her father, a princess on a pea sprout. Noodle sat amongst the two other boys Bradley and Michael, who laughed alongside the rest of the family, but were too scared of their father to actually speak up at the table.

Somewhere in the middle of all this chaos, Noodle observed his family like they were a pack of wild animals. His father, the head baboon; Stacy the orangutan; Marion the hyena who drowned herself in laughter at anyone or anything. The other boys were like monkeys sporadically running wild. Noodle knew he didn't fit in when he saw his father smoking, lifting weights at the same time, and watching rugby on TV with the older boys. Noodle had his own routine, he would disappear into his room to read books or work on his computer software.

Noodle's first job was delivering pharmaceuticals on his bike to old people in their houses. Within a year Noodle bought his first crappy laptop. With this in his possession he started his second year of high school prepared for the taunts and name jeering. Holding his laptop he would make his way daily into the hibernation of the library, hide amongst the books and shelves of lost poets and writers. He felt safe there. His brothers would often look for him, but they found the library too boring so they

never went in. Noodle made it his mission to know their moves before they knew his. In this way, Noodle acquired a learning and fast mind beyond his age. Like a detective, he began to outsmart his family.

By the age of 14, Noodle had another job working in the local dairy. With this income he bought his first cheap desktop computer. In time he taught himself how to decode and code web networks. He had far off dreams, like a field of gold corn that glows warmly in the summer sun. One of those dreams was to get as far away from his dysfunctional family as possible.

Some nights at the dinner table, Doug with his big baboon head would eye him over the table.

‘Noodle the soft brain aye. Never know what’s in that head of yours do we?’

The rest of the family would laugh and make fun of this. Stacy seemed to always sway into hysterics. Underneath it all she needed the attention, desperately wanted to be accepted by her peers more than anything in the world.

It was her unfortunate personality combined with her shadow self-esteem that she projected into the fate of the best looking guy at high school called Devon. His ultimate enjoyment was doing donuts in the local Linwood mall carpark on a Friday night in his electric blue 64 Holden.

In no time at all, Stacy and Devon had formed a relationship based on sex, and not much else. It shook everyone to the core. She became the queen at school. Everyone admired her for going out with such a popular guy. She insisted that, because she was so mature she could have him stay over. This extended into the holidays, until before long, Devon sat at the table amongst the zoo.

Something bounced around in Doug’s mind. Due to his own mixed transference of hope for one of his own sons. Devon became the other apple of his eye. Stacy could do no wrong. When she fell pregnant at Seventeen this was haphazardly a cause for

celebration. A pork bbq with pineapple was put on the spit, in the back yard. The Coopers from next door were even invited.

Devon attempted to smile and act like this was all part of the plan. But Stacy was out of control. She insisted that Devon should leave school and move in permanently to the Newton family home and get a job at the port. Without thinking twice, Stacy then up and left school at four months pregnant; stating that she would start her own online business in acrylic nails after having the baby.

But then she started to smoke like a train. Doug began to lecture her in a fatherly manner about how it was choking the baby. She would argue back fiery venom, while spouts of spit and phlegm seeped up between the puffs. She was losing the plot, her looks were changing, as she gained weight she cried and cried, and argued with Devon. Doors banged, the house erupted. Christopher and Jerome behaved like monkeys about it, they thought their sister was completely nuts, and would end up a solo mum.

The bitter and sad thing was, that the more Stacy pushed towards Devon, the more he wanted out. One morning when Stacy was outside puffing on her tenth cigarette and coffee, tinfoil bits in her hair dyeing her hair more red again, six months pregnant, Devon sped off in his electric blue 64 doing a donut down the end of the street; a solo salute. He turned at the last minute; the finale; a burning black burn out as he hooted out of the dead end street escaping into the wild freedom beyond. He ended up at his parent's house, one suburb over, with no job and no money.

Devon's parents, Eileen and Rob, would sporadically come around to visit Stacy, voicing their concerns over Devon and his wellbeing. Doug was furious. 'How dare a man leave his responsibility?! Fuck his wellbeing what about my daughter's baby?! Whose gonna fucking look after that when its born!' he yelled growing redder,

his neck turning violet purple, veins popping down into his shoulders making them in turn purple.

He spat on the floor, slammed the door in the garage; metal clashing against metal meshed up a notch, combined with gyrating grunts of baboon like pain. Marion's high hyena hysterics could be heard in the background of the house while Stacy howled.

Doug pumped more iron, his face turning bottled plum, while Christopher and Jerome disappeared off to their girlfriend's houses. Bradley and Michael scooted off on their bikes to the local dairy taking the opportune time to buy mixtures of lollies from money they had stolen from Marion's leopard handbag left on the kitchen bench the night before. Noodle knowing this was his opportunity to make the most of his freedom stepped up his plan on making himself more invisible and independent from his family. He blended into the shadows. His family never noticed him anymore. But this was just the way he wanted it. As soon as he had enough money Noodle's field of gold corn would come to fruition. He was going to leave his family with all its Newtonian dysfunction. Forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

At 2.00am Jed's asleep on the floor of the basement. A fluorescent light above flickers in and out. He slowly turns his body to his side, opens one eye slightly. Across the concrete, there's a smashed wine glass. Little remnants have sprung, a red stain of wine spreading out in a long misanthropic tree, its branches reaching up into the darkest corners of the garage.

With a sigh, he draws his head upwards, peeling his eyes wider; the branches are far reaching now, into the corners of his mind, the wandering memories. His sprawled out many memories. Sarah. A time when everything was right in his life.

He tries to bend his legs to get up, something crunches under him. With a slow turn he looks down behind, realises he has fallen into a box full of Sarah's craft hobbies. The album of their trip to Greece and India. His jaw goes tight as he picks up one of the books, flicks through her work with the dates at the top. She was happy then.

Shit. A lump hits his stomach. The dates seem to get longer between her doing her art. A big gap. The patterns seem to stop, the rest of the book empty. He holds the book up to his chest. A huge lump now, unmoving settles deep in his stomach.

The pamphlet silently floats to the floor curving away from his feet to the far point of the garage. He stumbles a few feet to reach it. Fuck. No. Counselling for couples. Fuck this shit. His body spins almost automatically searching for the bottle by the stairs. Down it goes. His hands reach up to his face, clinging for air. Distant memories banging in.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Autumn, 2015. The cracks are edging in. With his head to the side, Jed leans further forwards under the tyres of his bike fiddling with the gears.

‘You know I asked you two weeks ago if you would consider this. It’s not too much to ask is it? Someone else, you know an outsider, who could help us find time to work out a solution to cope with things?’ Sarah scuffs her ankle boot, a single stone spins past him nearly hitting his head.

‘Ok, ok, just put the pamphlet there, I’ll read it, what’s the person’s name anyway? I’m not seeing a man or a women for that matter ... look I really don’t think ... fuck!’ Jed mumbles as he reaches around the bike with a screw driver.

Her fists tighten into balls, as she finds herself bending forwards. ‘For your information Jed, it’s a man, yes a man, his name is Yanni, he’s very well informed ... he’s a councillor who also practices couples relationship therapy, plus he’s a psychologist.’

He pushes himself up off the concrete floor, sighs loudly. ‘Look Sarah, the last thing I need is someone telling me that I need to go back to my childhood to some regression, and remember all the shit that possibly caused some sort of crap trauma ... blah blah blah, and that I need to retrain my brain ...’ He looks back to his bike, touches the tyre, spins it as the grease rubs off onto his hands.

She turns to the wall, her hands raised. ‘Jed! Jesus, you’re not even listening to me are you! He’s here to help us, just say you’ll give it a go.’

He turns to face her, noticing her red cheeks, makeup so slight and natural; stunning when she’s angry. Her blue eyes glowing into him.

‘Ok ... Ok ... I’ll go.’

She bites her lip. His stomach flips as he reaches out, touching the lower arch of her back. The pamphlet drops to the floor. Ever so quietly she makes a small sound.

*

On the couch, Jed almost nods off as an endless bird documentary plays on the TV.

Sarah rambles through the fridge, her fingers spread out reaching for the bottle of Champagne.

‘Why not,’ he says, smiling over the couch at her. With her usual twist of her hand she pushes her hair away from her face, smiling as she pours the glasses.

‘Well?’ she asks as she sprawls down on the couch beside him.

‘Yeah, yeah, I’ll give it a go ... I said I would in the garage, before you pounced on me ...’

She extends her arm out whacking him on the chest. ‘I did no such thing, Mr Deans.’ Her eyes suddenly light up as a smile bolts across her face.

For a brief moment, he’s floating.

‘I love you, Sarah.’

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

With a sudden thump, Jed crashes to the garage floor. The pain in his head like forks driving into a block of cement. His focus blurry as the vomit travels up to his mouth. In a spasm, he leans over the garage stairs, it forces itself out, over and over. The effort too much, he falls to his knees. Peeling his eyes slowly back open; he watches as the trail twists into the wine tree branches; a montage of yellowish clouds.

He stumbles his way out of the garage, the shivers taking control. The dark house bending inwards beneath him. The towering stairs to the bedroom sway sideways in his head as they go on and on. Finally he falls on the bed. Flailing his arms out in the ocean of sheets, the waves roll up and down.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

The rain from the early morning has left dark empty wet patches on the road. A constant reminder of his night from hell. With a sharp turn into Madras Street, Jed eyes the café. The long line of people extends up the pavement for their midday trim soy lattes and flat trim whites.

Tired, Jed peels himself out of the car, the traffic loudly imprinting into his brain. Jesus. He fingers the cigarette box, fuck, not many left. He joins the line as his phone violently buzzes in his pocket. Sigh.

<Morning sunshine, gather it was a late night ... find Dylan's father pronto>**D**

Another text. Miranda, the IT girl at work. <The fathers address in case you forgot. Dell wanted me to remind you: MR WILLIS IS HUDSON ROAD 4A, ACCOUNTING FIRM: WILLIS & ELLWOOD & PARTNERS HUDSON ROAD 4A>
M

The aftertaste of red wine vomit is stuck to the roof of his mouth. He tries to speak, his voice seems cracked, over a craggy hill, incoherent and lost. 'Aaaaah flaty whittte pleeaase two sugars, triplllle shoot, cheeeers.' He grimaces as he hands the cash over to the girl. Thank god for sunglasses.

With slow steps he walks back to the car, his fingers fiddling in his pocket. He pulls out the invoice. Opens it, reads the address. PROLIFE.

<Hi **D**. Just going to follow up on a hunch ... will see the father later today>**J**

*

“PROLIFE Discounted Computers and Parts” is stuck to the window with old tacky lighting from the 80s. The blinds appear to be half pulled, with a neon sign flashing “Top Ups” attached to the front door.

The doorbell dings like a canary on helium as he enters. A crackling radio, the local FM station slashes out 80s music. Most of the items on display are upgrades and hardware for pc, mac, and apple software.

Slowly he walks around to the first aisle. Two young men are shifting boxes. Another younger looking girl in the third aisle is placing boxes of paper up on a shelf. The whole place smells stuffy with no air, while the fluorescent lights flicker annoyingly.

At the counter a large boy is talking on the phone.

‘Yeah we got that, no problem, just shoot down here and we can do that, fix it in no time man,’ he hangs up the phone and clicks on the computer in front of him.

In an attempt to get the boys attention Jed coughs, scanning the large boy’s label.

‘Drew? Um Drew, yeah, so I’ve just lost a friend, I was going through some of his paper work and accounts ... it turns out he had an account here.’

The boy fiddles with his glasses, with a look of surprise. ‘Oh man that’s not a problem, what’s the guy’s name, I mean that’s awful, sorry dude, like we can look him up man.’

‘Great that would be great, his name is Spade, first name Daniel.’

The boy gives him a look ‘like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth’ as he swallows slowly. The small piercing in his cheek moves around like a lollipop, he bites down on it which makes it pop forward as his voice rises up a notch. ‘Sure, just give me a minute.’ The large boy steps away from the counter and walks to a back office.

Jed hovers, taps his fingers along the counter, the airless room making his head pound. He rolls a fingers around a cigarette. Fuck, three left. Out of the corner of his eye he notices a soda machine up against the wall; cold coke slides down. Nervously he

begins to flick the tab at the top of the can. It's been five minutes, what's taking them so long?

With restless energy, he walks back around to the third aisle where the girl is kneeling on the ground opening the large cartridges of paper. She looks up quickly, gives him a cold look. He slowly walks closer, notices the tattoo on her neck; little blue stars stretching up to her left ear; her ears are pierced four times with stud like metal, a shiny crystal sparkles from her nose. He inches forwards, reaches above her and takes a book for accounting off the shelf.

'I ...,' but before he can get anything else out someone taps him on the shoulder making him jump. 'Jesus!' The large boy is back, with another young man in his twenties dressed casually in cargos and T-shirt boldly displaying the words USA written across his red top.

'Ah, oh hi, I was just browsing,' Jed says quickly.

The large boy turns to the other man. 'This is our manager, Jamie, he can help you more with your enquiry sir.' All four hesitate for a second, then the girl pulls herself up off the ground and looks bitterly at the Manager.

The Manager walks forwards, pushing out his hand to introduce himself.

'Hello, I'm Jamie. I hear you're enquiring about an account under the name Spade? He half turns to block Jed's view of the girl and large boy, extending his arm out for Jed to follow, he then quickly looks back to the girl in irritation.

'Oh yes, Spade's an old friend of mine. I'm trying to settle his will for him because he tragically died. We go back years ... um, his accounts say he spent some money here. I was just wanting to know what exactly he bought.'

Jamie nods as they shuffle through a tight corner space of stacked boxes to the back office where he offers Jed a seat.

With a swift click of the mouse, Jamie looks up at the screen. ‘Give me a second ... I’ll just look up what we have here on file ... hmm ... um as far as I can see ... yep it’s all pretty self-explanatory. He bought a desktop computer, some software, spyware, and a prescription for Word and Office for the year, all the usual stuff ... do you want a print out?’

Boxes are piled high, making the room feel smaller. In the corner of the room sits a small fridge. Jed scans the postcard stuck to the side of it; a picture of Turkey, and what appears to be a middle aged man who looks very like Spade. He swallows, his eyes slowly settling back on Jamie. ‘Um you know what, that would be great. There’s a funeral to arrange and what with all the expenses, it’s good to know where we can account for money, um, how much did he spend here?’

Jamie squirms down in his chair, squints into the computer screen. ‘Oh, about four thousand or so, that’s relatively a good size computer we’re looking at. It wasn’t the top brand but it was a good one, he wanted all the spyware, umm ... just a second.’

The printer in the corner whooshes to life. Jamie slides his fingers across to the papers and quickly staples them together. ‘Here’s the print out. If there’s anything else you need, feel free to contact me again.’ Jamie ends the conversation abruptly as he stands, extending his arm, he walks Jed back out of the office, past the mountains of boxes to the front of the shop. At the door, Jamie awkwardly pushes his hand out before turning. ‘Sorry I have a busy day ahead, you know how it is ... a skype meeting in five minutes ...’

Back on the street, Jed reaches for his phone.

< **D**. Spade was doing deals with Turkey >**J**

<TURKEY?>**D**

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Dylan taps out the code DW.AKA into the alarm system and bolts up the stairs. As he reaches the top he scans the empty room. Stuck to the screen of the computer is a scribble “gone out.” He rips the piece of paper off the computer and stuffs it into his pocket. He walks to the little fridge, grabs a can of coke, throws himself onto the sofa. With a sigh he leans back, his eyes gently closing.

A slight breeze from the window above the computer desk blows the blind lightly, flittering dust-light into the room; it dapples through his eyelids; a mandala of patterns runs across in a dancing spectrum.

Molecules of light particles float; billions breathing in the air; alive, free; **black clouds hover**. *How long does a body take to die?*

A coldness rises in the room.

He scratches his head, shoots the can of coke into the rubbish bin. The Mouse is still out there. It’s not Stevenson. He opens his phone.

<Noodle. **ABORT**>D

No answer.

An urgent need for air rushes up his lungs as he races down the stairs, out the door into the daylight. His thoughts pumping; *Noodle, the Mouse*. He raises his head towards the sky; spits of rain hit his face from the grey cumulous clouds. He looks back down; the splashing spit now reaching out its wide octopus arms.

His phone vibrates.

RED.

<Ring me Dylan.> Dad.

The screen seems to be in slow motion; a wave of something, a pebble rippling outwards, passing through. He pushes it down.

Teeth grind.

A low groan, sideways out into the air.

RED RED RED. He flicks the phone off, back down into his pocket.

The Mouse presses in; a bright neon light flashing inside his head.

The Mouse.

His only mission now.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

The box of empty fried chicken swings into the back seat amongst the rest of the tossed empty boxes. Jed squints his eyes to the GPS, 'Hudson road,' he repeats with a yawn as he looks in the rare view mirror at his blood shot eyes.

WILLIS AND ELLWOOD, leans gently against the backdrop of the Avon River. The architecturally designed wood reaches down to the ground like sails balanced by huge windows stretching out across the length of the building.

The beginnings of a Banksy painting spans at least 10 metres on the entrance wall. A glass wall separates the foyer, with people buried in their computers sitting at slender rimu designed desks. Little mac's emerging from the little slits in the top of the desks.

His feet echo loudly on the tiled floor below as he enters the foyer. He looks around the entrance as a little voice greets him from behind a pod.

'Hello. My name is Nina, how may I help you today sir?'

Jed scratches his head awkwardly. 'Oh hello ... ah ... I'm wanting to have a word with Mr Willis if possible?'

Nina touches her purple rimmed glasses, her lips pursed. 'Who can I say is calling sir?'

'Oh ... ah ... Jed Deans. I'm interested in forming a client base with him.'

The tiny secretary eyes his suit, fixating on his shirt at the top of his tie. Her mouth opens slightly, she looks at him once more as she picks up the phone on her desk.

'Oh hello ... yes Mr Willis, I realise ... yes I know you're busy. There's a gentleman here with some business ... a Mr Jed Deans ... yes sir, that's fine, five minutes, not a

problem.’ She puts down the phone clearing her throat as she touches the top of her blouse shirt.

‘Mr Willis will see you in five minutes. Would you like a tea or coffee?’

He scratches his chin, feeling his rough regrowth, instantly regretting not shaving in his crappy morning. ‘Oh yes that would be great thank you, ah, black coffee, two sugars, cheers.’

She lifts herself seamlessly out from her pod in her minimal lime green pencil skirt with high heels that only allow her to take miniature steps at a time like a geisha girl. She disappears around the corner, her high heels reverberating on the tiles sending echoes up into the stairs and high ceiling above.

The quietness surrounds him. He glances down to his tie. Realises it’s just twisted slightly, it isn’t around his shirt properly. He fiddles with it. His hands shake as he tries to get it done before Nina comes back. Fuck. Her little tapping steps come closer.

‘There we go sir. I’ve put sugar on the side in case.’ She stares at him, accessing him once again. She reaches her hand up to her hair with her right hand as she twitches her nose as though she has been exposed to something that smells harsh. She then steps back to her sanctuary behind her pod.

He tries to reply. A gurgle comes out, as he positions himself back on the couch. Lost for something to do he looks up at the ceiling; a design of little pencil hole dots in diagonal rows. A pattern that almost looks like a hexagon, but then it is overweighed by a design of a semi -circles that are enclosed within it. A design of intricacy that makes him think about complexity ... Sarah ...

The wave of coffee hits him with relief. He attempts to rip the sugar packet open, it tears all over his trousers. ‘Ah,’ he mumbles as he stands up and tries to dusts the sugar off. Nina quickly looks his way from behind her little pod, twitching her nose

again in irritation. As he continues to brush the sugar from his pants, the sound of footsteps approaching reverberates down the stairs. He turns to look towards the stairs as a very tall bald man strides quickly towards him in a striped shirt, red tie and polished black pointy shoes.

The tall man extends his hand out to Jed.

‘Mr Deans, sorry to keep you waiting. James Willis. Would you like to come this way?’

Jed takes a last gulp of his coffee, his shaky hands crashing the cup back onto the neat little wooden table. Nina glances back up from her pod in irritation. ‘Err, yes Mr Willis, thank you for seeing me, at such short notice.’

Mr Willis smiles. ‘Would you like another coffee? I can make you one upstairs. I need one too, one of those days actually.’ Both men walk awkwardly up the stairs together, their steps echoing up into the wooden beams above.

The office extends out towards a huge glass window that stretches the wall, while the wooden rimu arches in the ceiling forms into three arches that group in the middle to create a motif of a rose.

Mr Willis goes straight to the coffee machine that sits on a long wooden oak cabinet. ‘What would you like? A flat white or a straight black ...’

‘Oh ... ah ... black, two sugars if you have them,’ Jed replies with his wide eyes.

With a gentle nod Mr Willis turns back to the coffee machine, and quietly waits while the water boils and slowly begins to stream out the coffee.

At first glance, Jed can see the room appears to be in perfect order. Impeccable tidiness with a sharp looking mac humming in front of some open books. ‘Are you the head accountant here?’ he asks as he turns around to find Mr Willis in front of him holding out a coffee.

‘Um ... well ... I’m one of them. Mr Willis warmly replies with a smile. ‘I create portfolios for businesses, see if there numbers add up. Then I decide what they could change to make sure they can stay afloat and create more money essentially ... I also predict falls in the economy overseas and project how this can affect a company’s business. It all sounds very abstract at times when I say the market out there ... it’s part of what we do here, without a portfolio a company can crash. We help to stabilize businesses. A lot of my work involves travel...’

‘Er thanks for this, I needed it.’ Jed says taking another sip.

With another gentle nod, Mr Willis crosses the room to the window, leans against the wall with his own coffee as the last of the sun softly falls on his back.

’Yes the afternoons are a killer ... so Mr Deans, are you here on business? Or is there something else I should be concerned for? Forgive me, but you don’t seem the business type ... twenty five years in this business has taught me how to read what people want,’ he asks smiling again as the Scottish accent rolls off his tongue.

Slowly Jed looks down below to the Avon River; a mother pushing a pram over to some ducks, she straddles the toddler as she tries to open a bag of bread; throws it chaotically towards the ducks as more and more swoop in to surround her.

‘I’m here about Dylan,’ Jed replies quietly turning back into the room.

Mr Willis slowly nods, lets out a sigh, his mouth set in a thin line. ‘You know, he was such a beautiful looking boy growing up, he was tall for his age, strong. From outward appearances he looked like every other kid around. But I’ve got to say, we’ve had our huge ups and downs with him. More the downs, but as long as we kept him within the perimeters of certain things he seemed to do ok. At the beginning we had no idea what was going on, before we got the diagnosis of Asperger’s.’

He shrugs, his shoulders stooping as he walks to the curvy art deco couch, and sits down. With a long sigh, he stares out across the table, his eyes resting on something in the distance.

‘So ... ah ... Mr Willis, do you know where Dylan might be now?’ Jed asks as he slowly sits on the couch opposite him.

‘Well, I send him messages all the time, but he never answers them, which is really annoying, so I rely on Sophie. My daughter. She keeps an eye on him. Although he is really independent these days, he has been for a couple of years now. Sophie usually contacts me if he goes all over the place. You see, sometimes he forgets his meds. He disappears, doesn’t sleep, then he wanders the streets, or goes on the buses. The bus thing is one of his usual patterns he does to calm himself down. But he’s getting older now so he’s a bit more street smart these days. He has a friend he hangs out with a lot, but I’ve only met him occasionally, he seems to be in sync with him.’

‘So who’s this friend?’ Jed says opening his notebook.

‘Ah, let’s see it’s in my phone somewhere,’ Mr Willis replies as he stands up, walks over to the cabinet. ‘I had to enter him in here because Dylan was always going there. Here we go, his name is Noodle, 23b Bartley Street. That’s all I have sorry, um, they’ve been friends through High school. But since Dylan got expelled I’m not sure what’s going on.’

‘Ok, well can you tell me about Saturday morning? You say you picked Dylan up from the police station around 4.00 am. What happened after that? Did he talk to you or anything?’

Slowly Mr Willis walks back over to the chair, crosses his legs again, glancing up at the ceiling. ‘Hmm, well I picked him up. He was pretty unresponsive to me.’

The police filled me in, saying he was a witness in a murder possibly. I took him home, I had to help him into the shower. He shut down basically, like a zombie.'

'He went to his room, didn't come out. At about six that night he eventually came downstairs, just stared at the TV screen, for about an hour. Then he went back to his room. I thought he went to sleep. But the next day I made him a coffee, went up to his room and he was gone. I think he left in the night. I assumed he went to see Noodle.'

'Ok, just one more question. Do you think Dylan's behaviour was different than normal that morning?'

'Hmmm, that's a bit of a hard one to answer because Dylan isolates himself anyway regardless of what's going on. He doesn't speak huge sentences at the best of times, all I can say is he did seem really off. He has his own world, Joanna and I accepted this a long time ago. You see, he has a heightened perception of things that causes sensory overload. This increases his anxiety at the best of times. His way to cope is to remove himself from situations.' John stops, stares into space.

'Ok, well Mr Willis we might call it a day. I'll need to talk to Dylan again about his statement as soon as possible ... perhaps your daughter ... Sophie?'

'Oh ... ah ... she's at university most days.'

'Ok,' Jed says with a nod, looking down at the carpet. Silence. He then looks back up to a white faced Willis. 'Look, here's my card if you need to contact me for any reason, if you suddenly have a thought or need someone to talk to.'

Mr Willis nods, stone still on the couch. Silently Jed slides the card onto the mahogany oak cabinet as he walks out the door.

The low sunlight is almost gone below the tree line in the carpark. Jed lights a cigarette and waits for the relief in his brain to seep inwards, slowly exhaling the smoke out into the cold air. He coughs, closes his eyes. *Red swirls dance.*

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Scrunching her face up to the *Google* map, Dell peers at the little dotted lines on her phone. She sighs. ‘This isn’t bloody working.’ She presses back to *Google* search, enters Dunbar Street South. The road seems to be intersected by a motorway that leads into the industrial area. ‘Ah, got it,’ she says with a click of her tongue.

With a sharp U-turn, she manages to come back onto Brougham Street off the city centre. She finds herself following a long line of traffic as the lights turn green leading to an under cross off the motorway gearing back into the industrial area.

The radio begins to play a honkytonk song about summer in May. With a breathy whistle she looks back out the window, then turns with the traffic. A sudden car honks as it speed’s past. ‘Oh alright!’ she cries. Flustered she steers the car to the side of the road and switches off the engine.

She leans across the passenger seat to her phone.

<Dylan may be on the run>J

She looks back out the side window as a slow swishing sound stems from behind her; the rubbish recycling truck moving steadily along the opposite side of the street. Its lights flickering in the dim afternoon. She pauses to let it pass, then looks back down the road where the old warehouses stretch out in a dark dreary street. A sad sign of neglect. An era that has long since passed for the local City Council to take a hold of the market, to generate an economy that holds on to the local community spirit.

Now the buildings cast out a dilapidated run down shadow; paint peeling, smashed windows, rusting iron scaffolding in heaps of heavy piles hanging off the sides.

She starts the engine again, slowly meanders at 30 kilometres down the road as she searches for the blasted street. The thought of Dylan suddenly presses in on her. He really needed to be brought in a long time ago, two days ago in fact. Jed really needs to push more, or she'll have to take over.

In a cloud of thought, she passes Dunbar Street South and begins to steer down towards the outer area of Waltham where the road comes to a dead end. She suddenly puts the breaks on, picks up her phone again.

<J. Try to locate Dylan today>D

This will probably piss him off, she realises, but he needs to get a move on.

With a slow swivel, she turns the car around the dead end street. Out of the corner of her eye she notices a smallish stocky boy of about 18 standing smoking close to a small walkway through to the back of the industrial area.

'Yoo-hoo, excuse me, can you help?' she shouts winding down her window. The boy looks up, crosses over to her car. She peers out at him, smiles, as he stands there red faced. He inhales a drag as he eyes her. The smoke slowly escapes from the left side of his lip up towards his cap. 'Hello, I'm looking for Dunbar Street South?'

The boy looks down the road as he points.

'You've passed it, its three blocks down on the right.'

The boy sniffs, turns to walk away, not before he spits in the gutter, rounding his shoulders. The skateboard hits the ground with a thwack, he turns, gives her one last look then kicks his stocky legs into action, tears off down the road, flicking his cigarette to the grey ground. She watches as he disappears into a small dot in the concrete jungle.

'Righto.' She puts her tongue to the right side of her cheek as she starts her car up again and slowly moves down the street. Eventually Dunbar Street comes into view, but the South part of the word on the sign has been bent off to the side; a graffiti purple scrawl sprayed across, "Gotta get out of here."

With a wide turn into the street, she glances down at her hand where she has written in small writing the name “Forsyth.” She takes a deep breath and stares down the road, ‘Righto.’ Then she straightens herself back in the seat. There seems to be nothing on either side of the street as she reaches the end, doing another U-turn she drives back towards the start of the street. About half way down a small sign written on the side of a mailbox appears with the words Forsyth Web.co. ‘Righto,’ she whispers under her breath as she pulls to the side of the road.

The driveway is covered with pale stones that crunch loudly beneath her. Not the best shoes she realises. At the end of the drive a rundown warehouse with an office attached stands isolated, with a little 80s style silver hatchback car parked at the back door. Apart from that it is mysteriously still. She walks to the office door, taps gently on the glass door, as she waits she glances down to her phone. Another text from Jed. Ignoring it she puts it back in her pocket as she peers through the old grey curtains that cover half of the window next to the door. Nothing.

Another tap. Silence. She turns to look around, noticing some black worn old tyres up against the wall by the back yard, closed off by an old red rusty chain fence that extends around the warehouse, the weedy brown tussled grass sitting in stillness. She tries again, peers through the window once more as a dog begins to growl from behind the back yard.

A thin looking man wearing a maroon baseball cap appears from behind the back of the warehouse. He makes his way around through the back yard tugging the leash aggressively of a pit-bull. With another violent yank he shoves the dog back with his foot behind the fence and spits on the ground.

‘Coming,’ he yells.

He walks forwards, his shoulders rounding in on himself, like a crab walking towards the caves while the shadow of his face remains hidden under his cap. She reaches into her pocket, clutches her phone.

Surprisingly, the man extends his hand out as he takes off his cap, revealing a middle aged man with large deep lines set across the corners of his eyes that spread out, downwards almost to his cheeks like the veins of an old tree.

‘Can I help?’ he says calmly.

She extends her hand out in return.

‘Oh, hello, my name is Inspector Dell McCauley from Sydenham police. I’m just making some enquiries, about a man who apparently worked for your business. His name is Daniel Spade.’

The man looks down at the ground for a few seconds, scuffs his shoes on the gravel beneath his feet. He glances back up at her, his eyes quickly shifting to something behind her in the office, then down the drive, and finally back to her.

‘Yeah, well I did know him. He was a partner in my business, until recently.’ He then scratches the back of his head impatiently, crossing his arms. ‘He told me he no longer wanted to do business with me, he said he was setting up on his own.’

She tilts her birdy head as she eyes in on her next question. ‘What exactly is your business Mr ...?’

‘Martin Stevenson ... I run a company. I design web development for the market ... Spade was our code developer.’

‘I see, and when was the last time you spoke to Spade?’ Dell asks as she looks behind him to the barking dog beyond the fence.

He sighs, loosening his arms as he kicks a stone in the dirt with his canvas sneaker, sending the stone scuttling further down the drive. ‘A week or so I reckon. He rang me, said I owed him some money, that he needed the accounts and information

from a past transaction he had done ... I sent him what I had, but only he could really have all of that info, it was just bullshit. He was stirring, he dealt with clients and had portfolios of work of his own that he did on web codes for other businesses. It was his call to bail on me you know.'

'I see ...' she replies nodding her head again.

He raises his hand up to his head, squints against the sun. His crow like eyes almost cracking into shards against the daylight, then glares back down the driveway. 'Yeah that's about right, it's left me pretty deep in the shit really ... I've basically had to close my business at the moment just to get by ...'

'So was it just the two of you working here?'

'Yeah that's right,' he says scratching his back again

'So, can I ask where you were on Friday night Saturday morning?'

He takes a step back. 'I was playing pool with some mates down the inner city ... a place called muse, then I went to a mates and slept it off ... anyway what's this got to do with my business?'

She tilts her head again, scans her eyes over to the dog pacing behind the gate, then back to him. 'Well Mr Stevenson, your past employee and partner Spade, is dead. I'm following up on his whereabouts and actions ... on the Friday night. And may I remind you that anything you say can be used as evidence in a court of law.'

He reaches for his cap, pulls it down, sending a sudden shadow stemming across his face. 'Well that's not right, I mean I don't like the guy after what he did, but I would never resort to killing the guy ... jeeze.'

She swallows, a sudden dryness enveloping her mouth. Her tongue reaches back into her mouth to gain some moisture. Slowly giving Stevenson one more look she inches further towards the driveway.

‘I never said he was murdered Mr Stevenson.’ She takes another few steps down the drive, one eye still on him. ‘I’ll be in touch Mr Stevenson.’

He shrugs, hunches over as he crab walks back towards the yard, smashing the gate closed.

She breathes out; air escaping in a hiss as she begins to walk away down the crunchy drive. A solitary lone cry, high pitched like a kick in the guts reaches out from the silence. Without even glancing back, every part of her body goes stone cold.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Noodle drives his skateboard hard along the street. The overpass above reverberates with a deafening rumble. He looks up at it as he hooks his earphones to his I-pod. A mash of dark drum and bass pulses out. As he pushes off again he follows the sign posts through to the empty buildings in the distance. The graveyard of steel.

The place seems airily still as he skates along. Eventually he reaches the bent sign of Dunbar Street South. He scans his phone; a small dot blinks on the *Google* map. He drums down his skateboard again, pushing forwards along the footpath. A southerly wind beats into his hot red cheeks; the first signs of a southerly storm.

With another kick, he pushes forwards on his stocky legs to get more power. Annoyingly his phone vibrates. He splits the board with a thwack down to the black asphalt ground.

<Where are you?> **D**

He stuffs the phone back in his pocket then pushes off again as hot sweat drips down his face.

