

Chapter One

It had never been a joke that I'd found especially amusing, and George Ruiz was more than well aware of this. Squinting at me through the oddly static cigarette smoke, he waited for my response—seemingly counting off the seconds it took for me to raise the coffee cup to my lips and take a sip. When one was not forthcoming, however, he merely nodded thoughtfully, taking it all in his stride, and leant over the table, winking playfully.

"I said," he said. "'My dog's got no nose.'"

"I heard you the first time."

"And that's it? You're not going to play the game?"

We'd been sitting in his mother's grotty kitchen for the past hour, talking about everything from the state of local politics to the way the rain ran through the dirt on the kitchen window. It had been riveting stuff, and had I had anywhere else to go on such a grey, shitty winter's afternoon, I would have. As it was, I'd decided that this was at least better than sitting in my flat listening to Ray LaMontagne and picking my toenails. Even with the dog joke.

I looked about the kitchen at the pots piled up in the sink, the greasy newspapers stacked by the kitchen door and the three in-need-of-emptying litter trays at the side of the sink—and thought that maybe there were advantages to my condition after all. I was sure that had I shared George's olfactory ability, I'd have been well on my way to lung cancer, too.

"So you're just going to keep right on ignoring me?" he said.

"I'm having a bad day."

He sniffed with disgust and lit a fresh cigarette off the butt of the last. “You’re always having a bad day. Your life is one long run of bad days, mate. If you want my opinion—”

I didn’t, but that had never stopped him before.

“—what you really need to do is get a fucking grip. Not being offensive, you understand, just telling it like it is.”

One of his mother’s cats—Gemini, I think she called it, though for the life of me I didn’t know why—had oozed around the door from the hallway. George got to his feet, sticking the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and picking up the moggy by the scruff of the neck. Opening the back door, he threw it out into the rain and returned to his chair at the table.

“Bloody things get right on my nipple ends,” he explained. “If it was up to me, I’d drown the bloody lot of them. Or just hit ’em with a good, hefty brick.”

“You could always set your dog on them.”

“I haven’t got...”

George wasn’t the nicest man on the planet, which was understandable, really, since he had never been the nicest boy on the planet, either. He was a bully and a lout—the kind of person I’d always striven to avoid, even as, all those years ago in the school playground, I’d found myself perversely attracted to the prospect of being his friend. He was more than happy to ridicule another’s failings, publicly mocking the dragging-footed gait of cripples and cruelly toasting port-wine stain birthmarks with a nice glass of the house red. But when the joke was on him, when the tables were turned and he found himself caught out, George was unexpectedly generous. His smile would light up the room with its nicotine glow and he would positively chortle at the absurdity of it all. It didn’t do to push it, however—as I’d learnt on more than one occasion.

“Bastard,” he chuckled. “Nice one, Price. You got me for a second, there.” He slapped me on the upper arm; a little over one year and one adventure later, it’s still tingling. “Don’t let it happen again.”

As the afternoon dragged on, George became increasingly morose. We sat in that kitchen, the light fading completely, the windows misting up (*on the outside*, George insisted, the room was that cold), and what little conversation there'd been had totally dried up. I wanted to leave, but all I had waiting for me were four channels on a cracked fourteen-inch television and two working bars on a five-bar gas fire. That and five tins of beans and one bottle of Stella. Not the most promising of Saturday nights, then.

"I've been invited to a party," George told me, without looking up from the tabletop. He said 'party' as though it were fatal blood disorder. I could understand that.

George shrugged and sat up a little straighter in his chair. His lank, greasy hair fell across his face and, perhaps for the first time, I noticed he was greying at the temples. It wasn't the startling shade of grey that would make him look distinguished in middle age, either. Rather, it looked as though he'd rubbed cigarette ash into his scalp and I knew it could only ever contribute to his unhealthy air of disassociation.

"A family gathering," he told me, begrudgingly. "Stale sandwiches and dentures. You know."

I nodded. I'd been to a few of those in my time. Yet another bond to tie dear, despicable George and I together.

"I take it you're not going, then?"

"I have to." He smiled. Or sneered. "Call it familial obligation."

"There might be some money in it for you, you mean."

"Pots of the fucking stuff." His eyes were sparkling with malevolent glee—the prospect of such unrivalled riches almost more than his little heart could bear. He told me of his ailing Aunt Martha, a spinster of this parish and drowning in financial success. As he told it, her investments were famous in family lore. She saw opportunity where others saw 'inevitable' financial ruin, and had never been afraid to pounce—accumulating the kind of wealth no one in their family had ever dreamed of.

"And me," George Ruiz said, winking at me, "I've always been her favourite, Price. She thinks the sun shines out of my shit-hole."

“Which it does.”

“Naturally.”

A sound came from upstairs. A dull thud that no doubt meant his mother was finally getting up. We both looked at the ceiling, George still puffing on his ciggy as if his life depended on it.

“She doesn’t want me to go,” he told me. “Thinks I’m spoiling her chances—which, I have to admit, I am.” He looked at me and shrugged, a sadness behind his eyes that I didn’t think I’d seen before... or, at the very least, one that I had seen and somehow managed to block out. “It’s all academic, anyway,” he continued. “I’m probably not going to go.”

This was a fairly typical tactic of George’s; as he saw it, his self-contradictory statements kept the enemy guessing. And in his confused little world, everyone was the enemy. Even me, it would seem.

“And miss out on a sausage on a stick and the promise of untold riches? Are you a fool, George Ruiz?”

