Chapter One

The Neighbours, the night of

A scream in the night began it.

Darkness is brief and can only cover the corners.

At two in the morning when man slumbers as a dog, and the night sits on you like a heavy sodden blanket, the brutal ice-pick screams of a child will be written off as the twisting rape of a cat, the screeching rubber of tyres, a horror film played too loudly in the apartment next door.

But only for so long.

A child may scream at night when caught up in the inevitability of her nightmares, or the taunts of her own burgeoning imagination; the thing under the bed, the man-beast shape that leers and creeps, dry lips cracking as a sickly smile works its way across the face of it, showing rotted teeth and libidinous intent.

But those screams calm and settle with the reassuring footsteps of parents, the turning on of a bedside light, the forever warmth of a mother's touch, the velvet armour of a father's words, *'there there little one, nothing's coming, daddy's here.'*

But when those screams continue, their vibrations beating like fervent wings, *you neighbours*, hiding under the false promises of sleep, wake you now to all the dreadful possibilities. Climb out of that dreamless river that hides you, open your eyes to a world where the persistent screams of a child are as impossible to ignore as a fire alarm.

Yes, we know, this isn't fair. It's cold outside and you've a video call with the CEO about a Congeneric Product Extension Merger at 7.00a.m.

Yes, we know, those screams are clearly coming from the apartment across the hall, and yes, *yes*, you'll reach her long before the emergency services do.

And yes.

As you cross bare footed towards them, and their sound is now more that of a dying animal, some piteous lamb being slowly devoured by a tiger, yes, we know, you're about to witness something that means life will never taste quite the same again.

"Martin! Martin! What's going on in there?"

"Open up!"

"Have we called the police?"

"Has anyone called the police?"

"Yes, yes."

"Yes."

"We did."

"Clark did."

"Jenny is at home, she's on the phone to them now."

Manic screams roaring from the other side of the Miller's apartment door silenced the accumulated neighbours' bickering and collectively reminded them why they had assembled there in the dead of night.

"We can't wait."

"Ok, come on, get the other big guys up here. Fast."

The Millers, the night of

The couple swayed together as in a dance. She seemed drunk at first, draped heavily over him, hair fallen over her face, arms lolling over his shoulders, feet being dragged as they gently slid this way and that across the tiles, rather than moving with any conscious intent of their own.

He, steady and unswerving, held his love so tight against his chest that when the burliest of their neighbours broke through the front door and followed the child's screams, which were now slowed to a desperate whimpered gasping, and found them in their unison, they seemed almost fused together by glue.

Outside it had begun to snow apple blossom petals, flakes of pale pink twirling as they cascaded through the moonlight.

Who knew a kitchen could be so romantic?

Just as the neighbours began turning to each other, wondering what all the screaming had been about, the man brought his arm back, bent at the elbow, and thrust it towards his love.

She jolted with the force of it, and the blood that pulsed out of her and dripped down her leg to join the growing pool beneath her gleamed in crimson-black. It was not the first of her wounds and would not be the last.

As if on cue, the child took to her screaming again. Not the first of her screams, not the last.

She had crammed herself so tightly between a cupboard and the freezer that none of the neighbours had spotted her at first.

It was only when the trembling warble-wine of her whimpers, rose to the mighty crescendo of murder-shock shrieks that they remembered in unison why they had battered down the door.

Women, and the elders of the neighbourhood collective, crowded round the shoulders of the men, gasping, crying, some joining the girl in her screams, many pushing, urging to get forward to reach her, the men's heavy arms holding them back.

The man thrust the knife once again into his partner's lifeless corpse as he continued his overkill.

The men nudged and tussled each other, about to stampede, bulls readying to be let out of a pen.

He stopped his onslaught, looked over to them, mildly surprised by their presence, then to the dead woman in his arms, even more surprised by hers.

He blinked savagely, trying to wake himself from the dream.

"Martin, my god, what have you done?"

Their eyes danced from him to the dead woman, to the eleven-year-old girl squashed like a bug against the white goods, the dolly in her hands the only one smiling as she gazed out with button blue eyes at the chaotic blood-soaked scene.

"What have you done to your family?"

He turned to look down at the girl.

His eyes hit her, as sharp as the knife in his hand, she squirreled back, cramming herself even deeper into an impossibly small space, an octopus manipulating itself into a glass jar.

He turned back to his neighbours, as if for help, his beleaguered eyes begging them.

They could do no more than shake their heads, no answers to be pulled from such a night gone mad.

He dropped the knife which clattered to the tiles. Let go his hold on the woman, who spilled down after it in a heap of dead flesh, turned towards the window and began to run.

"No. No. No!!!"

The men moved forward as one, knowing his intent just as surely as he did.

But bargaining was pointless.

They could do little more than watch as he forced his way through the balcony door, flung himself from the 33rd floor and left the world without further thought or explanation as to the overkill kitchen crime splattered all over the tiled floor behind him.

The Carstens, the night of

A scream in the night began it.

There is no godly reason for a telephone to ring at 2.00am.

"Gabriel!"

Vivien Carsten jolted out of her sleep to the shrill piercing cry of the landline, automatically calling her son's name in a half gasp half prayer to either God, or her husband Oliver, as he fought through the tangle of blankets to answer.

Her rapid breathing intensified as she watched his back, the slight nod of his bent head, telephone receiver gripped so tightly in his hand, the flesh of his knuckles turned bony white under the moonlight.

The room breathed with her, a low pulsating throb, every modern gadget and advanced system dutifully running with utter efficiency, letting them know they were doing their job, keeping them, warm, or keeping them cool, keeping some out, keeping them in, keeping them safe. The kind of safety only money can bring. Money can keep out the burglar and murderer and rapist. Money can keep a family safe from harm. Safe from everything . . . but fate.

"Gabriel."

She said his name once more, stupidly, *uselessly*, to her husband's back, in a voice close to tears.

He reached back with a hand to silence her and continued his attentive nodding.

She held her breath and the Carsten house returned to its stillness. A house kept calm by its silence.

He was nineteen now. No longer a child. But try as she might she simply could not see him as a man.

He'd gone out that night, to a club with his friends, and nonchalantly mentioned that he might be back, or might stay at Reece's. Kissing her on the cheek and leaving her to the agony of a mother waiting all night for her child to return from a city as cruel as the sea.

They'd nearly lost him less than a year earlier.

On the Thursday he'd complained of a headache. They'd worried and discussed it at length. He was their only child, and Gabriel never complained about anything.

By Friday he's stopped eating and had forgotten the password to his computer. Vivien wanted to call an ambulance then, but Oliver had resisted, mocking her instead. *She'd remember that.*

He resisted even when Gabriel slept through most of Saturday, only waking up to vomit violently. He resisted right until 7.30 Saturday night when Gabriel fitted, eyes rolling back, saliva bubbling from his nose and mouth, head banging violently on their opulent tiled kitchen floor. It would be the first of a set of seizures endured until the ambulance arrived, each one progressively worse, progressively dreadful, as if God were punishing Oliver for his unpanicked indifference. God would not forgive him for that either. *God would remember it too.*

He spent three weeks in hospital.

The doctors couldn't tell them at first whether he'd survive the meningitis. And if he did whether they'd get the same boy back. The same young man. She may have to mourn him even if he lived, *her beautiful, beautiful boy.*

Something changed within them both as their son lay fighting.

Her thoughts were inflamed, and her dreams infected. She calmly pondered how she'd deal with her husband if his choice to wait, to resist and mock her pleas for help, would mean the end of their son. Leaving him wouldn't do it. He loved her. She knew that. But he loved her the way he loved his car. He'd worked hard to achieve it and others admired it. It got him to work and was reliable. On the outside it shone in its silver sagacity and underneath, *baby it purred!* Sad as he'd be if he lost it, he'd find another. He'd replace it.

And she too was as replaceable as a plastic cup.

The Carsten house glittered and gleamed, an architect's dream house. Oliver was an architect and he'd built the house; he'd built their dream. But there was nothing within it that he could not easily substitute. Nothing, other than his son.

If Gabriel died it would be punishment enough. Oliver would know he'd brought about his own son's end through his arrogance and failings, his insistence on his own way over hers. His own way over everything.

She'd stick around and watch him suffer a while. But it wouldn't be for long. He was a coward despite his outer bravado.

She knew him well enough to know he'd mildly nod through the funeral, thank their family and pointless friends for coming, then get in his shiny, easily replaceable silver car and drive straight off the Des Sandes Bridge, his face aghast in horror as the brick wall of water closed in on the windscreen at breakneck speed.

He finished the call and turned to her. His face aghast. Aghast in horror.

Horror of a different kind.

