

# WELCOME TO THE APOCALYPSE

Lee Kerr

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# TO SHOP, TO DROP

**Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> August – London**

‘Why are we here again?’ she asks, as they walk towards Big Blue.

‘I don't wanna go and Jade don't wanna go, neither. There's nowt we need,’ Cortnee says, her arms flapping by her side.

‘And nowt we can afford, anyways,’ Jade says.

Mum quickly clips Cortnee around the ear, although it's less of a slap and more of a tickle, on account of the child being considerably taller, and by Mum's own admission, her big, fat chicken wings are not able to lift up much these days.

‘Your Ashley needs a new mattress. He's pissed enough in the last one.’

His two sisters point at him, making it clear where their laughter is directed. Ashley says nothing. He walks forward, his head bowed down and his shoulders hunched forward as he tries to block out his horrible siblings' howls, which echo around the empty car park.

‘Meatballs,’ Dad says.

Mum looks at him, her fists clenched, her head shaking. She knew it was coming and yet she can still feel the anger stirring within her. She takes a deep breath, which must never be mistaken as a sign of forgiveness, or even any level of understanding, but rather a chance to ever-so-slightly calm her frayed nerves. ‘Yeah, we'll get you some bloody meatballs.’

‘We have to get ‘em here because yours are so shit!’ Ashley shouts and starts running, ever so slowly, knowing she will give chase but entirely confident she won't ever catch him.

And sure enough, Mum breaks into a small run and pursues him for a second a two, just until her back starts to hurt or her knees start to ache, or her boobs begin chafing against that cheap, ill-fitting bra. The reason barely matters in the shadow of her obvious lack of willingness to continue. She puts her hands on her knees, her back bent over, not sure where the pain is coming from, as she looks around at the two girls who are still laughing. She looks at Dad who, in her opinion, ain't doing nothing worth doing. ‘Mine not good enough for you, eh?’ she asks.

He doesn't say anything, just shrugs his shoulders and walks through the entrance. The girls run in and Mum takes up the rear, counting up how much is in her purse, knowing they will just about be able to afford the meatballs, but it will be just one refillable juice to share between the kids and one coffee for the adults. Anything else they want will have to be swiped, and the only thing that will go through the tills will be Ashley's new mattress.

If Ashley pisses on this one too she has said he will go back to nappies, because it's getting stupid now, she thinks. After all, whoever has heard of a fifteen year old lad having to wear nappies? But then again, who ain't thinking it's gross that he's still pissing in his bed when he's so close to being a proper man.

Hypnotherapy could cure it, the consultant had said. Hypnowhat? My ass, she had thought. We can't be affording that, and besides ain't nothing a wipe down mattress protector can't fix, at a fraction of the price of some posh doctor, she reckoned.

And so, as Mum closes her purse and pushes her husband onto the escalator, telling him it ain't nothing to be worrying him, it is only Ashley who stops to think. He stands at the entrance and looks around the car park, all the time thinking that he has never seen this place so empty. Sure, it's early in the morning but there should still be people in the outdoor car park. He knows the multi-storey don't be filling up unless the rain comes or there is a queue for the surface one. But there are always the keen people who want to do all them home improvements at the weekend. Ashley thinks that one fine day he might come here as one of them, and not as part of this family outing. They always come here early, before there is too many staff on shift, meaning that their swearing and swiping is likely to be spotted.

As he moves up the escalator he can't help but think that this place is not like it normally is, and there aren't many other customers or staff members inside, either. He runs to catch up with his family, his mum is still shouting at his sisters.

'Mum,' he says, hoping she'll listen to him, just this once. 'The telly was saying we should stay indoors today. Don't you think we should maybe listen to what they is saying?'

She stops and looks up at him and, for a second, he thinks he might have actually got her attention. She holds his gaze as he watches her eyes for any hint of understanding. She stares back at him, as if she is actually thinking about this as a genuine problem. But she says nothing and eventually pushes out her backside, releasing a loud, prolonged fart – one of those very satisfying sorts that gets both ass cheeks flapping together. 'That's what I think of that bollocks virus shit they're talking about.'

The girls start laughing, and then, once they get wind of the deathly rat smell, start running. Ashley looks at his dad but he don't have nothing to say other than the usual: 'meatballs.'

Mum smacks dad hard around the face but he doesn't move, so she smacks him again. 'You'll get your fucking meatballs when we've got this little pisser's mattress sorted and not a minute before.'

His dad still doesn't move, not even to tense his arms. Ashley still remembers the days when his dad would come home and hear about whatever shit him or his sisters had caused their

overworked mother that day. He would calmly listen to her for barely a minute, nodding all the time, before he would throw whatever child was most guilty over his knee. Ashley was often the easy target, being the only boy, so whenever he took his punishment he would watch his old man's muscles flex and his tattoos grow, like they were swelling with such purpose, wanting his kids to be better than he had ever been. Ashley wanted muscles like that, but he always wanted to do something better with them.

'Can't we go straight to the good stuff?' Cortnee says.

'Yeah, the stuff that's ripe for the picking,' Jade says, licking her lips. 'Look, there's like hardly any staff on duty.'

Mum makes a swing for one of them, either of them, but misses both. 'Yeah and there's no fucking customers about neither, so we bloody wait until this place fills up. You know I can't afford to get caught again.' She pushes forward, forcing the family to follow. They didn't dare to be separated in public. 'I wanna look around, anyway. If we get that pay out from your dad's accident then we're gonna do the whole house up.'

'And what about them council vouchers?' Jade says.