The signage for the website company is barely visible from the mailbox sticking out of the fence. He lifts his skateboard up off the ground, searching for a place to hide it. The neighbours bush will do.

At the end of the drive, a lone car is parked up against an office attached to the warehouse; a laptop is open on the seat of the car. He lightly runs his fingers across the bonnet. Still warm.

The fence to the backyard is chained shut. He shoves his foot in the hole of the gate, quickly flips over, diving to the ground in a roll to the nearest dark bush. With another fast spurt he runs to the back of the warehouse where the door bangs loudly in

the southerly wind. He pushes off with his legs, ducks down inside behind a workbench with large plastic drums on top of it, and waits. Time slows.

Some stairs lead up to an office that looks out onto the warehouse where the shadow of a person walks backwards and forwards in the window light. He runs quietly towards the stairs, crouches down.

‘... There’s someone else, not just Spade ... I don’t know. It was a stocky little guy ... I don’t know ... I’ve been there, nothing, no trace ... ’

He shifts his legs around to the front of his body as he tries to crouch down on his legs. As he turns, his foot hits the bottom of a rusty iron pipe on the floor, it reverberates out clanking as it rolls along the dusty ground.

He bolts through a door under the stairs; finds himself in a little front office where he can see the silver car out the window. There’s nowhere to hide except under the desk or the cupboard. The cupboard creaks. He shoves his way to the back behind a large old orange rain jacket.

Someone moves upstairs. Steps. More steps, followed by a dog barking.

The man comes through to the office, his breath hard, heavy. Noodle sucks in his air. Time stops. A noise outside. Knocking. The man jerks his body as he walks towards the curtains. He quickly leaves the office, his steps echoing out into the warehouse as the dog barks again, followed by a low growl. Slowly Noodle creeps out of the cupboard to the window. A lady is standing in the driveway. The same lady from the car.

He waits, then scuttles back out to the warehouse where he crouches down behind the drums again. Experience has taught him to wait, observe. He squats on his round legs, his calf muscles straining. The footsteps retract for a moment.

Now or never.

Quietly he slips outside, runs around to the side of the warehouse, his heart pounding. The dog is close, sniffs mottled with growls inches away. He makes a sprint for the fence, pushes his body up sticking his feet in the wire hole; heaving himself over as the gate swings violently under his weight.

Silence.

He realises he will have to remove his shoes to make it. His breath shallow; he tiptoes to the first bush along the side of the driveway. Waits. More sweat drips down his face as he looks back at the two people talking. Slowly he edges along the drive balancing his shoes in his arms, further and further away.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

The wet patches on the road slide against the wheels of Noodle's skateboard as he follows the traffic back into the CBD. Eventually he reaches the skaters square, lights up a cig as he spins off a curvy wave. Some of the younger kids follow him, jack his moves; jumping off the edges heading downwards, but most of them fall down scattering on the concrete.

With a look up the street, he stops, flicks his phone up.

< Where are you? >N

One last puff of his cig, he circles around the younger boys with their boards. One last high jump off the stairs with a spin, he skids away. The hoots behind fall on deaf ears as he rounds his shoulders. Today he has some shit to figure out.

He skims along the one way street leading back up the top of Salisbury Street. Heavy drum and bass building in his ears; black storm clouds; tumbling in; fucking failure on replay.

He slams the board down. A pulse in his neck flicks up as he spits a mass of yellow green to the ground. 'Fuck this.' He pushes off again; the breaks suddenly off. A throb of adrenalin pushes up, his red cheeks on fire as the sweat slides down the sides of his face.

With one final kick, he slides into the PROLIFE carpark. He skims around to the side alley where Drew stands, idly taking a break from throwing a bin of paper into the rubbish tip.

'Well if it isn't the lone stranger, long time no see. When you coming back then?' Drew says as he slips his lip piercing around his tongue.

With a sudden skid Noodle stops. Half smiles as he wipes the sweat from his face with his arm. ‘Oh you know, when the boss decides he can pay me more than the flat rate I guess.’

Drew laughs a high hyena cry. ‘Yeah ... that will be the day, anyway we’ve got some awesome new programmes in this week if you want to take a look ...?’

Noodle flicks his skate board up in his hand, twisting his body to walk away. ‘Yeah mate I will, I just want a word with the boss first.’

‘Yeah well he’s up to his eyeballs in accounts right now ...’

‘Yeah I bet, gotta go ...’ Noodle turns, swiftly walks to the back behind the skip. Taps the code, yanks the back door open with more force than he needs. Squeezing through the hallway of tight boxes compactly piled up he finally reaches the door.

With a loud shove he throws his bag to the floor as he kicks his skateboard into the desk, then flops into the chair in front of Jamie.

‘Yes, that’s fine will have those figures by the end of the week. I’m just waiting for the accountant to get back to me, no he’s a very good accountant I think, one of the top, ok ... I’ll be in touch later. Thanks for your call.’ Jamie puts down the phone as he lets out a long sigh. ‘Shit man, things couldn’t be worse. We have to move this stuff.’

Jamie swivels around in his chair towards the window that looks out to a small retail carpark. The customers, mainly women with babies are coming and going in droves from the sewing company ‘Spin a Yarn’ next door.

‘I don’t get it, why does that stupid place do so fucking well? Every weekend it’s full of people, all those mothers and bloody babies.’ Jamie says as he drinks a swig of coke, his thin top lip turning down almost into a reptilian sneer.

‘Oh by the way, how’s that friend of yours doing?’

Fingering his cigarette Noodle spins it up to his face then lights it. ‘Who?’

Jamie turns back into the room, calmly looks up to the computer screen, his sneer still plied to his mouth. 'Oh you know the one, computer boy, what's his name, the one who likes walking around at night ...'

'Oh Dylan, he's fine, just doing his thing,' Noodle replies with a shrug.

'Yeah well I've had a guy snooping around, maybe a cop,' Jamie hisses, his face tighter, his eyes settling on Noodle.

Noodle raise his eyebrow, flicks his lighter on, putting his hand over the flame with precision. 'Yeah, well I'm onto it ...'

The room goes silent. Jamie slowly takes a swig of coke, his eyes still on Noodle, a blue vein thumping on his forehead.

'Just watch that kid doesn't get in the way right?' he snarls.

'We don't have a problem yet, I'll sort it,' Noodle replies calmly, his eyes now set five centimetres above Jamie's head.

With a smirk Jamie pulls his chair in, his breath beginning to grow deeper. 'If we have a problem, make it disappear.'

*

With a loud crash Noodle kicks his skateboard to the asphalt thickened tar. He pushes off in the direction of his warehouse. Half way down the street, he pulls up; fires a text off.

<Going back to den. No Mouse. Change plan>N

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Perhaps she's just imagining it. The trees swaying. She continues. The adagio slowly flowing up through her legs, into her stomach where it rests. She brings her left hand up to the keys, the bass clef joins in with the bright treble; *a whisper of the wind in the trees.*

Sophie closes her eyes again, the last few bars tentatively rise up; a semibreve rest, a descent, spiralling into the allegro, faster, faster. Tumbling now, she lifts her fingers to the tone. A light in the distance. With a dive into the last 20 bars, she holds her breathe; A mistake will cost her another 40 minutes. A leap to something unknown. A mad drive upwards, thumping the crescendo, her right hand leaps to the octave. Her left hand has to hold strong. It must deliver.

The last note whispers, then disappears into the strings of the piano below her hands. She lets go, breathes out then opens her eyes. The trees sway in silence. She looks down, bar 140 needs attention. Maybe she could text him.

*

Yesterday morning hadn't started well. Their hands had met. Brushing over the black keys. She played her Bach Andante Fugue in B flat in perfect time. As she played the last few bars she heard Professor Allen breathing as though he was floating with her in the air; softly flying through the notes; *a duet of life.*

It was a silly idea. Her own daydream. She had touched his hand hoping he would understand her feelings as well. Nothing had happened of course. In a cloud of embarrassment, ashamed of her own stupid naivety, she had closed up her music sheets. Her cheeks were ashen. She could barely look at him.

She remembers now, that she mumbled; said *yes she would come next week.*

She banged the door, squirreling away down the corridors of the music block, down the stairs, tears swelling and strange sounds escaping her mouth. She understood him, believing he could understand her. She knocked a fellow student, papers flew out and around in a swirly autumn storm. 'Sorry, sorry, I have to go.' The student was left in astonishment with papers all over the marble floor. But she kept on running, down a dark path with twists and turns, feeling like a lost Alice, peering through the wrong lens. Somehow she reached the carpark, where she sat pathetically in her little blue Volkswagen gripping her blue fluffy feathered steering wheel.

Stifling back her tears, she swallowed, looked down at her phone as it vibrated, <CALL ME> DAD. She threw it back on the seat, switched on the radio, turned up the volume. The dance track gyrated, vibrating through her little car; the hula hula purple pansies that hung from her rear view mirror fell to the floor.

There was a wave of rebellion rolling in her now. She had driven towards Riccarton Mall, the heart of shallow sentiment, pervaded by trashy swingtags. The sign caught her eye, she paused, tilted her head up to the highlighted italic, it beckoned her inwards; HEAVEN TATTOOS; above a little horror attic with detached teenagers leaning up against the wall.

The tattooed figure that approached her was colourfully covered in piercing. His bald head had one of those skulls with darkened eyes resembling a pirate's cross, while the bits around the back of his head were a mottled mixture of red and grey.

With an energy that seemed to zap into her body, she plucked up the courage, boldly stood at the counter, her little leather tote bag restless at her side.

'Hi there I was wondering if I could get a tattoo?'

The man flexed his muscles, garishly displaying more tattoos of daggers with spider webs all up his arms. He whistled as he looked through his schedule, the large

gap in the front of his teeth stood out like a gaping hole. He grinned; something sparkled out towards her; a gold tooth centred to the side of his right upper gum. Maybe he was a pirate.

‘If you just go over there love, I can do you in an hour.’

She sat on a dark black vinyl chair, amongst the assemblage of e cigarette cases, vapour pods and sex toys stuffed under the chair.

She bit her lip, slid her fingers around her hair. This was rebellious and independent. A step outside of her world. Then time slowed. Everything played out like silent film in slow motion. She looked down at her phone. No message. She had expected something. Perhaps she had dreamed it all.

The needle pushed its way through her, like an icicle without a point of return.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

The coffee machine screeches like nails pulled down a blackboard. A young girl with green bits running through her hair nods, waits for him to speak.

‘Ah ... a mocha pleeeeeease,’ Dylan says, tipping down a long corridor, no windows, just walls.

‘Sure. Would you like vanilla or spice on top?’

He looks sideways at the coffee machine behind the counter. Taps his hands nervously 4 times on the glass display cabinet. ‘Aaaah spicccce,’ it rolls out too fast, barrelling in the air. He steps back, runs his hand through his hair putting his card out with speed. With a quick jerk he stuffs it forward into the *Eftpos* machine with his shaky hand.

Out of the corner of his eye he traces her movements. Too much salt on his mouth, *low groan*, **PURPLE**. He reaches for the jug of water. The girl winks at him.

RED

‘Cool, you must like it here, you come here a lot ...’ she replies her smile widening into a dark **GREEN** D minor.

RED RED RED. ‘Ah yeah kind of ...’ he grabs his card, turns quickly. *End of.*

The far off cubicle looks safe, somewhere he can be alone. *Maybe the girl was just being nice? Why did she have to talk so much? Why couldn't he just pay and leave the counter?*

He burrows down, hooks the tracker up to the laptop. Nothing comes up. The girl brings over the coffee, another wink. **RED**

He flicks up his phone. A text from Noodle. *Leave the Mouse alone?*

low groan. He shuts his laptop lid closed; 6 hours till sunset. *Outta here.*

*

The 'lucky duck,' flashes with a gold studded electronic cat waving through the window at him. Unsure about the cat, but starving, he pushes the door forwards as he knocks a man rushing out the door. The hot sauce sprays upwards like a splatter of maple syrup on to the man's suit. He jeers towards Dylan.

'What the fuck, Jesus kid!'

lips suck in.

No air.

RED.

With a quick jerk from under his hood, he looks back out the window. The man seems to be swearing to himself as he brushes the spilled sauce from his pants and gets in his car:

A high end Subaru.

ENR55F

FERN

REF

NERF another word for **NERD**

= **55: two primes**

The guy doesn't look like he makes enough money to own it, more like he works for smith city in the furniture department.

RED.

low groan.

The smile floats out to him from the Chinese lady's mouth. Something about fried rice.

He looks down. **RED.** 'Nnn....nnnnNo th ... than ... thanks.'

She cracks another smile:

Stained teeth:

1 black tooth:

Top right side.

CHAPTER FORTY

Dell looks up at the clouds. Seemingly they sit still in the sky. The first drop of rain almost ready to put down its mark. She turns from the window back into the office, resting her phone to her cheek. Bloody answer phone.

‘Hi Jed, just wanting you to pop in. I’m in my office ... have you talked to the father? Keep me in the loop.’ She looks down at her desk, the folders have built up into an ant mound. **CASE 204 DYLAN WILLIS** stares up at her. With a flick, she opens it to the photos of blood stained clothes.

A sports sweatshirt, “*LA LAKERS*” with traces of Spades blood; little dots around the *LA* bit. The list of items found include a pack of cigarettes, hmmm a smoker? She clicks her tongue as she turns to the statement, wondering if Jed has actually read it.

She tries again.

‘Hello ... where are you? What ... eating? Oh well can you come up to the office soon, it won’t take long. We need to look at his statement, make a plan to bring him in, five minutes, righto.’ She clicks off, looks back out the window. The clouds seem darker.

The door slides slowly open as Jed walks through balancing the noodle soup tousled with chicken dumplings wrapped around his hands.

‘Ah, sorry Dell, I bumped into some blimin’ kid, it spilt all over my fucking trousers. Fuck.’

‘Hmmm. So how did you get on today? The father bring up anything? Dell asks spinning her pen through her fingers.

He plonks himself down opposite her as the noodles sway sideways in the bowl. 'Not much to go on. The only thing he said was that Dylan was in shock, I mean that's obvious. He couldn't talk or communicate anything properly at the time. Clearly the kid is autistic on some level, but he's high functioning so ... umm yeah. The PROLIFE place where Spade bought his gear is pretty suspect, the boss was in some deal or something with Spade ... I wouldn't mind getting a search warrant. Oh yeah and Dylan has a friend ... Noodle or something? I'll try to get to him soon.'

Dell nods, 'Yes I got the same thing from Sophie, the daughter. So was the father certain about Dylan?'

'What do you mean? Like his behaviour? Jed mumbles through a mouthful of noodles. 'Um, ah ... yeah, ah, I think so, he would know him more than anyone, the guy seemed amiable enough, I think he's had a hard life bringing up the kid ... but yeah we really need to talk to Dylan again.'

'Hmmm righto, have you read the statement? Her birdy head tilts to the side as she gives him a quick glance. She sighs, looks down to the report again. 'Well, it seems a bit odd going to someone's house at 10.00 pm for a computer package. He said he was on his way out when someone entered ... shot Spade. He made an attempted call ... then ran up the stairs.'

'So who made the phone call to the police?' Jed asks as grabs the folder in one hand, leaning back on his chair. 'Hmmm an unidentified person rang the station at 1.pm from a suburb close by.'

'It was a woman, we have the voice recording,' Dell replies with a click of her tongue.

Jed coughs, the last of the soup broth almost choking him. 'Yeah well some of this just doesn't add up ... there's holes in it. For a start, he doesn't have an alibi, I mean maybe he's protecting someone? And how did he get blood on his sweatshirt?'

Did he see Spade get shot? I went back to the house, the two footprints; the bathroom and downstairs are different.'

'Hmmm,' Dell pushes her lips together as she looks into his unshaven face.

'Well in his statement he said he saw nothing, only heard what went on ... I'm printing a warrant for you to find him, do that today.'

'You think he's at home?'

'I've tried there,' Dell replies with a click of her tongue. 'I think he spends most of his time at this Noodle guys place ... oh ask around at the school.'

Jed stands, stretches his arms up, walks towards the door as Dell looks up from the file.

'Hey! Jed, I'm not cleaning up this bloody mess!'

He pulls his body half back in the room, reaches for the bowl.

'Sorry Dell,' he winks at her as he gathers it up, then heads back to his own dishevelled heap at the back of the office.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Dell leans back on her chair as she looks out again to the grey clouds settling over the CBD. Sophie presses in on her mind. She was so cold about Dylan. She tilts her head to the side, reflecting on her own family.

Growing up in the 60s, her sister had been the complete opposite of her in many respects, she was now a successful English teacher. Dell knew she could have gone down the track of a more arts career. The constant arguments mixed with bitterness at home had made her plough ahead.

She'd intended to study in the same city but when the offer came up to move north she put all her effort into saving money to get away. Her sister Bernadette pleaded with her to stay to support her mother. She had to go.

When she arrived in Wellington she immersed herself in the place. She felt drawn towards the civil work area. So began the lengthy hours of scrutinizing over reports to do with cases involving murders, of crime, abuse, everything and anything. She felt fulfilled in many ways but in some areas of her life she always thought something was lacking.

She never really dated. She didn't want to end up with a man like her father. Her upbringing often meant she couldn't see past her own shadow of earlier life. Sometimes there was a huge craggy gully that she looked down on.

There was one man involved in her training, who surprised her with her own feelings. Chief Inspector Mr Rowan Peel. He was 15 years her senior. He stooped when he walked, brooded over things as he smoked his old tobacco pipe, drinking his dark smoky ale in the pub. She would sit alongside him with her notepad, while he sank deep into his own mellow thoughts over the crime. His dark brown eyes, resting on the

silence in the air. In these times, she learned the art of contemplation, almost like the silence of a Tibetan monk.

He would eventually roll out his hand, softly seeking some rum tobacco from his pouch mixing it in his pipe. Lighting it, he would then look off into the distance hills.

‘So Dell, any ideas forming ...’ he would say.

Dell deduced that he was open to an opposite point of view, which she would give. This seemed to exude in him almost an energy that would move him out of his trance state.

‘Hmmm, that’s a possibility Dell.’ Then he would drink his ale, followed by a puff or two. In these deep sombrous pauses he would say, ‘Give it time, give it time.’

One particular case had caused them both bafflement. It involved a lawyer, a Mr Lawrence A. Pike. He had disappeared leaving his wife of forty years with a mortgage and debt. His bank account hadn’t been touched for over nearly six months. The wife admitted he had had affairs that she had known about, but none of them had really been anything more than spring flings.

However, more digging by Inspector Peel uncovered a double life. By going back to when the first payment on the house had been made, Peel discovered that Pike had secretly added another name to the account, depositing 30,000 into it. He had then gone to the bank and changed it back to his wife’s name. But he had kept the other account, under another name. No one knew. This went back thirty five years. The grand total was nearly two million in an offshore account on the Island of Borneo in the country of Brunei. A tax free haven with lots of gold. Peel had meticulously gone through all of Pike’s past accounts. This one account had been a pool of money the man had been saving. But this wasn’t all. Going into the Interpol police, Peel gained access to some documents that uncovered more information about Peel. He actually had two more separate accounts, one of which was gaining interest in a bank in Sweden.

Dell and Peel contacted the police in Europe, something they hadn't thought of doing earlier. Interpol put out a search warrant for the man. For almost seven months nothing came up, until one day the German police contacted Peel, saying the account had been touched. Going through the cameras a photo eventually emerged of a possible sighting of Pike.

He was dressed in fishing gear, visiting a national park to fish for a rare kind of speckled trout; *Salvelinus fontinalis* commonly known as a brook trout (although technically from the Salmon family). He was found by the lake, without a proper fishing licence in the valley of Augsburg. The German police tracked him down to a little village bordering on Bavaria. He was living in a house in the woods, with what appeared to be a German woman half his age with long blonde hair plaited down to her buttocks and a couple of little five year old blonde blue eyed children who looked like they were twins, Sven and Helga.

Unfortunately there was nothing Peel could do. He sat brooding over his ale. The smoke of his pipe slowly covering his face like a mysterious fog coming off the moors. Dell sat there brooding attempting to be in comradery spirit. Peel had simply left his wife. He had another life. Poor Mrs Pike had to sell her property, and become a widow of sorts. Pike had his blonde strumpet. All the money he had been earning had gone into his other family, there was nothing illegal about it. The fact Mrs Pike had involved the police was a waste of time.

Peel just sat there and said, 'Well we have learned something today, never go after someone who doesn't want to be found.' Dell tilted her head like a bird towards Peel. In that moment she wanted to kiss him, he was like a wise old awkward owl. She could almost feel a butterfly in her stomach rising upwards. But there are always consequences.

With some unknown strength, perhaps from her own families' dark ode, she kept her hand in her pocket, clutching instead at her little tartan purse with gold handles that she had bought herself when she had been promoted to Sergeant.

After this case Peel invited her to be a part of his thoughts on more than one occasion. Dell had the bug. She forgot about other things in her life. Instead she sat endlessly through many late nights, him brooding over files, her sitting beside him like a little bird, waiting for each little worm of intrigue to appear.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

The pain sears through Sophie's body as she sprawls across the bed. A sudden rush of energy bolts through her as she jumps up. She quickly lifts her t-shirt up; the bold edges seem so real.

She falls back on the bed with half a smile. Total bliss, as she nods in time with the radio squeezing out the latest garage smash hit. With an urge, she grabs her phone, flicks through the messages. Dad. God. She stuffs the phone back under her pillow. Maybe she should go and see if he's there.

She peels her oversized yellow hoody over her head, slips her slippers on, scuffs along the hall way towards his room. The door silently opens just a crack. No sign of him.

She can't remember the last time she didn't feel a lump in her stomach over him. This last year had been the worst. Dylan had made it clear to everyone that he no longer required any form of care from anyone. If dad had been more in the picture, maybe Dylan would have stayed around more. Maybe. God knows.

The barren fridge stares out at her. She sighs, opens the lower cupboard, grabs the bag of potatoes, peeler, then positions herself down on the stool. She flicks the TV on. A category 3 storm, on the way. Putting down the peeler she reaches for the tap, running her hand under the water as the soft light notes of the *Arabesque* dapple away.

A sudden knock. What? She walks to porch light, flicks it on. Pulls back the curtains and looks out into the darkness. A lone figure stands there enveloped in the dark, his face hidden. Slowly she opens the door a crack.

'Ah hello, Sophie Willis?'

She tugs down on her sweatshirt cuffs. 'Um, yeah that's me. Can I help?'

The figure walks forwards, now in the full stream of the spotlight. His black scuffed shoes point towards the door, edging to get inside.

‘I’m Jed Deans, an Inspector,’ he flicks his ID up to her. ‘Could I talk to Dylan ... ah ... your brother ... is he home?’

Sophie pulls back her hair behind her ears. ‘Um, yeah. I mean, no he’s not here. I’ve already spoken to the police lady ... Anyway I hardly ever see him, but I could txt him to come home. I’m not sure if that would help at all?’

Jed nods. ‘Sure, that would be really helpful ... oh I couldn’t use your bathroom? It’s a long way from the city, you know how it is.’

Her fingers feel up the door, as she half twist her face to look out into the dark. ‘Um, oh of course, come in, it must be freezing out there. Would you like a drink?’

Jed’s face lights up. ‘Oh that would be great ... um coffee? Black two sugars ... and the bathroom?’

‘Oh, sorry, yep, just down the end of the hall past the vase of flowers there on the left.’ She then walks back over to the bench, flicks the jug on. Suddenly remembering her phone, she rushes through the kitchen up the stairs to her room, grabs it then runs back down the stairs, almost banging into Jed as he walks back into the kitchen.

‘So, what would you like me to text him?’ Sophie says looking down at her phone.

‘Um, just tell him there’s someone who needs to talk to him,’ Jed replies as he walks over to the kitchen stool.

‘Is it important?’ she asks, her eyes now wide as she begins to text.

He looks up at the ceiling, his mouth set thin. ‘Um, yeah Sophie, we need to bring him in for questioning. So if you do know where he is or could be?’

‘I didn’t realise, after the other night. You know, he gave a statement and everything ... I just thought it was over ...’ she replies as she begins to walk back to the kitchen.

‘Well Sophie, we need to rule him out of our enquiry, this is fairly normal in a case like this.’

She nods, pours the coffee, feeling like she’s in a strange dream all of a sudden.

Calmly Jed leans back on the stool, taking the cup as he speaks, ‘It’s hard, I know, but we’ll sort it out.’

The clock suddenly seems loud in the silence.

‘Ah, so, can you tell me about Noodle?’

‘Um, yeah, Noodle’s his best friend, since high school, they do computer stuff together.’

‘Do you know where Noodle lives now?’ Jed asks, eyeing her shaky hand.

‘Um, no, not really, I mean, I know he used to live in a house with his family down Bartley Street. I remember because once Dylan had an episode there.’

‘An episode?’

With a sigh, she walks back into the kitchen, looks up at the flower patterns on the tiles of the kitchen wall as her shoulders slowly slump down. ‘Oh, you know he just spun out, locked himself in the toilet ... flicked the lights. The usual. I think it was the dad and mum yelling at the daughter Stacy that set him off. But then again, who knows, it could have been anything, um ... Noodle rang dad, and I was with him, so we went and picked him up, brought him home. Dad gave him a bath, meds.’

‘Medication?’

‘Yeah, Ritalin, and some other stuff to calm him down.’

‘Is he on anything now?’

She shrugs, swallows the last of her coffee then bends down to the dishwasher.

‘I don’t know really ... Dylan has kind of been doing his own thing for about a year. He decided he wanted independence, didn’t want anyone hassling him about his meds, or shit, so we backed off. I don’t know ... I mean half his stuff is still here, I guess the rest is at Noodle’s.’

‘Hmmm. Ok. Well there’s not much I can do tonight then if he’s not coming home ... um ... let me know if he turns up, ok?’ Jed says scratching his jaw as he stands and walks towards the door. ‘Oh, ah before I forget, does Dylan play sport?’

‘Um, no, never ... why?’ Sophie asks with a shrug.

‘Hmmm, oh, no reason, just wondered if he has a hobby.’ He stops at the door, fingers a loose cigarette in his pocket.

‘Cheers, Sophie, stay in touch ...’

The door shuts silently.

*

Somehow she finds herself in the cold dining room. Slowly lowering herself down, ebony envelopes her, the lightness of her right hand weaves through the waves up into a soft echo.

A tear. Sweeping notes fall in; through the darkness the bass begins a long heavy walk. Silence. She looks up at the old mirror opposite the piano; *the breaking of a wave*.

The lid slams shut. Keys mesh.

She runs through the house. Up the stairs, back to her bed. With her heart racing she holds her phone up to her face.

<Sophie, shall we meet?>**D.A.**

Her stomach somersaults. It’s him. Her heart thumps. Impulsively, she pushes off the bed, walks to her duchess where the mirror sits on top, peels her t-shirt up.

The tree of life stares back. Seamlessly surrounded by tiny speckled stars. She swallows, sending it off out on the waves.

<Tonight>S.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

The swirls of smoke rise up then fade into a grey veil above Noodle's head. He quickly logs into the network, then establishes himself in the chatroom.

The nearest code is Genex; now displaying signs of weakness. He moves closer. Contact. Genex eventually replies. It's on the border. He opens the connecting system. Sixty seconds left.

All quiet, one minute passes then the green circle flashes. Done.

Delete.

“X” floats across the screen.

*

The apple pie strudel, or a packet of macaroni cheese? Opting for the pasta, he rips the package open then flings it in the microwave and waits.

He reaches for his phone, slowly watches as the little dot moves silently across the screen.

Durham Street, moving south.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

The edges of the dark ruined cathedral lie beneath the smudged fog. Slowly Dylan walks around the steel shell, his ears picking up on a distant hum of a car engine. A homeless man rustles through his bags making a discorded cry. It rises up in a mottled curl as the empty bottle clunks along the ground rolling further away from him into the gutter.

He continues on through the dark. At the corner of the alleyway, he quickens his steps to the door of Zebb Café; for the cyber driven. As he enters, his eyes soften to the dimly lit room. A long row of people in little cubicles face computer screens, while deep trance music beats in the background. He looks to a place in the corner of the room, throws down his bag and logs on.

The chatroom is unusually quiet. A greyish green skull stares back at him. The vile mouth opens then closes as it turns around on the screen. He scans all previous activity. The only recent movement is from an unknown source. They have accepted a signal from Genex. The conversation has lasted two minutes. Both are gone.

The fairy lights above on the ceiling catch his eye, swaying with a gentle motion from the heat pump humming in the corner of the room. Eventually he looks across the room. Guppy Girl is back. She moves her hand over her face, brushes her hair behind her ear, showing her elf like face, climbing studs up her ears. She briefly looks back towards him. *Her eyes ... no air ... green green green*

He quickly looks back down to his laptop.

X is back.

X moves across the screen. It's forming a structure. It hovers. It seems to be moving away. **RED**. A loud groan forces its way out. People look up at him. Eyes digging in. **RED**. The screen is empty.

RED RED RED

He glances towards Guppy girl.

She shuts her laptop, gets up and walks towards the door.

BLACK

Must keep going.

20 steps to the streetlight

+ **15** steps to the corner

+ Right turn at the 24 hour dairy.

Traffic intersection.

12 metres ... **10,9,8,7 6,5, 4 ...**

STOP.

Guppy girl stands at the traffic lights around the corner from where the market stalls set up in the square. She looks down, pushes her boots up with her fingers, then reaches for her phone. With a laugh she tosses her hair back, rolling her eyes. The studs sparkle out catching on the orange tinted street light above her.

She laughs again.

'I'm coming,' her voice floats out across the street.

green green green

With quickening steps she crosses the street, walks down towards the old church yard, where she pushes past a group of drunken people going the other way.

A sudden rattle splits the air. **RED**. Too late. The can scuttles out across the street, breaking the quiet shell of the still night. She stops and stare's out towards him.

He freezes **50** metres away. His steps are slow now as he edges backwards into the blue bush beside the footpath.

The motorbike almost glides across the bridge. It makes a dive down into the lower part of Manchester Street, coming to a halt beside the lights. The figure pushes on a side gear revving it twice more. Guppy girl gets on the bike, takes a helmet, flick's her hair back as she laughs. With one final look back up the street, the figure revs the engine once more, swirls the bike around, then heads south, towards the hills.

Emptiness draws in as Dylan steps out from the bush. The orange street lights twinkle above. The only sign of life, apart from a distant soft sweeper. Probably in the square. He quickens his walk, back along the river towards home.

The ground rushes up as he looks down. Dark brown dirt mixes, stones; loudly flying. Back up towards the stars; little needle point pins dancing ... **1001, 1002** ... Spinning, rabbiting, round and round at the speed of light. *The Mouse? The person on the bike?*

Shoelaces suddenly bedazzle him as he spirals downwards. **BLACK**. The graze across his cheek pinches at him as he tries to rebalance, kneels over, coughs. Grey cracks stem up. Beginnings and ends, connecting to the piece of stone that leads along the street to the stars. **24 sets of yellow street lights**. The archer in the stars. Tipping towards the universe.

He drags himself up. The scape of the city becoming an infinitesimal dot in the land of stars as he walks further and further away. The cicadas; wings on fire amongst the quiet suburbia of little homes and gardens, distantly beating into his heart.

The final steep hill climbs closer. Mailboxes jumping towards him; little faces, sticking up signalling to him with smiles. His boots; giant cans of heavy baked beans, drag him along the ground towards the front gate.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

Sophie casts a glance behind her shoulder as she walks towards LUSH on the corner of high street. The blue neon light shines through the window as the music thumps inside, grinding out rhythmic beats. She stops below the door sign. Takes a deep breath, walks through.

The garish club mix washes over her. She looks out across the room to the dance floor where people are swinging, others are standing at the bar talking loudly.

She walks over to the bar, peels her eyes around the tables. He's not here. She looks down at her phone. Nothing. Suddenly there's a tap on her shoulder. She spins around. Professor Allen. Effortlessly wearing a light blue Indian style shirt, white denim pants. His deep brown eyes longingly look at her, while his brown hair flows over the top of his forehead.

'Sophie, so glad you've come, what are you having? A wine perhaps? His slight smile, more serious than normal.

A red rash is beginning. She can feel it. She bites her lip, tries to control her nerves, as she loudly talks over the music.

'I'll grab us a table by the window,' she says scooting away down the back of the bar.

He nods, another serious smile as he lines up at the bar.

She walks over to a secluded couch and table with tea light candles. Nervously she flicks her phone open.

<Sophie are you home?>DAD

<No. I can't do this now.>S

A loud cheer from a drunken group leaving the club echoes into her ears as Professor Allen comes towards her with two glasses of white wine.

‘Well Sophie, I will repeat, I’m so glad you’re here. I need to say some things to you.’

She takes two gulps of the wine. Bites her lip. Her face hot, red again. This is stupid, god.

‘Professor Allen, look ... I ...’

He reaches over, stops her, as he kisses her lips, and whispers in her ear.

‘Please call me Daran.’ He sits back and looks at her.

Nervously she pulls her hair back behind her ears, reaches for her glass as he glides his fingers towards her knee.

‘Sophie, I really need to say some things ... um, you’re talented. I’ve never seen such a rawness in someone’s playing. You have a lot ahead of you to refine your skills and playing ... I just don’t want anything to get in the way of your playing.’

Suddenly feeling flushed, she finds herself mesmerized by his brown eyes that seem to be swimming towards her. His words are floating on *Clair De Lune*, a wave in the light.

She tries to focus on him.

‘I ... I love you, I want to be with you ...’ she hears herself whisper as her eyes meet his again.

‘Hmm,’ he says his face now serious.

She swallows. Fuck.

‘I’m sorry Daran, I ... I didn’t mean to be so abrupt ... you know I can handle this, I’m twenty ... I’m an adult. I have dreams, I mean ... maybe I should find another tutor. But that doesn’t mean I can’t stop my feelings towards you.’

He nods, a half smile creeps up the corner of his mouth, as he looks back out the window deep in thought. Calmly he reaches for his glass, sips the wine slowly letting it linger in his mouth. He then looks at her intensely and sighs.