He smirked and defiantly stubbed out his cigarette on the tabletop, a few inches away from the overflowing ashtray. “Maybe I am. Wouldn’t put up with the likes of you if I wasn’t, now, would I?”

The sound of movement upstairs was growing louder and more urgent. I heard a grunt of frustration and a barely muffled curse, before something fell to the floor with a muted thud. George said, “She always drops it when she’s getting it down off the top of the wardrobe. Especially if she’s been on the piss the night before. I’ve told her, keep it by the bed, where it’s handy, but...” Again he shrugged. “You know what they’re like. Can’t tell them a bloody thing.”

I shook my head and smiled sympathetically—wondering just how bad it was for him, living at home with Carla Ruiz, her prosthetic limb and all her cats. Whenever I met her, she was always polite, if a little crapulent, with the air of one who felt as though she should have been born into more elegant times. Her cigarettes were always smoked through an ivory holder and she often enunciated with a mathematical precision that was never

quite convincing. Occasionally, as she passed him on the way to the drinks cabinet, she would ruffle her son's hair affectionately, but George's reaction would always tell me far more than the act itself. Pulling away and cringing, it would have been obvious to anyone observing that he detested her with a passion. What they may not have noticed, however, was the tension in his neck and shoulders; the tightness around his jaw and lips that informed me, the more educated observer, that George Ruiz was afraid of his mother... or, perhaps, afraid of what she could inadvertently do to him.

"I think you should go," I said, a little sadistically. "You can't let yourself miss out on an opportunity like this, Georgie. It's too... you know, *monumental*. Money like that... it could change your life forever."

It was the most I had said all afternoon. He eyed me suspiciously as I tried not to let the guilt show, imagining Carla beating him over the head with her false leg when she found out that he was intent on stealing her sister's money out from under her nose. For a moment, I thought he was onto me. If I could see his vulnerability through the angry, violent façade, it was no doubt true that he could also read me like a book. In the playground—the memories of which still haunted me some twenty years later—he had always worked me like a well-trained puppy, knowing just what to say and how to say it. He'd called me to heel and used my fear of exclusion (from our gang of two, rather than school itself) to make me do things I wouldn't ordinarily do. Today, however, he seemed oblivious to just what was going on inside my head. Or, if he wasn't, he certainly hid it well.

He rubbed his face and sat back in his chair, rolling his head from side to side to relieve the tension in his neck. "Don't think I could stick it," he finally admitted. "*Familial obligation* or not, I hardly know any of them and..." He twitched his eyebrows at the ceiling. "Well, she'd be looking daggers at me all night. More than a boy could bear." Lowering his eyes to meet mine, suddenly smiling, the realisation that I had yet again been played came too late.

"Unless..." he said.

It was still raining heavily when I left, but it was nevertheless a huge relief to be out of the Ruiz household. I had escaped, it was true, before Carla had managed to hobble her way downstairs for her 5pm breakfast of cigarettes and Malibu, but I had not successfully avoided the snare that had followed George's planned 'unless'. Better men than I had been trapped by his machinations, this I knew—but as I pulled up my jacket collar against the wind, the welcome rain beating down on my balding head, I couldn't help feeling that it would have been better if I had spent the afternoon alone in my flat after all.

Cursing my bad luck and rank stupidity, I stopped at the kerb, preparing to cross. A piece of cardboard floated by in the gutter, as limp and lifeless as I felt, and as I looked up from watching it slip down into the drain, I caught someone scrutinising me from the other side of the road.

She stood within the shadow and shelter of an old familiar oak—holding a cat that, although I couldn't have been certain, I thought might have been Gemini beneath her chin, stroking it mesmerically and staring at me unashamedly. Wearing a long, unfashionable raincoat and green Wellingtons, her drenched auburn hair plastered to her head, neck and face, she was anything but attractive... and, yet, I couldn't stop looking at her.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

And the rain continued to fall.

I raised a hand uncertainly, wondering if I should cross the road and talk to her—ask, perhaps, if she was lost or if there was anything I could do to help—but my hand got no higher than my waist before she turned and started walking down the road, away from me, in the direction of the abattoir. Hunched against the onslaught of rain, she looked somehow older from behind. I estimated that she was possibly only in her late twenties and, yet, as she walked quickly away with the cat still tucked under her chin, she looked much older... forty and prematurely frail, I thought, weighted down by innumerable burdens.

As I started to walk after her—not quite knowing why, or what I was going to say once I caught up with her—a car pulled into the kerb behind me and beeped its horn. Turning, I saw the familiar Renault Clio and groaned, torn between running after the old young woman and returning to the car. The cat-cuddling woman promised something—I didn’t know what, but it had to be preferable to the bad news the car and its owner would inevitably be delivering. And, yet, it would look odd if I didn’t do what I knew I must. To chase after a stranger was one thing—but to do it while my father was sitting in his car waiting for me to get in was another.

I thought of George’s phrase *familial obligation* and opened the passenger door.

“Now don’t say a word,” Dad said. The dry, warm interior was welcoming—reminiscent of the family days out we’d suffered through my childhood, when it had *always* rained. I very briefly wondered if I could get Dad to follow the strange girl with the cat, but as he continued talking, I realised just how impossible that was. My fate had been sealed the minute I got into the car, as surely as if I had been a little boy accepting a lift from a stranger. I really should have known better.