'You can piss right off if you think we is using them in 'ere. If we ever get them I'm getting the bathroom done but it ain't gonna be this posh.'

'Why are we looking around in this bit then?' Ashley asks, rubbing his eyes, trying to wake himself up, knowing the answer but not wanting to hear it come from his mother. 'This stuff won't be here next year, anyway.'

'Bollocks,' Mum says. 'It's all the same shit, so we're looking around the whole place and I don't wanna hear any more moans. I've been standing up all week in the chippie, so today I'm gonna chill and you bastard kids are gonna behave! Are you getting me?'

And so each of them nod in turn, as the family start their journey, snaking their way around living rooms and then towards bedrooms. The girls sit on every sofa and lie on every bed, making sure that they rip anything they really like, always hopeful they'll see it in the reduced section next week. As they do so, their mum reminds them that if they get caught they should say the security guard touched them. As Ashley blocks out this usual chatter he looks around, seeing that he can count the number of staff in here on one hand, all of them wearing worried expressions, and this time he doesn't think it's his family visit that's got them all flustered.

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The police car speeds through the streets quicker than any of the four officers have ever known before. Despite having a combined sixty years of experience, none of them can ever recall a time when they made it around the A406 so quickly, and especially without a few near misses along the way. But today is different, as if half-term has been combined with a day where England are playing in the World Cup – that’s the only combination of things that could ever clear the usual, grinding congestion from this inner London road.

Luke starts to wonder whether maybe all Saturdays in the summer months are like this. He sits quietly, keeping a tight hold of the handrail, as the car swerves around the corners, far quicker than he’s used to. Although the officers in the car have vast combined experience, his own makes up less than ten percent of this total; he’s still in his first year as an armed police officer, but he already knows he’s enjoying it far more than his previous beat around Wembley and Ealing High streets.

This job still fills him with excitement. No, that’s not the right word. It’s more like adrenaline mixed with slight fear; a sense that the unknown is waiting for him each time they speed off. Sure, you still have to do the regular stuff – the traffic violations and the petty theft – but then you get to carry two weapons; solid steel instruments, at your side, ready to obey your every command. He’s still to do it, still waiting to shoot someone. Maybe he’ll never get the chance, and although he won’t admit it to his sergeant or any of his colleagues, he feels that to never unleash this power on another person would, in some way, be a real shame.

Of course he means to let it loose on a bad person; someone entirely deserving of the cold touch of steel with skin, all from his steady aim. He wonders if today might just be the day; there’s certainly a different buzz on this shift, a feeling that something is looming, something that none of them can quite get a handle on.

Every officer in his station has been called into work, so he knows that something big is happening. The briefing seemed deliberately vague, telling them their task today would most likely be urban pacification. When they left the station, he noticed that half of the officers were being kitted out in riot gear, and everyone knows that when that happens, the press will be all over it in hours.

‘Okay, remember to keep a low profile,’ his Sergeant shouts from the front passenger seat.

Before Dave has even finished talking, Luke gives a quick nod. He listens intently, filtering out all the radio chatter and the blasts from the siren, so he can hear every word from his boss, an experienced police officer who has been in the force for years. He’s one of the best, Luke assures himself. Nothing seems to panic him and you know that if he feels the need to start shooting then you just aim at whoever he’s pointing at and let rip.

‘We set ourselves up in strategic points and let the beat officers take all the attention. We expect the streets to be clear this morning but eventually the curiosity will get the better of most people, especially when they see all this activity on the news, so just be ready.’

‘And what exactly are we getting ready for?’ Mike asks, from beside Luke.

Dave looks ahead, no doubt checking that they are on a straight road, and when he sees that the next few seconds are clear he turns himself around fully, letting him see the whites of their eyes. ‘I don’t know what we’re getting ready for. You know what I know, and that’s as good as today gets.’

‘So this could be a training exercise, for all we know?’ Mike asks, looking at Luke and then back to Dave. Mike asks more questions and gives more opinions than most of the guys Luke has worked with so far, which he thinks might be because of his age, as well as that thing you often hear that he has ‘been there, done that and never got the promotion.’

Dave looks back at Mike, but he doesn’t really nod or shake his head; he just stares at him. ‘That’s what you want it to be, and that’s what I want it to be, but the reality might just be something different, so you just remember that.’

Mike nods and then shrugs his shoulders. ‘Sure, boss.’

The car suddenly takes a left turn, leaving the longest convoy of police cars Luke has ever seen. He watches as a couple of cars turn with them whilst the rest speed ahead, all of them looking like they’re bumper to bumper. Luke can’t even see the first car anymore but it has been replaced by identical blue and white cars, which are followed by many ambulances, moving a little slower, but just as determined to get to somewhere.

‘This is no training exercise,’ Mike says, speaking only to Luke, his voice barely above a whisper. ‘There’s no way we’ve got the money for this to be some sort of training day. We didn’t even get this paranoid during the Olympics or the jubilee, or the NATO Summit.’

Luke stares at Mike but he doesn’t know what to say, what else he can add.

Mike simply grins back. ‘Not even the royal wedding got this much attention.’

Luke looks forward, thinking only about his training, reminding himself that there is no difference between an exercise and a real life need to fire a weapon. ‘We will do whatever we need to do,’ he says.

Mike laughs. ‘I can tell you’re still a newbie. You actually think we’re doing something noble that also happens to pay the bills.’

The car comes to a halt and Dave leans around again. ‘Right, you two get out here and set up a control point. Give it one sweep of the area and then base yourselves with whatever uniformed arrive shortly. Keep channel one open at all times and report anything suspicious.’