‘Sophie, I feel deeply for you, I just don’t want to hurt you.’

She leans back against the couch letting her hair fall down her face, Debussy floating further in to the shore.

He reaches over to kiss her again. ‘Come on then.’ He pulls her up with his strong arms, grabs her handbag and coat, and glides her towards the door. As they move away from the club he pushes her up against the wall.

She finds herself moaning softly as he mumbles in her ear.

‘Hmmm ... I want you so badly you’re making me crazy you know,’ he mumbles under his heavy breath.

She pushes away from him, laughs, as she steps back onto the curve of the footpath, suddenly feeling dizzy like a drunk teenager.

He runs his hand through his hair. ‘Ok Sophie, are you Ok with this?’

She nods. Bites her lip.

‘Come on, back to my place.’ This time his smile seems to envelope her completely.

*

‘When did you start playing the piano?’ she asks as the taxi turns down Manchester Street.

‘Oh, um, that’s going back a bit.’ He rolls his eyes. ‘Hmmm, I think I was ... probably around the age of four. My grandmother had a grand piano that was in her living room, and I had lessons with this Jewish doctor who lived down the road with his extended family. He would come over every Saturday, bend over me with his little spectacles. He had this long thin grey beard, he would sit with this walking stick,

thump it over and over, saying. 'You need to be more patient with your entries, staccato, do it again, again!' It was all very good for me, now looking back on it.'

'What about you Sophie, when did you start playing?'

She looks back out through the window to the rain making jellyfish splattered patterns on the glass. 'Oh I was probably about seven. I had a lady ... um ... a student from university doing her music performance degree. She came to our house, but it became a problem at home, so I stopped for a while ... then started up again when I was nine.'

'Why did you stop? That's such a shame,' he says suddenly looking serious.

The tentacles seem to be branching out further and further away as they blur with the car lights melting into the window. 'Well ... my family, we had difficulties ... um, with my brother. I guess that was the reason I stopped. My parents needed the money to help him for a while.'

He turns to face her abruptly. 'Why? Whatever happened?'

'Oh its nothing now, it's just how it was. My brother has Autism. It was hard for all of us for a while.'

'God ... Sophie,' he murmurs reaching out to kiss her.

Slowly she slips her face down to his shoulder resting her head there as the rain gently patters on the roof.

Eventually the taxi pulls up at a house. Daran reaches over to pay, touching her leg gently. 'Hey you, are you ok? If not I can get the taxi to take you home?'

'I'm fine,' she nods with a smile as she steps out into the cold night. Her eyes suddenly reflecting a dark circle from the yellow street lights above.

'Come in Sophie, I'll pour us a drink.'

Sophie finds herself in long living room. The L shaped couch with a TV in one corner, and a large black grand piano down the other end in what looks like a little

sunroom. There are bookshelves with books surrounding the whole room from top to bottom, with a beautiful grey Persian rug sprawled across the floor.

The fireplace clicks to life with a switch as Daran comes back around the corner with two glasses of red wine. He hands her one, then comes to lie on the ground beside her, grabbing a cushion to prop himself up to face her.

‘So it must have been hard growing up with that then?’

‘Um, yeah I guess, I mean, it was.’ She begins to say feeling flushed again. ‘My parents spent more time monitoring Dylan than me, yeah ... so I was kind of alone a lot ... but you know ...’ she trails off looking down into the flames of the fire.

‘Hey, you’re still alive, look where you are now ... a bright future ahead ...’

Daran answers, looking at her intently.

She suddenly looks up at him, laughs. ‘Don’t be silly. I have to have something else in mind in case ... you know in case the piano thing goes ...’

Daran pushes the cushion away, flops on to the floor as he looks up at the ceiling. ‘Well, if you’re serious about your music ... maybe you should continue playing, look at teaching music, perform as well ... that’s my advice.’

He turns his body over as he leans on his hand, gazing at her top, her small breasts, olive skin showing a hint of a tan through her black top. She flops down towards him, leans her head on his chest, pushing out her feet as she relaxes into the soft rug.

‘I know, you’re right, I should have done more theory papers. I’ll probably need to do a year of teachers college ...’ she sighs, looks back up at the ceiling, noticing the cream pattern circulating around the middle of the room, towards the centre lightbulb like a whole universe.

Slowly he begins to run his hands along her body, touching her thigh as he brings himself closer, moving his hand further up to her breast where she softens under his gentle touch.

He groans, this time beginning to sit over her, he kisses her on the mouth again, while he runs his hand further up her back. Responding, her tongue goes into his mouth as he moves his legs in front of her and pushes her legs further apart.

‘My god, you’re beautiful Sophie,’ he whispers under his breath. She looks over at the flames, as everything in her life melts away.

*

The rain pelts down into the grey drains of the street below.

No messages.

Jesus. Who starts a relationship going to bed on the first date? Fuck Fuck Fuck. How was it going to work? She picks at a fingernail, the stunted regrowth. Only 3.00 pm. He will still be at work.

Deciding to get some proper sleep, she begins the long walk up the stairs, slopping a cup of tea on the carpet. Fuck. At the top she hesitates by Dylan’s door. It’s shut. Thank god. She continues on to her room, throws the duvet up over her head. Beethoven plodding into her heart.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

Something flips inside Jed's stomach as he lines up in the school corridor.

He steps up to the glass window. 'Oh ... ah, I just wanted to talk to the Principal about a past pupil.'

A short stocky lady, her eyeshadow casting a turquoise purple glitter over her cheeks peers out at him. She points to the visitor's book.

'The child's name? I need to see some identification, please.'

Jed fiddles in his pockets, bringing out his ID. 'Oh, ah, Noodle ... sorry I really don't know if that's his real name ...'

The secretary's right eye flicks up a notch. 'Just give me one moment, I think I can retrieve a file that has someone with that name ... here we are, Noodle. Also known as Nathaniel Nicholas Newton ... yes he was a past pupil here, he left this year. I'll just give you a number ... ah ... 13'

Squashing down in the seat along the corridor, a raised voice extends up over a monotone boys voice. Then the door clicks open. A tall gangly boy emerges, sloping off down the corridor.

He swallows, his stomach flips again. His father had ignored the times he was called to the principal's office. The school sent letters, phone calls, but he never came. Instead Jed's mother sat, listening to the old principle Atkinson as he groaned and mumbled about honour and respect. Then they would go home, try not to tell Jed's father about any of it.

Amongst his bruised face, Jed scrambled to get out. At the age of fifteen he joined the St Johns brigade. He had a focus. Soon he became interested in the mind of people.

In 1990, he left home, racing into a University Hostel, where he enjoyed the freedom. In his first year he managed well, by the second year he was placed in the top five psychology students.

Then Mia floated into his life. She introduced him to all things new, piercings, and jungle tribe art. His first taste of love. Intoxicated in this freedom, the doors opened. He drank consumed with his emotions.

Mia was older, raw a with passion way above him, or so he kept telling himself. He tried his best to keep up with her way of life, but became unravelled. He had to decide between his studies, or her bold delving's into esoteric transference. In the end she dumped him. Leaving behind a butterfly clip attached to an empty bottle of red merlot. The darkness was there. Inviting him in.

*

'Mr Deans ... Mr Deans,' a small lady with her blonde hair pulled back in a bun stands over him.

'Oh yes sorry, thank you for seeing me.' He tries to stand, fumbles his hand in his pocket, feeling a cigarette.

The lady turns to walk away as she quickly speaks over her shoulder towards him. 'Come this way, I'm Sylvia Beech, the Principle here.' They walk into a large office where there are a couple of seats facing an organised desk. 'Please sit down.'

She pushes her red glasses up, which seem to fit with the rest of her pristine perfect outfit of the navy blue shirt blouse with tiny red tulips on it, under a dark blue blazer.

'So, my secretary tells me you are enquiring about someone called Noodle? A boy who was here at this school?'

Jed clears his throat, suddenly feeling the urge to fiddle with his tie. 'Ah yes, I'm from the forensic department in Sydenham. This is part of our enquiry into an

investigation. Ah, um, if you can tell me anything about him or his friend Dylan Willis that would help me immensely ...' he trails off as he notices her running her fingers along her throat. 'Ah, only if it's convenient for you of course?' he says scratching his chin awkwardly.

Ms Beech looks over her glasses, twitching her lips. 'I see. Do you have ID?'

'Oh ... sure, um just a sec, it's in my wallet somewhere, here we go.'

Ms Beech efficiently glances at the ID like it's a school report of someone's behaviour. She twitches her lips, straightens her neck then hands it back quickly. She glances at the clock above the wall before looking at him directly.

'Let's see, Dylan and Noodle ... where do I start? Yes they were both here last year. An inseparable pair. Dylan was expelled in November last year actually. Noodle left at the beginning of this year, citing he had learned everything he needed to.'

Jed glances around the room, as the wind from the window brushes the curtain slightly, pushing forwards a gush of air across Sylvia Beeches desk. Her papers move slightly in the wind. She straightens them in a second, reaches her fingers to her throat running them back down the small area to her chest. She then clears her throat as she places her hands on the desk, clasping them in a church steeple pose.

'Can you tell me a bit about their relationship,' Jed asks as he crosses his legs, preparing himself for a sterile response.

'Well, let's see. They were close.' Ms Beech replies as she twitches her nose again. 'They spent most of the time in the library. From very early on they had a relationship that was more out of protection. Dylan was bullied quite a bit in his first two years here. Noodle, was also finding it hard due to his own battles. He came from quite a dysfunctional home life. We have had all four other of his siblings at this school, and they have all had behavioural issues.'

‘Noodle was a milder case than his brothers. There was something though. I could never put my finger on it. Like a coldness underneath it all. I did wonder if he had a detachment disorder. Surprisingly, given his home life, he achieved well here.’

‘I see. Does he still live on 23b Bartley Street? Jed asks as he opens his black book.

‘Hmm, I don’t think so. As far as I’m aware he went flatting last year. Social services were involved. It was decided he was better off living independent from his family. His father had hit him in one incident that brought the police to school plus his case worker.’

Straightening herself in her chair Ms Beech shakes her head. ‘I was very surprised that Noodle left school. He was so bright. He had some anger issues that he needed to deal with, but well, he’s gone now. He was 18, what could we do? We can’t hold students here legally once they hit that mark.’ Ms Beech re-clasps her hands shut.

‘Um, ok, you’ll have to help me out here. You say anger issues. Did he do something to cause concern here at the school?’

Ms Beech looks down briefly, feels for a pen on her desk, begins to twirl it in her fingers. ‘Yes and no. Dylan was being bullied one day by a group of students. Noodle simply lost it, in the cafeteria. He held a boy against the wall, almost choking him. It took three teachers to pull him off. We had discussions, then brought in his mother, who just laughed. The father wouldn’t come, obviously. And then Noodle turned up with a black eye the next day. No surprises who did it.’

‘Ok, well um, Dylan, how was he at school?’

With a sigh, Ms Beech stands up, walks over to a filing cabinet, where she opens a drawer and pulls out a large 20 inch thick file. ‘Under our school policy and protocol, I have to keep Dylan’s records for one year after he has left school. From what I can understand, he’s not coming back to school. We suspended him in November last year,

after the Airforce incident, which the police also dealt with. And then this year he un-enrolled himself. His decision. So this is his file. You're welcome to take it, look at it in the library or in the spare office we have down the hall. I will need you to fill out a form of disclosure though ... and sign it today.' She clunks the file down on the desk. 'Apart from this, I can tell you he wasn't the easiest of students.'

'The problem is that part of the curriculum for special needs students set out by the Ministry of Education is to integrate students with special needs into the mainstream classroom and community. It was also in our job description. As providers of education we had to help Dylan to become more functioning in the school, and prepare him for the world out there. But it was very hard. Almost too hard, his sensory issues were a great problem. It was easier if he had his own space in the end.'

'Ok, so he wasn't the easiest of pupils, um, how did he manage under stress? Did he lash out, hurt other classmates or teachers, or did he withdraw and hide away?'

With a slow sigh, Ms Beech gets up and walks over to a little table. She flicks on the jug, and stands beside the cups in deep thought. 'Oh, sorry Mr Deans, I travelled away for a second. Um, do you want a coffee?'

'Um, that would be great, ah black, two sugars.'

'We did have some challenging moments Mr Deans. One day he threw a chair across a room. It nearly hit another student. We later discovered he had been provoked by that same student who had put a radio up against his ear. So we had to come up with some in house strategies to help him. This was all in collaboration with Amy White, his psychologist and social worker coming on board.'

'We discovered Dylan didn't like lots of people, or certain noises like the sound of tapping and high pitched noises of cars. When he was with other students in the classroom his brain just couldn't cope and would send him into a fight or flight mode. Most often he would just simply get up and walk out. The cerebrum part of his brain,

which helps to form the reasoning responses, and form emotions was overloaded. He couldn't work out the proper reasoning part of everyday things.'

She turns to the jug, pours the hot water into the cups, stirring the sugar in with a spoon. She walks back to the desk and opens the file to the middle. 'Here is the psychiatrist report, the last one, and medication chart he was on. The psychiatrist, Mr Mitchell had him on things for ADHD, anti-depressants, and an anti-psychotic at one stage, these all helped relieve the anxiety and pressure in his brain.'

'Amy White had suggested the anti-psychotic meds. Tests have proven that in some cases high anxiety can be alleviated with small doses. The ADHD medication helped tremendously with his attention, basically the minute he was on the Ritalin a light bulb went on and he became very calm and manageable.'

'I have to ask, um, how were his parents through all this, I know they are divorced,' Jed says as he takes a sip of coffee.

Ms Beech relaxes her grip of her church steeple clasp, tapping her fingers on the cup. 'After he threw the chair, we had to establish some boundaries for Dylan. Then we had to find out about his set pattern at home, this required a meeting with his parents. At the beginning, his parents were doing fine. They came to meetings that we set up, but it was somewhere in the second term that things came to a halt. Dylan didn't come to school for a couple of weeks. So I rang the house I only got the sister, she wouldn't tell me anything. I asked about Dylan and she said he was sick. I said could they supply a doctor's certificate, she said sure. It never arrived.'

'I waited two more days, then I rang again ... no answer. I finally rang the psychologist. She rang and got no answer, so she went around there, and physically had to wait for someone at the house. The mother, it turns out, had left the home. The father was living and working from his work office/apartment, sporadically visiting the house when he had time off work. Dylan was in his room, living on potato crisps, coke,

watching DVD's, computer games. The sister Sophie was the main caregiver. It turned out the father was putting money into her account, but she was only fifteen and it was a lot of responsibility. By the sounds of it Sophie was too embarrassed and anxious to involve any other party.'

'Unfortunately, involving Child, Youth and Family was the last resort, but it was all we could do. Dylan's case was brought before a panel, both parents came ... but individually. For quite a few months John came to the meetings by himself. Eventually John became the key carer. It was a very hard time, Dylan was aware of the situation, he's a smart kid. But it unfortunately led to some extreme levels of anxiety on his part. Thankfully, Amy the psychologist knew some techniques for ASD children, and with her help we were able to introduce them to him here at the school.'

'Hmm, so why did they separate?' Jed asks leaning forward.

Ms Beech takes another sip of coffee. 'Well, it seems there were a number of factors involved. For so long, they had been focused on Dylan. I think that the marriage had begun to take its toll on them emotionally ... they had both gone their separate ways long before they finally split up. The mother, Joanna was seeing a man around the time of the break up, a photographer I think.'

'The father John ... he was seeing someone too. It was such a mess. Joanna bought it up in the first few meetings that she did attend. She said he had consistently not been there at meal times for Dylan for years. She challenged him on where he had been, and why he hadn't been at home when she really needed the help. It was really hard to gage who was telling the truth at this point. In the end she just up and left, completely, moving to Sydney with the photographer.'

'Over the next period, things were rocky, that's when Dylan was at his worst. His anxiety was elevated, but through consistency we managed to get things under

control. Sophie the daughter was a big help, she came to a few meetings on tips for Autism awareness we had running at the school.'

'So Sophie, was she at this school? I don't remember having noted this down...' Jed asks flicking back through his black book.

'Um, no actually, she went to the local Girl's high school. She would have been fifteen or so when Dylan started high school.'

Tired, Jed blinks, then slowly moves in his chair. 'Er, well thanks for all this, it's been a tremendous help. Would I be able to have a look at that large file you have on Dylan's behaviour...?'

Her lips twitch slightly as she walks back to the filing cabinet for the disclosure form. 'I just need your initials that you are going to have a look at this file.'

'Right. Follow me Mr Deans.' She races around to the door.

'Oh, um right,' he says as he stands, pulling his jacket pockets down nervously. 'Um, please call me Jed.'

She nods half smiling as she touches her red rimmed glasses. She then turns, leading him out of the office to the spare reading room.

Pivoting sharply she looks up, pointing to the shelves. 'We use this room to do our own personal self-development and evaluations on teaching, it's a never ending job Mr Deans. Well, I will leave you to it. When you're finished just hand the file back to our secretary.' She quickly turns, walks back down to her office, leaving Jed clouded over with books.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

The old dairy on the corner of Ensors Road shows the battered storm of time. The sign outside swings on its last wire. The light bulb flickers in the dust cemented in the socket. Along the southern wall by the edge of the shop, splattered mumbo graffiti creeps outwards amongst the litter.

A homeless man shuffles his trolley towards the bin overflowing with scrappy papers. He tips his body, his holy pyjama bottoms poking out through his rough rainproof slacks, with his green smudged army jacket attempting to camouflage his movements. A top his head, poised to win the race, the larger than life *HAWAII* cap shouts out another world.

His belongings, a large shadowy mound, with a worn red pillow and dirty green sleeping bag are rolled up gasping for air. While his brown coat over the army jacket scuffs the pavement, a shivery hiss running beside his steps.

With a sigh, Jed smokes the last of his cig as he passes the man, shakes his head. Jesus this place needs work.

The house sags to the right with the wooden boards heaving under the pressure. The only house painted green. A dilapidated caravan sits in the corner of the backyard, painted mustard, it leans down at one end into the swampy grass.

The bell hardly works as Jed pushes it. A dog barks from the rare of the house, followed by some banging and crashing out the back in the garage. An elongated squeal like a pig about to be slaughtered reaches out in the air. He tries again. Someone is definitely in. He peers through the little window beside the door just as something runs along the passageway, backwards and forwards screaming.

He shakes his head as he walks back down the front steps of the porch, and around to the back of the house. The music from the garage pulsates louder as the piggy squeal reaches a high pitched crescendo. He swings the back gate open, then walks up to the steps where a young woman suddenly appears in front of him.

The plume of weed hits him in the face. She stands there defiantly. The kid appears at her side. It tries to crawl onto her leg as it lets out another squeal. The girl ignores the kid, shoving it back down to the ground.

‘Shut up will ya!’

Jed takes a step back, ‘Ah ... hello, I’m wondering if this is where I could find Noodle?’

The girl walks towards Jed aggressively as she pushes out her orange stained lips, her pink hair statically standing up. ‘Oh yeah, who wants to know?’

This time Jed steps back. An electric hum biting the air. He pulls at his jacket, feeling inside his right pocket around the curve of the cigarette.

‘I’m Inspector Deans. I’m looking for a Nathaniel Nicholas Newton. He lived here I believe. He’s part of an investigation.’

The girl blows another compulsive puff, then screws up her face as she leans forward into Jed.

‘Prove it,’ she spits.

Jed sighs, pulls out his wallet, flick’s it up to her red blotched face. She looks at it then her eyes dart to the garage. She screams over his shoulder. ‘Dad! Noodle’s in trouble. Get out here!’

Taking a step back, Jed raises his hands. ‘Well, actually he’s not in trouble. I just need to talk to him.’

Clanks of metal clunk to the floor of the cemented garage, followed by muffled mutilated gurgles.

‘For fuck’s sake, alright, keep your knickers on Stace. It ain’t a bloody fucking fire you know, Jesus Christ!’ A little man, his face beetroot appears, the sweat drips in triple beads into his neck, where the red singlet has made a dark patch of sweat, almost black, around the Chicago Bulls pattern. He bounds up the steps quickly, pushing Stacy aside.

‘Sorry mate. My daughter, Stace gets a bit worked up you know ... What’s the problem?’ He looks at Jed, the crinkle clown circles around his eyes dark and puffy, the muscles on his arms twitching like a live wire.

Jed swallows, shuffles sideways, starts again. ‘I’m Jed Deans. I’m looking for Noodle, perhaps you know him?’

‘Doug. Got any ID then ...?’ the little man says putting his hands on his hips.

Jed pulls out his badge again. ‘Look it’s just a general enquiry, he’s not in trouble.’

With a twitch Doug squints at the ID. With a sudden jerky spasm he pulls a cig out from his grey loose tracky pants pocket, lights it, turns towards Stacy with a spit to the ground. ‘Fucking Christ. That boy’s a loose cannon. He left here you know. God knows what fucking mess he’s in!’

The little man’s sweat begins to stream down the sides of his face to his mouth where moisture sits amongst the lines of his lips.

‘So, you don’t know where he is ... is he your son?’

Doug turns back to Jed, his neck pulsating, as he blows the smoke into his face. ‘Yeah mate, he’s my fucking son. A bloody no hoper. He bloody dropped out of school, packed his shit up and left. He fucked off. Good riddance. He left us you know, not a word of thanks for putting food in his mouth or nothing. And as for that boy he hangs out with, well the pair of them are bloody nuts.’

The kid lets out another piggy squeal as Stacy shoves it up to her waist. Slowly Jed raises his hands as he casually takes his sunglasses from his pocket, and attempts to polish them with the bottom of his jacket.

‘Oh ok, you mean Dylan Willis?’

The little man kicks a stone across the yard. ‘Fuck, that’s him, they’re always together, couldn’t separate them, and he’s just a weird kid that one.’

‘Oh, in what way would you call Dylan weird?’ Jed asks.

The little man jerks his body in another spasm of anger, his face darkening into beetroot again. ‘Well he didn’t speak, they just fucking hung out in front of the computer. That’s all they fucking did. One day the kid had this crazy melt down and hid in the bathroom, fuck.’

‘Hmm, ok, well, do you know where your son lives now?’

‘Nah,’ Doug replies as he takes another puff of his cigarette, then spits to the ground, this time it lands by Stacy’s foot.

Slowly nodding, Jed puts his hand in his pocket, feels around for a card. ‘Ok. Well, if you do see Noodle ... give me a call.’

Unmoving for the first time, Doug folds his arms like a bottle about to burst its gas. Stacy stands beside him smoking in silence. Jed backs away down the stairs, slipping the card onto the chair beside the mountain of nappies.

‘Um, well thanks for your time then.’ With a slow turn Jed walks back down the drive.

Nothing moves. Even the kid is still. Doug stoically stares out into the grassy swamp, his pale blue eyes falling on the long line of nappies swaying in the southerly wind tied to the long lone palm tree attached to the garage.

With a long sigh, Jed slumps back into the car seat. Steam seeps off the road from the rain, almost like a smoky cigar creeping ... the start of a migraine pressing in to his temples.

Well that was fucking pointless!

The lucky duck, a bottle of Merlot.

Salvation.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

Exhaling slowly, Dylan watches as the vapour hits the glass. It spreads out forming little crystals of white feathers. He blinks, each crystal changes within each second. Time to move. He grabs a pair of socks, then underwear from the cupboard, puts them on quickly with his tracksuit, *LA LAKERS* sweater.

Images swirl. With heavy breathing he throws water over his face to block everything. *Guppy girl, motorbike guy*. She really liked motorbike guy. How long does water take to flow clockwise down the sink? *1,1.2.3.4: 1.4* seconds total. He gives his sweater a tug, pulls the hood up over his head, glancing one last time in the mirror.

He runs down the stairs, blurring numbers fly past. As he reaches the bottom, the jug of boiling water whips into his ears. The lights of the kitchen pin into his eyes, too bright, he squints, reaches for the switch in annoyance flicking it off quickly. Sophie spins around from staring at the TV.

‘Oh hey, Dylan, I thought maybe you’d gone out ...’

He flaps his hand up. ‘Hey, no I slept in,’ he answers walking over to the kitchen bench for his orange mug.

‘I boiled the jug ...’ she says as she turns back to the TV.

He looks down to his phone. *10.30*.

low groan. The bus: 11.15.

She sits on the couch, clears her throat, pretending to be casual as she stares at the TV. She pushes her hair back from her face as she begins to bite her fingernails.

Her habitual habit; Low groan. Biting her nails then flicking them off into some part of the carpet. RED

‘Um so how have you been anyway? Sophie asks tightly.

RED

Low groan

He fills his mug up half way with coffee, and tiptoes around to sit on the stool. The TV reporter; a one Ray Santino, is standing in front of the Singapore National Zoo, the caption runs across the TV screen flashing; **“Mother Geraldine has had first baby girl in 10 years!!”** The father of the baby, Stanley, the youngest most fertile member of the Gorilla males, considered to be in his prime struts his stuff around the enclosure.

Looking closer into the screen the garishness of it all catches in his throat. Dry yellow spikes of jaggy grass press into him. The brittle barrier bars that surround the cold exterior. A disturbing sight; the eerie whacking wallop of the beating plastic pipe Stanley thwacks repeatedly over and over on the chained gate. Gnashing gnarling teeth, mix with the loud gasping breath that immerses from above in the public gallery of photographers and rubbernecks that have all come to see the holy savage birth.

The cameras flash - a ripple of bright white light - from the TV screen into his eyes. Stoically Stanley stands on a turned over twisted tyre. Throwing down the plastic pipe, he beats his fists on the ground, as if this is all rehearsed. He finishes off his performance *drama* with one grand gesture of urinating, displaying his primal form to the front line of the press.

The sound reverberates around in his head, a vile taste rising into his mouth. **RED.** He grits his teeth, looks away out the window to the soft morning rain as it gently falls on the grass.

He sips the coffee, quickly glances at Sophie, then back to the garden. ‘Fine, just around, you know.’

The baby gorilla, Nerollie, is now been given a bottle of milk by conservation ranger Shona White. An American Swiss import with a huge white smile, bouncy

buxom large thighs. Mixed with a tan only acquired by days of vigorously working out in the slopes and mountain ranges of the tropical rainforest in the Congo River Basin near Bwindi, Uganda.

‘Yeah, look, here’s the thing ...’ Sophie begins, her eyes set ahead on the TV. ‘The police, well a detective guy has been around asking for you.’

He gives her a sidelong look, runs his fingers through his hair as he twists himself back to look at the TV; Geraldine is going for a walk with Stanley, while Shona holds baby Nerollie in the hut.

‘I’ll sort it,’ he quickly answers taking another sip of coffee.

‘Dylan, I can help, you just need to work with me right?’

Loud groan

RED

Suddenly he stands, walks around to the bench, throwing the rest of the coffee down the sink. The black syrupy fluid spins clockwise down the black hole. Like his physics paper for year 11. He thought that one day another black hole would be discovered. If only time could catch up with reality, or perhaps it was the other way round. The last dregs disappear down the sink. What if reality wasn’t in time? Maybe time had no meaning. What would be the point in anything anymore?

A distant light is shining. Small rays slowly sparkling into the black hole. There’s something stretching out. It sounds peculiar, so high like its coming from the sky. It’s not possible. It’s getting louder.

‘Dylan, Dylan are you listening?’

He blinks.

The tap water is still spinning around.

RED.

10 minutes to go

It echoes out ... a tiny pebble on the water.

‘Later ...’ he murmurs as he runs out the door.

*

<We need to talk>S

<Where are you? I’m at the den>N

< One missed call> Unknown

“Oh hi Dylan, this is Inspector Jed Deans. I’m wondering if I could have a chat with you sometime, at your convenience ... cheers.”

Through a tiny gap in his hood he looks out the window. Images beyond, like a wall raised up high. He leans back further on the bus seat, closes his eyes to the outside world. The prisms from the sun form branches that reach out to him.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

<Where are you? Miss you>**D.A.**

<At home. Do you want to come over>**S**

Sophie bites her lip and waits.

<Ok, be over in an hour>**D.A.**

The butterfly's lurch up her stomach. Shower, clean clothes ... shit. She looks towards the clock on the wall. Not enough time. She runs up the stairs, her mobile ringing in her pocket.

<Unknown number>

'Err, hello?' Silence cuts the line.

'Oh hello, Sophie, Inspector Deans ... Ah, Jed speaking, um have you had any luck with Dylan?'

She stops on the stair landing. Turns, walks back down to the kitchen over to the pot plant by the sink. 'Um, he was right here ... he left though ... sorry'

'Oh. Ok, hmm, do you know where Noodle's warehouse is by any chance?'

Sophie glances at the clock. 'No ... um I don't ... but I know he used to work at some computer place. Um, Dylan wanted a new hard drive because his old one had crashed, dad said to go with him to buy it ... someplace called PROLIFE.'

'Are you sure of that?' Jed asks, his voice tightening.

'Um, yeah, pretty sure.'

The static on the phone clicks. Silence. She can hear him breathing. 'Are you there?' she says.

There's a muffled noise down the line as he clears his throat. 'Um, thanks Sophie, you've been a great help ...' the line goes dead.

She stands still in her tracks, taps her little phone with her fingers. Shit, 30 minutes. She rushes up the stairs, strips off her pyjamas, throws herself under the hot shower, squirting the shampoo round and round quickly. Bach lifts high, then down into a deep crescendo.

The hot air of the shower suddenly too much, she steps out, wiping the foggy mist from the mirror. The tree stares back. The crack of peace transcending into a horrible knot. Over her shoulder she tries to scramble back to shore, but the waves are knocking onto the rocks.

She runs out of the bathroom to her room, glances at her phone. Fifteen minutes to go. She speeds through her contacts. <WE NEED TO TALK DYLAN. URGENT>**S.**

She stares at her phone. Nothing. ‘Fuck,’ she cries. She throws the phone back on the bed, walks over to her dresser pulling on her pants and bra. As she slips into the jeans she had on from yesterday with the blue sweater, the mirror flickers in front of her. Clouds catch the reflection, pillows of white cotton floating by. Just out of reach. *If only.*

Suddenly her phone buzzes on the bed <I’m here>**D.A.**

‘Sophie,’ Daran murmurs, reaching down to kiss her in the front doorway.

‘Um, hi,’ she answers, bending her body into his as her stomach somersaults.

‘Don’t you want a cup of coffee?’ she asks, as he pulls on her sweater.

‘Coffee can wait, don’t you think?’ he whispers kissing into her neck.

She surprises herself with a little laugh as she leads him up the stairs to her room.

‘Oh ... Sophie,’ he mumbles, before he kisses her completely on the mouth.

She looks up at him, swallows, *waves crashing in.*

CHAPTER FIFTY

His first jumper was just a kid. Sixteen. The body was so contorted. The legs had twisted up and back like a floppy plastic kid's toy that you throw against the window that sticks, eventually sliding down to the ground. Blood from the young man's head had made a spiral blood pattern like it was turning and forming the petals of a flower. It reminded him at the time, of one of those spores from the flowers found in summer by the beach. A native of some sort.

*

A sudden knock. Lil waves enthusiastically through the window holding his takeaways.

The chicken wing slides in his fingers as he presses the phone speaker.

'Err, Yes? ... Jed? ... Anything?' Dell asks fumbling down the phone.

'Ah, yeah, I think I have something. There's a link between PROLIFE and Noodle, Dylan's friend,' Jed answers as he opens his rice, scooping some of it into the chicken dish.

'Righto, chicken nice?'

'Ah yeah, would be better with some red ...'

'Any luck with Dylan?'

'Ah not yet, if I can track down Noodle, Dylan will be there. I rang the sister, Dylan's been and gone ...'

'Righto, he can't be that bloody hard to find. I think it's time to make him a high priority, send out a description to everyone on the ground.'

Jed stops chewing. 'You think that's a good idea? I don't want the kid bolting. He already disappeared this morning.'

Silence down the line.

‘I know what you’re saying Jed, but all hands on for this kid, I think we need to bring him in ASAP.’

‘Yeah, I get what you’re saying Dell, but I’ve been reading the notes on him from the psychologist, and Principal at the school. Look the kid has high anxiety and Asperger’s. Whatever his involvement in this murder is, he’s not going to be telling us straight out is he? He’s used to been on the defensive ... He’s in a highly anxious state as well, so ...’

‘Righto, I’ll leave it to your better judgement then, Jed.’

She clicks off.

He stares back out the front of the windscreen to a homeless man with a trolley, negotiating the busy traffic as he tries to get from one side of the road to the other. A car stops, which causes the cars behind to honk their horns. With transcending steps of gold the man seemingly floats across the road. As if nothing has occurred, as though it was some sort of apparition, the traffic resumes.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

The red dot is silently moving. Noodle puts down the phone, stretches and walks over to the kitchen. The bare cupboard, a lone packet of stale biscuits stuffed away at the back looks out at him. He pushes his arm right to the back, tries to pull it free, it doesn't budge. With a butter knife he swings it backwards and forwards until it hooks the package.

Vanilla cream. Biting down, he looks back out the window; stale cream slides forwards to the tip of his tongue. The girl down below stands in the sun's shadow as she begins to bring in her washing. Her toddler squats on the concrete strip with a toy truck, pushing it along the cracked pavement, where the ants run frantically to create a mound of food to push into their hole before nightfall.

He pushes the back door with his boot. It opens just a fraction, where he perches on the stairs, watching as the sun just barely creeps over the building sending its last rays out over the cold city.

The girl looks up, notices him above. She waves. Then presses her hands onto her jeans, wipes them as she leans down to pick the toddler up. With a jiggle, she puts him on her waist with the basket in her other hand. A harsh wind suddenly whips around the yard, pushing her thin brown strands of hair into a tangle around her face, she pulls them back against the wind, exposing her weathered face, with deep lines set in around her eyes.

With one last look out at the sky, the clouds now a purple line in the horizon, he walks back inside, glances down to his phone.

<Thanks for last night>E

< ☺ >N

Suddenly the skeleton cries. Steps, soft at first then louder.