“This is how it’s going to be,” Dad said, pulling back out into the road. He put the windscreen wipers on their fastest setting as the rain came down more heavily and I had to look away. “I’ve stuck my neck out for you, here. No question. But I don’t mind because that’s what fathers do for their offspring.” Only Dad could make me feel like a malfunctioning mattress. A rare talent. “I had a word with Tony Fraser. You remember him, right? Used to fix fridges for McArgills? Anyway, he works for the parks and gardens people, now –”

“Fixing fridges?”

“Eh? What?—No. Not fixing fridges. Jesus, Price, get a bloody grip. What on earth would he be doing fixing fridges for the parks and garden people? No, what he—”

“Do they still call them that? Parks and garden people, I mean.”

Dad stopped at the traffic lights on Waterhouse Road. He took

a long, deep breath while I looked out of my side window. Twisting his hands on the steering wheel, the vinyl squeaking against his sweaty palms, I imagined him counting to ten under his breath—and took far too much satisfaction from the thought.

“I did say, didn’t I?” He spoke with a forced calm that had once terrified me. Now it just made me smile. “When you got in the car—I told you, right?”

“What did you tell me, Dad?”

“I told you not to say a word, did I not?” I nodded, not saying a word. “So don’t. Ok? Just sit there quietly like a good lad and listen to what I have to say.”

I pointed out that the traffic lights were on green and he muttered something I didn’t quite catch as he put the car into gear and drove on. I expected him to immediately pick up where he had left off, but instead he sat quietly for a few minutes, concentrating on the road and sucking on a Werther’s Original that he got out of the glove compartment (without even offering me one.) Thinking that this might go on all evening, I used the conversational lull to look for the mystery woman, even though I knew that we must have overtaken her a good way back. We passed closing corner shops and disused cinemas, school grounds and multi-storey car parks. Five more minutes of silence and the rain started to ease up. I listened to Dad crunch the last of his sweet, feeling suddenly quite old and pathetic—sleepy from the warmth of the car’s impressive heater.

“So, like I was saying,” he finally continued, “I was having a word with him and I happened to mention that you were looking for a job.”

‘Looking’ was probably stretching it a bit, but now didn’t seem a good time to point that out.

“He always liked you, you know,” Dad said. “He told me that. Said that he saw something in you. He didn’t say what, and I didn’t ask, but to cut a long story short, they’re looking for... they’re looking for an assistant gardener at the Italian Gardens at Redburn and... well, the job’s yours if you want it.”

I didn’t want it, of course. The last thing I wanted to be was a

gardener, assistant or otherwise. Unqualified for the job in every respect, I could already see just how much of a disaster it could well be. It wasn't so much that I wouldn't be up to the job; the truth was, I could pretty much turn my hand to anything. But my heart needed to be in it. Were I to do a job as well as it had to be done, it required a certain degree of motivation and commitment on my part.

"An assistant gardener," I said, trying to figure out the best way of breaking the news to him.

"Could be quite an opportunity," he told me, indicating a left. I didn't know where we were going, but I had a funny feeling. "There's the chance of promotion and, well, who wouldn't want to work in such beautiful surroundings?"

Redburn was a peculiar leftover from Victorian times. Perched on the edge of a cliff, the townspeople and their foreboding architecture traded on their meagre heritage, keeping the funicular railway running and suckering the tourists in once a year with the fabled and originally titled 'Victorian Week'. Craggy and a little stifling, it was grey in winter and not much better in summer—the one-time smugglers cove its only redeeming feature, but for the Italian Gardens... where Dad seemed intent on my working.

I remembered them from my childhood—regimental formality and precise colour, so at odds with the garish, excessive fashion of the day—and it was true that they, at least, *were* beautiful. I remembered looking down on it from a high pathway, crouching between the comfortingly wild undergrowth and wondering how they got Nature to run in such abnormally straight lines. It had seemed obscene, somehow, even to the naïve, seven-year-old me, and, yet, it had nevertheless been impressive and, yes, beautiful.

I smiled to myself when I recalled how, later that day, Mam had encouraged me to smell the flowers—still convinced that the Anosmia I've suffered for as long as I can remember could be cured by simple perseverance. "Sniff up, love," she had said. "No, harder. There. Did you get anything?" I hadn't liked to give her straight 'no'. It had seemed cruel. And so I had shrugged and told her maybe.

False hope. It's that, not money, that makes the world go round. "Why don't you give me his number, Dad," I said. "I'll give him a bell and drop by to see him."

He cast me a sideways glance, smiling ruefully and raising an eyebrow. "Oh, I think we can do better than that, don't you?"

At this precise point in our conversation we passed a road sign. I didn't want to look at it, but I was unable to help myself. *Redburn*, it said. *Two Miles*.

We found Tony Fraser the Former Fridge Fixer in a disconcertingly modern brick building to the south of the Italian Gardens. From the outside, it looked like a public toilet—square and squat, perfectly situated for the cottaging hordes and the weak of bladder and bowel.

Dad opened the door and leant in, shouting Tony's name a couple of times before the volume finally lowered. Looking over Dad's shoulder, I saw a man approaching from the shadows at the back of the room. Tony Fraser, I guessed.

"Cliff Waters," Tony Fraser said, with all the volume and enthusiasm of the Bach symphony he'd been listening to. "Fancy seeing you again so soon, you old sod. What can I do for you?"

Stepping out into the light and very pointedly closing the door behind him, Tony Fraser took one look at me and his face broke into a huge, undeniable smile, and he nodded knowingly. "Ah," he said. "Of course. Say no more. The prodigal son—right, Cliff?"