Gabriel, the night of

"What is wrong with you? *What the fuck is wrong with you?*"

He'd never sworn at this father before. Even amid his hysteria his beleaguered mind momentarily paused to wonder what the comeback would be for pushing the man he so dearly loved and so often feared that one step too far.

But Oliver calmly tolerated the barrage of profanity, just as he was calmly tolerating the pummelling of fist blows his son was raining down on his chest.

He deserved them he supposed, children often mature assuming their parents, *their fathers*, to be exempt from the stained flaws of humanity. He expected Gabriel would have reacted the same way if he'd been charged with drunk driving, or shoplifting, or fraud.

Perhaps this was fraud.

The life he'd created for them, the perfect world, the house designed so immaculately it was barely possible to live in it and feel at home. The night had torn a knife through it all, proclaimed it a fallacy. What he'd created was far from perfection. Their house was cracked, the surface broken, his son's faith in him savaged and gone. His son. His only son. But not his only child. Not anymore.

"Alright," Oliver breathed with a soft command in his voice.

Gabriel's own voice was cracking through the strain of his irate shrieking sobs.

It was time to bring this to a close.

Oliver brought his iron hard arms around Gabriel and for a moment it felt as it had nineteen years ago. The first time. When he'd laid his little head against his chest, his body still slippery and wet with amniotic fluid. He'd folded his arms around him like wings, with a silent promise to never let the wickedness of the world breathe anywhere near him. *His beautiful, beautiful boy.*

"Alright," Oliver said again and Gabriel knew it was time to let go. The last of his incensed punches managed to land on his chest, but the imprisoning cage of his father's arms grew tighter and pulled him in. The beat of his father's heart commanding him, with quiet thunder, telling him through ribcage and sinew and walls of flesh. *'Be still now, boy, be still, surrender'.*

"What is wrong with you?" Gabriel begged to know again, but this time in a broken whisper. Then abruptly he sagged and the tears came and raged against his father's shirt.

Chapter Two

Avery, as it began

The girl Avery stood in the middle of a headstone crowded cemetery where the grass cried for breath and felt her new family approach her from behind.

Around her people stood. People, but not mourners.

No one had come to cry for her mother. And no one for the man who had stuck a knife into her twenty-seven times.

A woman held her hand tightly in hers, but not a cousin or an aunt, not a concerned friend of the family or the mother of a school chum. In her other hand she held a clipboard. Business in both hands. A girl in the left, a file on the girl in the right. A file on Avery Miller.

What was to be done about Avery Miller?

What was to be done about Avery?

What indeed?

She'd left her white sock remain bunched down on her right ankle. She was old enough to pull it up.

She was old enough for many things.

Without a mother there to correct the asymmetry, the social worker had made effort to do so, sighing as she held her phone under her chin, her clipboard under her armpit and, without breaking conversation, bent down to un-bunch the offending sock and help unravel its way back up to her knee.

And who may I ask gave you permission to do that miss pretty?

Avery studied the young woman at her sock work, for a moment letting her fuss with the garment, then began swinging her leg. The social worker sighed her irritation, then, quickly remembering what the girl had been through less than a week before, admonished herself, gave her a fleeting little smile and tried once more.

The swing became a kick, hard, direct, and purposeful. A kick with a surprising amount of a power for such a slight eleven-year-old.

How'd you like that miss pretty?

Seemingly not at all. The kick missed the social worker's face by an inch, nearly knocking her black framed Chanel glasses off the tidy little pert nose.

Avery could hear the insistent voice on the social worker's mobile, demanding to know why she'd suddenly silenced.

Avery returned a quick fleeting smile of her own to the social worker's bewildered face, the Chanel glasses now out of position on the tidy nose, magnifying her wide eyes and making them huge, turning her into a gormless unblinking bug in Avery's imagination.

Avery felt the urge to laugh.

Would that be inappropriate?

The black car had just arrived, and a nice man was holding the door open for her with the kindly look of a grandfather on his face. She didn't want him to see her smirking. She let out nothing but a little giggle, lifted herself off the seat and proceeded, one sock up, one down, towards the vehicle that would take her to watch her mother get swallowed up into a big ol' hole in the earthy chewy ground.

Oliver, as it began

He'd been relieved when Gabriel had been born a boy.

Not that boys, he'd come to realise over the last nineteen years, were always easy. But when Vivien, four years after their wedding, had announced the pregnancy, the thought of bringing a girl into the world left him with the papery taste of fear in his mouth, alongside the champagne they cracked open to celebrate with his parents and hers.

He knew why.

He traced it immediately back to the big mistake.

The big mistake.

The mother of all mistakes.

The monster of all fuck ups.

The Grand Poobah of all irreversible mother-fucking monstrous wrongs.

The big old bad boy that sat beside him for years and years, festering like a rotted corpse. Reminding him every time he relaxed, every time he laughed, of what he carried around his neck like a penance.

He had no siblings now. That hadn't always been the case. He'd been one of a set of triplets. The Carsten Triplets or the Carsten Three or the Trio C, just some of the variables by which they'd come to be known. He'd been born slap bang in the middle. Handsome strong fearless Thaddeus 'Tad' at the forefront, shy little Ellie at the back. Oliver, the middleman, separating the two. Keeping them apart. At least that was what he was meant to do.

He was a man made up of his errors.

He'd always thought 'the big one', the monster, the rotted corpse of all his wrongs would be the one to come back and bite him first. But no, his more recent of misdemeanours, the one made eleven years nine months ago was facing him now, or rather facing away, staring solemnly down at her mother's grave, her hand gripped tightly by a woman in a black suit with tidy hair pinned up in a French twist.

He was given nothing but the back of her head to consider as he trod a careful pathway through the maze of headstones towards her. Two blonde plaits pinned up atop her head, loose baby hair unfettered and free, dancing in the breeze at the nape of a tiny slender pale neck.

The wind around him seemed to know what was coming and the shape it would take.

He'd seen the girl's mother from behind for the first time too. Fallen almost instantly in love with the sight of her golden back. It was a work seminar. He'd made the obligatory statement to Vivien about how much he hated being away from her and Gabe overnight. Kissed her. She'd barely noticed, let alone returned his kiss with anything resembling warmth.

He'd stood and watched his wife without her realising before he left via the back kitchen door.

She was engrossed in something on her laptop. As he'd watched her, she had swung one leg up and rested her right ankle on her left knee. It was a habit of hers, manlike, and unique, he'd always found it curiously erotic, even when she unintentionally let a little fart out in the process.

She farted now, twice, and he itched to pick up the nearest wine bottle and cave the back of her head in.

He thought of saying her name, repeating his goodbyes, see if she'd seem embarrassed, she if she'd even notice.

He chose to do neither and left for the comfort of his car.

The woman had been sitting at a bar in a turquoise backless dress the first time he saw her, it was cut so low he craned his neck, while chatting to work colleagues, to see if he could get any angle in on arse cleavage. A colleague laughed, the complicity sat between them, he'd been trying the very same thing all evening.

They fucked four times that night. He and Vivien hadn't embarked on such a marathon since their twenties. He was lucky if it was four times a week just lately.

Before he left, he sat on the hotel chair in her room and watched her sleeping. Her legs were widely parted, her pussy open, glistening, coated with her own dirty wetness and recent traces of his.

He could still smell her on his fingers, all through the drive home, stopping occasionally, to deeply breathe in her scent.

Thoughts of her consumed him.

He parked at a service station, went to the men's room and found a clandestine cubicle, licking his fingers, begging for the taste of her while he squeezed and jerked his cock with his other hand. He could hear a drunk coughing and belching in the stall next door. It didn't matter. It was a continuation of it all, filthy, illicit, rotten, and wrong. And a spell he didn't want broken just yet.

Seeing Vivien, touching her, that would break it. Bleach it clean. From his fingers, from his mind, from his skin. He crushed thoughts of Vivien out of his head, squeezed himself, almost punishingly and brought himself to a spasming climax, echoing the sounds of the drunk's groans as he squeezed out a turd in the stool next door.

And now it was memories of the woman he strove to crush from his mind, as he we wound his way towards their child. The child he never knew he had, not until the previous night.

He couldn't account for why she hadn't told him. She'd known his name, his company, his details, he wouldn't have been hard to locate.

Maybe she'd longed for child and spent many a night in backless dresses luring in the out-of-town horse studs to impregnate her. Maybe she'd been with someone, as he had, and couldn't risk the life she had. Maybe she was that rarest of creatures, one who wanted nothing from no one and would manage the burden alone.

A burden which now stood at four foot 6 inches tall in a tatty black pinafore dress, scruffy old Mary-Jane shoes with one sock pulled up under her knee and one bunched down at her ankle.