Dylan rushes through the door, out of breath, his hand flapping.

‘I need you to log on to the chatroom with your charger, mine’s stuffed.’

‘What room?’ Noodle asks as he walks over to his computer.

‘I was at a cafe last night, the Mouse was there, and didn’t attack me in the room. I saw someone ... maybe our Mouse ...’

‘Ok, well ... what café was it ... and what time was it ...?’ Noodle replies, his eyes gazing into the computer screen as he clicks the mouse.

‘9.30. Zebb Café. There was this girl there ... sh ... sh ... she looked at me, she was in the chatroom when the Mouse was.’

Noodle suddenly coughs, swallows down hard. ‘Oh, ok, what kind of girl. How do you know she’s involved?’

‘No no ... sh ... sh ... she’s connected ... she walked out of the café. I followed her, then she met this guy.’

With a large sigh, Noodle spins around. He walks over to the fridge, kicks the door open with his foot then grabs a coke.

Calmly, Noodle rest his eyes ahead onto the window ledge. ‘Um, look Dylan, I’m sure she’s not connected ... Maybe we can look at the others on the site that were there at Zebb café at the same time.’

‘I spose,’ Dylan mumbles with a shrug. Suddenly he sits upright as Noodles phone jumps across the desk. Noodle walks over, glances down at it.

<Tonight?>**E**

‘Um yeah ... I ...’ Noodle begins to say.

‘Can I ... I ... stay here ...’ Dylan quickly blurts out, his eyes darting to the computer then back to Noodle.

‘Oh mate, look I don’t know ...’ Noodle says sliding down on his computer chair.

Suddenly, Dylan sucks his lips in, begins to rub his ear with his hand. ‘You know, the cops are on to me ...’

‘What? What do you mean?’ Noodle asks spinning around on his chair.

‘On Friday night. I went to pick up a package for my computer at this guy’s house ... Spade ...he said to come late ...at 11.00 pm ... so I did ...’ Dylan says, his face turning pale white, his eyes fixed on the computer screen.

‘Go on ... so what happened ... I mean ... fuck, why didn’t you tell me? What happened?’ Noodle repeats.

‘He had another guy there ... but I don’t know ... it was so familiar ... and they were arguing, the back door was open so I stood in the laundry ... I ... I ... listened for ages, and then someone else came in, but I don’t know how they got in? I don’t know who it was ... th ... then ... then a gun went off. I ... I ... tried to ring you but it went to voicemail. Then a guy ran past me with a mask over his head and pushed me into the washing machine, and I fell down ... I didn’t know what to do ... so I hid in the laundry, while the guy was in the other room, then he went out into the kitchen, so I went into the living room.’

‘Jesus ... fuck Dylan!!’ Noodle cries lighting up a cigarette.

‘There was a guy who was dead ...’ Dylan begins to say, as he stands and paces the room. His finger rubbing quickly over his ear. ‘The blood was there, all over his face, and he was just sitting there. His eyes were like marble fish eye slits wide open. I could only see the whites of his eyes staring back at me. Then there was a noise outside, I could hear the other guy coming back into the living room, so I ran up the stairs and hid in the bathroom.’

‘It all happened so fast, I ran and ran I couldn’t get out, and I ... I had blood on my sweatshirt. I took my shoes off ... but then ... someone came half way up the stairs, and they were breathing I could hear them ... I ... I pissed myself ... and then the police siren ... it was too loud ... everything went dark ...’

‘Did you see the gunman?’ Noodle asks as he quickly inhales his cig.

Dylan walks to the window, looks out into the black night as a shiver runs up his body.

‘N... Nn ... no.’

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

Sophie jumps nervously as her phone vibrates.

<We need to talk>**X**

< I'm home alone>**S**

The idea of vomiting suddenly rises. She dry retches, barely makes it to the toilet. Spinning muted clouds pass in her mind as she sinks back to the edge of the porcelain whiteness.

Finally she hauls herself up, splashes some cold water over her face as she looks in the mirror. Her stomach turns like a hole inside, a deep dark pit.

<MISS YOU>**D.A.**

Groaning she quickly puts on her track pants and top, runs down stairs to the kitchen. Swishing in her socks across the kitchen floor she pushes the jug down, then reaches for the toast. She was so happy when dad made her peanut butter on toast. Dylan always wanted runny honey, because of the texture. He would count down the stairs, repeat the bottom step twice then flick the lights on five times. Then he would race to his stool, spin around until he reached twenty, before eating his honey on toast while watching his sea documentary.

Deep in thought she stares down at her plate as the peanut butter falls off the toast. The knock at the door seems miles away. Another knock, louder this time.

She turns.

Walks to the back door.

The shadow stands in the doorway, smoke climbing up around like a vine of twisty leaves.

‘We have a problem.’

Sophie swallows, unable to say anything, the peanut butter evaporates into a tasteless vile.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

A sudden burst of hail hits the deck as Jed tries to tie the cord around the umbrella. The thought of an early night runs through his brain as the security light flicks on down the drive.

‘Now what, for Christs Sake!’

Blowing in the wind, willowy Pierson stands in the porch light of the front door, like a mime artist about to do a silent movie.

‘Ah, Pierson? This is unexpected? Please come in ...’

Pierson’s pale blue eyes light up as he looks towards the warmth of the house.

‘Um, I’m about to have a glass of wine, can I tempt you?’ Jed asks as he walks back down the hallway.

Pierson holds his umbrella aloft like it’s a prop in part of his sketch as he follows behind.

‘Ah, well, unfortunately I have a long night ahead ... looking at the mysterious case of the Invercargill girl found last week, Willox ... her head half off, it just doesn’t add up you know ... well anyway ... not one of your cases I presume?’

Jed shakes his head.

Pierson smiles and opens his hands again. ‘Well, the reason I’m here, is a sudden lab result appeared this morning. I had trouble getting you on your mobile. Well, it appears to be a mysterious chemical only found on some types of metals or materials. I spent a large part of the day researching it. And there are only a few places in the world where it is legal to have such a chemical in use.’

Pierson smiles again, opening his hands once more. ‘The chemical was found on the shoe that you gave me. If I’m correct, it was on one of the suspects running

away? The shoe, trainer to be precise, has a silver ammonium nitrate attached to it, which one can only fathom has come from a warehouse of some sort. I would suggest the warehouse is used for transporting these chemicals to other parts of the world. This particular chemical is used as a liquid to form other such things. It's a very toxic chemical, highly desirable if put in the wrong hands.' Pierson finishes, a long sigh, as his arms fall to his side like a deflated lilo.

Jed swallows slowly as he sits on the corner of the couch arm. 'Hmm, I've had a hunch they are exporting and importing something. Was there any other traces through the house?

'There is a carpet from the living room. We are sampling it right now for further DNA. And of course we have Dylan Willis's DNA on the bathroom tub, but it doesn't match the footprint.'

'Of course, thank you Pierson.'

Pierson smiles, silently bows. 'I must depart.' He turns, folds himself inwards and walks down the hall. As he reaches the porch he elegantly raises his feet, stepping out into the pelting rain, with one last nod. The gale wind suddenly rises pushing him sideways, as his left jacket pocket flaps like a small sail boat battling a very big storm.

Walking back into the living room, Jed pours himself another large glass of Merlot. Another renovation programme on the TV. He curls his lip at the happy couple advertising how wonderful their house is. How happy they are that they have invested such a huge proportion of their money and time. With another large gulp of wine, he realises he hasn't heard from Sarah in a day.

He walks back into the kitchen, reaches for the first drawer. Bugger, it's not there. He closes it, casting his eyes slowly back around the kitchen. It must be somewhere. Sighing he looks up at the ceiling. His eyes settle on the long tall cupboard in the corner of the kitchen with the fern sleepily unfurling down.

The envelope half pokes over the side. He jumps up. It edges closer. Another go. This time it floats to the floor. Slowly he walks back over to the couch. His lip curls over as he reads SARAH ELIZABETH COLLINS has applied on this day of the 29th of July for a divorce from the party involved; that of JED HENRY DEANS. Over the page, more lawyer bullshit. He flicks through to the end. Sarah's autograph. Cold and bold.

With a sigh, he looks back up to the TV; the couple stand huddled in the rain, with their gumboots on, the water pooling around their feet. Declaring through gritted teeth and determination that everything is fine after a year of delays including flood water having wet the wooden boards of the house.

The man interviewing them tells them that they have stood the test of time. The happy couple both laugh, affirming their love for each other yet again through sideways looks and more gritted teeth. The woman appears to have aged 10 years, now holds a baby, while the husband looks off in to the distance, to the remote hills, perhaps thinking about the freedom he once had before he embarked on the TV reality programme. Now, he has responsibility to maintain a stiff upper lip to anything coming his way, including the liquidation of the company building the house.

The scribble looks half finished. It will do. He pushes the papers back in the envelope and places it on the kitchen bench. He then turns back to the couch. The merlot waiting.

As he leans down into the cushion, his phone flickers.

'Er, hello, Jed speaking ...' a silence reaches out over the phone.

'Oh, hello, Mr Deans? Ah, I mean Jed ... its Sylvia Beech, Principle from Cashmere High. Um, I apologise for the inconvenience of ringing you after hours, you must be busy with your family?'

Jed scratches the back of his neck as he looks around the empty room.

‘Ah, hello Mrs Beech. No, you’re not disturbing me at all, it’s just me in fact,’ half laughing. He gulps down the last of his wine, suddenly putting his serious voice on. ‘So how can I help you Mrs Beech?’

There is another silence down the line of the phone. ‘Oh, well actually, just Sylvia, no Mrs. Um, anyway, I was reading through some notes earlier today, and came across an interesting fact I forgot to tell you. When Dylan was 14, he broke his nose. He fell down some stairs at the school, he had been running, not watching where he was going, and he fell on his face, knocking his top lip up to his nose. Um, well it was his reaction, he screamed, then passed out in fact. We had to get a PE teacher and an older boy to lift him to the sickbay. When he came to, he said he hated blood. I asked him why, and he said it was the colour.’

‘I see, that’s really helpful actually. Did you document the accident?’

‘Yes of course, I can bring it now if you like?’

Jed scratches the back of his head. ‘Ah yeah sure, only if you’re not busy? As a principle you probably have family and everything, either that or I could meet you tomorrow say at the café down High street called “YAZU,” say eleven? If that’s not too early for a Saturday?’

‘Let’s see ... I have a hair appointment at twelve,’ she pauses. ‘So yes, I could squeeze it in. That’s fine. Until then.’

‘Yes,’ his voice spirals upwards. He grimaces, puts his hand up to cover his mouth.

‘Right, see you then,’ she replies. The phone clicks off.

With another gulp of wine, he opens his phone.

<I’ve signed papers. Will put in the post>J

He leans back on the couch, stares back up at the ceiling where the steel lights reflect the colour of the sea marine walls. They seem to moving like gentle waves. Backwards and forwards in motion, slowly closing around him as he drifts away ...

*

... softness, cushions, with something like feathers touches his face

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

The usual mags cover the table. Nothing jumps out, apart from an old obscure magazine peeping out from underneath the glossy ones. *Walks of the Lake District*. With a tilt of her head, Dell walks around the room. Various flyers cover the walls for youth suicide, youth prevention, lifeline, Christian youth, outreach programmes, a list of psychologists, doctors available.

Over in the corner opposite the front door a young girl chews her pen behind the little reception desk, she appears to be incredibly young, wearing too much blue eyeshadow, perhaps a uni student.

The fish tank in the corner of the room sways towards Dell as she finds a seat, its little black metal stand heaving under the weight. The only activity from a black shark, with a red tail. Barely visible as it hovers on the bottom of the tank, like a scud missile, moving its silver eye up slowly it lets out an occasional silent bubble that floats up towards the surface of the water before it slowly disappears with a slow lethargic pop. Feeling like an old fish herself, Dell breathes in the tight hot air blasting from the heat pump above circling in tidal waves around the room.

A young teenage couple walk through the entrance to the clinic, the reception girl smiles handing them the dreaded clipboard. Feeling over it all, she looks back down across the table towards the walking magazine. She reaches out for it as her back invariably creaks again, maybe not, another sigh, picking it up anyway she flicks through the contents to the article on the inside world of Beatrix Potter, the pictures of the article portray an inviting picturesque view with green paddocks, tussocks, blossom blotched landscapes, pastures with willowy trees of green dappled leaves that begin to roll into her head.

‘Ahem, excuse me ... are you Mrs McCaully? A thin women hardly any bones to her body stands in front of her, only reaching 5 foot 4 perhaps, with dark piercing brown eyes.

Dell jumps up in her chair as the magazine drops to the chair beside her. ‘Oh so sorry love, that’s me, Dell, are you Amy White? I was miles away reading about walking tours in the UK.’

The women steps back allowing Dell to pick her bag up.

‘Yes ... yes I’m Amy, please follow me Dell.’

*

Dell walks forward into the room, tilts her head as she looks out the window to the carpark below. ‘Thank you for seeing me at such short notice ... if you can give us any insight into Dylan’s mind that would be helping with our inquiry immensely.’

Amy nods her thin face. Immediately Dell can see the worn lines creeping up her face. Although, for such a small women she manages to pluck up the energy from somewhere as she over enthusiastically pushes out her words.

‘Yes, absolutely, please, have a seat Dell. I’ve made a gap of about one hour, I hope that’s a good amount of time to tell you something of use. A cup of tea?’

Leaning back into the sofa Dell feels behind herself to the faded purple cushions that appear to be worn from the many clients. ‘A cup of tea would be lovely, it’s such a grim time, this weather has gone on for days, the rain comes and goes, then when we think its clearing up it starts all over again.’

Amy nods in agreement, then walks over to a small bench, turns the jug on, as it boils she reaches above to some beautifully handcrafted brown mugs. ‘Is ordinary tea alright, or peppermint or rosebush?’

Dell tilts her head to the right ‘Oh ordinary is fine, no milk. Thanks.’

Amy pauses over the bags, watching as the darkened ashen tea quickly absorbs the water almost like clouds in the sky. They linger. She furrows her brow, quickly pushes them back to a deepened corner. Clearing her throat she projects out her next words, but they sound small, narrow like an arrow lost in its bearings.

‘So how long have you been with the police Dell?’

Adjusting herself again in the chair, Dell pushes the cushion behind her so it slopes into her back to ease a nagging pain. ‘Oh, um, probably coming up to twenty five years now. I’m on the verge of retirement. I would really like my partner Jed to take the reins in the next year ... but we’ll see.’

Amy nods her head quietly in deep thought as she pulls the tea bags out, slowly turns, then walks over to the comfy tweed patched blue seat opposite Dell. As she puts the mugs down, she leans back with a long sigh, but then with a nervous twitch she leans forwards. ‘That’s a long time in the same job, do you ever get sick of it?’

Dell tilts her head again, before she leans back on the sofa chair with a look of contemplation. ‘Um, well I’m getting to the stage where I would like to have less intensity in my life, too many murders, call outs, all a bit tiring now ... I think maybe I’m getting a bit over it all.’

With a half-smile, Amy nods, ‘Yes I can imagine, I find myself wondering where I will be in five years’ time, I get tired of the endless youth call outs, high risk teens, talks with parents, abuse, neglect, suicides, depression. If I didn’t have an outlet I would go crazy...’ She trails off, her eyes settling on the rainbow crystal that hangs in the gap of the window, catching the morning sun softly spinning its hues on the window.

‘What is your outlet? If you don’t mind me asking.’

Drawing herself back into the room, Amy tries to smile. ‘Let’s see, well I dabble in paint, mainly abstract art and watercolour. I also garden, so most of my spare

time is surrounded with doing things with my hands in a way.’ She laughs, as she brings her hand up to her mouth almost covering her smile.

‘Hmm, sounds lovely,’ Dell says as she notices Amy’s strong tight grip around her mug.

Swallowing the tea down slowly Dell twitches her mouth slightly as her tongue goes to the side with a click. ‘Tell me Amy, do you think Dylan is capable of murder?’

Amy gulps her mouthful of tea, as her eyes settle on the table in front of her. ‘Yes and no. It’s a complicated thing, Autism Spectrum disorder. Dylan has a mixture of things involved in his makeup. A complicated bundle of things, not just the simple diagnosis of ASD.’

With a serious look Amy crosses her legs. ‘There’s lots of evidence now that indicates ADHD is psychological. That is why Dylan presented such an interesting case to me. His mind ticks very fast at times. But in other ways he processes things differently using “a different filter,” well that’s how I like to put it, and this is sometimes at a varying pace. Like for instance reading a facial expression or the look between people. He may misconstrue things as anger, when it is merely a glance, a fleeting look of hesitation in a person. A lot of his misconceptions or confusions over things comes from his feeling realm which is not always accurate.’

‘Yes, I think I understand,’ Dell replies, taking another sip of tea, followed by a click of her tongue. ‘Well do you think if he did do something like say harm someone he would feel some sense of remorse?’

Slowly Amy pulls her hair back behind her ear as she looks up towards the ceiling. ‘That’s a hard one to answer in some ways, every case is different you see. What we sense as a neuro-typical person with remorse; such as saying a worded verbal apology or crying, well Dylan is not so good at communicating these signs verbally, but that’s not to say he doesn’t not show these signs.’

‘He does have emotions. But he displays things differently. For example he is very honest, in fact too honest. If I was to ask him what he had done on a particular day, he would list it almost like a log book, not derailing or going off on a tangent to anything else in particular. Most people will have a general talk about what they did and it will become a laid back conversation where two people have a discourse.’

Pausing for a breath, Amy takes another sip of tea, her little frame then seems to become more animated as she raises her hands to speak again. ‘But the interesting thing is, I know he can think in an abstract way. I have had numerous conversations on what he notices in a room or about a person, the descriptions of what he sees are beyond the general IQ of a normal functioning person. For example he sees many things in a three and four dimensional way. The problem with all this is that Dylan has no filter for anything, he’s just processing information all the time. Which can lead to over stimulation, exhaustion, and anxiety.’

‘So, this puts huge pressure on his brain to take everything in, to logically form a reasoning pattern over situations. This can lead to him sometimes interpreting things wrongly. And when this happens his coping mechanism is often to disassociate from this world into his own world. It’s become his normal way to cope. By removing himself from this reality he feels safer.’

‘Through therapy, I have helped him process things. But he is still unique, he will never be like you or me walking around. He has his own set of ticks, traits and personality, some of which he is aware of, but at other times he’s not so aware of how he is.’

‘You see, a person such as you or me have learned how to process things through social interaction and also through the reasoning part of our brain, which stems from our limbic brain system which helps to create our own cognitive awareness. We have an understanding of such things as attachment, love, happiness, sadness, and an

awareness of ourselves in relationships with others. Dylan's limbic brain never properly developed, at the age of about two and a half he went backwards developing a detachment from his parents and the world.'

'By the time he walked through my door at nearly five I had a fairly good idea of what was ahead, but the ADHD was slower to diagnose as it mixed with his anxiety levels. It wasn't until he was eight that we did more tests with a psychiatrist Dr Mitchell, that we were able to stabilize his mood through medication enough to have him sit on that chair and tell me his own colour number sequence, which he was really into at the time.'

Amy lets out a sigh, glances at the clock on the wall as she leans back in the chair. 'Is there anything else I can answer?'

Pushing her lips together, Dell tilts her head. 'Well ... if we have time, I was going to ask you about his parents?'

Crossing her legs, a shadow of something darkens on Amy's face. Appearing more rigid in her small body, she looks down at her hands, grasping them in a tight ball.

'This is going to be the slightly awkward bit of the conversation.'

Dell raises her eyebrow, as she twists her head to the right. 'Oh.'

Amy shuffles in her seat. 'You are aware that Dylan's parents separated?'

Nodding silently, Dell gestures for Amy to continue.

With soft sigh, Amy's voice becomes small, distant. 'Well, this is strictly off the record ok?'

'Yes of course luv.'

Amy swallows, a hard lump slowly moves down her throat to the bottom like an anchor. 'Well ... I was seeing Dylan's father.'

Nervously Amy casts her eyes back up to the ceiling. 'It was a friendship for a very long time, before anything romantic began to happen. You know, his wife is very

attractive. It never crossed my mind that we would end up you know ... let me rephrase that, I wasn't looking for anything, but he reached out to me, I don't know, I thought we had a real connection.'

'Eventually John told his wife. Joanna said she knew that something was up. She left home, moving in with some guy called Drew, a photographer. Then they up and left to Australia at the end of Dylan's first year at High School.' John suspected she was seeing Drew before we even got together. It was all really convenient that she just up and left Dylan and Sophie.'

'Did you still see Dylan professionally when you were with John?'

'Yes and no. I ended my therapy sessions with Dylan at the beginning of last year, but John and me ... well we have ended things now.'

The clock on the wall ticks loudly in the silence as Amy slowly swallows, the anchor unmoving. 'My affair with John was a stupid regrettable thing to do. But at the same time Joanna had kind of ended things in her head with John quite some time before.'

She suddenly stops mid-sentence, shakes her head almost berating herself. 'Listen to me ... I sound so stupid now ... I'm trying to justify it ... I still have feelings for John ... but Dylan ... he has to come first.'

She then scrunches her face, sighs and wipes her eyes. 'Sorry, I forgot you asked me if Dylan was capable of murder. All I can say is that if he is ever pushed beyond what he's capable of, he will act impulsively without thinking things through, but he's not a violent person, it's not in his nature.'

'Hmmm,' Dell says as she looks up towards the wall at the clock, then reaches down feeling around the chair for her bag. 'Ok, well, I guess that's our time Amy. I'm sorry this has to be under these circumstances.'

With slow movements Dell hobbles her way back towards the door. She hesitates before turning the handle, with a brief look backwards, not always the best philosophy. Amy stands beneath the rainbow crystal; the prisms of light casting a shadow over her shoulder.

‘... I must go luv.’

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

The blank screen stares back at Dylan. Nothing. The emptiness reminds him of space; still, silent, with the occasional shooting star that flicks out into the unknown.

He glances down to his phone.

6.58pm; +5 = 12 = Midnight.

RED.

New message. JED DEANS.

Teeth grind.

Loud groan.

He walks into the kitchen, opens the cupboard, nothing.

Hunger pangs inside.

The wind howls outside the window. He looks out into the dark black night.

All empty. The stars have gone out.

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

Autumn, 2013. Dylan can feel the divide. Like the tip of the North Island, where the two bodies of water meet, but never touch. Cape Reinga on the left, and North Cape on the right, with ninety mile beach running behind, its feet dipping in the water.

Mum has gone. **RED**. She has a perfectly good home. Dad has said she needs time out. Just like how everyone needs fresh air he said. Technically air is fresh.

Dad sleeps alone in the big blue room. His body lies like a corpse. Although technically if he was a corpse he would be dead. Also as Dylan's text book on *Human Anatomy 103* by Jonathan Spire has said; an adult breathes between **12-20** breaths per minute, but this slightly decreases in sleeping. In total, a human adult can breathe between **17,000** and **30,000** breaths in a day. One night he stayed up and watched him until **4.04 am**. There was a small rise under his rib cage every **4.2** seconds. The blue sheet quivered slightly as the warm air hit the cold exterior of the blue room.

*

Rocks, rivers, pools, stars shoot high across a deep blue struck sky

The knocks get louder.

Granite grating pierces through. Shards of glass into his eyes.

'Morning Sunshine,' Sophie says as she knocks the door again. She then looks down at her phone in a haze of texting. The radio blares from her room. It reminds him of the rubbish truck that hisses loud **ZZZZzzzs** down the street every Monday morning at **7.00 am**, with the drivers hooting and hollering **RED RED RED**

Loud groan, the pillow, a rock, hurls towards the door.

'Go away!' he says, slamming his face down under the covers ... **DARKNESS**
... **PURPLE**

She backs away down the hall raising her hands up above her head. 'Dad, a no go, Dylan's in one of his moods.'

'Leave it to me Sophie, do you need money for lunch? John asks as he pushes himself against the wall to let her pass.

'No, I made a sandwich,' she sings back, then bounces down the stairs to the kitchen, whistling like a canary. 'Hello boy ...' she says as Thunder weaves between her legs.

He can hear her. He can always hear her. **Low groan.** Her heels dig in. Tiny miniscule minute pebble stones crunch under her feet. The gate swings open; E #, **ORANGE**, its rusty hinges opening wide like tweezers. **5** seconds of creaks. **5,4,3,2,1** ... it swings back, hits the side wood of the garage **3x** ... Kaa Jong!!

'Hey,' John says as he leans up against the wooden frame of the door, creating a shadow over the beam of light from the hallway, reminding Dylan of *ZANE; A fallen angel from his comic HEAVENS AND BEYOND 24.com.*

John stretches out his hand, placing Dylan's favourite orange mug on the table. He continues over to the desk where Joanna's non-communicable note lies; 'Needs a repeat prescription John!'

His eyes travel to the mountainous dishevelled heap of clothes over the chair. He pulls the jeans away from the sweatshirt with the t-shirt stuck inside as the static pops, then reaches up to the drawer for his school uniform.

'Honey sandwiches for lunch? John asks staring out the window to the haze of CBD traffic in the distance.

Low groan.

'I'm not going.'

The red Cadillac clock on the wall above Dylan's desk ticks over to 7.30 am, a present from Joanna on his eight birthday.

'Do you want to talk about it?' Johns asks scratching his chin as he glances back out the window again at the hovering dark clouds. 'Hmmm, I think it's going to rain, so you might need your jacket Dylan.'

He kicks his feet under the covers, then pokes his head up from the duvet.

'Why's mum gone?'

With a long sigh, John bends down to pick up a book about Labyrinth's and mazes from the floor. 'Um well, we've decided to have some time apart. You know how sometimes you need space away from people? Well your mum needs some time alone. Space. You know.'

Pushing his feet upwards, the duvet makes a mountain in the middle of the bed. **Low groan.** He grabs his coffee mug from beside the bed, sits up, **2** gulps. The **3rd** gulp has to be slower than **4** seconds. **1,2,3.0.3.2 ... RED**, he spits it back into the cup. 'WHY!! When will I see her again?'

The silence grows as John comes to sit on the bed, his runner's knee cracking with a pop into the still air. His eyes scan around the room, eventually falling on the model silver 1975 Cessna 150 mobile calmly twisting around on its fish wire. Dylan had made it when he was seven, in all his excitement he even added wheels made from plastic black buttons. Slowly he looks down to a huge set of brown eyes staring back out to him.

'Look Dylan, I'll try to organise for her to come this weekend. I'll take Sophie out so you can spend some time with her? How does that sound?'

Teeth grind. Lips suck in. RED.

Dad's mouth is turned down. Like a crab ... is he angry?

DAD'S mouth is an angry crab:]]]

*

Before going down stairs, he looks out the window, his breath, a cold curl, stretches onto the glass creating a circle. Using his index finger he draws sticks for legs, crazy hair, ski boots, a minus mouth.

It's a minus day. RED.

Low groan.

With a silent shrug he pulls himself back from the glass. The bus is coming closer. Its gears are changing to go down Cashmere hill onto Colombo Street South. He sucks his lips in, remembering his dad's strict rule about no busing until the weekend; and only with an adult.

8.10 AM. 52 seconds.

SCHOOL. GREEN.

The cowboy strides spread out like he's in the rough terrain of the west as he makes his way towards the stairs. He almost steps off over the cliff to the mountainous depths below. One deep breath.

LIFT OFF

1,2,3,4 back one. Forward one.

1,2,3,4 back one. Forward one.

1,2,3,4, back one. Forward one.

YELLOW

Mercury in space = YELLOW

... 15; the 2nd landing; = square/4 angles of 90 degrees= LXL or L squared/

A=L squared.

YELLOW YELLOW YELLOW YELLOW YELLOWYELLOW

Low groan.

SCHOOL.GREEN.

8.16 AM. 43 seconds

Step 16

1,2,3,4 back one. Forward one.

Step 17

1,2,3,4 back one. Forward one.

18.

STOP.

G major = *blue blue blue*

With a jolt through his body, he runs to the kitchen, reaches for the lights; *on off on off on off on off = 5 blue blue blue*. In the background, the TV mumbles into his ears like an aquarium filter popping and bubbling away in the water.

With one flying leap he spins onto the stool, his eyes closed shut; **1,2,3, 4, 5,6,7,8.5.9 =PRIME**. “Auuuugh!!” It opens up through his mouth. **STOP**. Eyes wide open in both directions. **180** degrees between the TV and kitchen.

Out of the corner of his left eye he can see dad pushing the plate of honey triangle wedges along the bench towards him from the edge. **7 triangles X 3 sides =21 sides =*blue blue blue***

‘All set? I’ve rung the school to let Miss Atkinson know you’ll be slightly late to class, we should probably leave about 8.45, how’s that for you?’

As if his legs are on a bike he spins around on the stool again, his dad’s voice over a **PURPLE** hill somewhere by the seaside floating away, pushing at the tide, far far away. **GREY GREY GREY**

STOP. The lady on the TV has a sparkly necklace of little oblong beads made of crystal with a tiny green stone in the middle. **31** sparkly stones= **PRIME= *blue blue blue***. But it’s not equal on both sides of her neck. **RED RED RED**.

Teeth grinding

Low groan.

Her mouth is moving up and down, pursing her lips out; bright pink lolly cake, like the one on his **12th** birthday **3** weeks ago. Even more interesting is the way she breathes every **5.5** seconds. The trick is to get the suction right and not pass out. He closes his eyes as he draws in a huge warm breath to try, but the horrible purple flower pattern of the curtains gets in the way through his eyelids ... **RED RED RED**

‘Dylan ... open your eyes!! Your toast ... it’s getting cold ... eat it please!’ John yells as he slaps his hand on the kitchen bench to get his attention. John then walks a few feet feeling inside his pockets for his keys.

‘Fuck!’ he yells again as he walks halfway to the hallway, peers into the fruit bowl where the sparkly key chain with numerous keys on stares back at him. ‘Right,’ he says under his breath as his phone buzzes.

<How’s Dylan, did the shower go ok?> **Joanna**

He hesitates in the hallway, stuffs it back in his pocket running his hand through his hair, then briskly walks back into the kitchen. ‘Ok kid, let’s get this party going,’ he says over enthusiastically, his lips tight in a thin line as he looks towards the TV, then back to Dylan who looks back at him confused.

‘Dad, it’s not a party, it’s school. I didn’t get an invitation to a party; who’s having a party? Is Mum coming home? Is that why we’re having a party? I just had my party **3** weeks ago.’

John picks up the remote, pushing the button down hard. ‘No Dylan, no party, I was just excited to leave.’

Closing his eyes into little slits he looks at his dad’s face, = he’s **RED** today. **AN ANGRY CRAB.** ‘Are you coming to school as well?’

Without answering John walks to the door, waits for Dylan, then locks the door as he tumbles backwards, his left foot tripping over the Aloe Vera pot plant with its

sticky up bits. ‘Shit! No Dylan, I’m dropping you off at School ... then I have to go to my office for work!’

Lips suck in.

Low groan,

Teeth grinding

His dad’s down a black hole in space. He could suck him in. Into the vortex. He quickly makes a giant **SPACE JUMP**, away off the back door step towards **SPACE**. **5 MOON SPACE** strides away into the potted geraniums.

With a spin to the right **90** degrees, the house stares back at him. The windows have **16** rectangles. The good thing is that the sides of the house are cut in half, with **2** sets of **4** on each side of the door, with a total of **8** on each side. It’s even. But something he can live with, as the door makes it **17**= **PRIME**=*blue blue blue*.

Another turn, **45** degrees this time, he faces the path. With his moon walk, he **SPACE JUMPS** to the gate **10** metres ahead. The gate creaks **5x** before it hits the wooden garage wall. The car with its **8** foggy faces waits along the slope. The perspiration drops stream down the glass in quick succession, reminding him of how people cry; water streams form from the tear ducts in the eyes. Interestingly his *Encyclopaedia of the World; Discoveries of the Planet Series 3.4*; says that the eye of an animal can produce tears; *lachrimation* which is necessary, also technically healthy for this to happen. Vertebrates are capable of this. And some mammals on land = produce tears. Fish don’t cry. They live in salt, which cleans their eyes constantly. A big blue bath. Maybe dolphins cry though. Sometimes people cry on the inside. This is what Amy has said. She is right. Not mum. Not dad. Amy listens.

Low groan. His last session, they had talked about colour, how **RED** was an angry colour. She had asked if he was angry a lot. He had said it depends on if it’s a

plus day or a minus day. But that was something Amy just didn't understand and never would.

He reaches out his hand to wipe away the water. Dad is waving his hand back. A lollipop man doing yoga exercises. **YELLOW**. He pushes his lips into the glass, like one of the grunt kissing fish on his documentary of the undersea creatures of the world with David Attenborough; then with a huge breath in he blows a sucker kiss through the air.

The window bangs at him. **JOLT**. Its coming closer towards him through the ocean. The door opens with a huge gust of energy pushing him back onto the footpath. 'Dylan! Come on! Get in, we haven't got time for this today!'

A **BLACK** dark vortex creeps out to him. It wants to suck him in again. It's creeping up into his head. **Low groan. Teeth grinding. MOON JUMP** into the car with the space boots. The **BLACK HOLE hovers**.

John looks across to him in the front passenger seat, then glances in the rare view mirror. 'Dylan, please try to remember not to grind your teeth! Come on, we have ten minutes to get there, before your teacher will officially start to send out a search party for you.'

Lips suck in.

DAD the CRAB.

'Dad, am I in trouble with Ms Atkinson?'

John squeezes his eyes together reminding Dylan of the time he got his finger caught in the kitchen door when he was 5 years old. He had screwed his body and face up like a sea anemone from his underwater sea creature documentary series; A sea anemone could live entirely alone if it wanted. It survived by either attaching itself to a base or floating through the sea. Dylan was a floater. His rings of tentacles spread out across the surface, and his mouth could open and close. His mouth opened and closed

when he screamed. But he could protect himself from harm, with his secret weapon. *Cnidocytes*, a stinging agent. If anyone got too close to him he was going to use his *Cnidocytes*.