Tony Fraser was a tall, slender guy in his mid-sixties. Hair shoulder-length and grey, thick as a lion's mane, he gave off the impression of an old hippy that was 'done with all that foolishness'. When he stepped towards me, I expected him to shake my hand but, instead, he hugged me, slapping my back vigorously and laughing heartily.

"Bloody good to see you, Price," he said, standing back to get a better look at me.

"You, too, Tony." I said it as if we were long lost buddies. The truth was, I couldn't remember the bloke. I dimly recalled hearing Dad mention the name a few times over the years, but

that was about it.

“That’s Mister Fraser to you,” Dad said—with a nod to Tony, just to let him know that he knew how to keep the young ’uns in their place. “Mind your manners.”

I was about to tell him that I’d do whatever the fuck I wanted with my manners, thank you very much, when Tony rolled his eyes, shook his head and said, “Tony will do just fine. Jesus, Cliff, you can be one uptight son of a bitch, at times.” Turning to me with a sympathetic look, he asked, “How old are you now, Price?”

“Thirty-seven.” It sounded ridiculous and we all knew it.

“And he’s reminding you of your manners?” he said. “He still wiping your arse for you, too?”

“He’d like to think he was.”

“I fix you up with a job interview, and that’s the thanks I get?” Dad said, sounding a bit put out. Turning in my direction, he cleared his throat and looked me directly in the forehead. “I’ll leave you here, then,” he said. “I’m sure you are more than old enough to find your own way home.”

I was about to point out that it was positively chucking it down—thunder rumbling in the east like a percussive harbinger of doom—but before I could say anything, Tony stepped in and told him that that wouldn’t be a problem. He’d be finishing up himself in half an hour and would be more than happy to drop me back off at my flat.

“I take it you do have a flat,” he said to me, once Dad had gone. “You don’t still live...”

“Perish the thought.”

“Pleased to hear it.” He patted me on the back and then flicked his hair from his face, rather effeminately, and started leading me by the arm to the door to the, as he described it, “administrative hub of my little kingdom.” Pausing before the door, he looked at me gravely, the gardens suddenly still and quiet around us, but for the sound of the rain. “If you’re going to work for me,” he said. “There’s someone you have to meet, first.”

I didn’t say anything, merely followed him into the gloomy, windowless building. It felt damp inside and my eyes itched a

little. I wondered what delightful smells I was missing.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I was surprised to see that this was more than just a storeroom. Yes, there were the spades, forks, lawnmowers, bags of bleeding compost and terracotta plant pots that I'd anticipated—but there was more than that. A good half of the building's single room had been turned into a remarkably comfortable-looking lounge area. I saw a couple of sumptuous settees, a footstool and standard lamp (which Tony now turned on, after first closing the door behind him), a portable widescreen television, a rack for newspapers, piles of romance novels, dusty rugs on the floor and, even, a microwave oven. All of this paled into insignificance, however, when Tony stepped aside to introduce me to the person he'd brought me to meet.

"Price," he said. "This is Claudia. Claudia Aslett."

In her mid-forties, Claudia was beautiful. Her dark hair tumbled over her right shoulder to her breast and her eyes seemed to suck in the light—holding it within, feeding off it and unwilling to share, but all the more enchanting for it. She stared past me at the far wall, in no way acknowledging me, and her hands remained limp and motionless in her lap. Tony leant over and kissed her on the forehead, lovingly—with a sadness that made me want to look away.

Claudia shifted slightly in her wheelchair and made a tiny, indecipherable sound in the back of her throat. Tony wiped a spot of saliva from her chin with a paper tissue, and then turned to regard me.

"Three years ago, Claudia was driving home from work," he said, filling the kettle at the sink by the door. "Minding her own business, like we all do. She was a solicitor with a firm in town. Banks, Jaudice and Aslett. She was the Aslett. A full partner and highly thought of. She had a good mind, you see – one of the best in the business, Banks and Jaudice later told me. Plus she had principles. Too many, at times, though she would have said that too many still weren't enough." He stopped and smiled to himself. A memory stirring, but quickly banished. "Anyway, she was driving home, minding her own business, and, *wallop*. She gets hit by one

of those fucking four be four monstrosities. She was driving a Porsche—which, incidentally, she never took above fifty—and... it was a right mess.”

“That’s awful,” I said, speaking directly to Claudia, just in case. “I’m so sorry.”

“Even worse when you consider that the other driver was three times over the legal limit and escaped without so much as a scratch,” Tony said. “Son of a bitch got a couple of years. Claudia... well, she got life.”

When I had left George’s earlier that afternoon, I could never have imagined that an hour and a half later would find me sitting with Tony Fraser and Claudia, sipping Twinings Assam tea and listening intently as Tony told me all about her—the struggles and sorrows they had had, the little victories that kept them going.

“We’d been friends and neighbours for many years,” he said, the two of us on one of the settees, Claudia pulled up close to Tony. “We got on like a house on fire, but I couldn’t stand that husband of hers. Right pompous little turd. Anyway, when Claudia got a bit of sense—this is before the accident, you understand—and sent him packing, I started doing the occasional odd job for her... don’t look like that. It’s not a euphemism.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“That didn’t come till later,” he added with a smile and a wink. Patting Claudia on her knee, he said, “We were good together, isn’t that right, love? Still are, if you want the truth. You don’t find that shocking, do you?”

“No. No, I don’t. I...”

Tony seemed to approve of my answer, even if he didn’t entirely believe me. He sat back and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s been hard, Price,” he said. “There’s no denying that. But it could have been a hell of a lot worse.” He took a sip of his tea and sniffed, blinking rapidly and clearing his throat. “Still want to work for me?” he asked.