Suddenly, without warning or hesitation she turned to him, as if the wind had reached through him and tapped her shoulder, beckoning her eyes his way.

Those eyes.

They found him like magnets, blue, aching and encumbered with endless sorrow.

She found him.

There in the crowd. As if she knew him. Cells he'd created, parts that were once him, locking in on where they once belonged, finding home in this forest of a world.

Oliver gasped and wondered how he'd ever be able to breathe again.

It was the same as the moment the woman in the backless turquoise dress, her mother, turned to look his way.

Exhilarating, magical, dangerous, life changing, terrifying.

Once again, he fell utterly in love.

Vivien, as it began

She'd been relieved when Gabriel had been born a boy.

Women had never taken to her, nor her to them.

It was probably jealousy. Everyone had said it, her father, her brothers. Evan Tia.

Lovely Tia, slightly mad, self-proclaimed psychic, and her only friend. Probably a lesbian and probably always a little bit in love with her. But she couldn't imagine life without her any more than she could without Gabriel. There was something about a woman who loved her for her beauty rather than resented her for it that she needed in life.

She often mildly wondered if it ever came to saving the three of them from a burning building in which order proceedings would go.

Gabriel first, of course. No point in consideration of any other alternative.

But could she get through life without someone she could really talk to? Be herself with utterly and completely, the way she could with Tia?

Oliver was her partner, her husband, the father of her only child. But she was never allowed to let the act of being the perfect wife slip. Life in that role could be thankless and exhausting.

She stood back and watched him approach the new little bastard thing.

For Christ's sake she was eleven years old. Did she think anyone was buying the *'I'm just too young and clueless to pull my little sock up'* act?

Hopefully she'd be as ugly as the pinafore dress two sizes too big for her she was swanning around in.

Come on, turn round bitchling, show mama a face like a horse.

Oh Fuck.

She was beautiful.

Gabriel, as it began

He'd been relieved to hear his newly announced sibling was a girl.

He'd never had a jealous heart. But maybe that was purely because he'd never had to contend with sibling rivalry before.

At nineteen he'd never quite become the man's man he secretly feared his father had always wanted for a son.

Sharing his father's devotion with another was one thing. Having to share it with a robust rambunctious football mad eleven-year-old oik would be another. A fresh start and new opportunity for his father to have the rough and tough, shake and bake of a chip off the old block he'd always wanted would have been more than his stomach could handle right now.

Perhaps he could content with a girl. How much trouble could she be?

Little flouncy bows and pretty pink dresses; surely no threat? He'd rather get down on his knees on a carpet and play with dolls if he had to, than roll around in the dirt on a rugby pitch pretending he was better at sports than some ragtag eleven-year-old urchin that would probably squeeze his balls or bite his ankles just to show them all who was boss.

She was sitting next to him on the back seat of his father's . . . *their father's* . . . car. Sitting next to him and staring solemnly out of the window, little patches of her breath leaving steamy patterns on the glass as the newly formed Carsten-Miller family drove silently towards some horrendous and impossible future.

He knew his mother felt it the worst. She could never hide her emotions, even her tight shallow breathing seemed to be whispering 'fuck you' to her husband on every curt inward sniff.

Oliver, meanwhile, was fidgeting like a man about to explode with dysentery. Practically every five seconds his eyes would fly around his head like ball bearings in a pin ball machine. To the road, to his wife, to his son, to the eleven-year-old illegitimate daughter none of them had known about until the middle of the previous night, back to the road, back to his wife, back to his son. It was as if he was waiting for the moment the ear crushing tension would break and the three of them would turn like yapping hyenas and tear each other to shreds.

Despite the situation Gabriel wanted to laugh. He'd never seen his father quite so agitated before. Mr perfect with a handle on everything, never a hair or a file or a piece of overpriced furniture even a millimetre out of place.

Guess this one outranks the great mistake, the monster of all fuck ups, daddy-o!

Gabriel had felt his father's love in its purest form the night before. He'd shown him love as he never had in nineteen years, even amid the chaos, the insanity.

His phone had rung about a thousand times. His mother always rang when he was out, begging him to text, just to let her know he was ok. It was sweet but overbearing. But this time the

insistence had been impossible to ignore, and he'd drunkenly stumbled outside the club to see what the fuss was about.
That fuss that now sat next to him silently steaming up patches on the car windows like a little cocker spaniel.

After the inevitable emotional fallout his father had held him, calmed in, with a strength that was warrior-like and overwhelming. He'd then wrapped him in a blanked and put a hot chocolate in front of him in the quiet blue lights of their kitchen and waited patiently until his son found a way to speak?

"Do you love her?"

Gabriel had studied his father, watched him shake his head piteously before answering. "It was eleven years ago Gabe. One night. I love your mother. I slipped."

"No. The girl. Do you love her?" Gabriel asked the question but wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"I've never even met her. Until tonight I didn't even know she existed."

Non-committal. Hmmm. Coward's way out.

Oliver had gotten up then, nodded at the untouched hot chocolate in front of his son. "Drink that and try to get some sleep."

Gabriel's pain laced voice stopped his father at the kitchen door. "Dad,"

Oliver turned to him.

"Do you love me?"

'Oh Gabe', his eyes had said, his heart too broken, his voice too close to tears to be able to answer.

Answer him! Tell him! *'I love you deeply, utterly, profoundly. I love you more than life. Without you there is no life.'*

"Turn out the lights before you come to bed." His warrior father chose to say to him instead and left him alone to his hot chocolate and another round of tears.

Martin Black snr, as it began

He spied the silly little thing sitting in the back of the silver Mercedes and pondered the best way to get at it.

He could step out in front of the car, let them swerve to the right, hit a tree. They'd catch blood dripping from cracked open foreheads in their hands as they came round dazed and dreamlike, stare at it aghast, not knowing what had happened, only realising too late when the car burst into flames and engulfed them.

But they seemed a nice family, especially the young lad who'd held the door open for him at the foster home. They didn't deserve such a fate.

It didn't either. It deserved something far more befitting. He preferred it to die slowly.

Thin, clouds formed above him, their shadows lengthening out. Spring was too mellow a season to hold the hell in his heart. This day deserved the fiendish breath of summer, summer from a desert, fierce and unforgiving, where the shrubs choke and the carcasses of dead animals litter the highways, their bones poking through broken skin like springs through fraying furniture. A ripe time for vultures, for maggots, for worms. Summer's hell under a devil's hot sun.

He smiled a gaunt mean smile with teeth so yellow they seemed painted with poison and launched himself at the silver car, his face smashing against the window where it sat.

They all jumped, and the man instinctively slammed on his breaks, throwing his head around to stare at the sudden intrusion, befuddled and disbelieving.

Martin Black senior wiped his face all over the window like a sponge, leaving smears of sweat and drooling saliva across the glass.

The woman inside was demanding something, probably that her husband drive away.

He was scrambling to do just that, panicking, trying to find first gear.

It shrieked at the sight of him and cowered back, into the lap of the nice young man who'd held open the door and unbeknownst to him, let him near it. Now it was trying to bury itself in his chest, burrow into his skin as if to find some hole to hide in.

The woman was shrieking and grabbing for her phone. The man was coming to his senses. They'd be gone soon; he'd miss his chance.

Bash, bash bash.

The cement brick hit the window three times before it broke, raining in on them in a shower of glass.

It screamed and tried to burrow itself further into the young man's skin.

Don't play possum with me! Leave innocence to the innocent. It's you and me now. Toe to toe!

"I just want to talk to her, okay?" He offered to the frantic couple in the front of the car, before turning to it, his face contorting with rage.

"Why did you do it!!!?"

"Dad, drive away! For fuck sake, drive away!" the nice young man was shrieking at his father, while trying to prize its arms from round his neck so he could breath.

The man nodded at his son over his shoulder and tried to do just that. But shock and fear were making him as useless as a great baby and he could only stab at the breaks rather than hit the gas.

"Why did you do it!!!?" He thundered.

The man would find his senses soon and they'd be gone. As nice as the young man was, he wouldn't be holding the door open for him again any time soon, certainly not into a marvellous house the likes of which would have such a sleek silver Mercedes sitting in the drive.

His eyes glowed an angry inflamed orange and he launched himself through the broken window, grabbing for it. He got a hold, he had it, a handful of hair and a fistful of tatty pinafore dress. He could pull back now and take it with him. Lumber away with it, stuff it into a sleeping bag also filled with rocks and stones, throw it far off into a river and give it to a watery grave. But witches don't drown, do they? *He'd think of something of else.*

The pain shot up his nose like a bullet from a gun.

The force of it made him throw his head up and face a benevolent sky.

Had it kicked him? No. It was still squirming and struggling and trying to fight its way into the boy's insides.