Luke gets out of the car as Dave puts down his window. 'We'll be two blocks away and if it gets nasty out there just remember that you control the situation.'

Luke nods, taking hold of the steel object draped around his shoulders. As the car speeds off he checks the safety catch for the hundredth time today. He also checks he still has his side arm, as if it could actually just disappear. After a few seconds he remembers to check for Mike, and finds him standing behind him, laughing and shaking his head.

'It's nice of you to remember me,' Mike says, before marching forward towards the biggest building in the immediate area.

Luke quickly follows him, wishing that he was with Dave, wishing he was with anyone but Mike. He breaks into a short run, just so he can get close enough to visually inspect Mike's weapons, and he sees that his rifle already has the safety off.

Mike catches Luke looking at him but he doesn't rectify his blatant breach of procedure. 'Today is no training exercise, and today is not going to end well.'

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'I like this one,' Mum says, sitting on a sofa and looking at each of the kids as they stand around, tapping on their phones and playing with their hair. 'What do you lot think?'

No one answers. Not Dad, not the girls and especially not Ashley. He just wants to get his mattress and get back home, hopefully grabbing some tinned food and bottled water on the way. That's what the news people have been telling everyone to do. Whatever is happening, it is the only thing on his phone. All the different apps have been telling him the same thing: get indoors and stay there.

Mum huffs at the lack of response and it is Dad who gets the slap. 'Well your ass seems to be liking it, don't it?' she says to him.

The kids all laugh, pointing at their dad's fat ass spread out across the crack somewhere between the two large cushions. He looks up, catching the eyes of each of them in turn, but he has nothing to say.

Mum fills the silence with another long fart until her bowels have been emptied of all available air. The pungent scent gets muffled by the immense stretch of fabric underneath, but eventually reaches its victims nonetheless. She gives a satisfied grin, like she's marking her territory. 'Beans for breakfast do the trick nicely.'

All the family laugh again, even Dad this time. This faint hum slips out of the side of his mouth for just a moment, just long enough for him to be recognisable from that previous life.

‘Let’s see them greedy bastards sell this now,’ Mum says, holding out her hand.

Ashley does his duty and pulls her up, hoisting her out of yet another piece of furniture that they won’t be buying until Dad gets himself back into a job, which looks like it will be sometime close to never.

‘Don’t like it anyway,’ she says. ‘That colour looks like dog-shit-brown to me.’ She crinkles her nose as she starts down the long path towards bedrooms, with dining and casual chairs still to get through. The family follow, the two daughters heaving their dad out of his comfy chair. He would have told them he had enjoyed that, if he could just have found the right words.

‘Oi! Why’s it so quiet in ‘ere?’ Mum shouts at two staff hanging around the display rugs.

The first one shrugs her shoulders, and then carries on with her tidying and shuffling about. Mum stares at the other one, determined that she will not be looked down on by these little slappers, all dressed up as wannabe till tarts.

‘It’s the virus, innit,’ the other one says, still playing with the stock, not wanting to look up at the woman.

‘See! I told you about that!’ Ashley shouts out.

He gets a quick smack, a bashing on the back of his head that warns him not to push his luck. ‘That’s total bollocks. There’s always someone flapping about MRSA or bird-shit flu in this shithole of a country, plus all that other crap going round from all them foreigners.’

‘This one’s for real though, they reckon,’ the staff member says. ‘Our supervisor is probably gonna close the store soon, especially since there are only a few customers in here.’

‘Oh, Mum, we ain’t been to the marketplace yet!’ Jade shouts.

‘And my mattress,’ Ashley says, tugging at her arm.

‘Meatballs,’ Dad says.

Mum pushes Ashley off and holds out her hands, silencing all. ‘What a load of shit. I can’t believe any of you is gonna believe this. You remember when we came back from Majorca? When them cabin crew reckoned we got some bug from the hotel and they wouldn’t let us get on the plane?’

The kids nod, all of them suddenly reliving that particular nightmare.

Mum looks at each of them and then turns to the staff member. ‘Well, that ain’t happening to me again, so is that restaurant still open or what?’

She nods. ‘It is for now.’

Ashley hears this; he knows how long a trip to the restaurant will take, and he taps his mum’s arm again. ‘Please, Mum, what about my mattress?’ he says, desperate to get it. After all, if they are going to be holed up indoors for weeks then he doesn’t want to be sleeping on a piss-soaked bed

any longer, especially as he thought this sort of thing was now consigned to that past life he doesn't ever want to remember.

She pushes him away. 'It's not all about you, Ashley!'

He looks down at the floor, knowing it's never about him, but knowing better than to argue with her in public.

Mum makes a loud tut, telling everyone how pissed she is. 'He ain't ever gonna shut up. It's like having a three year old all over again. So, let's all go and get young Ashley's piss protector and mattress and then we can finally get some nosh.'

Most of the family cheer, and then Ashley's sisters remember that they need to laugh at him for still wetting the bed. They point their fingers at him, all the time calling him 'pissy pants' and never once wondering if this constant taunting was in any way contributing to him wetting himself in the middle of the night.

Ashley hasn't always wet the bed; he is a teenager, after all. He did it a few times when he was younger – like, much younger. Then it started again, sometime between him starting school and his balls dropping, and once he had got a few slaps from his mum, he realised that his life would be much easier if he simply didn't wee himself in the middle of the night. He approached this as intelligently as he could, by reading online about the causes of bedwetting. The best and simplest – and, of course, cheapest – piece of advice was not to drink anything from eight in the evening onwards – three full hours before he went to sleep. He used to go to bed dying of thirst, his still-digesting dinner demanding some liquid to help the process, and he used to wake up with a thick layer of fur across his tongue and his lips cracking from his self-imposed torment. But, however dry his mouth was, so was the rest of the bed, and so to Ashley it was worth all that suffering.