Chapter Two

Sitting in George's kitchen earlier that day, I had never envisaged that by evening I would have a job. It had been the most unlikely of propositions—ranking up there with alien abduction and speed of light travel. I hadn't wanted a job. I certainly hadn't been looking for one. It wasn't so much that I was idle and unwilling. Not really. It was more that I was a realist. I understood that, whatever people might tell me to the contrary, sometimes I just wasn't capable of work. My Anosmia was the root cause of this—as implausible as that might seem—the depression it on occasion inspired was utterly debilitating and all encompassing. The pills never helped and so I refused to take them, and the well-meaning, pinafore-dressed therapist I had seen had had all the insight and ability of a badly stuffed mole (which the poor, short-sighted, mousy love more than resembled.) And so I had muddled along, killing time and believing that I was missing nothing by not having gainful employment—when all the while the truth was waiting for me in a squat little building in the Italian Gardens at Redburn.

Closing the door to my flat (which was actually more of a bedsit), I turned on the light and surveyed the scene before me. An unmade bed. The cracked portable television. A microwave oven that, I imagined, still exhaled the heady, stale scent of last night's ready-meal tikka-masala, which I would never smell. A DVD player with heaps of pirated DVDs and CDs beside it. Second-hand books by the dozen and newspapers galore. It wasn't exactly the most welcoming of rooms and, yet, tonight it seemed a far brighter prospect than it had for a good while. The dirty sixty watt

bulb overhead shone a little more brightly, and when I crossed the six or seven short paces to the window in order to close the curtain, I felt an inner warmth that I'd never experienced in the flat before.

I felt so good, in fact, that I put Ray LaMontagne on and sang along to Three More Days at the top of my inexperienced voice—the lyrics curiously apt—only stopping when the old tart next door started banging on the wall. He never had struck me as the type of person who liked to see others having a good time. It was evident in his tight, tiny nostrils and the headmasterly way in which he clasped his arms behind his back.

Even he couldn't upset or anger me tonight, though. I shrugged him off like an old donkey jacket and opened a couple of tins of beans—hungry as hell and intent on leaving the bottle of Stella for later that evening... a good book, Parkinson on the telly and a bottle of lager. All on a full stomach. What more could a bloke ask for?

But something wasn't quite right. It had been niggling away at the back of my mind ever since I'd arrived home, but I hadn't managed to put my finger on just what was bothering me. Now, however, I put the tin of beans down on the counter and turned to look about the room. The television and DVD player were still in their places—as were the microwave and the little fridge beside it. The DVDs and CDs formed their disorderly piles and ranks, just as they had when I had left that afternoon, and my books... they were where they should have been.

All but for one.

The night before, I had felt particularly miserable. The world had seemed an especially unfamiliar place to me—a world of five senses, a world of secrets whose weight I could only begin to grasp. Outside, it had been dark and windy—the glass rattling in its frame, as if someone had wanted to get in—and as I had curled up under my duvet, I had known that something very distinctive had been called for... not something that would rid me of my mood and sense of dislocation but, rather, something that would flatter it. And so I had found the Hardy novel that I had bought for ten pence at a car boot sale, *Jude the Obscure*, and had settled down,

determined to complete the job of thoroughly depressing myself.

I had fallen asleep a couple of hours later, whispering half-sentences to the memory of a girl I had known over twenty-five years before, the book on the empty pillow beside me.

And there it had remained, a token of longing and loss, still in place when I had left for George's that afternoon.

Squatting down, I picked it up from the floor—turning it over in my hands as I tried to fathom out how it had got there. It was on the floor at the end of the bed, so there was no way that it could have simply slipped from the pillow and landed there. I knew from the numerous times I had thrown it across the room in despair that Jude did not bounce. It was the kind of book that hit the ground like a dead pigeon, and stayed there, happy to rot.

So how, I thought, had it ended up over here?

My bookmark—a tattered piece of paper—was sticking out at an unusual angle, and as I replaced it I realised that it wasn't my bookmark, after all. It was pink notepaper. Pink notepaper with, I saw as I slipped it from the book, something written on it.

Be careful, the note said. Please.

Perhaps a little stupidly, I looked over my shoulder—half-expecting to find someone standing in the corner of the room, watching me. It occurred to me that maybe the note had been in the book all along, ever since I'd bought it, but I quickly dismissed the idea when I remembered that I'd read the book a number of times, and thrown it across the room in exasperation even more. No, the note had most definitely been placed between the pages of the book some time that afternoon, while I had been out.

Checking the door, I found no sign of forced entry. The obvious culprit was my landlady, Margarite Hamshaw. Letting herself into people's flats behind their backs was, frankly, just the kind of thing I could imagine her doing. A large, oily woman—with a retroussé nose that looked at odds with her flabby face—she was always on the lookout for an advantage. Anything that could be used against her tenants was not only welcomed, but hunted down with all the tenacity of a bloodhound. That my life was so safe and, well, boring had been an obvious disappointment to her. All her prying

and ‘scrutinising’ had revealed nothing (something she would no doubt find suspicious in itself) and it was no great leap for me to imagine her in here, looking among my books for Class A drugs or child porn.

But that wouldn’t explain the note. If Margarite Hamshaw came into my room when I wasn’t there it most certainly wouldn’t be to put a note for me within the pages of a Thomas Hardy novel. And in the highly improbable event that she had, it most certainly would not have been a warning on pink notepaper. And nor would she have said please.