It was him. *Oh nice young man, now really?*

There was blood on both their faces. His blood. The young man had pushed her away long enough to bring his head back and thrust it at him like a footballer heading a ball towards the goal at Wembley.

His nose had broken immediately with a sickening crack.

Senses returned, the man had finally found first gear and off they tore, through the country lane away, away and away.

He wobbled once, like a drunk, watching them leave as he raged. He tried to repeat his question *'Why did you do it?'* But his mouth was filling with blood and all he spurted was a babble of incoherent yawps.

"Wiiiiiieee 'id ou d'it? Whyyyyyyy 'idou dooooit?"

The clouds above him broke apart, answering his fury with slowly shifting whiteness that parted and let through beams of gentle yellow sunlight, promising a summer that may still come. A summer that would be born of the devil, if only he'd find a way to swerve the angles of God.

The blood that pulsed from his face turned black and soon he tumbled into a world of darkness. Darkness for a time was the answer, darkness was peace, darkness was enough, darkness was good.

Even though, like light, like summer and spring, darkness never lasted, not for very long.

Detective McNally, as it began

Gabriel jerked his head away from his mother's fussing hands as she, for the fourth time that hour, tried to examine his face for any signs of damage or injury following his recent act of heroism. Unconcerned about any facial trauma, Gabriel was far more interested in the tall enigmatic detective who was standing in their kitchen, laying pictures of their recent assailant and his deceased son out on the table.

"I'm sorry you had to experience that," Detective McNally began.

Oliver was leaning against the window frame, watching Avery outside, turning slow sad circles on the small brightly painted merry-go-round, the social worker barely engaged in the depressing little game, one hand on the handle, the other, and all her attention, on her mobile phone.

"Who the hell was it?" Oliver asked without taking his eyes off his newly acquired daughter.

"Martin Black senior." McNally answered, lining pictures of father and son side by side on the table. "Father of her mother's killer."

"Christ haven't that family put her through enough?" Said Oliver.

"I don't think he wanted to hurt her. I don't think the man knows what he wants. He's half mad with grief. He lost his wife and daughter in a car crash a year ago. And now this."

Oliver only sighed, his eyes still fixed on the child he'd never known, imagining what the short years of her life had already put her through.

"Mr Carsten," said McNally "I'd advise changing your locks, your email and house security codes, also your telephone lines. Land and mobile."

"Will he come after her again?" asked Vivien, her protective eyes immediately flying to Gabriel, rather than the girl at the route of her question.

"He'll be sectioned no doubt." McNally answered. "It's more press intrusion that concerns me. They're insidious little parasites at the best of times. But when it's a murder case like this, especially involving a child, can be months before they get their teeth out of your skin."

"Detective," Vivien said, almost guiltily.

Oliver sighed, knowing what was coming next.

"We have a gun in the house." Vivien went on. "It's perfectly legal. We built this house on a farm we inherited from my parents. We inherited the gun along with it and have the correct licence. We keep it in the bedroom."

"Do you have a code on the lock?" asked McNally.

"Gabriel's nineteen." Vivien answered, the guilt in her voice ratcheting up several notches.

"Put one on, please, this evening." Instructed McNally.

Vivien looked over to nod her agreement to McNally and instruction to Oliver, only to find the fleeting image of the back of his shirt as he left the kitchen and appeared through the frame of the window, heading towards the new little bitchling.

She crossed their opulent tiles and took up the same position Oliver had recently vacated and watched him coldly as he reached her.

"Why would he do it?" It was Gabriel, studying the pictures on the tabletop with intense questioning eyes.

"We all need someone to blame." Vivien answered, her eyes homing in on Avery Miller.

"No, his son. Her stepfather. Why would he do that?" Gabriel asked picking up the picture of the late Martin Black junior.

"It's happened all too often before I'm afraid son." Detective McNally volunteered as he began packing up the photographs and other items. "A couple live together happily for forty years. Then suddenly it'll end in murder over what one of them wants to watch on television. Strangers, get in a row, over a parking space, one pulls a knife."

Vivien turned back from the window.

"By all accounts he was a quiet decent man." McNally added. "Restrained."

"Restrained?" Gabriel queried incredulously.

McNally clicked his briefcase shut and looked at him earnestly. "Each man has his limit. Some people are born bad. Some are made so by years of systematic abuse. And some, for one crazy moment, just slip. They say inside every human heart a quiet killer sleeps."

Father and Daughter, as it began

The brightly coloured merry-go-round carried Avery Miller round in slow sombre circles. She gazed at the moving flashes of grass as she passed them, staring forlornly ahead with eyes so blue they may as well have swallowed the pale cold moon.

Oliver reached the merry-go-round and nodded at the social worker, his eyes asking for privacy. Without breaking the flow of her conversation, the social worker gladly relinquished her efforts with the merry-go-round and retreated to her car.

Oliver pushed the handle, letting Avery pass him three times before suddenly gripping the wood and bringing the ride to a sudden stop.

She turned her huge eyes his way.

"I know how hard this must be for you." He felt clumsy, ridiculous, a fraud just for talking to her, as nervous as a teenager asking out a girl for the first time.

She stared at him, eyes like marbles in the day's fading light.

"I'm going to do my best to give you a home . . . and a family."

He bent down, un-bunched her fallen sock and slowly fed it back up her leg to sit under her tiny knee.

"No one will ever hurt you again."

She sat, caught in the pull of his gaze, cells and bones and tissue, all that comprised her, suddenly glimpsing the source of its existence, blood smelling the blood from which it had first sprang, skin knowing the nearness of itself, itself encasing another human soul.

He searched her eyes deeply, as if trying to scan the interiors of her brain.

Was she registering his words? Did she believe them to be true?

Or simply not give a shit?

He'd had passion for his wife once. Now, simply respect for her. He'd known love for his son. Love he would kill or die for.

This, this half born, fledging thing, this feeling that pushed him across a tightrope like a gun in his back, this was removing every bit of order he'd used to brick up the fireplace of his vulnerability.

She studied him in the cool light, making him feel as though he should apologize for spanking her. Then dug her scuffed shoes into the gravel and pushed herself away to spin in slow circles, round and round on the coloured wood.

What squeezed the tender spaces around his heart was vague and unknowable. Her eyes trailed the earth as she passed him and yet he felt scrutinised, examined, a frog pinned to a board awaiting vivisection.

He stood up and saw his wife in the framed window, silent and still, like a ghost caught in an old photograph, hiding behind the wooden slats and her tumble of black curls. The eyes that peered and probed and unapologetically pointed his way, of course, were hers.

Husband and Wife, as it began

She'd given him little more than the back of her head, the coldness of her shoulder, since they'd been back that day.

He was happy not to try to kiss her, or make amends, or appease her, or go through all the little hells of banishment and silence but knew these were the marks of death for a marriage already teetering on the edge of the bucket under a noose.

She was always a woman to forget what she chose to and remember everything she wanted to.

There was little point at this stage in him trying to play the game. If he got it right, he'd be wrong, if he got it wrong, she'd be right. Someone might as well have shackled them together blindfolded with a knife in each hand, settling it all that way would have been fairer and far less bloody.

His ice-cold wife kept firmly turned away, illuminated in a glow of lamplight that made him want to run his hand over the skin of her arm. Why did he always want whatever he was denied. He could feel vibrations coming from deep within her stone-cold limbs, as if her soul were Imprisoned there, desperately struggling to be let out, reach him, fall into his arms, beg like a child for him to make it all go away.

There was one thing at least they both knew had to happen.

"Avery." Vivien said and it was as if the word meant murder. "How sweet."

He'd had to think of a code for the gun case. Normally their passwords were always 'Gabriel-Mark'.

It wasn't always easy having a witch for a wife. He was sure the damn woman could see through walls. How she'd managed to catch a glimpse of the password he had programmed into the gun case god only knew.

"How long are you going to keep punishing me?" he asked and put the gun case back on the top shelf of their wardrobe.

He slid into bed beside her, accompanied only by her silence.

A framed picture of Gabriel sat on the table next to his side of the bed. He picked it up and slid his thumb across the image of Gabriel's cheek.

"Bang on the devil's door and he'll smack your head right through the window." Vivien said without turning round.

Something was better than nothing. He returned the photo to the table and turned back to her.

"When Gabriel was in hospital last year with meningitis," Oliver said "I got down on my knees like I was ready to cut a deal with God. Like it was a used car I was bargaining for, or a piece of real estate. 'Let me have him a while longer, and you can take him another time, even when he's

still young; thirty, twenty-two, even next week. Just let me have him long enough to open his eyes and look at me, even if only one more time.' My beautiful, beautiful boy."