Two weeks ago, it all started again. He woke up with a big wet patch all around him and his boxers drenched. He had stopped his routine of not drinking before bed some years ago, since his mind had clearly become able to control his bodily fluids while he wasn't awake, so he was pretty annoyed with himself that this particular problem had come back. He hadn't dared ask his mates, and of course his sisters would have had no interest in helping, other than to tell his so-called mates, just to make sure everyone knew how weird Ashley was. He did ask his Dad, hoping a man-to-man chat would sort things out, but of course, he got nothing back of any substance, just some rambling and a few shrugs of his shoulders.

When he had found the courage to approach his old man, he hadn't realised that his mum had been listening from the kitchen. Hearing that he wasn't getting anything helpful from his dad, she chose to fill that void with her own opinions, frying pan in hand, which Ashley could definitely vouch for how much that hurts when it catches the side of your head.

In that painful moment, as Ashley's Mum continued to chastise her son for something that was arguably out of his conscious control, she obviously thought that bellowing at him with all manner of her own issues, whilst brandishing her favourite sausage pan just above his head, would somehow solve the problem. And while she screamed that 'I really don't fucking need this,' and 'I ain't washing your pissy sheets no more,' Ashley thought that if she had just asked him why he was wetting the bed again then he would have happily told her.

To Ashley, there was an obvious reason why this problem had returned, and that reason was the stress they were under. He often spent the final few moments of any evening looking at this family unit that had fallen into chaos. It had never been particularly strong at the best of times – certainly had never been a team – but when his dad was normal, things at least happened.

Every night before heading to bed, he would take a final look at his old man, and he would always find him staring blankly at the flickering TV screen. He would then look over at his mum, who was always asleep on the sofa, her oversized, snotty nose scooping up all the air and her fat, greedy gob pushing it back out again. He knew she was slowly poisoning the place he once called home but any love for her had left a long time ago, and once his dad had sort of left then there was no actual reason for him to stay.

The family make it to the bed section before Ashley can sort any more of these thoughts out in his head, which he is strangely okay with. He knows that if you can't fix something then you put up or get out. He just needs more time and, quite obviously, a lot more money. The scary shit that was going on right now wasn't helping but there was little he could do about that either.

'We'll head to the knick-knacks downstairs,' Cortnee says, 'if Dad gives us the car keys.' She winks at her sister, as if Mum might just buy this and let them go down there without her. She has done it before, sometimes finding it better if she lets the kids do the nicking on their own. That way if they get caught she can come over and give them a good telling-off, and hopefully convince the Manager to let them go, assuring him that she would give them some proper punishment once they got home. The telling off was never faked: she was always pissed when they got caught while swiping the things she wanted.

'Yeah, we ain't that hungry,' Jade says, standing shoulder-to-shoulder alongside her sister.

She gets a slap back, not being quick enough to move this time. 'No, you bloody well won't. We all stick together today.'

'That's probably a good idea,' Ashley says. 'The virus warning is all over north London now,' he says, looking at his phone.

Mum takes a deep breath, her eyes shut. 'Will you shut up with that virus bollocks?'

He nods back at her, almost knowing this is the only response he will get. His phone credits are nearly gone, so it won't be long before he loses this source of information. It doesn't seem to be doing any good, but he would at least like to know what's coming next.

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Luke watches Mike as he talks to the uniformed officers. He has finally decided to lock his weapon, which, strangely, has calmed the situation. At least that's how it seems to Luke who is standing next to him, not really listening to the conversation, holding his weapon in both hands as it hangs across his chest. He spends his time staring at the patrol officer and then takes in the wider area. He times how long it takes him to complete a 360-degree survey, his overactive mind absorbing the view of the car park and shops in just over ten seconds.

Luke has already forgotten the names of these new guys, who have been drafted in from South London. He wonders how happy they are at being called up this way, and if they are going to be any help if they have to give chase through the surrounding housing estates. Not that he has any idea of what they might be chasing, but he is fairly sure that today is going to involve some running.

Perhaps it might be running away, Luke thinks. Mike certainly doesn't look ready to run anywhere; his feet are locked in formation and his index finger regularly brushes against the trigger, like he's almost teasing it before the main event.

'I've heard it's spreading quickly, like wildfire,' Mike says, his thoughts mainly directed at the other two, because he knows that Luke doesn't want to hear any more of his views on this subject. 'It's important to ensure you know as much as possible in these situations.'

The other officers nod. One of them has his phone out and is checking for live updates to add to the discussion. The radio chatter is pretty basic, and the regular briefings don't appear to be giving any more information beyond what's already on the news.

'What you got?' Mike says, looking at the officer with his phone out.

He looks up. 'Not much, to be honest. Just the same stuff we've heard already. The BBC think it's a virus that's spreading quickly, starting from Heathrow Airport and making its way further into London.'

'So the host has gone dark?' Mike says, like he's a detective now. He's talking like he's part of the solution, part of the team who are fixing the bigger problem. Luke wants to tell him that he's not, that they are only part of a huge ground team, dealing with a very tiny part of whatever is

actually happening. They are small part of the massive numbers who are here to fix what they've been told to fix, and he wishes he was with someone who understood that. 'We should do another patrol,' Luke says.

Mike puts a hand out in front of at him, indicating to Luke that he should calm down. 'Yes, in a minute. Let's make sure we know all the facts first.'