John swallows hard, then his fingers grip the gear as he pulls it into second then third as he swivels out on to the road. ‘No Dylan, that wasn’t what I meant, I was just meaning that Ms Atkinson really wants to see you today.’

GREY GREY GREY.

The thought of having to talk to her ***GREY***. She always stands right in front of him, with a warm but stale breath. She’s a carnivore. Obviously. Some sort of meat is sitting inside her stomach. ***Teeth grind.*** Through the window the odd number mailboxes have eyes with little mouth slits. ‘***1491,***’ he says under his breath as they reach the end of the street and turn into the motorway.

The interesting thing about the motorway is the way the white lines speed past in the middle of the road disappearing below the car. The lines surf. A wave, a big one that can carry you away.

The urge to count out loud bites on his tongue.

RED RED RED.

Dad the crab has said **NO** counting.

Lips suck in.

Low groan.

He begins to squint, just enough so that the long telegraph lines extend the shapes up ahead, so they become little oblong trees, like a small oasis.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

The hardest conversation. He never imagined having it with anyone. He just told Joanna as it was. He had simply stepped over the patient client boundary. He said he had feelings for Amy. Joanna had waivered unmoving, closed in. She finally stretched out her hands onto the bench then stormed out of the room, slamming the bathroom door. After an eternity she came out. She said she knew it had been going on. Instead of yelling, she had picked up her keys, said she was leaving. Then she walked out. That was one week ago.

.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

The light streams through the trees along the street. It reminds Dylan of the mosaics of the middle-eastern mosques from one of his books; *Egypt the Final Frontier Part 1 and Part 2*. Patterns within patterns. The willowy trees above have similar structures of patterns. Every vein leads into the pattern.

One leaf shines out. It has approximately 32 veins. The problem with this estimation he realises is that each leaf will depend entirely on the tree and particular species. Each tree has its own set pattern, with a series of numbers of veins. A Labyrinth; a pattern within layers that never ends.

‘Dylan, come on!’

‘Got everything?’

He nods as he stares up at the willowy tree.

‘Come on, you can look at the tree at lunch time, or after school when I pick you up, ok?’

He sucks in his lips as he lifts his bag up, pulls himself out of the car leaving the green tree world behind.

Shadow stepping is the only way to move towards the grey building. His feet begin to plod more and more like little anchors in the sea. Dads scuffling shoes whisper with no endings into his ears.

Feet meet. The door opens streaming outwards like a wild sea. John pulls the doors back touching Dylan’s shoulder, edging him forwards. With widening feet he moon jumps through the empty hallway towards the trap door.

‘I don’t want to go in there,’ he says back to the angry crab.

He watches as his dad's Adams apple stiffly edges downwards, then bounces back up as he looks in through the glass slit in the door to Ms Atkinson standing in front of the class.

'Come on Dylan ... you like learning facts and numbers. You have your laptop don't you?'

He nods to the angry crab as he slowly slides himself in front of the window.

'You have your phone right? Give me a text message at lunchtime, that's only two hours away, ok?' John says, his voice sounding like a squeaky puppy.

He sucks in his lips as he opens the door slowly. *The dark black sandstorm swirls up over his head. Must keep going. 7 SPACE JUMPS over the thresh hold. Ginormous strides through the wind swept storm sliding sideways with the GREY tangle of chairs. The room is BLACK. The click of a pen. One more. God. How many clicks in a minute? The desk. A heavy weight still over his shoulder. He reaches for his laptop. blue.* The storm moves towards the window ... out into the cloudless sky.

Ms Atkinson says a welcoming hello to him as she spins around to face the class.

'I'll be three minutes, everyone continue with page 47 of the algebra equation.' Stepping into the corridor, she smiles. 'John how is everything today?'

'Not the best,' John mumbles, his voice cracking up a notch. 'I'm afraid it was a slow morning, um my wife ... she's away this morning ... I had to get him up, it threw him ... a bit ... anyway, we got here that's the main thing, but give me a call if things go rocky.'

'Oh dear, oh well, I'll keep an eye on him today. The good news is his new teacher aide is almost ready to start ... next week I think. He's doing really well with

general maths. But I think he will do well with his own programme once she starts, you know something that will challenge his brain.'

John scratches his head. 'Oh really, well that's good to know, he does love numbers, plus computers are his world ...' Trailing off he pushes his hand out awkwardly towards Ms Atkinson then walks hurriedly down the sickly blue corridor towards the exit.

*

<I won't be coming back this week. I'll see Dylan next week>**Joanna.**

John reaches for the car handle, yanks at it. The urge for a scotch sits at the bottom of his throat.

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

At Cashmere High, the lunch bell rings shrilly. Hundreds of students swarm out into the main area to eat. The corridors are awash with gangly teens walking in groups, looking at their phones, laughing, jeering. Two older boys are play fighting with a younger rounder boy. Suddenly the fight takes a rough turn. The older boy of the two with orange hair kicks the rounder boy into the locker. The boy's books fly out sprawling onto the floor. One last punch deep into his stomach. The two boys laugh, leaving him crouching over in pain.

In a hurry to avoid any confrontation, Dylan walks past fast along the wall opposite. He can see the round boy leaning over in pain by the locker with his very short stature, sharp blue eyes, with a kind of snarl on his mouth, like an animal, a carnivorous sort.

Picking up his pace he speeds along the west corridor towards the stairs. The bit he hates straight ahead, where the corridor becomes dark; a cold vortex, narrow with a tiny hole at the end. Scrambling to the hole, he begins to climb the familiar steps to the second floor.

1,2,3,4, back one. Forward one.

1,2,3,4, back one. Forward one.

1,2,3,4, back one. Forward one.

STOP.

He catches a brief look inside through one of the little library windows to the calmness. *blue*. The familiar warmth washes over him as he hurries inside through the alarm barrier to the books beyond.

Eventually he finds his way through the encyclopaedias, to the little table ahead of him, where he nestles down into his place of solitude amongst the books. He reaches for the laptop from his bag, and logs on.

blue blue blue

The wizard creator is his favourite mind numbing game. It has **30** different ethereal worlds. He clicks on the tree icon, selecting **5** things to carry through to the next layer. Water is one of the best shapeshifting tools to have because it can disappear into other dimensions.

Out of the corner of his eye he notices the round boy who was pushed down by the locker a few minutes ago taking a seat at the table. The round boy opens his own laptop and stares down at it.

Ten minutes go by, before a group of boys creep up behind Dylan. One of them pushes his pencil case to the ground. They all laugh. With a sudden move around the table, the round boy comes to stand behind Dylan's chair. Unsure of what's going on, Dylan looks up, he freezes as the round boy stands still, solid as a tree.

Suddenly the round boy speaks.

'You can hassle me, but not him, leave him alone ...'

One boy steps forward, egged on by the other boys, he pushes the round boy's shoulder with his hand. The round boy doesn't move. A vein in his neck pops, his face growing redder.

'Come on, he's a waste of space, he's just a Noodle brain,' says one of the boys. Another boy chimes in. 'Yeah, let's go see what those girls are doing in the dance room...'. The group turn to go, but not without the front boy glaring once more at them.

Still frozen to the spot, Dylan's eyes dart upwards. The round boy quickly walks back to his own seat and looks down to his laptop. Dylan takes another half look at him sideways.

Teeth grinding.

Low groan.

The round boy pushes out his jaw, looks back up towards Dylan. Eyes meet. Dylan tries not to blink as he looks at the round boys sparkling light blue eyes. Little crystal icicles in the iris of his eyes. Almost too bright. But he can't look away, mesmerized by the light refracting in them, like a glacier pool.

'Do you always stare like that? Chill alright. I sorted it, they won't bother you again, they're just bored, jerks ... stick with me and you won't have a problem.'

Bold sticking up bits of a fence rush up to his mouth. But nothing comes out. He quickly looks back down to his laptop; wizard laws, how many powers can his wizard have. Technically as many as the laws of the universe allow.

Fifteen minutes pass, then the bell rings. Dylan glances at his phone. **3** minutes and **23** seconds to get to class.

'Damn it, stupid computer,' the round boy says.

Dylan hovers, pulls at his jersey cuff ends, swallowing down his nerves. 'Maybe you don't have enough gigabytes? Or it could be the Wi-Fi here, Dylan replies back, his lips sucking in.

Both boys look at each other. Dylan quickly casts his eyes down. Paisley flower patterns swirl on the carpet with the geometric triangles right through the middle that splits the circle in half. **33** circles in **2** metres of the square carpet.

The round boy moves his arms to shut the laptop.

Dylan looks up again. ***YELLOW YELLOWYELLOW.*** 'I ... I ... I have the latest mg80 pack, it gives me more data, it's really fast.'

The round boy nods, closes his laptop with a thud. 'Where did you get it ...?'

'I downloaded it,' Dylan answers, turning to go.

The round boy quickly half smiles, before his mouth edges into a lock. ‘That’s illegal,’ he answers as he follows Dylan to the door.

At the top of the stairs Dylan scans down the **40** steps ahead. A large black gum sludge mark sits on step **27= 3 inches wide = PURPLE**. ‘Technically, I didn’t break a law. The package comes with the office programme attached to my dad’s computer for his business.’

The round boy smiles again, this time the smile stays. ‘Maybe I can get that computer name off you today after school? I’ll meet you here. 3.00 pm?’

Dylan blinks, swimming for a second in the boys eyes, in the deep pool. **Lips suck in**. ‘Ok,’ he finally says, as the round boy jumps down the stairs ahead of him, leaving Dylan to count his way down.

CHAPTER SIXTY

With one eye on the teacher, Dylan looks out towards the trees across the carpark. The leaves appear to shimmer with brightness; the many layers of green illuminating the leaves as they float through the whispering wind, *in motion; evolving simultaneously*.

blue blue blue. A weightlessness washes over his head, like a dream, a journey to somewhere unknown.

He doesn't see it coming. **BLACK**

BLACK

BLACK

Heaving his eyes open he looks around.

The radio, **3 inches** from his ear

Zig zag

Zig Zag

Zig Zag

His hands fly up to his ears. **RED RED RED** everywhere. He screams. His noise only exacerbates the students as more students join in laughing. More *zig zags*. A darkness closes in. Tightness. *A deep cut. No air.*

The desk topples. It sinks down. A chair swings.

More laughing. His insides flip. He screams again as the door swings open loudly. Ms Atkinson rushes in with the principle. The room goes still as everyone stops then looks towards Dylan.

Ms Beech, the principle walks towards him.

‘Its ok, Dylan, come with me, it’s ok ... please ... Dylan look at me, come this way.’

A familiar sound, but over a line, in a different part of space.

... *where?*

... *Why is she there?*

With effort he draws himself down the dark tunnel as the light in the room comes fluttering into his eyes. Everything is fuzzy; his hand is floppy. Too floppy.

RED RED RED. No energy. Everything draining away. He blinks, looks down. **GO!**

RUN RUN RUN

Ms Beeches perfume ... squashed on her neck ... frangipani?

Ms Beech turns on the class. ‘Right that’s enough everyone, this is not appropriate behaviour. You know Dylan is highly sensitive to loud noises.’ She turns towards Ms Atkinson, her face taut. ‘I want to know who started this. Send them to my office immediately.’

Slightly flustered, Ms Beech pulls her coat jacket down, touches her hair with her hand, pulling it straight as she feels her tight bun. She then swiftly turns, her high heels steeply driving into the corridor as she walks away in search of Dylan.

*

Ms Beech shimmies in her knee length skirt up the steps into the library. As she opens the door quickly her eyes fall on Eleanor the librarian.

‘Is Dylan here?’

Eleanor nods back grimly. ‘Yes he ran past about five minutes ago, is everything ok?’

Ms Beech pulls at her jacket again. ‘No ... not really, Dylan has had an episode, but he was provoked, is he down the back?’ Eleanor nods quickly.

Ms Beech walks wearily down towards the back section. She peers through the books that are stacked on shelves five levels high. Though the tight squeeze in the books she can just see him looking down at his laptop, quietly doing something. Tentatively she reaches for her phone, thinking better of it she pushes it back down in her pocket. Leaving the shelter of the books, she quietly steps out towards him. Dylan immediately stops tapping on the laptop and looks away from her.

‘Dylan, are you ok? Listen, I’m very sorry the class was too loud for you. I will find out what happened. Do you want me to call your dad? Do you want to talk to him? I have a phone you can use.’

She steps forward a few more feet pushing the phone down on the table. Dylan glances at it, then back to the table.

‘I have my own phone,’ he says blankly staring down at the table.

‘Ok, that’s fine Dylan. Do you want to stay here for the rest of the day? Or go home.’ He glances to the right, out the window, his lips tight, his face pale. ‘Stay here, I have someone to meet after school.’

‘Ok Dylan, can I ring your dad?’

He nods.

‘Ok.’ She awkwardly turns to walk away from him back towards the shelves.

Low groan

Lips suck in

*

Ms Beech is clutching her purple apple I phone behind the bookshelf. She is breathing 1.3 seconds to fast for an average person. Her chest is rising every 3 seconds; =20/60 $ab+cd=d/c$

CHAPTER SIXTY ONE

He flicks his phone up. 3.02 pm. He's late. He scans ahead down to the entrance twenty metres away. Eleanor the librarian sits at her desk staring at her computer screen. She marks something on a piece of paper, her thin long line across her lips seems to grow more upturned as she crosses something off.

Dylan looks back down at his laptop to the internet site *W8tchit.com* that sells computer packages for faster speed. He twitches, flicks his phone up again. 3.17 pm.

RED RED RED

'So, what you got?' The round boy asks as he energetically lands in the seat opposite Dylan. Startled, Dylan looks down, then nervously launches into the different packages on offer. The round boy gets up, walks around the table to a spare seat next to him.

Low groan.

'How much is it ...?'

'About \$180, but I could get it for you for free. If you give me your laptop, I can download it through my dad's system tonight,' Dylan answers as he sucks his lips in.

'Really, that would be awesome, I owe you man. Your name is Dylan isn't it?'

Dylan squirms in his seat. 'Yes.'

Silence.

The round boy waits for more.

'Um, ok ... well Dylan. I'm pleased to meet someone normal at this school. I'm Nathaniel, but call me Noodle, everyone else does.'

Dylan turns slightly towards him. He can feel his upper lip shivering in a curve upwards on his left side. It's abnormal. **RED RED RED**. His stomach flips. The words push out. 'Why are you called Noodle?'

'I guess it just kind of happened ... life I guess.' Noodle shuts his laptop and pushes it towards Dylan. 'It's cold out, you coming or you staying the night?' he asks as he stands to zip his jacket up.

'The logistics of staying here wouldn't work. Why would I do that? I have a home to go to,' Dylan mumbles as he looks back down to his laptop. The wizard world enveloping him.

Noodle grins, 'Yeah I know, just joking.'

Silence.

'Later,' Noodle says raising his hand. 'Um ... I'll come by here tomorrow, see how you're getting on with my laptop, same time?' He hovers. 'Ok then ...' he turns to walk away. By the entrance way, he glances back one last time to Dylan.

*

Planet OXB8 is a rocky yellow terrain. He is stuck on the east side, where the sun is too hot, over 84 degrees. His supplies are low, his battery pack is almost depleted. If he's to survive he needs to space jump through the next wormhole that is passing in approximately 3 minutes. It will take him to dimension 9, where the water well is. The well of power where the Book of ASHA is kept. It will just give him enough energy to get home.

CHAPTER SIXTY TWO

Ms Beech extends her hand. ‘John, how are you? We’ve had an interesting day here, please have a seat.’

Anxiously walking to the seat in front of Ms Beech, he adjusts himself down into the small chair, nervously crossing his legs.

‘Um, where’s Dylan now?’ he asks quickly glancing at the clock on the wall.

Ms Beech crosses her hands calmly together. ‘Dylan is in the library. He put himself there after the incident. I thought it was best not to move him, he wanted to stay there. I’ve taken the liberty to talk to Ms Atkinson, Dylan’s form teacher.’

She then opens a file on her desk as she clears her throat, putting her hands across the pages. ‘It appears a boy has put a music boom box up to Dylan’s ear, one of those transport I pod things.’

‘Good god ... is he ok? Was he hurt?’ John asks leaning forward.

Raising her hands up to calm him, Ms Beech then clasps her hands back together. ‘No no ... he’s fine, the boy Dylan threw the chair at is also fine. Dylan ran out after the episode. We let him, as we are aware of what works for him. As you will also be aware Mr Willis, the guidelines from Dylan’s psychologist, Amy White, are specific in leaving him time to adjust, calm down re-orientate himself if things get too much.’

She lets out a long sigh as she flicks open the file. She then clears her throat. ‘Mr Willis, it might be best for us to look at special education for Dylan. I think, he would do well in an environment that doesn’t present too much sensory overload. We do have the funding now, it came through this week, which would be perfect for Dylan’

Leaning forward Ms Beech suddenly becomes serious. ‘John ... originally we were going to have a teacher aide in the class, as we discussed earlier. Now things have changed. This is a fully funded private twenty five hours a week. We have recently equipped a room made up with things specifically designed for ASD students. It’s something you may like to consider.’

Looking down to the floor, tiredness floating in a wave of helplessness, John feels his head shake. ‘Well ... it would be wonderful, but won’t he miss out on learning the same things as the other students?’

Ms Beech smiles as she closes the folder. ‘No, not at all. I have spoken to Dylan’s teachers, he’s exceeding in some of his subjects, apart from his English, which we can help with. The maths, science, are all good, he seems to really enjoy them particularly maths, everything to do with numbers. If he has some one on one time, we can offer him more attention in the subject, plus we can also give him extra help with English. Do you want to think about it?’

Uncrossing his legs, the cramp lets go, the lump in his throat slowly slides upwards. A migraine beginning. ‘Um, well ... it’s certainly something I would consider, unfortunately my wife is ah, well she’s having a small break from us ... ah, well, look I wouldn’t mind ringing Dylan’s psychologist, talking things through with her. Maybe we can have another meeting?’

Ms Beech nods, then stands up quickly as she pulls down her small jacket, adjusting her red rimmed glasses. Her arm extends out almost automatically as she leads John out of the room. ‘Not at all John, sounds a perfect plan. I’ll wait to hear back from you once you talk to the psychologist.’

Half turning in the door, John hesitates. ‘Look, um, Dylan is going through a bit right now, his routine ... it’s a bit shaken, what with Joanna gone ...’ Trailing off, the heat begins to creep up his head, followed by a lump in his stomach. A flicker of

Joanna, and how they had both given up even touching in the last six months. Praying Ms Beech can't read his mind, he sighs again, pauses with his heavy shoulders half raised then lets them fall. 'Anyway, I better go get Dylan.'

Smiling warmly, Ms Beech's eyes lift up and move ahead as she indicates the directions. 'John, the library is down the hall, follow the stairs that go up to it, you can't miss it really, Dylan's sitting in the back of the Dictionary section.'

With a sideways stoop, John walks away down the corridor, his head spinning with thoughts as he feels for his phone in a frenzy. As he clicks it open an immediate buzz hums out; lunch meeting tomorrow at 1pm. Glancing at the time he realises it's nearly four. Shit. Dylan's routine will be thrown.

*

Eleanor has a stern look of concentration. Her face glued to the computer catalogue system as John walks in.

'We are closing in five minutes,' she says pushing her glasses back up her face.

His Scottish accent lilts higher as he bends his body towards her with a slight smile. 'Ah, yep just give me two minutes.' Eleanor's twists her lips in a knot.

He runs down the first aisle. Nothing, then down the second and third. Where the hell is he? Finally at the last one, he sees Dylan sitting alone staring down into his laptop. Scratching his unshaven chin, he lets out a sigh of relief as he walks towards him. Drawing closer he can see the intensity on Dylan's face.

He leans forward by the table, waiting for him to look up. Unmoving, Dylan presses a key on his laptop. With another sigh he reaches out his hand to Dylan's shoulder.

'Hey, Dylan? I'm here now.'

Dylan flinches, quickly moving his arm away from him as he closes his laptop with a small click. 'Can we have chips for dinner?'

Lips suck in.

With a half smiles, John lets out a sigh, his shoulders lowering. ‘Um, yeah sure, come on let’s get you home.’

As they walk to the entrance of the library, Dylan stops suddenly. He looks up at the lights, then turns towards Eleanor at her desk. ‘You have a light out down the eighth row, four in, there are forty eight in total. It’s a helium **E50**. *Lips suck in.* They sell them at the *Morton Electronic* shop down High Street. Number one hundred and thirty two High Street.’

Eleanor nods, ‘Well, thank you Dylan, good to know, we will fix it as soon as possible.’ Turning, without expression, Dylan walks to the top of the stairs where he counts his steps downwards as John follows slowly behind.

At the bottom, he puts his left hand on the wall, softly letting it glide along the stripped pattern that decorates the wall. John walks a few steps behind on the other side of the corridor with his eyes cast down. He clears his throat, still wishing for that scotch.

‘So what happened today Dylan? he says glancing up at him.

Looking down quickly, Dylan stops, walks backwards then forwards as he anxiously stares at the floor. ‘Too much noise,’ he mumbles. He then puts his hand up to his right ear massaging it with his two small thin fingers.

John moves closer. ‘Hey Dylan, no more sound, it’s all gone ... ok.’

Dylan pushes past him in silence, his shadow extending upwards in the far light of the exit door.

The carpark is deserted apart from John’s silver Toyota parked on an angle, almost hitting the perennial line of shrubs in the middle of the car park. As they walk silently towards the car Dylan looks up at the trees expanding towards them from the road ahead.

‘Come on,’ John yells as he opens the car door and glances in the rear view mirror to Dylan spinning around with the leaf in his hand through the car park. He tries to swallow, an uneasy lump, suspended there.

The wall is widening.

*

The burnt amber leaf makes a soft whirling hum in the warm wind as it turns clockwise. A small shadow stems across his hand, its shape changing over and over ... he is becoming one with it.

CHAPTER SIXTY THREE

The orange flame flickers in the cold air. Noodle raises the lighter to his face, then lowers it, running his fingers back through the flame.

‘Do you want a coffee or something?’ Sophie asks, her voice a lost echo, her breathing, halted, heavy.

‘Yeah, no milk,’ Noodle replies pausing by the kitchen bench, then bends his body down onto the stool. ‘Does he know?’

Sophie pulls her hair back behind her ear, turns around by the jug to look at him.

‘No. Not yet, it’s just a matter of time ... he’s not stupid ...’

‘Fuck,’ Noodle mumbles, running his hands through his black hair. He then splays his fingers across the bench, bites down on the side of his lip. ‘Spade was supposed to be there alone, not you, not Dylan.’

‘Yeah well I was there looking after my fucking brother! Shit, this can’t be happening. I mean he didn’t know you would be there. Shit!’ She turns back to the kitchen, looking out into the black night.

‘Fuck Sophie, you shouldn’t be involved. No one was supposed to know anything about it. Fuck!’

‘Yeah well, someone had to protect him!’ she spits out her words but they come out tangled in the white dry moisture from her mouth.

Pushing up from the stool, he slowly walks around the bench. With his right hand he raises it towards her. She flinches, tries to pull away, but he blocks her as he pulls her closer, gripping his hand around her thin arm. A small strand of hair falls across her face. He curls his lip as he pulls her chin up with his hand. He hovers by her lips. ‘Will sort it,’ he says letting her go slowly, his eyes glazing over.

‘How? How the fuck will you do that!’ she screams, pushing herself back into the corner of the kitchen.

‘Just give me a minute ok? Noodle reaches for the jug, calmly pouring the coffee. ‘Look, he may not have seen anything.’

‘Yeah, well I don’t know ... I’ll have to make sure he sticks to his story...’ She nervously walks over to the back door and peers out into the night. ‘I feel so suffocated you know, like I’m in a fucking goldfish bowl, I just want to get out!’

‘Well ... welcome to my world Sophie ...’ Noodle mumbles, his jaw clenched, his fingers fiddling with his motorbike helmet straps. ‘Did you leave anything at the house?’

Nervously she spins around, feels up her arm for something to cling on to, finding nothing she pinches her skin. ‘No, I bolted out the door, I pushed passed Dylan, threw the gun in the river down past our house.’

‘Fuck! Why toss it so close to this house?!’ Noodle yells shaking his head, his eyes suddenly piercingly blue.

‘I wasn’t thinking properly ok, you left ... I knew Dylan was still at the scene of the crime. I had to get back here, you know, pretend everything was normal ...’

Slumping back onto the couch she pulls her sweatshirt sleeve up to cover her eyes.

The silence draws out as Noodle drinks the last of his coffee, the bitterness lingering in his mouth as he swirls the remains over. Calmly he places the mug down on the bench, then turns towards the door. ‘There’s nothing we can do about the gun. Just pray that the detective snooping around doesn’t get any bright ideas.’ With a quick glance outside into the dark night he zips his leather jacket up, his jaw locked tight.

‘Dylan’s on my couch by the way,’ he says edging out the door, where he brings a cigarette up to his face. The flame casts a flicker across Sophie’s face in the dark. A fascinating shapeshift of parallels runs sideways as he searches her face. Her

almond eyes always so hauntingly deep, something still, hidden in the depths between her and Dylan. Fleeting, it disappears into the darkened shadows. Gone.

‘The best thing you can do is not panic Sophie.’ The smoke trails behind him as he walks down the path, lingering enough, for a sickening motion to run through her heart. The vile taste of peanut butter returning back up to her mouth.

She makes a run for the toilet. The sea of waves battling forwards again, about to knock her overboard without an anchor. She lurches forwards, but nothing comes out, just the emptiness of the porcelain bowl that doesn’t seem so white anymore.

CHAPTER SIXTY FOUR

The rounded brown biscotti beside the coconut cacao balls all look the same to Jed. What do normal people eat at 11am? A growing nervousness in his belly flops up then down like a monarch butterfly entangled in a swan plant. An unusual feeling, he pushes it away as he steps up to the counter. His mouth opens before he's ready as he quickly babbles out a bubbling barrage of words, incoherent in his ears, he reddens, then smiles but his face feels cracked like an uneasy crocodile smile.

Quickly turning, he comes face to face with Ms Beech. 'Oh gosh, I nearly wiped you out, you're early. Um, I was just going to find us a seat ...'

Ms Beech warmly smiles. 'Oh, ok, I will just order a coffee, are you wanting one?'

Jed glances at Ms Beech noticing her dark brown giraffe like eyes behind her red rimmed glasses for the first time. 'Um, I actually already ordered one ... I'll grab us a seat then.'

Ms Beech opens her mouth to speak as Jed speeds off into the café searching for a place to sit.

Finding a place hidden by the window his thoughts bounce awkwardly around. Sarah ... their first date together. Catching himself thinking about thinking he puts his head down, shakes his head then lifts his eyes forwards as he looks around the café. People engrossed in weekly catch ups, all positively happy. Why is everyone so god damn happy? In a somersault, he finds himself back in the same place as he was a few minutes ago; his date with Sarah, nearly four years ago, she had just been out celebrating her birthday with friends, they had met for a coffee. The butterflies flip

again. Should he leave? He reaches for the serviette, fiddles with it, like a puppeteer gone wrong.

Ms Beech swoops efficiently into the seat in front of him. ‘Well how has your morning been Mr Deans, good I hope?’

With a smile so wide his teeth poke out, totally unnatural. He quickly tries to straighten his mouth, quickly looking back down into the safety of the serviette. ‘Ah, well, pretty laid back today, I have to follow up on the case this afternoon to do with Dylan, so this is perfect meeting you now.’

Ms Beech smiles sipping her coffee, leaving a small faint dark line covering her near perfect coral lipstick. He glances to her blouse where he notices she has two ladybird buttons that are delicately placed on the top two holes, a tiny fray of cotton is hanging on one of the buttons. Perhaps sewn on in the last few days. It must be her favourite shirt.

Sighing he leans back, realising his pose isn’t exactly assertive he creeps forward again. ‘So, Dylan is afraid of blood you say?’

‘Yes, as we discussed over the phone, and in the notes that I’ve brought with me today. Dylan repeatedly said he didn’t like blood. He just kept saying he wanted it to stop.’ Furrowing her brow, she passes the file over to Jed. She then leans back taking another sip of her coffee, glances out the window. Suddenly she sits forward, with her finger raised. ‘Oh yes, before I forget, another thing, the psychologist also said Dylan had a very strong association with colour. Amy told me that colours often overwhelmed him to such an extent that he needed timeout.’

‘This is great Ms Beech, it will help the case tremendously.’ He takes another sip of coffee. Damn it, disappointingly cold coffee.

Swallowing, Jed strains his voice to hear himself over the people in the next table. ‘Um, so how long have you been teaching Ms Beech?’ He then looks down, sees

the cacao ball, stuffs it into his mouth nervously, almost choking at the dryness mixed in with the spice.

Ms Beech eyes him through her glasses.

‘Ah sorry, I should have offered you some first, it’s very dry anyway ...’ he mumbles through his full mouth, quickly reaching for the glass of water on the table. ‘Please go on ...’

‘Well Jed, can I call you Jed? I’ve been at Cashmere High for five years, not long at all by teaching standards. But I do want to stay here, it’s such a lovely area, the students ... teenagers ... well they can be challenging, but rewarding at the same time. Do you get what I’m saying?’ her fiery eyes stare back at him.

Nodding, he tries to swallow the last of the cacao ball without choking, ‘Yes ... ah totally, my job is hard, with long hours, but the challenges, plus the people I meet, it’s always very rewarding at the end. But it has its downs particularly the murders ...’

Ms Beech twists her mouth, suddenly looking sad.

His heart flips. ‘Um, well haven’t you got a hair appointment?’

She reddens for the first time, almost flustered as she turns towards her handbag.

‘I have indeed Jed, not much doing, but one has to keep things in order at times.’

‘Yeah, I guess, although with men we tend to just shave really.’ The stupid crocodile smile stretches up his jaw, awkwardly he scratches his face as he looks back down to the table.

The silence grows again. Nervously he pulls himself up just as she stands. ‘Ah, well Ms Beech, enjoy your day, um, if there’s anything else I need can I contact you?’

She nods, smiles warmly, ‘Of course Jed, please feel free.’ She places her handbag on her shoulder, smiles one last time as she walks away.

The cacao bits are stuck in his teeth. Bugger, she probably thought he hadn’t brushed his teeth.

The butterflies flip over again.

CHAPTER SIXTY FIVE

Standing at the entrance to the mall, Sophie looks at herself in the window of the 2 dollar shop. She doesn't look the same. It's itching under her skin. Walking into the bubble of people, she knocks the shoulder of a shopper. 'Excuse me luv,' the old man says as he continues on. The genuine empathy of a stranger how common and yet uncommon.

Une Barque Sur L'Ocean plays through her head as she drifts forwards. Her legs seem like they're not even touching the ground anymore. The middle of the mall bubbles up with monotone mumbles of people stuffing their faces with fat grease. It washes up and over her. The radio blurs discordantly in the atmosphere; delicate droplets of Ravel mesh. The dew drops are falling down somewhere at her feet ...

'Sophie ... Sophie! Are you alright ... Sophie!'

Drawing herself back to the noise of the mall, the lights suddenly seem harsh, overly bright. A figure is standing in front of her waving frantically. She tries to focus ... the arm shakes her again.

'I ... sorry I was thinking,' she says incoherently, still down somewhere below the surface.

John tugs at her arm. 'Sophie is everything alright? Here, look, let's go somewhere quieter, maybe the café round the corner? Follow me.' John moves at a rapid pace through the mall, an urgency in his step. The tiredness is building up in her, but she follows behind like a moth to the light starving for oxygen.

Finally finding a quiet seat John brings two glasses of water to the table. 'I've ordered us toasted sandwich, and coffee.' He then pauses as he looks directly at her, his forehead lines rippling. 'I'm worried about you Soph. You haven't been returning my

phone calls. Dylan has disappeared off the face of the earth in the last 24 hours, I wish someone would tell me what's going on ...'

Sophie slips her fingers around the glass in front of her. It feels heavy as she drags it up to her dry mouth. She takes a huge gulp, the ice clicks around on her tongue nervously as she glances sideways out the window.

Something presses in. Perhaps this is what it's like to be murdered. Lost, adrift in a suspenseful dream of reality, but not the reality that everyone else is in. A deep dark nightmare with a bolted door.

'Soph ... are you listening? I wish you could focus ... are you on drugs or taking something?' John asks exasperatingly. A few people look up from around the café. Eyes dart, murmurs behind serviettes.

Coming back into the room, she lets out a silent sigh. She looks across at him. Plain old dad sitting there with his favourite blazer, tie, his brown satchel, brown shoes. Nothing is ever unpredictable with him. She can't tell him. The vile taste rises up.

'No dad, I'm not on drugs. I'm just tired, you know, I have a performance coming up in three weeks so I need to practice over and over. Plus I don't see my professor enough so it's all up to me.' Her eyes roll, stuck on replay. Her neck pops, a sudden pulse. He's looking at her too deeply. His eyes, so like Dylan's.

'Look Soph, I need to find out where Dylan and Noodle are. The police still need to talk to Dylan. I mean seriously. They want him brought in for questioning now ... its urgent, Sophie, they're in the process of getting a warrant for his arrest.'

Suddenly feeling cold she hunches over.

'Yeah dad I get it, but I'm sure he isn't caught up in any murder, he was just there at the wrong time ... I saw him yesterday anyway, he seemed ok.'

'Have you eaten?' he asks as he looks at her pale face. His eyes fall back to the table as he stirs his coffee round and round. 'Listen Soph, when this is all cleared up, I

think it would be a good idea if we went on some sort of family holiday, just the three of us. You know get away from it all, maybe we could go up north or to the west coast.’

She bites down on the toast, pushes it around like sandpaper, forcing it down as her hunger for food drives itself back up to her, rapidly followed behind by a swaying sea.

She reaches for her coffee, her hand shaking slightly. John folds his serviette in deep thought as his voice becomes more serious again.

‘Just think about it Soph. I know we haven’t been much of a family unit for a long time. Dylan needs some sort of cohesion, you know. If the three of us could go somewhere, enjoy the sun and sea air, we could benefit a lot from it.’