Sitting back on my haunches, I studied the note again—turning it over in my hand, just in case I’d missed something. I realised that I should possibly feel threatened, someone had been in my room, after all – but I didn’t.

Standing at the window—my favourite place for thinking—the light out, I pushed the curtain aside and looked out at the street below. The rain was still falling fairly heavily and the orange, sodium streetlights reflected off the slick roads and pavements. A car shushed by, its stark headlights cutting through the night as though it were a physical form—something solid and rich. In spite of the evidence that I’d had an intruder, I was glad to be in my flat, rather than out there on the street. It didn’t do to be on the street on a night like this. These were the times when the likes of my good friend George Ruiz flourished. Cold, dark times when the susceptible were more startlingly revealed. I didn’t doubt that he would be out there, somewhere, wandering from one lonely, seedy dive to the next—seizing whatever rare opportunity might come his way.

Over the road from my flat was a doctor’s surgery. An old, converted Victorian three-storey house, the ailing front garden had been rehabilitated into a small car park, with a regimental line of conifers partially concealing it and the front of the building. Far from interesting, I seldom paid it all that much attention. Tonight, however, I found myself staring intently into the shadows at the end of the conifers. I saw movement there—movement that might well have been an urban fox, or merely my imagination. It shifted

left to right, and then right to left, and as I moved my face closer to the window—holding my breath so as not to steam up the glass—the shadow started to take on a recognisable form. It was not a fox. It was not merely my imagination.

I recognised the Wellingtons before I recognised her, even in the poor, orange-tinted light. She stood looking up at me, in clear view, now, and I felt a chill run the length of my spine. She had been in my room. The old young woman I had seen outside George's had been in my flat. She had been the one who had put the note between the pages of the Hardy novel. It had been she who had, for some peculiar reason, felt the need to tell me to be careful... felt the need to ask me to be careful.

I took the stairs three at a time, almost falling near the bottom, but saving myself with a shoulder against the damp wall, bursting out onto the street as if I had just discovered water displacement or, at the very least, that my flat was on fire. Running straight across the road, dodging a passing car in the process, I ran into the grounds of the doctor's surgery, past the line of conifers where I had seen her. I expected to find her hiding among the shrubbery. A shadow consumed by deeper shadow. But, perhaps predictably, she was nowhere to be seen.

Back on the street, I searched its length, hoping to find her waiting for me beneath a streetlight—smoking enigmatically and humming Lilli Marlene—but found no sign of her. I looked behind garden walls, in wheelie-bins the same shade of green as her wellies, and even looked under a few parked cars, just in case she'd been looking for her lost cat. All to no avail.

Once more in my flat, I stood by the window with the lights turned out—the note held in my hand as I watched for her, hoped for her return. This time I would not race after her, questions spewing prematurely from my mouth, I would be content just to know that she was there, watching over me in her green Wellingtons and raincoat.

But she did not return, and eventually I went to bed—falling asleep with her note on the pillow beside me.

I found Tony sweeping up some litter in front of his little love nest. It was my first day on the job and, rather uncharacteristically, I was eager to impress—turning up half an hour early in a pair of neatly pressed jeans, a white shirt and heavy bomber jacket. I'd slept well, in spite of the events of the night before, and felt alert and ready for anything he might throw at me. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was the solemn way in which Tony straightened from his task to greet me. His face etched with gravity, I understood immediately that something was wrong.

"Price," he said, forcing a smile. "Good to see you." He leant the broom against the wall and sat down on a deckchair that he'd brought outside. He looked a hell of a lot older than he had the day before. His hands flopped down between his knees and he shook his head a little bitterly. "You look like the direct opposite of everything I am today. Young and vital and ready for whatever the world might have in store for you."

I leant against the wall beside the broom, folding my arms and trying to look sympathetic. "I wouldn't read too much into appearance," I told him. "On the inside, I'm three times your age and have the damndest time tying my shoe laces." I considered telling him about the note I had found in Jude and the mystery woman that I believed had put it there, to take his mind off his troubles, but that seemed too self-centred even for me and so, as he smiled sadly back at me, I lowered my voice and said, "Want to talk about it?"

Tony sighed. It came out as a barely suppressed shudder. Shaking his head, he thought better of it and nodded instead. "Close the door, lad," he said, indicating that he didn't want Claudia to hear. "Every now and then it just gets the better of me," he said, once he was happy that the door was firmly shut. "The things I have to do for her... that's a walk in the park. I can do all that with my eyes closed. But what gets to me... it's nothing but it's everything, you know—the not being able to hold a proper conversation with her."

I mumbled a quiet little "ah" of understanding, but said nothing more—to let him continue.

“I talk to her all the time,” he told me, shoulders slumped. “And I have to imagine her replies, imagine that old wit and intelligence falling out of her with that familiar ease I loved so much. And I can do that, too. Most of the time.”

“It can’t be easy for you, Tony.” Sometimes the hackneyed replies are all we’ve got.

“It’s not, Price, it’s not. I know she’s in there, you see, whatever they might tell me to the contrary—but if I’m to keep believing that I...”

“You have to maintain your faith in the accuracy of the replies you imagine her giving.”

Squinting at me, Tony gave me the most credible smile I’d seen from him today and put his head back in his deckchair—looking up at the sky, eyes twinkling, close to tears. “That’s about the long and short of it,” he admitted. “And as a rule that’s fairly easy... only... well, sometimes I get tired. I get tired and trying to think up what she’d say under specific circumstances becomes difficult, you know? And then I start to doubt and... that isn’t good, Price. I can’t allow myself to start doubting.”