'What, from a few newsfeeds on a mobile phone?'

The other two laugh, their heads nodding, hopefully agreeing with him. 'He's right, you know,' one of them says. 'The BBC say it's a virus but Sky News are saying it's a possible terrorist attack, and that we're not being told so we don't go and shoot the wrong people.'

Luke watches as Mike strokes his weapon, clearly reflecting on this possibility. He looks like he's keeping it just on the right side of calm, like a dog about to start sprinting. Luke spots that the other two have noticed the same thing and he isn't sure if they wish they had what he and Mike are carrying, or if they're just glad they won't be at the front, having to make the most difficult decisions.

Luke looks around, surveying the area, looking for anything different whilst mentally preparing for what will hopefully be an extended patrol. McDonald's seems a little busier, despite the fact that they've already ran out of buns; the local residents clearly topping up their supplies from wherever they can get them. The main store still looks quiet – far too quiet for a Saturday morning. The doors are still open, which he takes as a good sign. There is now also less twitching of curtains and more people on the streets.

He looks across the vast, empty space, towards the car park entrance, and he sees another group of officers, and that they have a constant stream of people coming up to them, asking what he thinks must be all manner of questions. He notices that they don't linger for long, clearly not getting much in the way of answers from his colleagues.

The clouds are hanging low and he hopes more than anything that it doesn't rain. He looks around for Dave and his car, but they are nowhere to be seen; he hasn't seen them for at least half an hour now. He looks around for possible shelter but the trees are far from big enough and he doubts he'll be allowed to patrol the multi-story car park for the rest of his shift, however long it might be.

'There's a briefing coming through,' Mike says, tapping his earpiece.

One of the others puts his radio on speaker and they all gather around. He's still flicking through his phone, probably ready to compare the quality of what they are hearing to what's freely available to everyone. They listen carefully and quietly, as if there is no one else around them who really matters.

‘So we have a possible containment issue in this area?’ Luke says.

‘Oh, great, so we all get infected,’ Mike says, shaking his head. ‘I was due to start my holiday this week and I bloody wish I had. I could be on a beach right now.’

No one says anything; there isn’t much to say. They all start to look around, trying to spot the real issue in the masses of potential problems.

‘Remember to look out for any strange behaviour,’ Luke says, trying to keep it real, trying to keep everyone focused. ‘They expect anyone infected to be aggressive or disorientated.’

‘And don’t let them touch you, for Christ’s sake,’ Mike says.

One of them nods but Luke spots that the other one is looking at his phone, playing around with the settings. He finally looks up at everyone, his face white and his eyes blank. ‘There’s no signal anymore and no 4G either.’

Everyone shakes their heads but Luke tries to keep calm. How many times has that happened before? If it happened in the middle of your day off, when you’re shopping or chilling out, you wouldn’t think of it as anything more than a mild annoyance. But he also knows that this could be something very serious; the networks do get shut down in the event of a threat, and this could signal big trouble ahead. He feels worried and annoyed at the same time – being expected to show bravery yet being treated just like Joe Public.

‘Go to McDonalds,’ Mike commands the other two. ‘See if you can get on the Wi-Fi.’

Luke doesn’t say anything to them, as he turns back to Mike. ‘Dave confirms it’s a network blackout and we need to be ready.’

Mike simply nods, and the moment the other two are out of earshot he checks the view ahead through his holographic sight, nodding to himself again as he looks around.

Luke looks up at the sky again, seeing the cloud formations that seem to be joining together and tightening up, doing their best to block out any remaining blue sky. He almost feels the tension in the air and he can’t help but agree that this isn’t a training exercise.

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‘Meatballs,’ Dad says, as a plate of meatballs is put in front of him. This is followed by a plate of chips, and a glass of Coke. He looks up at her, his face slightly creased.

She knows what he’s thinking and soon pulls a cake out of her coat pocket, wrapped in a napkin, the chocolate smeared across it. She puts it down and licks the runaway chocolate off her hand.

He looks down at it and then looks up at her.

She gives him a smack, staining his cheek with sticky proof of her uncontrollable frustration. ‘They ain’t got no other cake that I can fit in me pocket, so that’s what you’re getting. And we’re sharing pop so you’re getting up to refill the bloody thing.’

The kids set down their food and start to pull out their own extras from their pockets. Ashley notices one of the staff looking at him but they don’t seem in the slightest bit bothered. He knows that this has to be because of what is happening today. They’ve probably been recorded on the camera but he’s not sure anything will ever come of it. ‘Why can’t I have my mattress?’ he asks, in between mouthfuls of chips.

‘Oh, fucking hell, Ashley,’ his mum says, spitting juice all over him and the table. ‘I told you already they ain’t got the cheap one in stock and I ain’t forking out a hundred quid.’

‘So I have to sleep in my own piss?’

His sisters start laughing and shouting ‘Pissy pants, pissy pants, who’s got pissy pants?’ Cortnee gets onto a chair to do a dance; they don’t look like they’re going to stop any time soon as she wiggles about and her sister calls out some beats to help the rhythm. Ashley starts to feel the anger swell within him; anger at being part of such a shocking family, and fear that he has another whole year to go before he can escape.

At this moment, as Ashley is considering how he will ever cope with this until he reaches sixteen, his sister, who is still dancing above him, a drink in her hand, has a bright idea: she decides to pour it all over his trousers. Her aim is impeccable, and most of the liquid lands square on his crotch, soaking its way into his light blue jeans before he can think of moving.