Oliver sighed and slid further down in the bed, closing his eyes, even if the possibility of sleep was as remote as the moon.

"Bet they're laughing at me now." He whispered.

"Who?"

His eyes came open at the sound of her voice.

"The devil," said Oliver "and God. At the silly little man down on bended knees."

He looked at the back of her head. She returned him nothing more than stiff silence.

She edged away and kept her face deep in her pillow as he reached over her to turn off the light, lest he see her face and know that she had been weeping.

The phone rang at close to two a.m. that morning.

Almost the same time it had pieced through the night a mere twenty-four hours earlier. A call to have pierced through the night and then their lives. Alerting him to the death of an erstwhile one-night stand and the existence of a daughter never known, never considered.

Mary Miller had made it clear in letters kept among her personal effects who the little girl's father was and how, in the event of her death, he could be contacted. And yet there was no evidence of illness, no notes about internal organ maladies, no signs, or even tests for cancer of any kind.

Yet cancer had teeth and could snarl and bite.

Mary Miller had known a different malignancy was chewing on her insides, felt the spread of it, foreshadowing her own, perhaps both, or all three of their deaths. A cancer that moved in and made promises of love and ate with her and slept with her and paid half the bills and played husband and stepfather a while. Then with the malevolent finality of all unstoppable parasites, took a total of twenty-seven bites out of her fine soft flesh.

And that, as they say, was that.

What was to be done about Avery Miller?

What was to be done about Avery?

What indeed?

Mr Carsten, if you'd be so kind as to pick up daddy duties from here.

It'll be just like having a new kitchen installed, a fresh little start for you and your family to love and enjoy as the years roll in.

He turned to Vivien to see if the call had woken her, but she was snoring lightly and sleeping deeply.

She wouldn't have heard it anyway.

The phone was only ringing down deep in the layers of his soul. Down in the blackness of his own drooling dream sleep, his answerless imagination.

Down in the dark-dream-ribbons that laced through his fitful frantic snatches of sleep. Down where the slumber wolves lurk and lick and snap, roam, stare with yellow eyes, circle and wait, just to remind a man of all his fears.

The pack of Oliver-dream-wolves threw back their large heads in unison, lifting their furry muzzles to howl at a wickedly white moon. Howls that merged and once fully fused were the sound of a telephone's persistently shrill ringing cry.

He sat up in his dream world to answer.

'Ellie, it's been so long since you called me like this.'

The gurgling sound her voice made because she was no longer able to swallow or cough, letting saliva build up in the back of her throat and upper airways, made Oliver constrict with sickly unease.

'Oliver, Oliver my brother.'

Her death rattle had grown stronger and more abhorrent over the years.

He opened his eyes and saw her, sitting comfortably at the foot of the bed, telephone in one hand up to hole in the side of her head where once an ear had been. With her other hand she reached out and stroked the length of Vivien's shin, the peeling skin stretching like tattered lace over her skeletal arm flaked generously, showering skin-snow down onto their bed clothes.

Oliver kept the phone up to his own ear, even though she was no more than three feet away.

'Ellie, why have you called, why have you come?'

'Remember Oliver, remember the great mistake, the monster of all fuck ups, the Grand Poobah of all irreversible mother fucking colossal wrongs.'

It was a long sentence to come rattling out of the throat of a dead woman. She coughed slightly with the strain of it and grey blood grew and lengthened through long neglected veins, sitting like a forgotten network under the skin of her sunken cheeks.

'Don't tell me this is worse.'

Vivien stirred slightly. Oliver held his breath and clutched the imagined phone receiver tight to his chest. She'd heard his delirium sleep babble chats with Ellie once before. Years earlier. The night after the time, *the only time*, he'd hit Gabriel.

Father and son had kept the event hidden from her and promised to forgive each other and never speak of it again.

But the dream-wolves had sunk their teeth right in like it was a big juicy just-slaughtered steak and Ellie had been sure to phone that night and remind him then of all his wrongs, and the way, try as you might, you can never box them up and put them away. Those wrongs come together and form something, something that has a way of seeping through the world around you, sluggish and filthy, staining whatever it touched.

Vivien had asked him the next morning what all the sleep talk had been about? Some sort of great mistake, and a Poobah of a fuck up. She'd laughed as she'd asked.

"I reversed the car into a tree." He lied. It was being MOT'd and he was currently driving a courtesy Nissan Micra; she'd never know the difference.

She'd laughed again. "No wonder you were having nightmares." And continued searching for the Witch Hazel to dab on the bruise under her son's eye from the fall he'd had trying to skateboard the day before. She'd told Oliver not to buy him a skateboard that Christmas, he was never a lad into such things, and try as he might Oliver would never carve and shape their son into something he wasn't. *Oliver, Oliver, Oliver*, never one to learn. No matter how many mistakes he made.

'Tell me.'

He begged his sister and watched as she pulled the knotted white bed sheet away from her throat. The spinal cord transection that had occurred when she hanged herself mercifully meant that death was instant, but left her neck with no infrastructure to support itself or carry her skull, even in her current rotted-corpse manifestation, loosening her noose a little let her words come easier despite the persistence of her death rattle drum, but made her head loll to one side like a doll that had lost its stuffing.

'Oliver my brother, just watch what you let into this house.'

"Please don't call me anymore Ellie." He begged her in a voice that had managed to escape through the prison of his sleep, and sensed Vivien murmur a response in what may have been the cages of her own dark dreams.

'You go now Ellie.'

'Why Oliver, why brother?' She rattled and croaked.

'Because you're dead.'

The parting click of the receiver and the flat dull tone of the line met him instantly.

He turned over in bed and laid his arm round his wife's waist, buried his faced in her curls, breathed her in, desperate for the nearness of something warm, something real.

After an aching minute she rolled over and held him.

Chapter Three

Father and Son, the first day

He deliberately skirted his parents' open bedroom doorway, trotting across the sand smooth carpet of the lesser used back stairs, hoping to be unnoticed, so he could escape the house and the tension that had been simmering therein since the *'joy'* of the new arrival.

"Gabe!"

His father's voice was like a fist, grabbing hold of a handful of shirt and yanking him back.

Gabriel sighed, reluctantly turning on the top step to face him.

"I'm on my way out." Gabriel offered before his father had a chance to suggest otherwise.

"Not tonight you're not." Oliver said without hesitation as he reached him, oblivious, or ignoring, his son's rolling eyes. "There's twenty quid on the dresser. Get a pizza for you and your sister."

"For me and my *what*?"

It was a more daringly sarcastic tone than he would normally adopt for his father. He'd had free licence in the last day or two, riding on the coattails of his father's latest 'great mistake'. But things were acclimatising now, and the usual strict order of dominance was returning. Everyone knew his or her place and position in the Carsten household and Gabriel only had free rein for the superiority of the wronged over the wrongdoer for so long. The great alpha male, the big gorilla, the daddy bear, was raising angry eyes and showing him the first flashes of a warning stare.

"I've got plans, I'm going out with Reece." Gabriel said, trying to hide the weakness of intimidation in his voice.

Oliver shook his head. "I'm taking your mother out to dinner. I need you to babysit."

"I'm going out with-"

"Gabe!"

"What am I supposed to do with her?"

"I don't know. Play with her."

"*Play with her?"*

"You're spending too much time with that jackass anyway. Get in trouble whenever you're with him you do. You start university in Autumn, and I don't want you screwing anything up for yourself."

"What am I going to screw up?"

"You're a kid still. You don't understand. This world isn't a kind place. You make one little mistake, and you could destroy everything." Oliver turned away from his son, tucking his shirt into his trouser belt line. "The tiniest slip could come back to haunt you Gabe."

"When? In eleven years, nine months like yours did?"

Yeah, take that daddy-o. You're not going to make me feel like shit over this. You hypocrite, you stranger-fucker, your illegitimate daughter-maker, you wandering dick.

Oliver turned sharply back like a dog, snarling from his flank as if stung by a bee.

"Gabriel, you cannot afford to be this selfish. You are not my only child anymore."

"Was I ever?"

Don't push me child. I may not own you. But you be sure I made you. And if I ever needed to, I'd remind you who owns this house.

"Boy one day your hour will come."

He said it with a cool and even tone, eyes locked in on his son as though he'd gone momentarily insane. It had been as quick and as brutal as an open fisted slap and stung with as much cruelty.

Oliver immediately wanted to snatch it back, to gobble the words up from the air, swallow them back down his throat. But they were there, settled in the permanent, in the enduring, the unforgivable, lodged in Gabriel's heart, the way three years earlier the welt of a fulsome lump lodged around his eye, soon to turn yellow, ringed by a more beauteous damson, handiwork of his father's momentary slip of monstrous rage.