Her head nods. Like a puppet. She oddly finds herself agreeing, half smiling, although she is drifting again. The Rachmaninov is playing, turning, unfolding, into an ocean.

Clearing his throat, John trails off as he glances at his phone. Realising the time, he reaches over to hug her. ‘Ok ... well think about it Soph ... I need to go though, I have an appointment at four. Will you be ok? Let me know if Dylan contacts you again, it’s really important Soph.’

She nods. The puppet agrees. Swirling within the g minor movement, the allegro begins to rise up and over full speed ahead into the last few bars. *Somewhere a gentleness falls.*

CHAPTER SIXTY SIX

The dark dampness cloaks the warehouse. Dylan hovers by the door. He flicks his phone up. Too many numbers; dad, Sophie, the detective again. He tries to breathe in but the air is suffocating.

RED RED RED.

Outta here.

He walks to the table, reaches for his laptop, stuffs it in his bag. With one last look backwards into the room, he turns the lock, runs down the stairs. Numbers blur ... disappearing away. The skeleton opens its lungs one last time.

Silence.

Picking up the pace, he hooks back around the underpass of the city, blending in with the darkness of the night as it uncurls its arms. The bus shelter is almost empty. The next bus; **5** minutes. Possible options:

1/ go home, hide out.

2/ stay on the bus.

Finally, the familiar sound of the red bus slowly makes its way towards the stop. At the other end of the road a motorbike crashes forwards. He raises his hands to his ears as the bike comes to a halt fifty metres away.

A figure steps off the bike. A chill shoots up his neck. The lone figure is fixed in the stillness, hauntingly looking towards him. *A black shadow.* Slowly the shadow removes the helmet. Dylan shudders. His breath almost stops in the air, frozen, dead. His heart racing as he bolts to the bus. With giant ***SPACE JUMPS*** he swings up the stairs, sprints to the back of the bus. Only then does he look out the back window.

Nothing moves, except a low fog falling into sleep.

With a jolt the bus moves to full throttle as it swings out into the street. The momentum hurls Dylan down to the floor. Slowly he pulls himself back up to look out the window. The shadow has moved below a street light, casting a still pool of light that flickers across his eyes.

Dylan crouches back down.

RED

RED

RED

Slowly building the courage to look one last time, he pulls himself up. Nothing. The shadow has gone. He sinks back down in the seat, tries to push it away. ***ZZZZzzzzz*** push in like fast speeding blurs of bolts. He falls to the bottom of the bus floor, yanking his hood up around his eyes and ears.

CHAPTER SIXTY SEVEN

Pulling up outside the PROLIFE shop, Jed takes a quick look at the front of the store. Nothing seems to have changed. The sign still flickers above the shop, the worn out poster in the front window still barely hanging with a small piece of blue tac.

The large boy idly stands at the counter, sucking on his lip piercing. Jed hovers by the lucky dip bin as he tries to remember his name.

A noise echoes around the shop, it seems to be coming from the back. As he walks to end of aisle one, the girl with the stud is bending over to lift something up into a crate. He quickly walks towards her, pauses then clears his throat.

‘Ah, so I wonder if you could help me out? Jed asks jamming his fingers back in his pocket.

‘Yeah? The girl glares back up at him, her green eyes flicking brightly under the fluorescent lights from above.

‘Look, I wonder if you know a guy called Noodle? I think he worked here or he does?’ Her eyes dart back behind him. He turns to look, noticing the boss Jamie down the other end of the aisle talking to another worker.

This time the girl talks quickly. ‘I can’t say much, sorry, but yeah he did work here he finished last week ... I dunno why he just kind of stopped coming to work.’ Nodding, he touches his chin. He tries to think fast as he looks one more time down the aisle towards Jamie, then back to the girl reading her name tag quickly.

‘Mr Dean’s your back so soon, how can I help this time? I see young Emily has been helping you ...’ Jamie calls out as he walks towards them.

‘Ah hello again, Jamie. I didn’t think I would be back, ah, but I have an investigation.’ Jed flashes his Police badge up in the air, just long enough for Jamie to step back.

‘Look, I need to know a few more things. I’m looking for a particular person of interest to us. I believe he worked for you. Emily said he did. He goes by the name of Noodle.’

Jamie quickly glances at Emily in annoyance, then back to Jed.

‘Yeah, well he did work here. I like to employ young people. Noodle’s a real genius with computer software programming, he was doing a lot of upgrading of computer systems for us here. Unfortunately, his mum got sick, so he’s gone ... a real shame to the company.’

‘Oh really? You wouldn’t happen have his address or phone number where I could contact him by any chance?’

Jamie swallows, shuffles his feet in a tango a few steps away from Jed. ‘Oh yeah sure, I can look up on his employment records, he wrote it down when I hired him. That was a few years back mind you. At least I don’t think he’s moved.’ Jamie walks back down the aisle to his office leaving Emily and Jed alone.

The bubble gum pops through the air as Emily shrugs. She turns back to the crate, bends down to lift another package out.

‘So, um Emily how long have you worked here?’ Jed asks as he bends down to help her, placing a package of paper in her hand.

‘Oh, um two years I think. I started when I was at school ... then I dropped out, now I just work here ... you know...’

‘So ... do you know Noodle well ... like as a friend?’

She shrugs. Another pop. ‘Yeah kind of, we hang out sometimes ...’

‘Has he ever mentioned a friend called Dylan to you?’

Another shrug. Her eyes flicker back behind Jed, then back to the boxes of paper at her feet. Nah not really, I dunno if Noodle has any friends. I just kind of hook up with him sometimes ...’ She blows another bubble. ‘Fuck this is boring, do you want to get outta here? I need a cig ...’

‘Um, yeah sure. Just give me five minutes,’ Jed answers as he glances back down towards Jamie’s office.

Emily slowly walks down passed the counter drolly looking at Drew as she lights the cigarette by the front door. Drew looks up, his piercing popping forward as he bites his lip.

A door bangs. Jamie’s steps draw closer. ‘Ok, I have the address. This was where he lived, and mobile. But I don’t know if it’s still fresh.’

‘Thanks for this,’ Jed says he looks at the phone number. Slowly turning to go, his shoes make an unusual scrapping scuff on the concrete floor. He glances down, a yellow dust covering the floor.

*

Emily blows another bubble of pink candy gum out into the cold air as she sits on the pavement. She then pulls herself forwards to the edge of the curb curling over.

‘Are you going after Noodle now?’

Jed lights up a cigarette as he leans back on his car, glancing up the street.

‘Well, that depends Emily on whether he has anything to hide or not ...’

She lights a cigarette putting her gum on the gutter, then stands and kicks a stone sending it over to the other side of the road. Placing her hand on her hip, she sticks out her lips. Her jaw suddenly tenses, as she angles her eyes towards Jed. ‘I’m having his baby ...’

The silence grows. He swallows, his mouth dry as he casts his eyes back towards her. ‘Um yeah? Does he know?’

She draws in another plume of smoke, exhales pushing it out too quickly. ‘Nah, god knows that would freak him out. I dunno what I’ll do, my mum lives on coast ... maybe I could go there ... you know what I mean?’

Jed holds his breath as he looks at her sideways. ‘Hmmm, what does he do on his computers anyway?’

Her face screws up as she crushes the last of her cigarette into the ground. ‘Dunno, just computer shit ... codes ... shit like that. I shouldn’t have told you ... so now you know ... please don’t tell him I told you ... or Jamie ...’ She suddenly goes quiet, scratches her head, then turns to walk away.

Shuffling Jed looks back down at his shoes, realising the yellow stuff from the warehouse is starting to seep into the little cracks in the leather sole of his shoe. As he looks up, Emily is nearly by the front door. He runs after her, grabs her arm. ‘Wait ... why would Jamie be upset?’

‘Yeah well it’s complicated!’ She jerks her arm free, pushing Jed backwards, as she runs towards the door.

‘Er ... thanks for the talk Emily ...’

*

‘Hello,’ Dell says, eating something over the phone.

‘Yeah hi it’s me. I got the address and the phone number of Noodle. Can you do me a favour? Double check for me with the file ... number 027 8766389, see if any calls were made to it on Saturday morning.’

Dell swallows. ‘Anything else?’

Jed scratches his chin as he steers the car over to the other side of the road. ‘Um, yeah, that guy, Jamie, is definitely up to something. The warehouse is suspect, also the girl Emily that works at the warehouse, she knows Noodle. She said he does

coding. Noodle knew Spade, and Stevenson. Maybe there was some kind of falling out?

Dell coughs down the phone. 'Um, well yes Spade left Stevenson with debts owing ...'

'What were they partners in? It's all backwater wash, there has to be something going on down the line.' Lighting a cigarette, he pushes the smoke out as he looks ahead down the road, his eyes narrowing. 'Noodle is a concern.'

Dell takes another gulp of her drink.

'Righto, keep me posted Jed.'

CHAPTER SIXTY EIGHT

The warehouse sits amongst three rows of industrial factories that line the inner suburb of Sydenham. Dark grey lines of smoke fill the sky in the shadows, trailing up into the clouds.

Peeling down his shades against the clouds, Jed stares up at the stark greyness reflecting off a window of one of the warehouse doors. There are no numbers assigned to any of the establishments, only shadows of activity shuffling amongst the dirt of cement.

He pushes his hands deep into his pockets as he begins to walk around the side of the largest warehouse. It propels backwards about fifty yards south heading to the old railway line that leads out to the ports of steel in Lyttelton. The first door is bolted shut. Off to the side, a grey door with a rusted padlock appears to have a small gap. He scraps it with his boot, causing an augmented echo to linger in the still air. Further off, a muffled cry. Someone is near.

The path from the metal gate backs out through to a small grass section behind the warehouse. As he reaches the small yard, he stops, spins around, squints up at a light that seems to be shining out from the top level. The light seems to be swinging from inside ... but maybe it's the reflection from the sun. In the middle of the lawn, a washing line swings in the wind with some old worn children's clothes flapping into the southerly swirl. The bottom half of the building appears to be a semi-detached flat below the main building with some stairs that leads up to the top story.

Casting a look towards the flat, he notices the small worn child's bike beside the stairs. Foam from the seat sticks out in marshmallow puff plumes. As he steps closer to the flat, the wafting sounds of crying graduates outwards.

He taps on the door. 'Hello, anyone home?' Scuffing his feet he looks down. All of a sudden the curtain flaps as a hand pulls at the sliding door.

'Hi, sorry, I was in the toilet.' A tall thin girl stands hesitantly by the door, her pale face, blotches of darkened circles under her eyes extend out from her sharp cheekbones.

'Um yeah hi, are you living here?'

The girl looks nervously behind her into her flat, then back to him. 'Um, yeah, I live here, me and my boy.' She stands on her tip toes nervously.

'Um yeah, look, I'm just enquiring about the person living above you in the warehouse, do you know anything about him?'

The girl sticks her jaw forwards, then squints back at him. 'Um ... why?'

She then fingers the curtain pulling her head back behind the door. 'Hang on,' she quickly runs inside pulling the curtain aside. A minute later she appears with a small boy on her hip.

Clearing his throat, Jed fiddles in his pocket, twirling a cigarette through his fingers, the urge to smoke jumping around. 'You mind if I smoke?'

'Nah, go ahead.'

As he lights the cigarette, he looks up above at the wide windows of the warehouse.

'I'm Jed by the way, the real estate gave me this address. I thought the guy must be selling the warehouse. I'm looking for a place for my business.'

A slight smile creeps up the corners of her mouth. 'Oh, ok, well the guy upstairs, he pretty much keeps to himself ... he's not home right now.' She pushes her child on her hip forwards onto the ground. She then reaches into her pocket pulls out a cigarette and shrugs. 'I'm trying to quit.' Her shaking stained fingers draw up to her cracked lips as she inhales.

Turning to face the yard, Jed looks back down to the back fence where a lawnmower rests up against a large old oak tree. ‘Do you mow?’

‘Um, yeah sometimes, but mainly the guy upstairs does, he’s good like that.’

‘Hmm, so how long have you lived here?’

The girl shrugs, twisting her body half back towards her flat. ‘Um, dunno ... maybe nine months or so. Um, before that I was up north. I wanted a new start, you know ... get away from all the shit.’ She sways in the wind gust that shoots through the back yard, as she lets out a heavy plume of smoke that follows the wind trail over the nearby fence to the east. She then stubs the last of the cig into the concrete, reaches for the child, placing the boy back up onto her hip. With a jiggle, she pushes the boy up towards her face, quickly turns towards the flat. ‘Look, I gotta go ... get down to the supermarket before it closes, grab some milk...’

‘Yep no problem, thanks for your help,’ Jed says as he walks towards the stairs. ‘By the way, what’s your name?’

The girl wipes some hair off the boy’s face, then quickly looks at Jed, her eyes blue grey like the flat sinking sky over head. ‘Jess, just jess.’ She then walks inside, pulls the curtain across before shutting the door with a bang. The wail of the boy eerily stretches outwards into the still yard.

The rickety broken boards of the stairs are worn with cracked paint peeling off onto his shoes as he slides across the dark red wood. A light flickers inside, but the frozen glass door sends a haphazard reflection off towards the other end of the building. Pausing for a minute, he leans towards the glass, peers inside to see if the light is actually on. Almost tripping he sway’s backwards on his foot as his phone buzzes on his belt.

<Noodles phone number was rung on the night>**D**

Jed gently taps on the glass. Nothing. He slowly walks back down the rickety stairs to the path that leads towards the road. As he walks past the front of the warehouse a small door off to the side attached to a garage comes into view, which seems an odd place for an entrance to a warehouse.

The late afternoon sun slides its way between the warehouse roof, with small gaps between the buildings that elongate downwards diagonally towards the road. The grey granite ground appearing more in the shadows than before.

A sudden piercing noise breaks the silence of grey sending a shudder up his neck. The motorbike screeches around the corner into the road. It speeds towards him. Suddenly pulling to a halt twenty metres away. The figure looks down at the engine then back up the road towards him. He has to make a move. He begins to walk, quickens his pace into a fast run towards the bike.

‘Hey! ... Noodle,’ Jed shouts.

The figure revs the engine, in an angry sharp cry to the sky. The bike jumps a few metres forward. Suddenly the figure pushes the throttle again, not backing down. With a fast jolt to the left, Jed finds himself hurling through the air towards the ground, hitting the road with a disjointed thud as the bike tears off down the road.

‘Fuck!’ he screams, as his hand shoots upwards in pain.

He runs back to the car, tries to catch his breath as he presses the speaker phone.

‘I nearly got him ... but the fucking idiot bolted down the alleyway! We need to get his motorbike registration ... Nathaniel Newton ... goes by the name of Noodle.’

Dell moves the phone to her other ear as she searches on her computer. ‘Ok, but on what charges though ... we can’t bring him in without a reason?’

‘Fuck, he nearly ran me over!’

‘Ok, I’m looking him up on the police scope ... in the meantime go after Dylan, he’s our first priority.’

*

Glancing one last time in the rear view mirror, Jed pushes down on the accelerator, leaving the warehouse within the walls of shadow, the night crawling in.

CHAPTER SIXTY NINE

Resting her head on the keys, Sophie lets out a sigh. A solid hour of practice over. Slightly euphoric, she stands, stretches then walks over to the window. Her eyes rest on the sun, losing its inner glow as it begins to set between the branches of tall pines off in the distance. The shadow of dark stretches inwards. She bites her favourite nail, turns back to face the piano, closes the lid with a sudden jerk. The keys forgo their song; ebony against tone crashes inwards.

Walking out of the room, she continues on into the kitchen pausing by the TV. She flicks open her phone, stares down at it. Emptiness pervades. She hovers her bony index finger tentatively over his number, the icon seems desperate to please her. Like a drug.

She opens the glass door; Sapphire blue coolness looks benevolently up at her. With a small smile she whisks the bottle into her hands. Walking back to the kitchen on soft billowy clouds; The clanking sound as the ice hits the bottom of the glass has a delightful sound, reminiscent of a Bartok ramble that had her once going around in circles earlier in the year. The professor had almost laughed at her rendition of it. Too rambunctious he had said. But now the ice had control. Nightmares had beginnings.

Her parents swirled in the gin. The good old days. Before things turned sour, ugly, despondently hovering over a minor dissonance. Before the lemon climbed into its bitter bed. Pouring a generous amount of gin, she slides the tonic up to the top, then makes her way over to the couch. Slowly sliding her way down the cushions, she moves her head sideways to look out towards the darkness of the garden.

The silence of the room is like the edge of a cliff. Darkness beyond. She takes another gulp of gin as she moves her fingers over his number. She presses it. Her

stomach flips. Overlapping waves. Fuck. Answer phone. She breathes out, hearing a slight whistle in her throat. She shuts the phone quickly.

Pushing forwards to the edge of the couch she sways over the seat, pondering how to get from her bedroom to the door then out to the professor's house. All this seems possible, in her head, if only she could find her purse and keys. Slightly slower, a fuzziness descending, she laughs. Another gulp of gin, she sways back over to the kitchen, filling her glass full again, more gin this time. Maybe just wait half an hour. Another three gulps, it's finished. Empty glass, surely not? She pours another one, then swishes through the kitchen up the stairs.

Like mountains within a mountains the steps continue on. Her bedroom appears to be luminously lit, with small dapples of light like the murmur of notes playing to her. She sways over to the mirror, removing her top, the tree in a deep pool of stars sparkles beyond. Just out of reach.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

Splashing cold water over her face, Sophie lets out a large breath as a sudden fleeting memory crosses her mind of the professor in the shower with her. Feeling aroused she splashes more water over her face. Abruptly, she turns the shower off, runs back to her room. The wardrobe sways back at her ... where is the little black dress?

Her hands don't quite get into the sleeves. She topples sideways onto the bed. Laughing at her own stupidity, she tries again, this time landing on her feet. She looks in the mirror smoothing the dress out. A flicker in the reflection. The light of her phone. She freezes, quickly grabs it.

<Sorry Sophie was giving a lecture, just going home, are you alright?>**D.A.**

< I need you> **S**

Fuck this isn't part of the plan. It's too late. She grabs her keys, runs back down the stairs to the kitchen, halting in front of the gin bottle. Why not, one for the road. The gin glides down her throat again. It's bitter. Clenching her jaw, her face contorts. Another message. It's him. He's replied.

<DYLAN GONE. FIND HIM> **N**

Spinning in panic, her stomach lurches into a spasm. Blotches of fuzziness appear in her vision. She tries to find her way out of the kitchen, runs towards the living room, the piano ahead, the leather seat bouncing up at her. She grips her hands down on the leather cushion. The ivory keys, the dark wood sinking in, surrounding her. Letting out a slow breath, she climbs into the Rachmaninov, sensitively at first gradually moving through the first movement, trying to push out the thoughts of Dylan, the professor, Dad, Noodle.

The movement begins to wash over her; floating backwards towards the rainbow dappled pebbles reaching outwards to the sea. With sun filtering through the clouds down on to her face. He lifts her high up into the air towards the blue sky, while the soft sea laps on the shore, the singing seagulls dancing high above.

Crashing back to the last few bars of the movement, a cold wind begins to pick up. Grey swirly clouds sweep in from the south. Plunging to take a hold, grappling with her thoughts, she looks backwards further out to sea. The boat is so far out, the shore is battling against the wind. The tide is turning, turning tugging inwards then outwards almost together in time.

Floating into the sound, she finds herself looking down from above as the screaming enters through. A haunting sound drifting on the air into the night. Soft muffled tones, then agitated louder insistent urges, tugging again then louder, grating at the door.

The hushed tones of the doctor standing in the door way. ‘Mummy ... mummy.’ Her father dragging her away from the bedroom door. ‘Sophie, mummy needs some time alone, she’s tired, come away now ...’ She’s been pulled in the opposite direction ... past another door. Dylan in hysterics, screaming, screaming ... on and on ...

A single tear falls down on to the ivory keys, like a single drip from a leaf after the dew. Touching the key; one single note that rings outwards, into herself. But then a wave brings her back to the emptiness of the room. That’s all there is now. *Emptiness.*

Running up the stairs, back to her room, she pulls the dress over her head, tossing it to the corner of the room. Her eyes scan the room for her overnight bag. Gritting her teeth she quickly dresses while the phone, rings persistently on the bed.

‘Hello ...’ she answers to a silence down the line.

‘Hi ... Sophie are you ok? I’ve been trying to reach you ... can I come and see you?’

Spinning around she bites down on her lip. ‘Um, sorry Daran, not tonight, I don’t feel well, maybe in a few days ...’

‘Why? What’s wrong ... tell me Sophie is everything alright? How’s your piano playing, have you been practicing?’

She can hear his insistent tone down the line, the thumping in her head getting louder, spinning beginning again. ‘Um, yes, yes ... I guess everything’s fine. Um I mean, it’s me ... no ... I mean it’s my ... look I need to go ...’

She hangs up. A heat shoots up her neck onto her face. Fuck. Quickly looking back around the room one last time, she grabs her sneakers, puts them on in a frenetic hurry forgetting to tie them properly. In a blur she clasps at her keys, runs down the stairs, almost knocking Thunder over as she pushes through to the back door. Shit shit shit. With one last look back into the house, she turns, stepping out into the blackness.

The back doorstep seems unnaturally low, far away on another island. She wobbles in the air for a second, then let’s out a cry. Her legs splay giving way beneath her. She tries to regain her step lurching backwards, as her eyes fall on to the lone dark figure standing in the dark.

Perhaps a hazy ghost.

Her stomach lurches back up into her heart, as she hears herself speak.

‘Dylan?’

CHAPTER SEVENTY ONE

Reaching to swish the wipers, John lingers over the switch as he looks out through the windscreen. The blossom turns over in a spider web pattern that spreads outwards on the glass. The simplicity of nature, a reminder of Dylan.

Swallowing he turns his attention out towards the carpark. The psychologist centre with its doors wide open. He glances down at his watch. Eight. Late night. She will still be there. Undoing his tie, he looks at his unshaven self in the mirror. He pushes his forehead back to try to look more relaxed, reaches for the door, looking one last time at his reflection, suddenly feeling worn.

With a sigh he opens the door, digging down his feet with determination. The long walk, how many times has he done this? Treading water, trying to get to the edge to survive.

Should he go? He halts in the middle of the carpark, his mind racing ahead, what if she doesn't want to see me? Touching his scalp, the perspiration of anxiety has made a sweaty pool on top of his bald head. Persevering he picks up the pace, reaches the glass door with a swing in his step. His arm extends outwards towards the door banging it against the outside rail. The young reception girl looks up surprised.

'Hello Mr Willis, long time no see. Are you seeing Amy today with Dylan?'

Waving his hand he looks towards her, his eyes widening. 'Hi, yeah, um actually no, just me. I actually wondered if I could speak to Amy, if she has a minute? I realise I might be asking the impossible today ...' He looks around the room, coming back to the girl in front of him. 'Sorry, I've forgotten your name, it's been a while since I've been here.'

The girl smiles, lifting the phone to her ear. ‘No problem Mr Willis, I’m Jasmine, give me a minute, I’ll try to get Amy on the line ...’

Standing by the desk, his heart pulsating under his shirt, he watches as Jasmine twiddles her pen while she waits for Amy to answer the phone. Eventually she answers. Jasmine turns her chair away from him whispering something he can’t quite hear. She then places the phone back down, turns her seat towards him raising her hand indicating five minutes.

With a slow turn he glances back up at the clock ticking away. The numbers go in and out of focus. He touches his eye; a habit; the start of an itch beginning to form, a slight migraine coming as well.

Scanning the room he walks towards the little cubicle for patients where the water bottle dispenser bubbles away, he reaches down for a cup filling it up with ice water. With relief he guzzles it down, fills the cup again as he looks down towards the table with crappy magazines, randomly picking one up he reads the title; “Top model has abortion.”

With a lurch in his stomach, he quickly puts it back on the table, his eye twitching again more nervously. Finding a seat in the corner, he closes his eyes. Memories flooding in. Amy, the abortion.

CHAPTER SEVENTY TWO

The doctor had said it was an egg that hadn't fertilized properly. It was stuck in a void, in limbo, nowhere to go. The only choice an abortion. Amy had been stoic at the time. Eventually there were more excuses to avoid each other more than anything. Dylan was worse. Joanna had left. He had talked about trying again with Amy, but she refused. 'What if it happens again?' she said. Things could have gone differently. But they didn't. Amy shut the door. John had no choice but to carry on as well.

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With a sigh he breathes out nervously looking up at the clock, it doesn't seem to have moved at all. Fuck all this. Suddenly Amy appears around the corner. She walks over to the reception desk, leans over, whispers to Jasmine then stands up straightening her top. Her eyes lift slightly as she looks over to the waiting room, eventually they fall on him.

'John, hi ... do you want to come through,' she says.

He can't help but look her up and down. Remembering how attractive she is, he swallows, taken aback by her soft green eyes just like Sophie. 'Um, yeah, if that's ok with you. I won't keep you long, I just need a word with you about Dylan.'

She nods her head as she turns to walk past the reception. 'Thirty minutes,' she motions to Jasmine, walking down the hallway with her head down. As she opens the door, he is hit with the old familiarity of the room. The two comfortable sofa seats, the willowy fern leaf pot plant in the corner, the hippy rug she had bought in a market in morocco.

She turns to face him, her left hand in her back pocket, an old habit she has, John remembers, as he looks at her body, still thin, still working herself to the bone.

‘So John, take a seat, what’s up?’

He finds himself perching on the edge of the seat nervously looking down. Bringing his eyes up to meet hers, his words stumble out. ‘It’s Dylan, he’s a mess. Something happened in the weekend ... he was found at a murder scene. I don’t know what to do ... and now he’s disappeared. I’m really worried he’ll do something stupid. The police are looking for him right now.’

Shifting her eyes towards the window, she lets out a long sigh, twisting her mouth slightly. ‘Hmm, John, now that you’re here, I need to tell you something. I had a visit from a detective ... yesterday morning asking me about Dylan. I’m really sorry. I should have rung you, they told me not to due to privacy ... now that you’re here ...’

He swallows, raises his hands to his mouth. ‘It’s gone from bad to worse you know. I can’t keep track of Sophie or Dylan anymore. The pair of them are not themselves, they’re both distant ... I feel like I’m losing them.’

Standing up she walks over to the bench, presses the jug down, reaching for the familiar mugs. John continues, his voice sounding cracked, tired. ‘I picked Dylan up from the police station on Saturday morning. He was shaking, he had wet himself. The police said he was a witness. He gave a statement ... I never assumed or thought he was involved. But now the police want to bring him in again.’

She walks back over to the chairs, sits down in shock, then reaches out her hand to touch his knee. Realises better of it, she withdraws her hands, clasping them in front of her. ‘I don’t understand ... what exactly happened?’

He swallows the lump in his throat painful, as he tries to think back. ‘The police told me that Dylan went to some guy’s address that was selling software for computers. Apparently there were two guys talking, then someone else came, there was a shot fired, Dylan says he didn’t see it, he was hiding in the laundry, and then he ran upstairs to hide.’

Good god! Was he hurt ... you should have told me John!' she says as her eyes widen.

Nodding, he sighs again, standing nervously. He begins to pace towards the window where he looks out across the carpark. 'No ... no he wasn't hurt, it's just emotional, you know trauma ... He can't express what's happened.'

With concern, she bites her lip, looks over at him, wanting to comfort him. He turns, walks back over to the green chair then slouches in it as he looks at her boots. Remembering how she put them on after their many nights together in her flat. A sudden flip in his stomach pushes him forwards in his chair. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have come Amy, this isn't your problem ... I don't know what I'm doing here really ... I just thought you could help?'

She leans forward again, places her hand on his knee this time. 'Sorry, John, I don't know what to say ... look as far as Dylan is concerned. He's become more street smart. He can probably look after himself up to a point ... I just hope his anxiety is not tumbling out of control. Let's hope he's still taking his meds.'

He slowly looks up towards her, his eyes watery. 'Um, yeah, I honestly don't know ... I checked a couple of nights ago in his desk. Do you have any idea of where he might be?'

She closes her mouth tightly, then pulls her hair back, and walks to the kitchen. Deep in thought she pours the water over the teabags.

'Well I do know one thing ... he used to bring up the bus all the time. I mean you know this anyway, it's his favourite place, it's the only place he feels calm. The engine, smoothness of the back seat ride, it all helps to calm his thoughts. It gives him the opportunity to detach and disassociate from this world. The only problem is I couldn't tell you which bus he's on.'

With a slight laugh, he leans back on the sofa chair, his face flushed with relief. 'That sound's very funny the way you put it, but also very like Dylan, anything that moves, has lights, makes him feel warm and safe.'

Smiling she comes to sit back down on the chair opposite John, holding out the tea. She then looks out the window.

'I'm really sorry Amy, turning up like this. I honestly thought you would slam the door on me.'

Furrowing her brow, she brings her eyes back into the room, brushing a small piece of lint from her jeans. She sighs. 'John, I couldn't ever turn you away, not after everything we've been through. Besides, I've had time to work through things more, process it all. I think before it was all so raw for me. I needed to get away from the situation ... but maybe things are different now ...' she trails off, her eyes settling on him for a moment.

'Um ... I wasn't expecting you to say that ... um my mind is ...' he quietly says as he looks back into her eyes.

She leans back, raises her hand. 'John, let's just focus on Dylan, we can look at us later, ok?'

Letting out a huge sigh of relief he leans back into the sofa chair, listening to the clock tick, his thoughts slowing down to a trickle.

CHAPTER SEVENTY THREE

The engine rips the air as Noodle revs it once more before coming to a complete halt. The PROLIFE back entrance is empty apart from Jamie's car parked along by the back door. Swiping the security card across the door, he spits a sludge of phlegm down to the ground, then presses the handle into himself as he swings it open. The little light at the back towards the office is gleaming through a crack in the boxes.

As he enters the office Jamie has his back to him, peering into some boxes. Noodle clears his throat. With a sudden jerk upwards, Jamie looks towards him as though he's seen a ghost.

A sly grin suddenly shades across Jamie's face as he steps forwards.

'Well, I hear Dylan is the man ...'

Noodle bites down on his tongue, his hands forming into tight balls as he walks towards him.

'It's not him ... you have no idea ...'

Turning towards his computer, Jamie stares at the screen as he calmly speaks.

'You probably should have told him outright you were the Mouse, instead of having him go off on a tangent on his own.' Jamie lolls back into his chair, his eye coolie settling on the shop outside the window. 'I gave you the keys Noodle, you turned it into a fucking mess. We have to ship everything out now. I asked you to keep an eye on Spade ... to get a contract with him ... not kill him.'

Tightening his fists again as the muscles in his neck pop, Noodle breathes out reaching for his lighter. He flicks it up to his face as he lights the cigarette, his icy blue eyes steeling on to Jamie. A trail of smoke slowly settles down in a grey mist over the desk.

‘I gave you all the details of every user I ever caught for you,’ his eyes narrowing on Jamie like a hawk settling in on a kill.

With a sly smirk, Jamie nods his small head, his face angling outwards towards the darkening night outside. ‘Yeah. Maybe so. But the cops are sniffing. We can’t do this anymore. You’re on your own. Spades dead, which terminates our contract.’

Biting down hard on his tongue, Noodles eyes grow darker as they flick around the room, then back to the humming computer on Jamie’s desk. ‘What about the hard drive, the shit that’s there ...’

Jamie whistles through his teeth as his smile begins to crack into a scowl. ‘It’s gone Noodle. I’ve sent it. We’re moving off shore. No more manufacturing or coding. We’re done. It’s over. Go home, go play with your little mate.’ A dry laugh cracks the air as he reaches down to the desk drawer, pulls out a cigarette, casually lighting it into Noodles face.

Through gritted teeth, Noodle turns towards the door. A sudden chill surrounds him. With all his effort not to smack Jamie’s head in, he grips the handle, dropping his cigarette on the floor. He slowly speaks back over his shoulder, his voice narrow down an icy ridge. ‘He didn’t do it.’

‘No? Well lucky for him then. But it must be hard, having someone you trust be such a disappointment ...’ He then leans back in his chair, smirking again as he begins to laugh.

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With a cry out of his lungs that’s wild, torn, Noodle spins around in the carpark. The black darkened ground seems to be rushing up at him, tearing into his eyes like glass shards hidden deep inside.

It’s all gone.

There’s only one thing he can do.

CHAPTER SEVENTY FOUR

The figure is stiff, eyes that can't be seen in the dark.

Sophie peers closer.

'Dylan? Dylan where have you been for god's sake, come inside quickly.' She leans out into the darkness pressing her fingers outwards, flaying them into the air as she tries to grab his hoody.

He jolts.

'Alright, calm the fuck down! I'm not going to hurt you, I just want know if you're ok?' she says as she sticks the key in the door.

Dylan walks past her quickly into the kitchen where he spins around. He pulls his hand up over his ear, massaging it around.

'I'm fine, just keep me away from Noodle!' he answers, pacing in front of the bench.

Her eyes widen. She pulls her hair back from in front of her ear as her drunkenness sweeps over her. With her heart racing she turns her hands towards him. 'Slow down, why don't you want to see Noodle anymore? He's your best friend.'

He glances at the door, *lips suck in*. 'I haven't got long Soph. I need to get out of here ... now!'

'Ok ... ok Dylan, just tell me what's going on ok? Then we can sort out a plan ... ok?' She slides herself slowly onto the couch, the cushions flattening under her like pancakes.

Dylan sighs as he walks over to his favourite stool, slowly sitting half on the edge with his hood pulled up over his face. With a slow breath out he fixates his eyes on the clock, his voice suddenly distant. 'Noodle ... he's the one ... he's the Mouse. I

saw him on his bike the other night with a girl, the girl who works for him ... I know it, they're in it together ... hacking peoples accounts, big firms you know, stealing people's information, identities.'

'I don't know anything about the Mouse Dylan,' Sophie quickly replies, as she begins to bite her nail. 'Look, I'm sure if it's something illegal, he'll get caught eventually. I don't know, I mean maybe he meant to tell you, but he couldn't because he didn't want you getting in trouble, '

Gritting his teeth Dylan quirks his head forward as he pushes off the stool reaching for his ear again. 'You don't get it do you Sophie, he fucking lied to me. We were going after this guy Stevenson, because we thought he was the Mouse. I mean I said he was, and ... and Noodle agreed.'