By the time he pushes his chair back and gets out of the way, the damage has been done. He looks at those around him, his family – the people who are supposed to look out for him. His sisters are still screaming ‘pissy pants’, one from above him and one from across the table. His mum soon joins in, a finger pointed at his crotch, as she laughs at him. He feels the absence of any love, so much so that it causes him to choke. He looks at his dad, the one person who would always have stood up for him in the past; the man who might give him a slap when he deserved it, but who would just have easily rubbed his hair and told him that the re-gearing of his bike chain or the shelf he put up in the kitchen was spot-on. But now there is nothing, as the thing that only looks like his old man shovels food into his gob, completely oblivious to what is going on.

That really is the last straw for Ashley; his dad has gone and he has reached his limit. He looks at his mum, who is still laughing her head off, and then he looks across the table at his sister, who is grabbing Mum’s arm, desperate to keep on the right side of her. Time seems to move slower now, as he looks up at his other sister, still laughing from up high, always looking down at him.

He leans down and grabs two of the chair legs, properly bending over, making sure he gets all the weight into his legs, and with one final glance up at his sister he knows she can see what's coming. She tries to move as she lifts a leg to leap onto the table, but she's too slow. Ashley pulls the chair with both hands. He puts every ounce of energy, of passion, and hatred into pulling that chair up and away, and does so with such force that it swings behind him and then flies across the restaurant.

He looks to see where it lands, impressed with how far it went, and when he turns back he sees his sister landing on the table, squashing the food and sending a scattering of chips and juice across the floor. She's screaming now and Ashley feels eternally disappointed that her head didn't hit something, so that his mind could be given a bit of a rest.

His mum and sister are yelling too, as they furiously scrub the meatball juice off their clothes before it dries. No one helps Cortnee as she scrambles around on the table, desperately trying to pick herself up as her hands slip on the plastic covering, now coated with all manner of sauces and crushed food.

Ashley starts to laugh, first at his sister and then at his dad, as he sees him picking around his daughter's body at the surviving food.

'Don't just fucking sit there!' Mum shouts at him as she looks on in horror.

But that's exactly what Dad does, keeping low and calmly rescuing what food he can. He's not just tucking into the food on his own plate anymore, but whatever he can salvage. He helpfully picks a meatball out of Cortnee's mangled hair, everything going into his mouth before it gets squashed by her frantic movements.

Mum looks over at Ashley, her face creased with anger. 'You're going to get the belt across your fucking back when we get home. Your sisters are gonna hold you down and I'm going to lash you raw, you filthy, piss-stinking little faggot.'

Ashley says nothing, as the family fall silent, everyone allowing his mum's sharp tongue to do its worst.

She takes a chance to look around, to savour her victory, and then he looks at Ashley. 'Now, help get your sister down off that fucking table.'

Ashley nods, looking down at his sister. She is lying still now, clearly expecting him to help her. She thinks about the punishment she's going to dish out, far in excess of whatever their mum does. The lashing will probably start just before *The X Factor*, and he'll be left in his room to nurse his wounds, with no supper and certainly no TV. And once the show is over then her and Jade will get on with the night of torment. She thinks she will start with shaving his eyebrows and then try some more extreme ideas. She thinks about leaving him tied down and using him as a toilet all

night; his own piss combined with whatever she and her sister can expunge from their bowels onto his stinking face.

She looks up at Ashley and he looks back; he knows what's in store for him. You don't have to be a genius to work out that if he goes back to the house tonight he will face horrors far worse than whatever is lurking outside the store. It is at that moment that Ashley truly knows he is on his own, and when you acknowledge that you've only got yourself left in the world, your perception of the rules seems to change.

'I'll help you down, dear sister,' he says, taking hold of both her legs.

Cortnee hears the tone in his voice and realises that she is too exposed. Ashley has always been bigger than his age, and these last couple of years have seen his muscles grow and his puppy fat disappear. Even through all those baggy jumpers he always wears she could see the change. What she will never know is that Ashley has been doing five hundred push-ups every day, ever since the day he first realised it was taking both of his sisters to pin him down. And now with just one to deal with, it was no difficulty at all to swing her off that table and onto the floor. He couldn't have timed it better: her head hit the leg of the table behind, making her scream out in pain. It's not quite hard enough to knock her unconscious but it is enough to set blood streaming down her face, which pleases Ashley greatly.

It is also enough to send his other sister flying around the table towards him. Jade charges at him like she's about to deal death to her brother, but he stands there calmly, and only when she gets within striking distance does he raise his arm and smack her straight in the face. Blood gushes out of her nose as she falls backwards. She stumbles towards her dad but he simply moves away; it's been years since he's cradled this bitch in his arms.

Upon seeing blood flowing out of her sister's nose, Cortnee quite rightly decides that this isn't going to end well for Ashley. Since he has crossed a line that the family will never tolerate, he is now what she would describe as openly fair game. And by this she means it is now entirely acceptable to bury a fork into his leg, which she attempts to do by picking up the one lying next to her. She doesn't hesitate, taking a firm hold of his leg in one hand, and lifting the other, the fork clutched tight.

It's almost as if everything the members of this family have ever done to each other has led to this moment; her mind providing her the graphic instructions as to how to best hurt her younger brother. On one level she thinks this might be a bad idea, especially as if he ends up in A&E, as then she won't get the evening of punishment that is clearly due. But, on balance, she is fairly confident she can convince her mum that he can be patched up at home, and his back will still be ripe for a good belting.