I wasn’t sure just what I could say that would help. The truth was, were I in Tony’s position, I thought that I would be inclined to believe everything the doctors had told me and, however reluctantly, accept that the Claudia I had known and loved was no longer there. It would be a tragedy, there was no doubt about that, but it had to be better than the interminable suffering that Tony was inflicting on himself.

I knew enough to understand that he wouldn’t want to hear this and, so, I merely waited the moment out—letting him talk his way through to the other side, which may well have been all he needed.

“We had this conversation last night,” he told me—his voice little more than a whisper. “It started off ordinary enough. A film we were watching in bed together. How bad it was. You know the kind of thing. We were warm and, I thought, content, and conversation came easily. I even got a smile out of her. A real smile. Nothing made up or imagined. But things started to change, Price. We talked and... the conversation got darker. We started

talking about things we've never touched on before and... she asked me something." He closed his eyes against the memory, hands clasped together tightly in his lap. "She's asked me things before. Many times. But never anything like this. I didn't know what to say—I mean, what do you say? One minute the two of us are talking about a lousy film on telly, the next she's asking me something like that... asking me to do something like that."

"What did she ask you to do?" I said softly.

Tony didn't speak for what seemed a very long while, staring into middle space and chewing the side of his mouth. I felt the moment stretching out, elastic and grim, and began to wish that I had never asked the question in the first place. It was too personal. I started to tell him to forget I'd asked – it was something I didn't need to know and I shouldn't have been so intrusive in the first place – but he merely held up a hand to silence me, letting me know with such a precise, conservative gesture that, under the circumstances, he thought it acceptable and even appropriate that I should ask this question. He just needed time. Time to judge how best to frame his answer for me.

"I'm not sure that I should tell you this," he finally said. "Claudia... well, she would say that it's something that should remain between the two of us, for my own protection, if nothing else. But it's too heavy a burden for me to carry on my own, Price. To have to consider something like this without having the opportunity to discuss it with someone... it just isn't fair. No one can ask that of another person."

"What is it, Tony?" I quietly said.

"I was holding her close," he told me. "We were in bed—I told you that—we were in bed but I'd turned the television off by this time and... we were getting ready to go to sleep. Saying our good nights and... being close. You know. I kissed her. I held her. I told her how much I loved her... and then I felt it—I felt it and saw it reflected in the sadness in her eyes... warmth where my leg pressed up against her."

Tony regarded me with all the weight and longing of the sincere, loving man I imagined him to be. "It doesn't happen

often,” he explained. “Normally she has excellent bladder and bowel control. We have a good little regime going and there are rarely any accidents. But every now and then... well, whether it was cold in her bladder or what, I don’t know, but she wet the bed, Price. She wet the bed and she asked me. She said, ‘Help me, Tony. Help me die.’”

Alone in my flat later that evening, my own mystery to grapple with, I would nevertheless find myself wondering why, exactly, Tony had chosen to tell this to me. It was not as if we were old and trusted friends. For all intents and purposes, we had known each other for less than twenty-four hours, whatever Tony might say to the contrary. So why me? My conclusion, as I ate my chip-shop chips and drank a cup of tea, was simple enough. I was there. As I stood there beside him, however, I felt that there was something more profound going on. I was aware of a closeness growing between Tony and me. Whether it was imagined or not, I don’t really know—but at the time it seemed real enough, and Tony sharing such a personal story with me certainly underscored this.

I therefore wanted to say something meaningful in return. Taken a little aback by this odd revelation—and its various implications—I felt that resorting to the hackneyed phrases was no longer fitting. And so I clenched my buttocks and dug deep for some rich, philosophical insight and said:

“Sometimes... it isn’t always as... you know, we have to be able to... I’m not sure I’m making sense, but what I really mean to say is...” I took a deep breath and said, “You imagined her saying it, Tony. That doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s something she’d want.”

“I understand that,” he said, his voice croaky with emotion. “But... that’s the fundamental principle on which we’ve built our relationship, Price. That faith in my belief that I know what she wants. If I just disregard this... well, then all that other stuff was just a sham.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Tony.” More than that, however, I was growing afraid that I might inadvertently say the wrong thing. I didn’t want to put myself in a position where I might be

accused of being in some way complicit, however much I wished to help him.

“I know, mate—I know. I really shouldn’t have mentioned it to you. It’s not fair of me.” He stood, flicking his hair out of his face, and forced a smile. “It’ll all come out in the wash, as my old mam used to say. Now, come on. We better get you sorted.”

Walking over to the door of his and Claudia’s love-nest, he looked over his shoulder at me and tapped the side of his nose with an index finger. “Not a word. Okay?”

The tour of the gardens he gave me was wholly unnecessary. I knew the place well enough, remembering most of it from my childhood visits, and found as he led me past the disciplined borders and carefully sculpted topiary, Tony pushing the drooling Claudia in her wheelchair, that what I wanted more than anything was to be doing. There had been enough talk for one day, and now I wanted to get my hands dirty. As I’d already told Tony half a dozen times today, I knew virtually nothing about gardening, and couldn’t tell a Pelargonium from a pergola, but I was ready to learn and relished the prospect of returning home with soil beneath my fingernails.

We wandered into the densely wooded area just to the north of the gardens, Tony telling me that my job would include the general maintenance and care of the gardens and surrounding landscape, heavy lifting (apparently, he had to watch his back, what with caring for Claudia and everything), helping with the planting, cutting back and weed control, and occasionally sitting with Claudia when he had to be elsewhere. “I know that probably wasn’t what you were expecting,” he said. “It’s not exactly your typical gardener’s assistant job description but I trust you won’t have any problems with it?”