Nodding she tries to focus, but everything is spinning again in her head, then her phone vibrates. Fuck. She looks down pushes the delete key in a blur. 'Look Dylan, why don't we get out of here for a while? Will sort it out. I'm sure it's ok. Maybe he was protecting you?'

'Maybe,' he murmurs with a shrug. Suddenly his eyes freeze, widening into dark pools as he looks back out the door.

Holding his breath, he grasps his bag ready to bolt.

'Don't move Dylan, I've got this,' she whispers.

In the silence, she slowly opens the door.

CHAPTER SEVENTY FIVE

Breathing out into the stillness the shadow lengthens for a moment, then detracts once more as the figure steps into the porch light.

‘I know he’s here. Let me in Sophie. He needs to talk to me.’ With a long sigh Sophie’s hand almost flops like a jellyfish as she lets go of the door handle.

Jed hovers by the door, squinting his eyes as he adjusts to the dimly lit room. Eventually his eyes fall on Dylan, twitching nervously behind the kitchen bench with his bag on his back, his hood covering part of his face.

With a steely breath, Jed slowly raises his hand, sensing Dylan is about to bolt out the back door.

‘Hey Dylan, my name’s Jed. I just want to talk man ... that’s all, no big deal.’

Dylan’s eyes dart to Jed from under his blue hood. The little man’s eyes look like little planets popping through space.

‘It’s ok, Dylan,’ Sophie softly whispers.

Gradually he lowers his shoulders, as his ears suddenly pick up on the distant clock; the second hand ticking eternally fast, while the large hand seems unmoving, out of time in its own sleepy world. With hesitation in his legs, he slowly pushes one in front of the other over to the stool, his eyes still on Jed. He then slides down onto the seat with his bag still over his back, his hood creating a shadow across his face.

Lingering by the door, Jed swallows, his gut turning, as he inches forwards into the room.

‘Look Dylan, I know you didn’t do it. You don’t need to worry about going to jail again. I just want to know in your own words what happened that night ... no police tapes or policeman arresting you, it’s just me, Jed ... here now.’

Sucking in his lips, Dylan quickly speaks. 'I need a piece of paper and a pen.' He then moves his hand back over his ear again, adjusts his body on the stool, his bag limply falling to the ground.

Jed turns to Sophie who is leaning over on the couch.

Sophie nods, runs to the hallway where she scurries through the desk eventually finding a piece of paper and pen. She turns, slides back through the hallway almost falling over as she skids into the kitchen, her stomach suddenly doing a somersault.

As she hands the paper to Jed, she raises her hand to her mouth. The effects of the last gin, swaying in a second full wave. It rises, the vile taste up to her mouth too fast. 'Sorry, I need to go to the toilet,' she just manages to say to Jed, as she spins around, making a sprint for it down the hallway, where she almost hits the table opposite the toilet.

Unblinking, Jed turns one eye to Dylan, the other on Sophie with her head down the toilet.

CHAPTER SEVENTY SIX

The heat feels like a volcanic eruption about to explode in her head. She clambers upwards on a steep incline of sharp rocks, pointing, cutting, towards the shiny white bowl. With a sudden leap forwards she vomits, a violent contraction. She slides, slipping backwards off to the side, she finds herself looking down at diamonds diagonally flipping over one another on the tiled floor.

‘Where are you?’ Noodle asks urgently down the line.

Sophie swallows, her mouth coarsely covered with salt.

‘I’m here, at home. Dylan’s here ... don’t come. Jed the police guys here ... it’s bad ... real bad ... he knows it’s me,’ her voice wavers in a whisper into a single entwined note. She bites back the waves.

The heavy sound of breathing extends out down the line. ‘Just act normal ... ok? Whatever you do don’t fucking panic. I need Dylan, we need to fix this. Jamie’s doing a runner.’

Trying to gain a sense of comprehension, Sophie staggers to her feet, sways to the left almost wiping out the pansy shower curtain. ‘I ... I don’t understand, I thought it was just Spade ...’

The static air on phone goes quiet. ‘It’s complicated Sophie. I’m working for Jamie. Spade didn’t know. He thought he was just dealing with me. I gave Spade a bullshit story about how access to his code source combined with my code source could give us access to Jamie’s operation.’

‘We were going to jump ahead of Jamie ... send the outsource code to a company off shore who were waiting. It was worth billions of potential buyers, profits around the world. Businesses were going to want it. It was going to break down the

monopoly to small businesses like Spades. Unfortunately Spade had a problem. His bent work partner, Stevenson. That night when Dylan and you turned up, I was about to agree to get the codes from Spade, without Stevenson knowing.

‘I don’t get it? Codes? Who do you work for? Sophie whispers.

Breathing heavily down the line he sighs. Silence. Finally he speaks. ‘It’s complicated. I had money tied up in it, the deal was with Jamie to get Spade to sign for the codes. That’s all. I was going to get away from all this shit after it went down.’

‘Well, what can I do about it! For fucks sake! You dragged Dylan into all this ... you set the whole thing up.’

There’s a fumble down the line as Noodle swaps the phone to his other ear. ‘You need to get Dylan ...’

Spinning in the bathroom, Sophie looks back into the mirror at her sinking eyes, cracked lips, pale, gaunt. With her head thumping, she creaks open the door, looks down the passage way as she whispers down the phone.

‘Why? You’re a con, scam artist, you’ve been using Dylan from day one to help you source codes.’ With a bitter edge forcing itself up, she presses the phone.

Dead silence.

A wave of exhaustion hits her as she kneels over on the diamonds slanting towards her into her eyes again. Wishing she could curl up, the tears slowly form, mirrors of reflection.

CHAPTER SEVENTY SEVEN

The muffled sound from the other end of the hallway comes in floating waves through Sophie's soft ears. Her hair falls tangled around her face, a mess in a sea of sleep.

A glass clanks on the edge of the kitchen bench waking her. She licks her dry lips as she staggers off the floor. Taking a few shallow breaths, she wobbles again as she pulls her sweatshirt down over her jeans. She reaches for the tap, splashes water over her face, then turns towards the door.

Smiling warmly, Jed gestures for her to come closer as she enters the kitchen. An agitation stirs in her as she tugs at her sleeves.

'Ah Sophie, glad you're back, we were just talking about Dylan's sweatshirt he was wearing on the night. Apparently it's one of yours.'

Furrowing her brow, Sophie pulls at the end of her sleeve bringing it up to her mouth. 'Um, yeah, maybe ... like I have three of them, I wear them around home. I think Dylan has one of mine ... I gave it to him in the end because he likes the LA Lakers.'

She licks her lips, the surge of gin coming back with a vengeance. Jed's eyes rest on her. A long enough linger for Sophie to feel nervous. She pulls her hair back edging a smile to her face.

'Um, so do you wear lots of fitness gear, like the whole trainers and stuff?'

Resisting the urge to bite her nails she nods. 'Um yeah, but you know, I'm not huge on fitness or anything, it's more a comfort factor, you know what I mean.' She swallows, her heart pulsating up in her neck as she grits her teeth.

Turning swiftly on his stool Jed looks at Sophie, his gaze directly on her now. Calmly his voice comes out across the room to her. 'Really, do you mind if I have a look at your sweater, and shoes?

Her face begins to burn. 'Um ... oh ... ok ... sure, um why? I mean there's no problem I just wondered why ... I'll go get them.' She turns to leave the room. To her annoyance Jed stands, facing her, his hands stretched out.

'Do you mind if I come with you,' he asks smiling towards her.

'Um yeah, sure ... I guess so, follow me ... just this way,' her teeth grinding together.

Jed turns back towards Dylan, 'We'll be five minutes, ok? Watch TV or something.' With a look up towards the door Dylan walks over to the couch, slumping down, he turns the TV on.

The climb up the stairs feels like a thousand mile journey of desert with no oasis. She tries to breath but her mouth won't open, only her nose seems to be resonating with the need for air.

Clearing his throat, Jed calmly asks, 'So, I hear you're a pianist? That must be hard, difficult to do I mean. I have two left feet myself.' He smiles warmly again. Sophie finds her lip almost twitching into a laugh as she imagines this thin wiry man banging away on the keys with his feet.

'Um yeah, I've been playing for nearly 15 years, I hope to play professionally sometime in the future. I'm studying at Uni.' Nodding Jed slides his hands up the rail, as they come to the top of the stairs.

The landing hangs between them like a deep empty gully. Jed breathes in as he tries to guide Sophie along the passage way. Finding it more difficult, he bends his body to match her slow pace.

'Do you see much of your mum and dad?'

Rolling her eyes off into the distance. She tries to remember the day her mum left, the way it felt; Numb, like a deep cut, no pain. Like she was looking in on herself but couldn't get through.

'Um not much. Dad has an apartment in the city, he spends half the week there for work, the other half here. He didn't want to break up the family home since mum left. He thought keeping the home would help Dylan through the divorce. But now I guess we may need to sell, I mean dad will have to sell it at some stage.'

Eventually the room comes into focus. She can sense his empathy floating through. She has to cut it dead, before it goes any further.

'What about your mum?' he asks with his wide eyes. Noticing a flicker run across her eyes, he quickly looks away.

She turns to face the cupboard, her face getting hotter. 'Oh mum, I don't see her. She lives in Sydney with some guy,' she replies trying to keep calm as she stretches up to the top of the cupboard sprawling out her hands, eventually grabbing a hold of the sweatshirt.

'Here we go, this is the sweater ... and shoes.' She places them on the bed as Jed stares down at them, his possum eyes wide, unblinking, as he picks up the shoe examining the sole with his fingers up the edge of the rubber.

Putting the shoe down slowly, Jed casts his eyes quickly at the sweatshirt, then looks back around the room, to the dishevelled valley of clothes on the floor. He then walks over to the window, looks down to the cold streets below, tightening his lips in thought.

'Ok Sophie, that's all.'

'That's it?'

Nodding, he calmly strolls to the door, putting his fingers on the handle gently.

'Um, yeah, that's it Sophie.' Oh, ah, I might have one more word with Dylan.' He then

walks to the landing, pauses, flicks his phone open reads a text then shuts it closed, before his feet pad down the stairs, the sound pricking into her ears.

Turning she perches on the side of the bed, her eyes moving down the sweatshirt. The tiny speckles of bright red blood almost pass by. They look like chocolate, too bright though. Too luminous to be sweet.

She swallows, a sudden panic in her breath as she tries to remember. She must have thrown out the wrong sweater. Surely he saw it, why else would he leave so quickly. He didn't ask her anything else. He knows. Act calm, just fucking act calm. With a long breath out she swiftly stuffs the sweatshirt in her bag, hovers by the door, glances back at her phone. No messages.

Waves part pushing her around as she grips the stairwell going down into the depths, almost falling backwards into the kitchen on the tussled waves.

Casually leaning over the bench, Jed glances over to her as she nervously waivers in the entrance way to the kitchen. She slides over to the arm of the couch. His smile somehow doesn't match his eyes this time as he looks at her.

'Just a few more questions Dylan ... ok? You say you got pushed over by someone who had just shot the gun, then they ran past you?

Blinking his eyes, Dylan nods as he looks towards the TV, then back to the paper in front of him where he has written the name **DANIEL SPADE**.

Closing his eyes briefly, Jed touches his chin. 'Was the person who ran past you ... heavy or light ... do you think they weighed a lot?

Circling the name with his pen, Dylan pauses the pen over the paper as he tries to work out a calculation. 'They were approximately between **71 to 74 kg**, the person's height was on average 5.6 or 5.5. Slim build, possibly athletic or smaller than average. There's a high probability that the person is underweight for their height. A **98** percent probability.'

Turning his mouth down, Jed looks at the equation, nods his head as he writes it down into his little black book. 'Jeez, you're good at maths.' With a jerk of his head, Dylan quickly looks back up towards Jed then back down to the paper, his face suddenly serious, *lips suck in*. 'Yes. I'm doing correspondence Maths University level 2. I would like to work with planes.'

Hovering over this statement, Jed pauses, then pushes his hands deep inside his pockets feeling around the curl of the cigarette, a wash of tiredness rising upwards.

'Um, ok we might leave it there. Although I do have one last question. When you ran up the stairs of the house to get away, you removed your shoes. Why did you do that Dylan?'

Scratching his face, Dylan sways back on his stool, he then looks down to his shoes, the tiny corner of his lips curving downwards as he begins to frown. 'They are white, I didn't want the red angry colour on the nice white surface of the bath or my shoes. It would have been wrong. White can't mix with red. It would be a minus day.'

The room goes quiet, as Dylan moves forwards again on the stool, he reaches his fingers towards his left ear to massage it.

Grimacing Jed steps back, his eye twitches. 'So Dylan, you're saying you had blood on your shoe? What happened to the blood?'

With his face downcast, Dylan sucks his lips in. 'I took my shoes off, washed them under the sink. So the red colour would go. It was making me feel angry.'

'Hmmm, Ok, well, I'm going to have to go back to the station with this information. We didn't pick up the blood on your shoe Dylan, I don't understand how we haven't got it on the results. It would also be good to get the whole family together I think, talk things over. Sophie, maybe you could arrange this with your dad for tomorrow? Say 11.00 am?'

Lost in some space between realms of reality, Sophie can hear his voice. She grates her way back, nodding. ‘Oh um, yeah sure ... we can do that.’ Her eyes widen at the thought.

Fiddling with his pockets, Jed stops in his tracks, turns back one last time towards them. ‘Well till tomorrow, go easy on the ...’ his voice trails off as he eyes Sophie then the gin bottle in the corner of the kitchen bench.

With relief she watches as the door closes ... lets out a lost trail of air as she slowly turns towards Dylan. ‘Well that’s that then ...’

He doesn’t answer, instead he slumps off the stool, walking with his head down, bent over his shoulders to the stairs. As he glides his hand up the rail, he stops, looks through his hood back over to Sophie.

‘Sorry,’ his voice is suspended in a blue still star.

Confused she looks back towards the fuzzy shape of him, as he counts his way up the stairs silently, his shadow disappearing into the darkened house.

Still silence.

Sophie glances back towards the gin bottle. One more might be enough to drown it all.

PART THREE

CHAPTER SEVENTY SEVEN

The gentle humming in the background rises up from beneath the surface, pushing out the water with a force that creates bouncing waves, twirling then casting off further to the left, then right as if in a salsa dance of life. John turns looking over the rail, the air whipping his hair back with a rush of coldness that makes him do one of his gritted teeth smiles.

He holds Amy's hand just long enough before another gust knocks them both sideways. The seagulls soaring above almost laugh in chorus to the tiny humans battling the elements.

The bell below rings out into the boat, causing a large group of people to chaotically attempt to make their way towards the starboard door, the large orange lifesaver ring shining into the faces of passengers as they pass by. The high pitched bell continues to ring. John looks around, everyone seems to be seated, he casts his eyes further out to the upper deck searching for Amy, where is she? With panic, he finds himself rising up battling towards the door, then back up on to the deck.

The waves crash against the sides of the boat tossing him through the air. He slips, lands on his right hip, gathers himself up again then rides up in the waves as they crash down once more. He tries to shout, full fingers are stuck in his mouth, he can't speak so he tries again ... the bell rings over and over. This time he turns, Dylan is standing over on the other side of the deck. John screams out his name, but Dylan is looking far out to sea, searching for something. John screams again. He attempts to move his legs, but they are pinned down, like led balloons, something seems to pull him back. He turns, Amy is holding his hand, he looks back towards Dylan but he has gone. Screaming, John pulls free of Amy's hands as he runs as fast as he can, but his legs are

slowed down by the weights stuck to his legs, he tugs his arms up to pull free ... ripping at the air ...

With a crack the clock falls on the wooden floor. John jolts upright. The bed sheets are tossed in a pile, the pillows miles away from the bed, his back soaked in sweat. He spins his eyes towards the blinds. A crack of light is just curling through the blinds onto the floor boards. He yawns, scratches his head, flops back on the bed, thinking of the strange dream.

Shit, Dylan. He sits up again, reaches for his phone discarded on the floor. His eyes pop open as he reads the first five messages, all from late last night.

<Hi me here. Can you come over>S

<Me again. Jed the police guy here. Dylan here>S

<URGENT COME>S

<Come tomorrow 11 am >S

With a rush he falls out of bed, the sheets twist in his left foot. ‘Ah ... shit,’ he says as he stumbles onwards, flicking on the hallway light. As he makes his way towards the bathroom he passes his workstation desk, with a glance sideways he looks at the photo frame beside his computer. His favourite. Dylan balances over a log, while Sophie looks upwards from underneath, her hair unfolding down past her knees.

Joanna with her head tilted to the right in deep thought sits between John’s legs on the slope of the hill. They are all laughing towards something. An inexplicable moment of joy. His body tightens. Was Joanna happy? Was he happy? Or maybe just Dylan; his eyes heading skyward up towards the seeds of the dandelion he’s blowing from his hand. The particles of light are caught in between the sun and seed as they float in the air, while his brown eyes, pools of light seem to ascend upwards to something beyond in the universe.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

Dr Mathew's face clouds over when Joanna mentions her ups and downs with Sophie. He pauses, leans forwards after considering her description of events, his fingers falling around his mouth in complexity.

'Joanna ... I think perhaps you're most probably going through what we call in medical terms post-natal depression.'

Joanna looks back towards John, her face grim, as she crosses her legs. 'What can I do about it?'

Dr Mathews, nods, still serious as he clasps his hands onto his legs.

'Well, Joanna, what I'm suggesting is a course of medication, known as a Serotonin re-uptake. It's a mild-antidepressant, it should lift your mood, helping to stabilize your serotonin levels, and hormone levels. However this is going to take some time. There is usually some variation, sometimes things need re-adjusting. It's not going to change things over night, these things take time.'

A feeling of powerlessness washes over John; the thought of Joanna struggling with it all.

'Considering you've never had depression, manic depression or bi-polar, before, I think we can safely say this is just a mild case, you will come right. But you will need to work at things yourself as well. Looking at your food, how you sleep, limiting alcohol, your work- life balance, all these things ... how does that sound ... Joanna?'

John leans towards her, grabbing her hand, squeezing it as her face begins to turn light red.

'Um, well ... maybe this does sound like it's the most plausible explanation ... I haven't been myself ...'

Dr Mathews begins to nod in agreement, then swings around on his chair, feeling for his pen to write down a prescription. As he methodically ticks things, he looks back up at the computer screen again.

‘Oh, just a few things, they don’t seem to be here in your medical history Joanna. Do you have any history of mental illness in your family, relatives or brothers and sisters with bi-polar, depression, anxiety issues?’

With a furrowed brow Joanna looks back down at the brown carpet, sighs. ‘I think my father and brother both have slight autism ... I mean, it’s so slight, they’re sensitive, slightly withdrawn, a bit different, but nothing outside the box.’

Dr Mathews swings back in his chair. ‘Hmmm, did they, or do they suffer from bouts of depression or anxiety?’

Joanna pushes her lips in, as her eyes stare back down to the carpet. ‘Um, well I think my father had depression. He had a hard life, my brother, well he also has had difficulties, it’s hard to explain really. In the past, one doctor said they were both on the spectrum, it was a private specialist that visited the family when my brother was at school. He was difficult, my brother. He isolated himself, but he was so bright. My father brushed it off, then my brother left for Australia.’

‘I see,’ Dr Mathews replies as he looks back to his screen.

‘How does your brother get on now, as an adult?’

Joanna swallows, frowning as her brow creases up with lines. ‘Well, he has a PHD in Geno-medicine or something, he basically lives in a world of science in a lab at the New South Wales University. He has written papers in studies on gene biology. Sorry I didn’t think this was relevant to me having post-natal depression ... I mean I’m normal. Sophie is really fine ... isn’t she?’

Leaning forward in his chair, Mr Mathews scratches his head. His lips twitch at the sides. 'Yes, I see what you're saying. Sophie is 7 months ... how were the paediatrician notes? Any concerns?'

Joanna looks back at John unsure what to say.

'Does she eat normal, sleep normal, any irregular irritation?'

Joanna raises her shoulders as she twists her head sideways. 'Um, well sometimes she cries too much, I have trouble breast feeding her at times ... she's sometimes restless.'

Mathews leans back once more, reaches for his pen, chewing the end of it for a second, then looks towards them, his face calm.

'Look as far as I can tell, autism can link into a gene, then repeat over. It can sometimes jump a generation, it can turn up when you least expect it. But what I can suggest is that if you're concerned over the coming months, come back to me immediately.' Mr Mathews then pushes his chair to the desk, filling out the prescription. 'I really think we should just focus on getting you well again Joanna.'

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The drive home is quiet. Joanna looks back out the window, her right shoulder guarded as she prepares herself for John's questions. He taps his fingers around the steering wheel as he tries to process what Dr Mathews has said.

'Joanna, I know you're probably not wanting to talk about this right now, but can we at some stage talk about this?' Joanna slowly turns, her eyes now looking at the wet patch down the road in the distance.

'John, I didn't want to tell you, if I had you would have run a mile. It's not something you just drop in to a conversation ... by the way I have two odd balls in my family that have Autism! I thought it was best to leave it out.' She lets out a sigh, exhausted, realising she has just snapped at him. Her shoulders slump down.

With his smooth Scottish voice John tries to guide the conversation back to something bordering on calmness. 'Joanna, listen I would have been more than open to any discussion about this, or anything to do with your family. I love you, no matter what, I wouldn't have treated you any other way. You know how I feel about you.' He then reaches out his left arm to her knee, his other arm guiding the car.

She tries to smile, her head tilting inwards to him, but part of her still divided, detached. 'I'm sorry, I should have told you. My family is a mess.'

With a warm smile, John laughs, his voice lifted up in some sort of hopeful swing. 'Oh Joanna, you know, no one is normal ... god my family are shocking! I never get any real conversation with my sister, she's always playing in concerts all over Australia, and dad drank himself to his death bed, mum lives in her sherry bottles.'

He clutches at her hand that is now clasping tightly around her other hand, almost like two crabs clawing together anxiously.

'Joanna,' he gently whispers, this time looking towards her then back down the road. 'We'll get through this ... our lives together are too important.'

She bites down on her tongue. A little blood, light metallic. Somewhere she pushes the emotions south. Her mind is made up though, about something. She can't let him in.

CHAPTER EIGHTY TWO

Opening the back door, Thunder pushes out of the doorway in between John's legs. Eyeing the mess. Remnants of a lemon peel lie discarded next to the empty bottle of gin and tonic bottle knocked over on its side in the sink. He turns around to scan the rest of the room, noticing Dylan's bag on the floor beside his favourite stool. His laptop poking out the top.

'Sophie!' Empty walls reverberate out. He climbs the stairs, reaching the top he walks past Sophie's room, taps the door, opens it a crack. Empty bed. Fuck, where is she? He then continues on to Dylan's room. The duvet hides the mound of his curved body, a large tussled mess, with the pillows piled up high over his head. The way he has slept for the past Seventeen years.

'Hey Dylan,' he says as he walks towards his bed. Dylan's hood is up cocooning his face. He slowly shudders as his eyes squint then open to the light.

'What? Dad ... you're here? Why?'

John stretches his arm out to his shoulder. 'It's ok, Dylan, I'm here for the meeting with Jed the policeman ... it's ok.'

Dylan wipes his eyes with his fingers, *lips suck in*. 'Dad, I didn't do it. I didn't shoot anyone.'

John looks back down at his son, his dark brown eyes staring up at him with such intensity. 'It's ok Dylan. I know. Come on, let's get this over with.'

'Where is it? My laptop?'

'Oh, you left it in your bag, I saw it downstairs.'

Dylan scratches his head, trying to think back to last night. 'Dad ... Sophie? Is she here?'

John feels his lips twisting as he looks down the hallway. 'Um, she must be somewhere ... it's ok ... I'll make you a coffee in your mug.'

Dylan lies back on his duvet, looks up at the ceiling the beams circling around, meeting in the middle of the room. 'Dad, she was up when I went to bed ...'

'Thanks for that, I'm sure she's fine,' John replies as he walks out the door towards the stairs, tapping his fingers along the banister.

CHAPTER EIGHTY THREE

There's a sniff, then a clank of something. John hesitates, decides to pull his neck through the door into the darkened room. A small light over in the far corner reaches outwards into the room from the morning sun. He turns to go, but the sniffing begins again. This time it's louder, followed by a breathy mumble.

'Sophie? Is that you?' he says as he walks further into the room, past the piano, only then seeing Sophie lying on the floor, her back against the wall, her wild eyes looking out the window towards the garden.

'They have such lovely little faces don't they,' she says, her puffy eyes bloodshot, as she turns to look at him.

'You always loved the pansies Soph, even when you were little we used to say to you, look at their faces. I guess somethings don't change.'

Leaning down he tries to touch her arm. She pulls away, urgently pushing herself up off the ground, she staggers around past the piano. 'I can't be here ... I have to go.'

Confused, he walks towards her again. 'Why? We need you, this isn't the time to be running off! Dylan needs our support ... your support, god we need to be a family Soph!'

Spinning in a hectic haze, she groans loudly. 'Dad you're not listening! For fucks sake! I need to go ... one day you'll understand. I'm sorry ...' she hurries towards the door, knocking herself against the chair by the door. He is one step behind her as he reaches her arm, tries to grab her, but she pushes at him to free herself.

'Sophie, what's going on? You can't leave like this!'

'Let go,' she screams as she runs out the door to the kitchen.

The back door slams shut.

*

‘Did you talk to Sophie last night?’

Dylan scratches his head as he yawns. ‘Yes and No. She just drank gin all night.’

Frowning, John casts his eyes back to the kitchen and the empty bottle. ‘Right, well I’ll make some coffee I guess.’ Wrestling with the instant coffee packet to pour into the jar, John’s eyes blur over again with tiredness. The TV echoing into his ears loudly. The light tap at the door goes unnoticed.

‘Ah, Mr Willis, hello, hi!’ Jed calls out as he steps forwards into the kitchen, surprising John who jumps back in his steps.

‘Oh god, sorry I didn’t hear you! I was miles away,’ John says reaching out his hand to shake Jed’s.

‘Right well, maybe we can make a start ... is Sophie here?’ Jed asks as he takes a seat on the stool facing Dylan.

‘Oh ... well that’s the problem,’ John replies as he rolls his eyes backwards. ‘She left about five minutes ago, really urgently, maybe boyfriend problems? She seemed really upset about something.’

‘Ah, no problem, I can catch up with Sophie later today. I have her mobile ...’ Jed answers calmly, twirling a cigarette in his pocket.

John sighs. ‘Well Dylan’s here, so how about we have a coffee?’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Jed nods, turning towards Dylan. ‘Ok Dylan, I just have a few more questions. Firstly how did you get to Daniel Spades house?’

With a flick of his fingers Dylan turns down the volume on the discovery programme channel so that he can hear the inspector while still watching the images of the *Underworld sea life of the Caribbean*. A re-run of a series of **12.8**, number **5** in the

episodes. One of his favourites recorded so he can watch it every morning after his shower at **8.15 am**.

Annoyingly he hasn't had his shower today. A minus day. Everything is back to front, **GREY** just like last night, and the three nights before that. Dylan glances at the Inspector guy again who looks dishevelled, his large bulgy planet eyes look like one of the fish on the Caribbean documentary.

He wonders if the Inspector will solve the case. Possibly. There's a **75** percent chance he can. The other **35** percent is left to the statistics that prove that not all homicide or murders are solved in the first initial week or consequence weeks that follow. Due to the victims death having an impact on the witness statement and facts that sometimes don't corroborate with all other witness statements and forensics.

With an eye on the blue sea of the Caribbean and the other on the Inspector, he pushes his teeth down hard grinding them in together with a moan. Similar to the yellow French grunt fish; his favourite, although the blue grunt is more common with its angular line across the tail. The French grunt, (*Haemulon Flavolineatum*) however, is the one that flickers across the reef with its yellow flecks of light delicately dancing as they stick their little mouths outwards towards the coral reef for food. He has always thought this is quite a seductive feeding habit for a common fish.

Not only do they almost kiss the reefs, but they grunt as they grind their teeth. The noise amplifies outwards from their bladders producing quite an interesting sound. It's this sound that seems to stick in his mind; it ticks over in his head, the effort the grunts go to, to exude such a high low frequency simultaneously. It almost makes him feel happy that there is something similar, something he can associate with. Although technically, it's a fish. Not a human.

With his right eye on the grunts, he looks sideways, his left eye fixed towards the Inspector.

‘I left here at **10.00 pm**. My watch said **10.01 pm**. The clock on the wall said **10.03 pm** which was **2** minutes out. My phone was accurate though. I arrived at the Stanmore house address approximately **10.43 pm**. The reason I was **3** minutes out, was because I took the number **5** bus from Cashmere to the CBD, then I had to take the number **18** out to Eastgate shopping mall. The number **5** is not as smooth as the number **18**. It uses a different kind of engine; a **B6.7 Hybrid, L9**. The number **18** was a **L9 Hybrid**, it uses a renewable natural gas.’

‘I got off the bus on Linwood road corner. The walk to the house was **9** minutes **30** seconds. It could have been longer, but the green light sequence at the intersection of Linwood shopping mall was particularly fast, **55** seconds, due to the low traffic. There was a team of road workers past the KFC, they wore helmets with lights. It could have been worse. And then I walked down to the house. It was an unlit street, at the corner there was a dairy that had its lights flickering towards a V drink poster up on the wall.’

Jed closes his book, contemplating something. ‘Hmm I see, so it was late. Um tell me Dylan, when you left here, did you tell Sophie you were going out?’

With a slow sip of his coffee, Dylan pushes his lips forwards and up, hesitates for a moment, then taps his orange mug. ‘Yes. She was here, she was playing the piano, practicing her Rachmaninov. It was **9.30 pm**. The first movement. It was very loud, with a repeat, twice through to the last stanza. Then it goes back to bar **38**, which is unusual as it should continue on to the end. There are **343** bars in the first movement.’

‘I’m sorry what’s this got to do with Dylan?’

‘Oh sorry Mr Willis, I need to know where all parties were on that night. It’s just routine, so we can rule people out of the investigation’ he answers staring at John for a moment, his face dead serious.

With his hands in his pockets John scratches his head as he begins to pace the room. 'Yes ... but Sophie had nothing to do with it ...' he trails off as he sees one of Jed's eyes flicker. 'Mr Deans, you can't be implying my daughter was involved in this murder?'

Sighing, Jed turns back to Dylan, who is now wide eyed, his lips sucking inwards.

'Look, there are things that have come to light. I wasn't sure until early this morning. But Sophie is now part of our investigation. I'm sorry Mr Willis.'

CHAPTER EIGHTY FOUR

Joanna gazes down at him. Her blue grey eyes steeling down on his wrestling body. Something is wrong. She can't put her finger on it. Why won't he settle? Why does he have to move so much, cry so much, have such a red hot looking face. She tries again to hug him up in the blanket. It seems to work for a moment. A random noise of a leaf hits the window; he pushes his head back, arches his back defiantly. A cry forces itself out, harsh, cold, his little lungs expand like a starving animal crying out on the forest floor in a winter blizzard.

*

4.00 am. The quietness of the house deepens into the woodwork as John switches positions in his chair. He yawns, glances down to Dylan whose deep brown eyes are wide open to every sound, still hovering on the point of sleep.

*

'It may be that Dylan is on the ASD spectrum,' Mr Mathews says leaning back in his chair, his pen in his mouth, thinking over things. 'He might be displaying the early signs of withdrawing from interactions with people. However, first things first. I would like to put you in contact with a very good ASD diagnostic doctor. Amy White. She is also a child behavioural psychologist, specialising in children and adults with Asperger's and Autism Spectrum Disorder.'

CHAPTER EIGHTY SIX

Waiting in the psych department of the clinic, time seems to slow down almost to the second hand tick gliding by. Joanna lets out a sigh, curling her eyes around the room; sterile, empty, apart from some magazines piled up in the corner. Swapping legs, John crosses his left over his right, straightens his tie as he looks back down to the Sudoku. His attention drifting back up to the clock then down to Dylan on the floor sucking his beads around his neck.

A door opens from one of the side rooms down the corridor. The steps pick into the floor, coming closer. Joanna grips John's hand as a thin woman appears. She turns into a little office. The room grows silent again. Three minutes later, the woman comes out briskly walking towards them. A small petite lady; 5.4, stands in front of them extending her hand.

'Hello, sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Amy White. You must be John and Joanna. You've come for an assessment for Dylan.' She then looks down to Dylan with a smile, 'Hello Dylan ... if you would all like to come this way.'

The room has a small child's table with some toys surrounding a play area. The rest of the room revolves around a table with a couch sofa and two chairs. Reluctantly Joanna walks towards the first chair, while John holds Dylan.

With a smile, Amy extends her hand out to John. 'If you would like to let Dylan down onto the floor in the play area while we talk that would be great.'

Furrowing his brow, John places Dylan down on the ground where he reaches immediately for the plastic rod with beads.

'Firstly, thank you for coming, this is not an easy process, I understand. What I would like to do, is talk to you about Dylan's early behaviour, perhaps things you have

noticed that you thought were slightly different. Then I would like to spend some time with Dylan. I don't call it a test. It's more like trying to find out how he processes things, also whether he can pick up on outside stimuli. Tell me is Dylan verbal at all?'

Joanna quickly looks towards John. He clears his throat, his Scottish accent sounding accentuated. 'Um, well at the beginning he made no sound, then at seven months he screamed all the time, raising his fists up and down. Then about four months ago he began to say mmm mama and car ca ca and gag a. But nothing like Sophie at the same age.'

'I see,' Amy says as she write this down in her folder. 'Ok. If you think back over the last two and half years, has Dylan had any emotional times where he has reached out to you, using hand gestures or movements in his body at all to be picked up?'