He'd forgiven him for it. His father had asked, begged, cried. Gabriel had agreed, agreed, agreed.

It's nothing, I'm ok, it doesn't matter, not at all.

But his father didn't ask for forgiveness, not this time, he simply stared at his son like a stranger.

It's everything, I'm not ok, it matters, I love you daddy, but why would you hurt me, why would you kill the love between us, why would you kill me like this?

Gabriel was the one to turn away, lest his father see the first trace of tears that were prickling in his eyes.

Reece, The first day

What a prick!

His best friend clearly wasn't in the mood for games.

Sitting sulkily at one end of the couch while this new '*sister thing'* he was expecting him to understand sat just as sulkily at the other, playing morosely with some tatty rag doll piece of crap and swinging her leg so violently it came within an inch of smashing into the overpriced glass coffee table on every upwards kick. Vivien Carsten would need an hour in a decompression unit if she'd been there to see that little act of petulant defiance.

He thought about a joke to lighten the mood.

Gabe, did you know the city is holding their annual incest competition this weekend? I've entered my sister.

Hmmm . . .

Maybe not.

He'd need to find another way to amuse himself.

He fished in his bag, soon retrieving two large books and setting them '*oh so nonchalantly'* down on the coffee table in front of his pal.

Gabriel picked up the top book and read the title. "The Study of Occult Practises"

Score, he'd taken the bait.

Even the little sister thing took interest, putting down the time-chewed doll and edging closer to them both, pushing a few strands of unkempt hair out of her eyes as she looked at the picture on the cover of the second book which Gabriel was now holding.

Jesus, those eyes. He hadn't noticed just how pretty the little girl was until now.

"Magic, Alchemy and Extra Sensory Perception." Gabriel slapped down the book and turned angrily to Reece. "Are you kidding? My dad will kill me."

Reece held a finger up to silence him, delved deeper into the bag and returned with the main event.

He placed a large triangular wooden device proudly atop the table in front of them.

The girl's interest grew, she was edging closer still, big pretty eyes alive with interest, the tatty doll discarded face down on the cushion, childhood games were over.

Gabriel flipped through the book and landed on a black and white illustration of a similar device. Reece had earmarked the page heavily and the book opened appropriately to present the illustration like an invitation. Within the illustration a group of five sat around a similar triangular box, two touching its long central dial. The other three participants looked terrified over their shoulders, seeing a muscular horned demon step out through the shadows to bear down on them.

Reece grinned and nodded at the device.

Gabriel's face contorted in incredulous irritation.

"He told you to play with her." said Reece defensively.

"I don't think '*in the realms of the occult'* is what he had in mind." answered Gabriel and read angrily from the inscription under the illustration. "Players should proceed with caution for not only can their intrusions into the spiritual world disturb the peace of any incorporeal or immaterial being, it can also make manifest more false and ungodly malevolent paranormal demons or fallen angels, with a want to tempt humans to sin, up to the one entity which is known as the personification of all evil and the devout enemy of humankind and God himself."

Gabriel snapped the book shut and tossed it aside, shaking his head at Reece.

From nowhere Avery was suddenly in his lap, as unannounced and uninvited as she had been when she arrived in it in the car after her mother's funeral when the half mad Martin Black senior had attacked, albeit without the frantic fear for her life and shrieking panicked hysteria.

Gabriel had never known what it was to have a sibling. Reece was as close as it had ever come. He felt a bond of brotherhood with his friend, would have fought for him, done anything for him, helped him however he asked. But something felt strange and new as the little girl settled on top of him and made herself at home. The softness of the back of her head resting gently on his shoulder, silky little legs with hardly any weight to them at all, laying across his own with the warmth of a blanket.

It could only have been his imagination, but somewhere deep inside, cylinders seemed to be firing, nerves alerted, near dead cells that had reached their cycle's end, suddenly bursting with life like buds in spring, as if their other halves had arrived and were calling them home.

I found you. I found you. I found you.

So thumped the beat of his heart.

He had assumed he would find her irritating, an inconvenience, a threat, a competitor for his father's attention and affection. He wasn't expecting this. He wasn't expecting to feel like an amputee who'd suddenly regained his arms. He wasn't expecting this strange, instantaneous, inexplicable feeling.

He folded his arms over her like gates that would protect her from the world.

He hadn't expected this to feel so natural, so right.

He hadn't planned for love.

Reece did a small double take at the impromptu act of sibling solidarity, felt a tiny squeeze of jealousy pinch his heart.

Whatever. He'll be bored by the time she gets her first period.

He pushed the triangular device towards them on the table. To the right of the dial was a scrawled word YES. On the left a neighbouring NO.

"Look, you ask it things." Reece said.

He held the dial with the tip of his index finger and drew it to the far right.

"Is my name Reece?" he closed his eyes and asked it.

He let go, freeing the dial which swung with elegant ease to the left, back to the right, left right, left right left, finally settling on the right side and the firm answer YES.

"See now you try." He said, pushing the box an inch closer to Gabriel.

"I think I know my own name."

"Ask it something else." Reece insisted.

Gabriel anchored his left arm round Avery like a seatbelt to stop her sliding off his lap, leant forward and pulled back the dial. "Is Reece a dickhead?"

With six swings, and to his great satisfaction, the dial landed squarely back on the world YES.

"It does work." Said Gabriel causing Avery to laugh.

The cylinders fired again. Her laugh was like melting butter. It was the first time he'd heard it. The first time he'd heard anything from her other than the startled screams of a child cowering from a man-monster.

Reece tutted his annoyance. "The only way we can really test it is by getting someone we don't know all that well to ask it something."

Gabriel stared blankly at him, before suddenly realising what he had in mind.

"No way!" Gabriel barked and instinctively tightened his hold on the little girl in his lap.

Reece looked at him, quietly asking with his eyes.

Soon she swivelled round in his arms and turned her eyes on him too. Eyes that asked the same. *'Come on, let's play.'*

Jesus, those eyes. They could carve up a man's heart. Make the moon break its moorings and lose its grip on the tides.

Gabriel tore himself out of their magnetic pull and scowled at them both. "No!"

Avery, the first day

He held her hand in his hand and she felt like she could conquer the world.

I found you. I found you. I found you.

So thumped the beat of her heart.

I was cold, and tired, this ol' world left me sick and sad.

I tried loving once, but all it left was calluses, scar tissue all over my hands and heart. Dead brain cells from too much thinking, clogged aortas from too much hoping, twisted vessels from too much trusting, allergic rhinitis inflammation, from holding my breath for far too long, just to make sure I could hear you saying my name.

She didn't need their help to climb on to the seat they were setting up in front of the fireplace. But she would take it anyway. She had climbed on or over several things far bigger than the posh chair with the marble frame and inbuilt silk cushions. She was old enough to conquer that puny height.

She was old enough for many things.

But this new brother of hers, and his idiot friend, held one hand each as though she were a bride marrying them both and half guided, half lifted her up into place.

I found you. I found you. I found you.

So thumped the beat of her heart.

Her new brother still wasn't happy. Didn't like what the fool was suggesting she do. He scowled morosely as fool-boy set the triangle box on the mantle in front of her.

"Now, this is how it works little girl."

I'm not three, prick face.

"It doesn't have to be just 'yes' or 'no' answers. You can ask it a question where the answer is a number. And we count how many times it swings."

She nodded dutifully, the way children who have no conviction as to their own authority do. An empty acquiescence. She could have been agreeing to him boiling her like a cabbage.

Her brother was sighing, good. He wanted to keep her safe.

She looked up into his warm soft face.

Finally, reluctantly, he nodded his agreement.

Cautiously, she faced it, it now seemed ominous, threatening, and real. Her tiny finger drew back the long thick needle shaped dial.

"How many nights," Avery began.

She wanted to be clever in front of him. Clever and adult. Not ask the questions of an eleven-year-old. *What age will I marry? How many children will I have one day? Sigh, gosh, isn't she sweet, pink posies and ponies and vomit all over the rug.*

She wanted the question he would hear from her mouth to be one with thick juicy meat and gristle on its bones.

She wanted him to know sugar and spice were the last two things she was made of.

"How many nights," she repeated and felt the whole room hold its breath "before someone dies in this house?"

Neither the boys, nor the girl, nor the room dared to breathe.

Finally, Reece. "Isn't she a sweetheart?"

Gabriel let out a small bubble of slightly disturbed laughter and put his hand over Avery's on the dial to prevent her letting it go. "I can't believe you. You've been in this house three days and not said a word to anyone and when you finally do open your mouth that's the first thing you come out with?"

Avery froze. Was she in trouble? Losing him as soon as she found him?

Then he smiled again. A smile that became a laugh.