I didn’t know if I was imagining it, but there seemed to be just the slightest hint of a challenge in this. I couldn’t help but think of the note I had found. Was this what it had been referring to? Was Tony and his strange relationship the thing I had to watch out for—the possible danger on the horizon? As we walked the tarmac path

up to the rocky overlook known as Lover's Leap, which seemed to cast the gardens in shadow at certain times of the day, it seemed a preposterous proposition. Tony was one of the good guys. Surely. You only had to look at the way in which he took care of Claudia to see that—ever attentive, wiping the drool from her chin and doing whatever else was required of him (something I didn't really want to think about).

And yet... what did I really know? Listening to the story of Claudia wetting herself and the resulting question she had 'asked' had been a strange and difficult experience, and while I had probably dealt with it rather well under the circumstances, it was certainly true that I had felt a considerable unease at his mention of her supposedly wanting him to 'help' her die. The whole idea of him believing that he knew what she wanted—that he knew her well enough to supply her part of their conversations—was, on the surface at least, quaint and touching. But as I looked at it more closely, I saw how open to abuse the whole process was.

When they made love, was it really consensual or was Tony in effect raping her?

"You've heard the story, right?" Tony was saying. I glanced at him, frowning. A little bewildered and lost. He gestured to the rocky ledge before us. "Lover's Leap. You've heard the story?"

The ledge was railed off—warning signs insisting that it was highly dangerous (not to mention forbidden) to pass beyond the barriers to the cliff edge... as if this wasn't already strongly implied by the notable drop on the other side. I'd seen it many times during my childhood, but only ever from a distance—Mam holding my hand tightly just in case I should be overcome by a moment of madness. Now I stepped a little nearer, shaking my head in reply to Tony's question, but also somewhat in awe of what, really, was a relatively unspectacular sight.

I heard Tony put Claudia's breaks on before joining me at the railing. "It's not much to look at," he said, reading my thoughts. "But its history... well, even if you don't know the details, you can nevertheless sense them somehow—don't you agree?"

I looked down at the gardens below, my eyes dropping to the

edge of the rocky outcrop and then readjusting. I nodded, feeling a little weak at the knees, and gripped the railing rather too tightly. It wasn't the height. That didn't bother me in the least. It was more a sense of something that I couldn't quite put my finger on—the history of which Tony had spoken, and yet something else entirely.

“They were both only fourteen,” Tony was telling me. I listened through the gentle, sea-shell rushing sound in my ears, fighting the urge to close my eyes. “Rodney and Juliette. This was about 1869. Something like that. The two of them were madly in love. Met up whenever they could—which was nigh on impossible, at that time. But they managed it. Quite successfully, for a while.”

“But it couldn't last.” It had to end in tragedy. Stories told on the edge of a rocky drop always did.

“No,” Tony said. “These things never can, can they? Soon enough, they were discovered. Two Victorian children, lost in each other's embrace—making love with a portentous urgency. Well, there was a scandal. Two of the better families in town suddenly found themselves shunned. They had brought depravity into a world where there, if the morally superior were to be believed, had been none. And as a consequence, the two families were made to suffer—socially and financially.”

“So what of Rodney and Juliette?” I said, wanting the conversation to stay on track—the sooner to have it over and done with.

“They were bright kids,” Tony told me. “They knew just how close to the wind they were sailing, and because of this, they also understood that there was a fair chance that one day they could well get caught. And so they'd planned for just such a contingency.”

“They met here?”

“Yes.” Tony looked over his shoulder, checking that Claudia was alright. Staring down at the gardens with me, he continued. “They'd been forbidden from ever seeing each other again,” he told me. “Watched constantly, it can't have been easy—but somehow they both found a way. They got out and came here, as they must have arranged months before.”

“They planned on running away together?”

“I don’t suppose we can ever know what they planned,” Tony said. “But, ultimately, that wasn’t what happened.”

He went on to tell me what I suppose I already knew—on some level, at least. The couple had been followed. Their escape had not been as clever and unobserved as they had thought, and as they had held onto each other—making the foolhardy promises that all young lovers make—a figure had stepped out of the shadows and approached them. Juliette’s father, his cane in his hand. Rodney had backed away, trying in vain to reason with the gentleman, but it would have been easy for him to see just how futile his efforts really were. This was the girl’s father. The girl he, Rodney, had loved and taken—befouled in the eyes of good society. And if he had needed proof, the steadily rising cane would have provided it. And as I listened to Tony tell the inevitably tragic final instalment of the story—wondering at the commitment to each other that the two young lovers had shown, something so unfamiliar to me—I felt their fall as surely as if I had taken those final steps myself, the wind rushing through my hair, the icy, hollow dread and certainty in the pit of my stomach. Hand in hand, they had jumped, no doubt staring into each others eyes... reverentially whispering their love for one another.

When I finally turned away from the drop before me, an unexpected sight greeted me. I don’t think Tony caught it, and I certainly didn’t say anything to him about it—it was too fleeting and difficult to grasp.

Claudia was staring at me. Her intelligent eyes met and held mine, and she blinked slowly—once—before dropping her head and drooling onto her breast. A strikingly pale shade of blue, those eyes had seemed so vital and aware, but just as quickly she was gone again... so quickly I doubted that she had been there in the first place.

“We’d better be getting back,” Tony said. “Looks like rain again.”