Letting out a sigh, Joanna presses her lips inwards frowning downwards, she then looks towards Dylan. 'This is really hard, but I can't think of him gesturing with his hands towards me ever. I mean we pick him up, but he just looks the other way, or he looks down at the floor or the toy he's holding. It's like we don't even exist or something.'

John glances towards Amy, then back to Joanna. 'Well to be fair Joanna, he does make some gestures, like when he sings in the bath, he holds up the bubbles, and when I take him to the beach he holds the pebbles up to the sun. I mean he doesn't look at me very often, but sometimes he does. He seems really happy in the water though. It's one of the only times I probably see him animated to be honest.'

Leaning backwards in the sofa couch John's shoulders begin to round as he scratches his chin. 'There just seems to be no indication that he knows we are here ...' he trails off as he looks down towards Dylan on the carpet spinning the twirly beaded circles on a plastic rod.

With another sigh John leans forwards, 'You see something like this with the plastic twirly beads thingy ... well that will keep him going for hours, he could do that all day and not look up at us once, or need us for anything.'

Nodding, Amy scribbles down something in her folder, then places her hands in front of her, her face serious. 'Yes, I understand what you're saying John. In early signs of Autism, children will often narrowly focus on one particular object, zoning out of everything else around them ... this appears to be what is happening right now with him.'

Amy then walks back to her desk, where she picks up another file, 'So Dylan is four?

'Um, yes, about four months away,' Joanna answers quietly, while her fingers dig into her thigh.

'Does he respond to his name at all?' Amy asks as she purses her lips.

John speaks this time, his voice strained, 'Well sometimes he looks, but it could just be the sound of my voice. Other times he looks the complete opposite way or stares vaguely outwards, like he's blocking me out. Sometimes Joanna sings to him, and he responds occasionally sucking his lips in, other times he cries, so maybe he can hear ...'

Narrowing her eyes, Amy sits back down, 'Interesting, has he had a hearing test?'

'Yes, the paediatrician, then the Plunket nurse. When he was three weeks old, then again when he was six months old, it was all fine,' Joanna quickly says.

Putting the folder down, Amy looks at Joanna then John, 'Ok, well we can do another sound test now. I have one more question. Is there Autism in either of your families?'

Contorting her mouth downwards, then into frown Joanna looks at the floor, then sighs. ‘Um, well, I think so ... I mean yes my father and brother have Asperger’s ... they function well in their own environments.’

‘Did they get a proper diagnosis?’ Amy asks leaning forwards.

Joanna tries to swallow, a hard lump sitting edged in her throat as she speaks. ‘Well my brother was diagnosed with residual Asperger’s when he was about 23. He’s very smart, works in a University. And my father is slightly more reclusive. They both get sensory overload of things around them. But they are great at knowing certain things. They just can’t cope with lots of people, or noise.’

Smiling, Amy leans back. ‘I see, it sounds as though they are high functioning on the spectrum. This may well be a similar trait with Dylan. Autism varies on so many levels, it can be mild, severe or in the middle, no person is the same. What we can do, is find out what makes Dylan tick.’

CHAPTER EIGHTY SEVEN

The switch flicks on then off. At first he seems oblivious to it. Amy pushes her fingers over it again. On then off. The clicking resembles a crackle pop. Almost with a jolt through his entire body Dylan drops the beads from his mouth. He reaches out for the switch, takes it from Amy's hand quickly and begins to flick it on and off.

'Good,' Amy says, as she leans over bringing some toy cars in front of him. She pushes them around for five minutes but he ignores them. His eyes remain glued to the switch. She then gets up, walks over to the cupboard where she brings out a Xylophone.

'This is a great one for seeing how children respond to exterior noises or stimuli,' she says as she plays some soft notes.

Almost instantly he looks up, as though he's had a fright. His face screws up tight, red, then a loud cry erupts, as he places his hands over his ears.

Quickly Amy puts the Xylophone down. 'That's interesting, he doesn't like that sound at all.' With a fast movement Amy steps back up off the floor to the cupboard, where she brings out a green balloon. She lets it go, so that it floats over to Dylan. At first he doesn't react, but then the balloon bumps into him, which sets off another round of loud cries, his face now purple.

With a hushing sound, Joanna comes over, she sits down beside Dylan. 'Is it ok for me to pick him up?'

Amy nods, 'Yes, please do, I want to see how he responds to your emotions and warmth.'

With a louder cry, Dylan turns his head away from Joanna as she tries to hold him still, he tugs, pushes away, his back arching as he tries to get back down on the

floor. Shaking her head exasperatingly Joanna tries again to pull his face towards her but he won't budge. 'So sorry ... this is awful, I don't know how to help him,' Joanna cries out.

Calmly, Amy tilts her head to the side. 'Hmm, can we try something else? What if you put him down, give him back the switch.'

Joanna looks towards the switch then back to Amy thinking it over. 'Ok.' She slowly puts him back on the carpet by the switch. Immediately his hands reach out, he lets out a sigh, sniffs, then flicks the switch on then off over and over.

'Hmmm, I thought that might be the case,' Amy quietly murmurs as she walks back to her desk, where she writes some notes down.

Tiredly, tears forming, Joanna steps back towards the couch. 'I've never seen him so worked up over something. I mean most children love balloons and sounds from Xylophones don't they?'

'Yes, in most cases children love light sounds, and the way the balloons float.' Amy begins to reply as she slowly walks back to her seat, her face set now in a look of concern. 'Look, from what I've seen today, Dylan is showing early signs of ASD spectrum Disorder. He seems unable to cope with outside stimuli that is both loud and soft. The balloon test is one I give to all the children I see here.'

'Those that have a high sensory overload with touch, or texture or both can be frightened of such things like the balloon. Even the sound and texture of the balloon, which is quite a light sound, so soft, can set off a child who has auditory sensibility.'

'So you're saying he has sensory overload?' Joanna asks looking back at John.

'From what I can see, yes. The music I played is an auditory test. Dylan displayed hypersensitivity, which suggests he struggles with noises, sounds. Normally music is stimuli that creates outwards and inward emotions of calmness, joy, excitement, perhaps an ecstatic state of bliss, happiness. Many babies, toddlers and

children smile when the Xylophone is played. Dylan's initial reaction was traumatic for him. From his outward displays of agitation, anxiety, fear, we can see sounds are quite frightening for him.'

'If I can explain it another way. Dylan was in his own world playing with the switch. I entered into his world with the sounds, then the balloon, and it jolted him out of his world.'

'So what do we do?' John asks, his lips in a long thin line.

'Good question John,' Amy replies as she opens the folder again. 'I will write up the report for you. But I would like to see you again in about eight weeks' time. What I find interesting about Dylan is that he has quite a long attention span for a boy his age. He's been playing with that switch for nearly 40 minutes. I don't want to put a final mark in the ground. There are more test we can do.'

Amy stops abruptly as Joanna's face goes pale, her eyes sunken, sad.

'Sorry, I'm just trying to work all this out in my head,' Johns says, his tone more directive. 'Dylan is showing signs of Autism? But there are more test to do?'

'Yes John,' Amy answers as she crosses her legs. 'In my opinion your son is on the ASD spectrum. To what extent, I don't know yet. He may well be very high functioning, like Joanna's brother and father. As I said before, his concentration seems very high, which is a good sign, also he hasn't completely stopped talking. In fact he may be gaining words by what you say. In severe Autism it swings the other way, by which I mean a child will lose their speech, sometimes completely.'

'Ok ... well is there anything else we can do now?' John asks.

'Ah, yes. One thing I would recommend is you keep working verbally with Dylan. Talk to him, make sounds around him. Try to keep doing the alphabet with other words in front of him. Also perhaps think of putting him in the local preschool in your area, for a half day a week or more.'

‘But what if he has a meltdown ...’ Joanna asks as she trails off in worry.

‘Yep I understand your concern, and he will have meltdowns for sure. He will want to avoid the noises and other children. But it’s finding the balance. Do you have my email?’

‘Um, yes, the doctor forwarded it to us,’ John mumbles.

‘Ok then,’ Amy says as she stands up, her little figure shadowed over by Joanna and John, who stand up, both with numb expressions. ‘That’s all for today. I will email you the report as soon as I’m finished. Also an Autism support pack for you to read, on the back it has some local support groups, counselling that can be used.’

With a lump in her throat, a sudden flush of fear overcomes Joanna as she walks towards Dylan. His little hand clutches the switch as she lifts him up, his face still rigid in concentration as he flicks it over and over again. ‘I wish we had one of these switches,’ Joanna says as she leans her head into Dylan.

Smiling Amy opens her eyes wide. ‘Oh you can have that one. I have a box full in my cupboard.’

John slowly puts his arm around Joanna, guiding her to the door, where they both hesitate.

‘You will be fine. You will get through this.’ Then Amy opens the door.

*

Joanna floats down the hall, where the muffled distant voices in the reception area roll over her rising up then down as she finds herself falling.

CHAPTER EIGHTY EIGHT

‘Outta here,’ Dylan says, as he picks his bag up, skirts around Jed, to the back door.

‘Dylan!’ John shouts.

The back door shudders shut.

Almost at a run, Dylan looks back down at the ashen cement road where the grey splotchy lines pulse up to his eyes meshing inwards quickly as he sprints across the road. With a quick jerk in his neck, he looks out from under his hood, **RED RED RED**. He scans the thin outline of the tip of the dark hill as the bus turns into the street.

The black stairs pointedly try to lash out at his legs as he climbs the jagged cliff to the back of the bus. With a sense of relief, he lets go, falling into the back seat as it closes its arms around him curling in, but the divide inside his head swings to the front of his mind again, like a rip curl, tossing him to each side, backwards then forwards.

Heaving out a heavy breath, he looks back out the window towards the fog surrounding the roads, pressing inwards, suffocating everything with a grey air. Like a switch going down the alarm bells begin in his head again as he reads a new text.

< We need to talk. BOAT SHED 10pm>N

Flashes run in front of his eyelids now. They are pressing inwards, fireflies of energy. Dancing then swinging. Suddenly ugly. **GRINDING TEETH**, as he pushes his head with his hands, the overwhelming sense of panic rising upwards pulsing with heat into his head. The gun. Black. The edge, I’m on the edge. Something now. It is a name, coming from somewhere. A faint whisper.

It’s my name.

me.

Dylan.

'Run Dylan, run.'

Blood. blackness. empty stars.

CHAPTER EIGHTY NINE

The pawn shop is squashed between a double world: the flashing car sales yard with low end Hyundai's and 90's Hondas on one side, on the other, a disproportionate remnant of the holy dilapidated Catholic church swaying in the low winter, destroyed by the Earthquake.

Letting out a deep sigh, Sophie stares down at her mother's bracelet, then back out to the lime green pawn shop. Its green exterior circles with an air of cheap junk for thrifty prices at all time low costs. Nothing to lose. It will buy a ticket.

The bracelet was something her mother had given her when she was thirteen, for passing her grade 7 piano exam. Now it just looks like a token gift. Something her mother had given her, just to appease her. Time to move on. The only thing she owes to anyone is to Dylan now. He needs to know. Then she can leave. Begin again. No one needs to know. Forget everything. Anyway, there was nothing now.

She pushes the door open. A cheap bell rings out followed by a canary crackle over the speaker. The shop floor is a jumble of real contorted with fake, imposing with ugliness into her face, she struggles forwards to the counter, where a man, with an orange apricot fake tan jumps from behind a rack of clothes.

His gold jewellery medallions tinker across his chest, making Sophie think of the 70s disco club thrust. He seems so desperate, with his upturned coat and shirt like an Elvis gone wrong. The only thing remotely real is his grey lines of hair sticking out from the bottom of the platinum gold wig set off on a right angle across his head.

She sighs, holding up the bracelet to his blue pale plate eyes.

'Um, its pure silver, from France, my mum got it for me. It's set in seventeenth century style. But I don't have the box it came in.'

The man immediately smiles, his face lights up, the tan rising upwards into a leathery mass.

‘Neil, a pleasure to meet you ... So why do you want to sell such a beautiful exquisite piece? Oh I do like the little gem on the side ... that could push the price up.’ Neil reaches out his fat apricot fingers rolling forwards as he takes it completely from her hand. A sudden spasm makes him jerk forwards; a rough smoker’s cough as he brings one of his apricot hands up to his mouth, dabbing at his line withered chin with a white hanky from his pink jacket pocket.

With another sigh, she turns away to look around the shop leaving him bending over the bracelet, his pours emanating stale breath. Strange looking things stick out of the ceiling and walls. A moose head, a deer head with brown button black eyes, oblong flags lie across the floor, knight armour cluttered into the corners, vases, painting of old burlesque like escapades. Who would want it? She wonders as she turns back to the counter.

‘I think I’ve seen one of these before, they are very rare. Are you sure you want to sell it?’ Neil asks swaying behind the counter, his eagerness pushing into the stale air.

Sophie looks down at it, a memory of her playing at a recital, the day her mother had given it to her. A bitter sweet moment, as her father had stayed home to watch Dylan because he had banged his head again on the trampoline. He was taken to A and E, which had caused Dylan to have a meltdown. Another one.

‘Yes, I mean no, I don’t want it anymore. It means nothing to me.’

CHAPTER NINETY

‘Do you need a coffee,’ Dell asks as she swings herself into Jed’s car.

‘Jesus, yeah, long night, long morning, never ending,’ he replies, pushing the accelerator down as he turns out of the police station.

‘Go to Milton street, they have a drive in takeaway there,’ Dell says pushing her tongue to her cheek. ‘So what happened? Anything unusual?’

The sun splinters through the windscreen, causing Jed to pull his face back, quickly reaching for the blind up above his head. With a thud he clips it down. ‘Um yeah, I think I know who the murderer is ... we need a couple of warrants.’

Twitching her head to the side, Dell looks back out the window as Jed circles into the carpark. ‘Oh, by the way Jed, did you get in contact with Pierson?’

Yawning, Jed looks back out the rare view mirror as he pulls up in front of coffee to go booth. ‘Um yeah, the footprint on the sole of the shoe from Spades house has some kind of chemical substance on it, it’s from Jamie’s warehouse.’

‘Righto,’ Dell answers as Jed orders the coffees. ‘I’ll ring the base. How many warrants again?’

‘Two; Noodles warehouse and PROLIFE,’ Jed replies as he scratches his chin, the regrowth annoyingly brittle.

Dell curls herself out of the car, straightening her hips as she stands in the carpark talking to the office over the phone. ‘Yes Prolife, under the SPADE CASE 214, yes that’s it, righto ... thirty minutes, ta.’

‘Righto, done, let’s go Jed,’ she says with a half-smile.

‘Why are you so happy?’ he asks, eyeing her as he hands her the coffee.

‘Well, there’s nothing like finding the endings,’ she replies, as she sips the coffee. ‘Jesus! This is strong’

Peeling his sunglasses down, Jed flicks the key on. The engine revs as he takes another sip of coffee before pulling out of the carpark.

Tilting her head to the side again, Dell sighs. So, anyway ... how are things?’

Jed glances at her quickly. ‘Jesus Dell, you pick the best of times to ask ... shit I don’t know. I’ve sent Sarah the divorce papers...’ Trailing off, he flicks the indicator.

‘Well good,’ she says nodding, as she takes another sip, grimacing at the strong aftertaste.

CHAPTER NINETY ONE

With quick movements, Jed reaches over to the glove box, where he finds his gun and badge.

‘Ok, Dell you go around the back. There’s a girl with a baby, harmless. She’s renting the back flat. There’s a flight of stairs that leads up to Noodle’s level, a door at the top. Just wait there.’

‘Righto,’ Dell says, pulling herself up out of the car, her hip twinging with slight pain. She wrestles with the walkie-talkie waiting for Jed to come over the speaker. ‘

<‘Is this thing fucking working ... Dell?’>

<‘Righto ...?’>

The knock reverberates on the metal door with a clang. Stillness. Jed knocks again. An echo. This time, faint footstep fall on his ears. A click, followed by a key then another click as the door opens.

‘Oh hi. Emily? Right?’

She blows a bubble, then sucks it backwards into her small mouth, some of the pink splatter of gum bits fall over her small lips.

‘Yeah ... hi ... you here for Dylan?’

Jed adjusts his feet, trying to angle his way to see past her, noticing the stairwell goes up to a third story, with a strange looking skeleton with red eyes blazing above the door.

‘Um, no Emily. I’m actually here to see Noodle. Is he in?’

Her eyes dart behind Jed for a second as she looks down the alley way.

‘Nah, he’s out, I dunno when he’ll be back.’ Her arm extends itself up the handle of the door, as if she is about to shut it on him.

Jed edges his foot to the bottom of the door. ‘The thing is Emily, I have search warrant to look in these premises. My Chief Inspector is round the back. We really need to talk to him ...’

Emily’s eyes flicker as she looks past him again. ‘Yeah, I spoze, I dunno where he is, like he just went off ...’

The three flights of stairs feel bizarre to Jed as he eventually reaches the top landing, only to find another locked door. Emily reluctantly opens it, then nervously hovers by the couch watching Jed circle the room.

‘Ok, Emily, I need you to tell me what exactly Noodle does.’

With lowered shoulders Emily lets out a sigh, easing her way down on to the couch. ‘Like I said, he does coding. It’s messed up ... it’s Jamie. I just go along with him. You know what I mean ... I don’t know anything else ...’

‘Come on! This is bullshit! ... It’s six to ten years Emily for aiding a criminal involved in illegal activity!’

She bites her lip. ‘Ok, but I ain’t told you this right. The boatshed. Tonight.’

Jed walks to the door, taps his finger along the edge of the handle. ‘Tell him we stopped by.’

Out on the street, Dell lingers in the late afternoon sun, the shadows creeping up the alleyway towards the car. ‘Anything?’

Slowly Jed looks back up at the black warehouse windows. ‘Nah, not really, nothing I didn’t already know. Get the team into PROLIFE, I want it locked down.’

CHAPTER NINETY TWO

The travel agent passes over the details, her squeaky voice evaporating over Sophie. She closes her eyelids to the bustle of shoppers enveloping outwards in a loud crescendo. The nausea rises. Oh god. She rushes for the toilet. The vivid green light pulsates above the door where a que extends out of the passage way. Fuck. Exhausted she turns back towards the mall entrance out into the carpark. A weedy brown patch of lawn in amongst the cars rises up towards her just as a yellow vile stream forces its way out.

‘CAWWW,’ the piercing cry penetrates into her ears as the seagull swoops down circling her, then landing on the carpark light above her. Jesus. Fuck off you stupid bird. She pulls her head up, looks around, the hot redness pumping across her cheeks, shit. Where’s the car? A sudden vibration in her pocket makes her jump. Fuck now what.

<BOATSHED 10 pm>N

She closes her eyes. Fuck. She glances around nervously, her little Volkswagen peeping out four rows away. With a coldness now making its way into her bones she slides down into the car seat, reaches for her phone.

<DYLAN, STAY AWAY FROM NOODLE>S

For a moment, she tries to think about what to do. A tree through the car window sways, its voice crying out, softly singing, calling something. Notes begin to float inwards, lifting her upwards, towards the clouds.

Small rain drops start. She turns the key, guiding her car away. Somehow on to Moorhouse Ave leading towards the familiar path.

*

There doesn't seem to be anyone home. She tries again. Nothing. She steps back, a curtain flickers up above. Someone is home. One more go. A shuffle. A low noise pushes its way downwards. A key turns.

'Sophie? This is a surprise. I thought you had work today?' Professor Allen says as he leans forwards glancing up then down the street.

'Um, no Daran, I gave that job up ages ago. Remember?' She casts her eye behind him, then back noticing his crumpled shirt, a button undone at the top, his socks off, which now as she looks at him seems really odd as its only eight degrees outside.

He clears his throat, his eyes suddenly seeming like he cares. His arm reaches out towards her. 'Sophie you look really tired, is everything ok?'

'Yes, yes, I just thought ... I ...' She bites her tongue.

Daran sighs, something she hasn't seen him do before. He then looks down as he folds his arms, another thing she hasn't seen him do.

'How are you?' she hears herself say in an off key tone.

'Oh fine, a bit tired actually. I was just going to lie down. Um, I had a lecture this morning on counterpoint. You know some of the students couldn't get it, I wonder what they teach them in school now.' His voice sounds cracked.

'Oh, I suppose.' She notices his arm is across the door.

'Look I couldn't come in for a bit?'

Daran scratches his neck, his head leans to one side as he lets out an exasperated sigh. 'Um, probably not today Sophie. Sorry. I would normally say yes, but I have like fifty essays to mark by Monday, I have to send them through as files to the administration. They're always on my back.'

'Ok, no problem, I'll go...' she trails off, her mind racing now, a feeling of sludge like vile sitting in the bottom of her stomach.

Her ear hears the thump.

Then a door shuts.

Slamming in her brain.

‘Do you have someone up there?’

Daran looks down, his lips tight. ‘No Sophie, there’s no-one here.’

Sophie pushes past him, her arm forcing its way onto his chest with a thwack, as she storms up the stairs.

The naked girl on the couch can’t be much younger than her. A first year cellist. Sophie notices her beautiful long curly brown hair, shining in the sunlight coming in from the window. The girl smirks, sits up casually.

‘You must be Sophie ... sorry, the conversation down stairs was getting really boring and repetitive.’ She gets up from the couch slowly, then walks through to the bedroom, her long naked body sprawling across the bed.

With swirly patterns pushing upwards, Sophie stoops backwards, the smell of sweet sweaty sex rising in her nostrils.

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ she says, swaying towards the stairs with the paisley carpet. Orange curvy lines blur upwards into her eyes as she races past Daran out into the garden, with its soft camellia bushes falling inwards to her.

CHAPTER NINETY THREE

The police cars sporadically sprawl around the PROLIFE carpark.

‘Police! Police! Don’t move, drop the gun!’ A sole shot punches the air.

Shuffling ensues, then a descending cry evaporates out.

With his torch full beam, Jed flashes it around nervously as he runs through the aisles. He finds himself amongst the rabbit warren of scattered boxes, discarded equipment toppled over by police and dogs.

A group of police are surrounding the back office. Jamie is bailed up against the wall, his shoulder bleeding through his shirt, the gun scattered to the floor in front of him. Jed walks in quickly kicking the gun further away.

Unblinking, his eyes as wide as saucers, Jed holds his gun up.

‘So Jamie, do you want to tell me what’s really going on? Or will I let the guys here sniff around?’

Jamie tosses his head back, his eyes squinting in pain.

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘Hmm, well Jamie, that’s not what Emily told me. You know the pretty young girl you hired, the one that keeps track of Noodle for you. Noodle. You remember him don’t you? The one you employed to do illegal coding, for your chemical trading? Manufacturing of illegal substances in America?’

The air is static, like it could pop as Jamie shuffles his feet. ‘You can’t prove anything,’ Jamie answers calmly.

Quickly Jed turns to look out the office to the boxes then back at him. ‘That’s where you’re wrong. I have the lab results of this warehouse matching a result on a shoe that brings all the shit back on you.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Jamie laughs, squirming slightly.

‘Yep, that’s right, I’ve had swabs taken ... it’s all over the place.’

‘That doesn’t prove anything,’ Jamie cries out.

Jed takes a step towards him. ‘Yes it does. The chemical you trade with, plus I have a witness who was getting a programme from Spade that was connected to a coding device you had given to Noodle to bribe Spade. But it went wrong ... didn’t it.’

With a sudden movement, Jamie tries to get to the door. ‘It’s not my fault. That weird kid got in the way.’

‘Cuff him,’ Jed spits, his lips tightly closing.

Out in the car park, Dell swivels into her seat. ‘Good work Mr Deans!’

‘It’s not over yet,’ he quietly mumbles, his wide eyes staring out across the carpark.

CHAPTER NINETY FOUR

The chill in the air quickly surrounds Dylan's body. With a sudden jolt, he pulls his hood up over his head, looks both ways before walking towards the shadows of the walls of shops. Eventually his path bends down opposite the broken brickworks beside the river bend, where the seepages of the ruins remain. Purple dusted hues reach out into his eyes; a pressing feeling, almost opening up its veins into something that will run outwards leaking through each cell of his body.

With a quick turn, the end of the shops comes into sight as they lean in on their own shadows outwards towards charcoal stretched lines of trees beyond.

Reaching the first bridge, he stops looks down into the water where the rushing water swirls with an energy meshing within the nature of its force. He quickly turns towards the long outside darkened track around the north side of Hagley Park.

The boatshed bends lower outwards over the river. Its green and white stripes stand static in the air, reminding him of a peppermint stick that he tasted on Tuesday, Christmas day in 2008 at **11.05 am**. It was the only time he tried peppermint. It was strong, overbearing, dissonant, a minus day.

The bridge connects to the boatshed by a piece of large cement on either side, a new venture from the rebuild. Ugly, it garishly hits the wooden boatshed like a piece of pointed glass. He grinds his teeth, stepping forwards onto the first metre of the bridge.

*

The fog is hung, like a corpse surrounding the river. Dylan looks across towards the figure, the lines blurred in blue.

'Well done ... although technically you're four minutes late.' The figure walks forwards a metre, then stops.

The silence stills the air. Dylan finds himself looking back down into the water below the bridge, to the swirl of red cast out from under the light above the bridge.

Blood. **Teeth grinding.** A wave of **RED** is right behind the back of his head, pulsing inwards.

‘I ... I ... kn ... know it’s you,’ he blurts towards the figure in a loud stammer.

‘I ... I ... know you’re the Mouse ... you’re working with Emily.’

Noodle’s shadow slides forwards before him as he walks another metre onto the bridge, clapping his hands with a cut into the still air.

‘Well done Dylan ... you’re so perceptive ... yet so lost,’ he says as he laughs, the dissonant notes falling over into the river then up pushing into Dylan’s ears.

Dylan shakes his head forcefully. *lips suck in.* ‘Why do it? Why do all this? I don’t understand.’

With another step closer, Noodle steps into the shadows of the tree above the bridge. ‘Because I can Dylan ... because you’re just a puppet. I mean look at you Dylan ... I can trust you with anything.’

Furrowing his brow, Dylan jolts his head back, darting his eyes to Noodle then down to the ground. ‘Yeah, but had been tracking the Mouse for months ...’

Another laugh descends onto the bridge as Noodle rises his eyes to look straight at him. ‘I know ... you’re the perfect alibi really ...’

RED RED RED, the wave of air seems to evaporate out of Dylan’s lungs. His hands form into tight balls as he looks down into the brown black wood. The bridge seems to be swaying now, pressing into him on all sides. He takes another breath, glancing back up to Noodle.

‘I can’t do this for you anymore ... I ... you were at the house ... when Spade was murdered ... it was you,’ Dylan mumbles under his shallow breath as he bends over.

This time Noodle makes a high pitched squeal over the bridge. ‘Relax Dylan, I’ve got it all under control ... you don’t have to worry about anything.’

Dylan looks towards him, but this time, he seems to be fuzzy, blurred, off in the distance. Blackened. He reaches for his eyes with his hand, tries to remove the sweat from sliding downwards over his forehead. ‘Yeah ... but ...’

Raising his hand, Noodle smirks. ‘Sssh she should be here any minute now.’

‘I’m here.’ A voice comes from out of the darkness as Sophie steps from behind Dylan onto the bridge. ‘Didn’t you think I would have the guts to come?’ she says her voice straining, closed with tightness.

Noodle claps his hands again, with a laugh that grunts through the air like his father. ‘Well, if it isn’t the two perfect little stupid pods. Mrs ‘I can do whatever the fuck I like,’ and Mr ‘know it all Micro man.’ Together at last.’

Dylan glances at Sophie, noticing her puffy red eyes, her tear ducts filled with salty water, dark pupils over her white bare moon face.

She pushes past Dylan, her hand touching his arm. ‘I’m sorry Dylan, this is between Noodle and me now.’

With a loud scuff of his shoes Noodle yells out across the bridge. ‘Oh come on, he can stay ... He’s part of it, after all.’

‘Leave him out of it Noodle!’ she angrily yells back over the bridge, before she turns back to Dylan.

‘Sorry Dylan.’

‘I don’t understand Sophie,’ Dylan says, his lips sucking in.

‘That’s right Dylan, you’re precious little sister saved you’re life. She shot Spade, then bolted leaving you alone in the house.’

The **BLACK** wave hits Dylan like a rock. It won't budge, it moves up his body, through his heart, into his head. The flashes are bright now, **ZIG ZAGS** press in. *lips suck in*. 'It was you ... I heard you're voice ... I ... it was you ... Sophie?'

'I'm sorry ... Dylan ... I knew you were going somewhere dodgy ... I knew ... Noodle was working with Jamie ... I didn't want you getting involved.'

'But how did you know?' Dylan says in between shallow breathes.

'It's complicated ... I ... shit,' Sophie turns to look at Noodle.

'That's right kid, me and Sophie, yep ... together ... once upon a time.'

'Shut up ... you bastard!' she screams, her voice filling the void across the bridge then disappearing below into the rapid running river.

With a jerk backwards, Dylan looks towards the park, his eyes scanning the trees. 'I have to go ...'

Sophie tries to claw Dylan's coat, but he pulls further back. In alarm she raises her voice higher. 'It's ok Dylan. Listen we have to get out of here, you and me ... ok? We can't stay in this city anymore.'

'Why can't I ... I have my computer ... the bus ... the house ... my university maths ... Thunder,' he cries, his voice rising as he sucks his lips in, his eyes darting around the bridge.

With a dark laugh Noodle walks closer, his shadow now blending into the blackness of the bridge, 'Dylan, Dylan, Dylan ... when will you ever get it.'

'Just shut the fuck up! It's all your fault!' Sophie screams.

The accent of his jaw flips, almost like a red light has gone on. 'That's bullshit Sophie ... you're the one the police want ... I was nowhere near the gun.'

'You ... you fucking prick ... you framed me ...' Streams of tears are now falling down her cheeks, her eyes wild. 'I had to ... I had to save Dylan ... you can't get away with this Noodle ... the detective he knows it's you ...'

‘You’re going down ... it’s all on you,’ Noodle says raising his arm, the metal reflection bouncing off the red bridge light.

‘What the fuck ... Jesus, Noodle!’ she cries.

‘Wait, Noodle it’s me ... Dylan ... don’t ... you can’t.’ His voice ripples out into blackness, ripping him open.

*

The air is warm for **5.5** seconds as it passes. With the speed increasing in velocity it hits with the force of sound against light. **3 seconds. There is a 2 inch hole.** At first there is no light, but this is followed by a solitude sense of oneness. Floating within a warmness, a **YELLOW** sun. There is a sound somewhere in the distance. Very faint, a whisper.

‘Dylan ... Dylan ... can you hear me?’ With an energy surrounding his entire body, like a brush dappling him in a light green like the swaying trees, he looks up into her eyes.

Yes. Yes. I can hear you. I could always hear you.

CHAPTER NINETY FIVE

‘Stop!’ Jed shouts as his voice loudly rips into the cold air. It’s too late. A cold silence surrounds the air. He runs, like he’s never run before, his heart flying up into his throat, the air whipping around his face.

Noodle leaps off the bridge down into the dark bank beside the hospital. Jed pauses, looks back to Dell surrounding the bridge with the police and ambulance. Then he jumps down beside the bridge.

‘Dell!’ he yells down his walkie-talkie. ‘Noodle on foot,’ he clicks it off as he stops by a tree. A fog cloaks the ground. ‘Fuck,’ he says under his breath.

A sudden clank stems from the building site attached to the old wing of the hospital. Pushing on he reaches the bottom, the scaffolding meshes inwards, like a maze of steel. Too hard to figure out, he pauses again to catch another breath. Another clang. He looks around quickly, noticing a stairwell with steel railing poking backwards into the old hospital

He’s close. The last stairwell comes into view, the paint, dust and mess are covered over with giant plastic. Slates for the roof line up against the steel piping towering upwards.

At the top, Jed stoops, stich in his stomach. He tries to breath. He doesn’t see it coming. The ton of bricks hits him, knocking him over onto the steel pipes.

With effort, he propels himself back onto his feet. The next hit he sees. He blocks it with his left hand as he pushes his body towards Noodle.

For the first time, Jed steels his gaze onto him. The young man is a block of muscle, his neck as thick as his legs.

‘It’s over ... Noodle.’

‘Bullshit,’ Noodle yells as he tries to kick Jed again. This time, he misses as his body falls forwards onto Jed. The roof slides with a sudden jolt beneath them, as they both land back into a huge pile of pipes that scatter knocking the large metal scaffolding over.

*

At first, Jed thinks he’s imaging it. It can’t be real.

Noodle sees the side of the building as he falls. His blood thickening into a mottled curl of dissonance. His breathing broken as he looks out towards the green grass in the park, through which a spider web is clinging for air.

Jed turns his hand. He isn’t going to give up. With a pulse quickening to red, he pushes himself around, twisting over and over. No looking back now. As he falls through the air the stars peel forwards through his eyes like shinning discs. The speed at which he is falling seems to be silent as the ground bounces eternally beneath him.

Noodle raises his hand, dizzy with the darkness falling in around him. A tightness grips him, like a wire curling in around his airwaves. He tries to push it outwards. Blackness turns to nothing.

EPILOGUE

A gentle salt breeze glides around the boat, it gathers in pillows softening around the air, almost like whispers of angel wings.

Tiny silver fish swim by, darting in and out with the gentle pressure of the engine, almost in a sequence; *1,2, rest 1,2,3,4 rest 1,2, rest, 1,2,3,4*. Dylan could watch this for hours. He leans his head against the red rail. It's sunny, **YELLOW** stripes streaming into his eyes. A distant **ORANGE** hum surrounds his ears, muffles of talking, stemming from below.

'Dylan! Dylan,' John yells as he walks up the stairs. Seeing Dylan on the opposite side, he waves, then looks out to sea. Dylan smiles. His dad is wearing jeans, something unusual, he only ever wears them when he's really relaxed. Light Blue, with **2** scratched out bits on each side of his legs. Amy is standing **3** metres away. She is also in jeans. Dark blue. No scratches. She is round today. She must be happy.

He turns back to look at the sea. A wave is gliding in on a **65** degree angle. In **3** seconds it will hit the boat.

blue blue blue