Her question was ugly and sour. Like her frayed pinafore dress and her scuffed Mary Jane shoes. But he loved it. He loved it because it was hers.

I found you. I found you. I found you.

She smiled back at him. A smile that followed his and collapsed to laughter. Then they laughed together. The two halves of one whole. Laughing, giggling, smirking in their complicity, while idiot boy scratched his head.

Her brother turned suddenly serious and looked over at prick features. "I'm not having her ask it that. How do we stop it?"

"We can't." twat face told him. "She's gonna have to let go of it. It'll start swinging as soon as she does."

He sighed an angry sigh, and, on his breath, she heard it clearly *'no one messes with my little sister'*.

"What do you care anyway? You don't believe." The fool was asking her brother, asking him, goading him, provoking him.

Watch yourself there bonehead.

He took his hand away from her hand and she felt the loss of his touch from her fingers all the way down to the balls of her feet.

She released her hold on the dial and let it begin its slow rhythmic journey.

Right to left, left to right.

They all followed it fervently with their eyes.

Tick, tick, tick

I found you. I found you. I found you.

Right to left.

Will you braid my hair?

Left to right.

Do you like me?

Tick, tick

Stop.

They stopped with it. Each afraid to move. Afraid to speak. Afraid to look over their shoulders lest a horned demon was crashing its way through the ceiling.

"Seven" confirmed Reece. "Next Saturday."

Something in the house's deeper parts clatter-crashed as if beaten like a drum and the light fizzled and hissed, then failed, engulfing them in abrupt darkness.

Gabriel, the first day

He was frightened but couldn't show it. Maximum bravado was required in front of them.

In front of her.

He was the big brother now. The role required such things as fearlessness and strength. Time to put away childhood games.

Yet as they inched their way in impenetrable darkness along the landing wall towards the hatch to the loft he couldn't help but feel they were playing at some juvenile Scooby-Doo haunted house type escapade.

He swallowed his nerves and thought of what to say. He couldn't be Shaggy, had to be Fred. Fred always had a handle on these situations. What would Fred say?

"Keep back from the edge of the stairs, here, take my hand."

"I'm ok." Reece answered from within the dark.

"Not you, you lame dick!" Gabriel said as he bumped into the door to the airing cupboard and realised they were in the place they needed to be, under the access door that would lead to the attic.

The air in the attic was thick with dust and memories.

Memories of the days leading up to a lifetime of Christmases, clambering up the ladder with his father to retrieve lights, wrapping paper, decorations, an assortment of the season's most magical items.

And memories of the dark days, the bad year, the 'great mistake', the terrible thing.

He wasn't sure why the bullying at school had started.

Tia and his mother did their best to convince him it was because he was special, beautiful. The contempt of his peers born of the bitter cruelty of jealousy.

He lived most of that year alone and miserable, hour long lunchbreaks that stretched out like centuries, friendless and forgotten. Wandering the playground with his hands in his pockets and a heaviness in his heart.

He wasn't the rambunctious, funny, *ok at maths and great at games*, son his father had wanted. He was now the freak, taunted in classrooms, picked last at sports, and never included at social gatherings. Other than the times they asked him to come, only to find he'd been duped, and waited alone on street corners until an hour had passed, to then trudge slowly home, humiliated, lonely and in tears.

Most of the boys from his class were going to a nightclub together when the first of them turned sixteen. He hadn't been invited.

"What if I come and sit and have a drink while you dance?" his mother had offered.

Looking back now he knew it was a suggestion born of sweetness. But at the time he felt a sickly anger towards her that made him want to set her on fire. The torments at school were bad enough. What did she think they'd do to him? A whole pack of them, drunk and wild with the exuberance of youth, suddenly seeing him out on a Friday night with 'mummy'?

But things had changed when Reece took him under his wing.

Reece was unlike them, unlike him, unlike anyone. In the days before the bullying and the 'isolation' he was condemned to, he'd have never considered Reece for a friend. He was an oddball. Erratic, free spirited, devil-may-care. Always scruffy, often smelly, but he looked life right in the face and squeezed something out of every moment of it.

When he befriended the once popular, now loner, Gabriel Carsten things got better almost immediately. He found himself laughing, in a genuine way, and knew a happiness again, perhaps even a more honest and real happiness than that of previous years, brotherly bonds known in a deeper way.

Reece was the youngest of four brother and always had some memento of their lives to share with his friend, music, clothes, alcohol and on that dreadful day, pornography.

He knew his father would have been wild with rage so only agreed if they took the old style disks up to the loft for clandestine viewing.

The first few were hysterical, rather than anything erotic, nail screeching bad acting, and nothing more titillating than what they'd experienced while seeing women sunbathing on the beach. The whole event was a joke. Until they popped in the fourth disk, the one that changed everything.

This brought viewing of a different kind, something that could never be unseen.

They realised the girl was no more than twelve five minutes into the film and even in their own naivety felt sick with shame and the wrongness of it. But by then Oliver was home from work and poking his head through the hatch to the loft to see what they were up to.

His parents had sent Reece home immediately and spent the next hour in the kitchen with Gabriel demanding to know if there was some monstrous part of their son they hadn't been aware of until this day.

He explained it as it was, and his mother took his side almost immediately. But she would have taken his side on anything. If he'd been caught smoking or shoplifting or skipping school. He'd still be her darling boy, her little sweetling.

Her frustration turned from her son to her husband who, two hours on was still refusing to be convinced.

Finally, she persuaded him to take the boy to the park to smooth out their differences and reconnect.

When they got back, she'd been pleased to find they were friends again. Even if Gabriel was sporting a black eye. Why Oliver had bought him that skateboard in the first place, let alone pick

that day to encourage Gabriel to try it out again was beyond her. But the accident seemed to have done the trick. Oliver fussed and fretted over him in a way he hadn't since Gabriel was a toddler.

She wasn't happy about the rising lump that was thickening and swelling under her son's eye, but if that was what it took for them to find each other again she would let fate have its way.

A sudden flash of blinding light stole him back from the memory of it all.

He'd fished his camera out of the drawer in his bedroom, set its self-timer and given it to Reece to hold as he'd clambered up the ladder and found his way inside. The circles of white-gold brilliance from the flash giving him quick snatches of light to find his way.

There'd be about a hundred useless pictures he'd have to delete someday, but at least they had gotten him safely inside.

"Take one more!" Gabriel called out and in the ensuing golden flash found the fuse box and pulled the middle switch down, resetting the Carsten house to light and colour and warmth and normalcy.

Normalcy that was, besides what they let in that night, the uninvited guest.

Gabriel wrote the sudden sense that something was watching him off as his fearful imagination.

That strange noise that sounded like breathing, that was nothing more than the gentle hum of their electrical system, slowly waking and coming to life and order again.

That cold chill on the back of his neck, that was nothing more than the last winds of winter, refusing to give way to the promise of spring, finding their way through gaps in the attic roof. All attic rooves have gaps, surely, even in a house as modern and airtight as this.

Cold winds and other elements can find their way into a house, if their gusts are strong enough, their minds are sharp enough, sharp with direction and with intent.

"You forgot the fucking thing!" Gabriel yelled and banged on the bedroom window, suddenly glancing sheepishly down at Avery, realising he had just sworn in front of an eleven-year-old.

She only stared up at him with those huge luminous eyes and smiled guiltily at the naughtiness.

He held a finger up for her to wait right there, bolted from the room, down the stairs and within moments was breathlessly back beside her holding the strange triangular box in one hand and banging on the glass of her bedroom window with the other.

"Reece!" Gabriel shouted. "Come back and get this!"

But down in the drive below Reece only laughed up at them, walking stiffly backwards with his arms outstretched in a lame imitation of a zombie and mouthing the words *'I'll see you next Saturday!'* before clambering onto his bike and peddling away.

Alone. Gabriel looked gravely back down at her. "You can never tell my . . . *our dad* . . . what we did."

She gazed up, nodding her head obediently.

He looked for a suitable place to hide it, hoping the girl would understand the seriousness of what he'd said.

Besides kiddie porn, the one other thing that was sure to have his father haemorrhaging with rage was 'dark magic' as Tia and his mother called it.

If he could he'd have banned Tia from the house with all her mystical ramblings. But she was his mother's best friend and his abilities to overrule his wife were limited. Besides, with her it was twinkly lights and frothy nonsense. Anything beyond the mad fantasies of the deluded were on a strict veto, whether that be supernatural books or possession horror films, even just the turn of the conversation towards anything of the occult or darkly sinister. 'Something from his younger years.' His mother had once explained when Oliver, ursine and bombastic, ridiculed, and chided Tia to such a degree it had left her in tears.