Of course, that isn't what Ashley has in mind: his years of being tormented by his two sister's means that he knows if one of them is hurt, the other is always waiting to strike. They are, by their very nature, a two-headed monster. They have different bodies, but barely manage one brain between them. Ashley laughs at his sister as she lifts the fork up. He leaves her holding his left leg as the other one kicks her between the eyes. The force of the heel of his boot sends her head colliding with the floor, the shock taking a moment before the screams of enduring pain follow, like no words could ever replace what has just happened.

As both of his sisters lie down, nursing their broken noses, he feels strangely satisfied. He looks at his mum and he knows he'll never be going home because he'll never be allowed to live if he does. He keeps an eye on her, wondering what she is truly capable of, as she looks around for the best tool available to hurt her unwanted and ever-neglected son. He needs only to pat his pocket, to feel his dad's car keys still in there, which he had swiped half an hour ago while his mum was yelling at him because the cheapest and thinnest mattress was out of stock.

He gets ready to run, knowing that all he needs to do is beat them to the car. He just about knows how to drive and is fairly sure the roads will be clear. As long as he can win the race back to the house then everything he needs is in the one bag in his wardrobe – always packed, always ready. If he thinks he has time he will give the house a trash too, mainly his sister's bedrooms. He'll at least have time to show them what a pissy mattress really smells like. And so he steps away from his family, from his mum, and from his bitch sisters. He looks at his dad, who has finally stopped eating to look up at what is happening.

Dad has nothing to say as he watches the boy step away, moving backwards through the maze of tables and chairs. He briefly wonders why the other two kids are on the floor, but he knows it will be because of some drama that will eventually turn out to be his fault.

'Goodbye, Dad,' Ashley says, as he turns and runs.

His dad smiles at him, and from the depths of somewhere in his vacant mind he wishes the boy luck. He thinks that in that previous life he should probably have been nicer to the lad, but those finer points all left him the day he fell down the hole on that building site. A sharp smack across his head brings him back to the moment, as he looks up to see his missus shouting at him. He can't really hear what she's saying but he has a feeling that in his old life he put up with too many of these slaps, and the odd punch, and he wishes he had given a few back when he was well enough to do it.

She smacks him across the face, as hard as she can, her rage towards the boy now funnelled entirely at his dad. 'Where are your bloody car keys, has he got 'em?' she yells, knowing that little shit is more clever than he looks.

Dad just looks back at her, as she keeps shouting at him. 'Meatballs,' is all he says, knowing how much this winds her up. Somewhere deep inside himself he's laughing.

Her face scrunches up, the rage swelling through her. She believes it's a feeling of anger at him and what he has become. But if she was ever brave enough to look into her own mind, she would know it is anger at what she has allowed herself to become; deep down knowing she could have been a good parent if she had just kept that demon at bay.

But that monster is loose now and it's growing within her. She smacks him again, sure that her hand is hurting far more than his face ever will. She looks at the table, still hunting for what she can use. The only things she can see are those few remaining meatballs, and so she scoops them up and then smears them all over her face. They sting a little but since they're nearly cold she thinks it's probably her pride rather than her skin that is hurting. 'There... are you fucking happy now?' She grabs his face with one hand, digging her nails into his skin as she continues to rub the meat and juice all over her face. 'Will this make you give me any more attention now?'

He looks up at her, seeing the thing he used to call his wife. He never wanted to marry her; he just wanted a few shags. Back then he liked her best mate way more, but she never put out and never showed any interest. A few shags can become quite expensive when you're on the dole, and the fact is that condoms become a luxury you can't afford. He stares at the beast in front of him and remembers that night when they had finished off the vodka and she had promised she would step off just as she finished him. But she never did, and as he lay there knowing the climax was coming, begging her to jump off now, she just ground him down a little bit more, keeping all her weight on him. It was quite a lot of weight, as he recalls, and she's been doing that ever since.

'Well, do you want to fuck me now, do you?' she shouts at him, that same face from 20 years ago now coming back to haunt him.

He looks at her one more time and then looks down at the table. 'Full up,' he says.

She screams and then hits him several more times, lashing at his head and shoulders, all her anger stemming from their poor choices and her eternal desperation to be loved.

The girls come together to watch, never having quite seen their mum lose it as much as she is now. She eventually wears out and looks over at them, her mind ticking away. After a moment she scrunches her face up again. 'Ashley,' she grunts. 'Where is that little fucker?'

No one answers as she continues her demanding glares, and then she starts to run, tearing up a path through the tables towards the escalator, throwing aside anything that gets in her way and screaming out her son's name like she will hunt him to hell and back.

The sisters and Dad watch her disappear out of the restaurant, and so do the poor staff who have had to witness all of this. ‘She’s crazed, something has taken over her,’ one of them says into the phone. ‘The whole family just lost it.’

On any other day the operator would have just ignored this description as a little over-the-top, caused entirely by the adrenaline of the moment. The first time she took a call about a shoplifter becoming violent she felt some degree of shock, but after ten years on the job it was just another routine call. But on this day she didn’t feel like that; everything is different now and no experience from the past can change that. She follows the strict instructions she has been given to send out a quarantine order on the immediate building, to inform the surrounding officers, and raise the alert level for the entire area.

After all, this isn’t the first time she did this today, and it is starting to become something of a new routine.

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Mike and Luke nod at each other as they hear the quarantine order come through.

Luke’s heart is pumping wildly now, as the realisation hits him that this has just become real for them. He thinks about how many officers must be standing ready, as he is, just looking and waiting until that call comes through. And now that whatever is happening is hitting his world, he knows that fate has turned up to see just what he does.

‘Mike, Luke, stand ready, please,’ Dave says through their earpieces. ‘We’re on route to you, sixty seconds out.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Mike says, looking over at Luke, staring at him with burning intensity, as if he is now the target. He has a panicked look, as though he’s all alone in this. ‘Get your fucking safeties off and stand ready!’