Gabriel opened the double doors to Avery's wardrobe, pushed the triangular box deep into the recess of the top shelf, put a blanket and a sweater in front of it and stood back to see if it could be seen.

It couldn't, but still the spot wasn't ideal. His mother was shopping for her in the morning and would, no doubt, be in there unpacking and hanging and positioning an array of things. He'd find somewhere else for it first thing then take it back over to Reece's.

Gabriel's face lit up. He'd forgotten about the twenty pound note his father had left for them.

"Come on, let's get a pizza." He said and led her towards the door.

He couldn't believe he'd forgotten. He was starving and pizza was his favourite.

Just like me. He self-castigated. *Head like a sieve you do boy.*

He glanced back at the wardrobe as he led her from the room.

Whatever you do idiot. Make sure you don't forget about that bastard thing!

The Uninvited Guest, the first day

The shadowy thing crept towards him, watching him in his sleep.

Gabriel stirred and rolled over. For a minute it thought the boy would open his eyes, but he only lifted a lazy leg to kick back the duvet, scratched his face and continued his dreams.

A hand reached down and touched his face.

He woke with alarm and saw her standing there, confused but unafraid.

"What's wrong?" he asked urgently.

She rubbed her groggy eyes.

"There's something in my closet."

"There," Gabriel said and then yawned. "No monsters."

He stood back and let Avery inspect the empty cavern of the wardrobe, her eyes moving slowly to each recess.

Eventually she smiled and wriggled back down in her bed.

"Okay now?" asked Gabriel.

She nodded and smiled, settled herself into a pose in bed so angelic and sweet she looked like something off the front of a Christmas card in his eyes.

"Go back to sleep." He said gently and left her to the night.

It was twenty minutes later when she woke him again.

"It's back."

Oliver, the first day

It was nice coming home with his wife in his arms.

He felt as he had in that long ago time, before marriage, before Gabriel, before . . . *before Avery.*

He'd been so proud to be seen with her when they first met. A woman so handsome, so determined, so strong. It was an honour that she'd picked him. She'd had no shortage of choices then.

The last few days of shock, betrayal and despair had left a shadowy dark crack running down the middle of their marriage. But curiously, had ended up being as effective as an intense course of couples' therapy.

They came home now to the quiet of their house, their feelings restored, renewed. Her arm around his waist, his over her shoulder.

They would do what they always did on nights like this. Go quickly to the bedroom and fuck quietly, muffle each other's moans and giggles, small quick noiseless movements lest Gabriel hear and come trotting in to see what was occurring.

He didn't want to break the moment, but something nagged within him. He thought of letting her go into the bedroom first and coming out with a quick excuse, *'I left my wallet in the car.' 'I think the kitchen lights are on.' 'I just want to check on Gabe.'* But she would see the guilt of a liar in his eyes, and he would break the painfully rebuilt trust between them.

There was only one way it could happen without ripping them back to the previous day's shreds and shards of tattered misery. Thankfully, she did it for him.

"Why don't you go check and see if she's ok?"

"I'm sure she's fine." He replied.

Please, insist woman, insist.

"Go on, you should."

"If you think I should. If you want me to."

Of course you don't fucking want me to.

"I'll wait for you." She smiled seductively and disappeared through their door, leaving him facing his daughter's bedroom.

His heart froze when he found her gone.

Internal arguments kicked off as he sat on her unmade bed.

Don't be ridiculous. She's just in the bathroom. The light is on in there, you can see it under the door.

But can you hear anything?

No.

Why would she be in there not making a sound?

It's been five minutes already.

Knock.

I can't.

Break the door down.

Don't be stupid.

Go and wake up Gabe.

As soon as he entered Gabriel's room the throat clenching terror of finding a child gone morphed into a flood of relief. She was there, safe, asleep, untouched.

Untouched?

The relief gave we to an unease that rose in him like a sickness.

Why in the name of God did he have her in bed with him?

He crept forward, fearful of waking either of them.

They were both dressed in bed clothes and laying back-to-back, an inch apart and sleeping in the comfort of each other's nearness like twins in a womb.

Maybe she'd been scared, woken in a strange huge house, not realising where she was for a minute, screaming. Gabriel would have come running.

Or suddenly swamped by the rolling wave of long overdue grief, finally hitting her less then two weeks after seeing her mother murdered on the kitchen floor in front of her.

Gabriel would have come running to her sobbing lament as well as her fear.

He would have rocked her. Stayed with her if she'd begged him too. Listened to her pain, her anguish.

Gabriel could be a good listener.

Gabriel could be many things.

He dipped his arms under the duvet and fished her out.

She melted into him as he carried her across his room. He glanced in the mirror to see his son stir and turn over, but thankfully not wake.

The conversation that needed to be had would be better suited to the unblinking light of day.

When Oliver finally slept, his dead brother Tad, tore his way through the underside of night to draw him from his dreams.

At least his sister Ellie had the decency to call first when invading his nightmares.

It was the Carsten house to which his brother bade him follow. Not the Carsten house of silk cushions and marble counters and granite tiles. The Carsten house of yesteryears. Huge and rambling. Sagging through the strain of its weight. Boarded shut, weathered, and beaten. Ripped of tiles and punched by the winds of the east. The Carsten house of his childhood. The crumbling Carsten house of ruin.

Where the Carsten triplets were born and grew to early adulthood.

Where two of them died before the age of twenty-three.

He followed his dead brother towards it, barefoot and shivering on the mossy ground. It stood atop a great hill, gazing down at his approach with the yellow eyes of a hungry tiger.

Tad gave him nothing but the hunch of his shoulders, the back of his wrecked head to gaze at, as he led him up creaking stairs, their footsteps slow as a world revolving.

He knew which room he'd draw him to. The attic bedroom, *of course*. The Carsten house's tangled mind, its broken backbone, its bleak beleaguered heart.

Ellie hung there still, roped to the beam by her bedsheet and swinging gently like a pegged robe on a washing line, swaying in a summer breeze.

Tad took his place below her, just where fate had left him, in his very last moment of life, the bullet that Ellie had fired from the Smith and Wesson Model 19 Revolver right through his brain still lodged in the blistered wooden floorboards three feet in front of them.

The pool of blood and brain matter glistened in fresh crimson, as if his long-ago murder had only happened moments before.

Tad propped himself on one brittle elbow, drew back one of Ellie's bony feet and sped up her swing, like an overgrown baby whose fingertips could just now reach the elusive mobile toy that had taunted him with twirling lights and magic. Taking great delight, he batted her back and forth. Oliver's dream-mind feared her broken neck may slip through the noose any second and she'd crash to the floor and break like glass.

'It's a family thing.' Tad croaked and pointed to the pool of blood in front of him, beckoning Oliver come forth and see what he could see, reflected there in its glassy red surface.

'He must get it from me.' Tad grinned, his smile lopsided, creaky, as though he hadn't used it in centuries.

Oliver stumbled forward and saw them together, an image of them, in the glassy pool of red blood, clear and succinct as if it was an image from a television screen. His son. His daughter. Laying together, an inch apart, back-to-back in the same plush bed.

Oliver wanted to stamp in the blood, like a child in a rain puddle, break the image into a thousand watery pieces.

But he could do nothing but stand in his imprisoned dream spot and observe what his brother wanted him to see, like some ethereal CEO conducting a ghost world presentation, laying out facts for Oliver's attention.

'He's a handsome boy.' Tad rasped with a broad lipless smile. *'Really, he must get it from me.'*

'There is nothing of my son in you!' The words screamed across Oliver's brain like a high-speed train.

And in this dream world not even his thoughts could be hidden. Tad answered him with venomous glee.

'Your son? By my reckoning I'd say that one belongs to me.'

Oliver's mouth filled with the taste of memory and sour milk.

Ellie's see-saw swinging suddenly ceased and she lifted her dangling useless head to look at him with eyes like two cuts that could never heal.

In her bony hand she held something; the Smith and Wesson Model 19 revolver, the same gun she'd used to murder their brother decades earlier. She offered it to Oliver with a gummy smile that said '*You need this now, it's a family thing.'*

Around them the room creaked and groaned, watching, waiting.

Oliver stared at his grinning brother. And his brother stared back with idiot indifference.

Vermin have a way of telling each other about these things.

Oliver tore his eyes from the offered gun, turned and fled the room, trampled down the stairs through the gluey wetness of the dream that held him, fought his way through the broken door of his fears and fled out into the night to try to find his way home under a sky as black as dread.

The Carsten House, the first day

Midnight.

Finally, all in the Carsten house were quiet.

Games were over and dreams were done.

All slept.

Except the uninvited guest.

There in the shadows with extraordinary stillness and a patience not of this world or the next, he waited.

And watched.