Luke jolts backwards then obeys, a battle raging in his mind between remembering his training and following Mike’s lead. He thinks about keeping it real, staying in the moment and always thinking about what is happening around you. Everything is moving too fast to take it all in, and the only thing he can truly rely on is his partner. Mike moves forward and so does Luke. He looks briefly behind him to see the two officers from earlier.

‘Armed police!’ Mike shouts, pulling Luke’s attention back to what’s in front of him.

He tries to take everything in, but what he can see battles against the flurry of information in his earpiece, as he tries to figure out what is most important right now.

‘Subjects are showing signs of infection,’ a voice says. ‘All units please be aware that the quarantine must be maintained.’

‘Armed police! Stop where you are!’ Mike shouts again, towards the front of the store.

‘I got your back,’ Luke says to Mike, suddenly glad of his experience, and that he is confident enough to do what he needs to do.

‘We give this kid one more chance,’ is all Mike says in return, never looking away from his eyepiece.

‘Stop now or we will fire!’ Luke shouts, announcing himself.

‘Officers behind you,’ someone calls out. Luke quickly turns to look.

The interval between him calling out that he is armed and turning around seems to last forever, and when he turns back he sees some kid kneeling down a few yards ahead of them, begging not to be shot. He looks scared but harmless, rational and in control; showing none of the symptoms of the virus that they had been told about.

But then someone else runs out of the building, her eyes wild and her skin covered in what looks like rashes and boils. Her arms are swinging everywhere as she makes her way straight towards the boy, her frenzied screams echoing across the big, open space. Luke is clear that this lad has now become a potential victim and obviously needs protection.

Mike is shouting the standard warnings, as Luke trails his crosshair on her. He hears the sirens in the distance, he hears the repeated warnings over the radio to maintain quarantine and he knows that Dave is coming. But he also knows that his boss will be too late. By all means protect innocent civilians, Dave had said, but don’t you dare break that thin wall of invisible protection for anything or anyone.

She doesn’t listen to any of the warnings like a rational human being would. In both Luke and Mike’s minds she is clearly possessed, which makes her fair game in this new, chaotic world. Shooting is a last resort, any officer will tell you that, but set against the backdrop of only what they know, the stakes soon rise and those quick decisions matter more than ever.

It’s the boy who helps make up their mind, as he turns around to see just how close she is getting. He’s in between her and the police, making a shot to the leg all but impossible. But when he shouts ‘she’s crazy!’ and ‘she’s got it in her blood!’ there really isn’t much else that can be said.

The deafening sounds of bullets travelling from the barrels of two guns, and the screams of one crazy woman are quickly met with silence in just seconds. Her frantic cries are replaced by instructions from the officers to stay down. The boy turns around, ever so slowly, not wanting to

provoke the same reaction from them. He looks over to the thing lying on the floor, the pool of blood trickling out of its head, and he knows that he wasn't lying when he said he has always known she was crazy, way before today ever arrived.

He doesn't really have any other thoughts about her, or what has happened, even when he sees the blank eyes of his dead mother looking at him. But at that moment something makes him look up to a window in the store, where he sees the silhouette of a man looking down, and he realises he does have one more thought.

'Best shopping trip ever,' he whispers, watching the shadow as it slowly disappears.

# YOUR MONEY MEANS NOTHING

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> August – London

He looks at me with that stupid grin and I know what's coming next. I know he will silence me with a kiss on the lips and then tell me how great everything is going to be. And sure enough, just before the lift stops he leans towards me. I let him plant his sappy, wet lips onto mine. I've given up telling him that we're not 16 anymore.

The lift doors open and I see another couple standing in front of us, waiting to get in. They don't look as embarrassed as I would have expected and Stan probably hoped; in fact they look like a potential copy of us, just a lot younger and healthier. Age is the last thing on my mind and since I have nothing to say on the matter I prepare to exchange places.

It's Stan who has to make a scene, has to make something out of nothing. 'Oh, I'm so sorry you had to witness that. It's like our honeymoon all over again!'

He's still babbling away as I get out of the lift and the other couple get in. They still say nothing, but their facial expressions say it all. One of them presses the button repeatedly, and I grab our suitcase, pulling it along the corridor, knowing that eventually Stan will follow.

'Well, they didn't seem very happy to be here,' he says. 'One of the best hotels in London and they still can't even break into a smile.' He takes the suitcase from me and starts making his way down the corridor, but after only a few short paces he turns around. 'I bet they are so used to places like this that it simply bores them. Can you ever imagine us being like that? There was once a time we could only dream.'

'Yes, Stan,' I say, pushing him forward. 'We could only dream.'

I follow behind him as we walk along the corridor. He looks at every door, checking each room number to make sure that it isn't ours, that we don't miss it – that we don't miss a thing. I watch him constantly cross-check each door with our room card, his anxiety so obvious, so out of place for somewhere like this. I suddenly notice that his jeans are too ill-fitting, his shirt is too tight around his increasingly unpleasant girth, and his blazer is obviously oversized. It's the only remotely posh thing he owns these days, and in even a few short hours he has managed to coat the top of it with a thick line of dandruff.

When we reach our room, he holds up the key card like he's presenting it to God. 'We've made it, Gloria! We're finally here! I never thought it would happen but now it has. I am literally opening the door to our new world!'

I nod and sigh. 'Well, Stan, you can get that door open whenever you like.'

He lunges towards me and kisses me again, first just a simple peck on the lips, but then his mouth gapes open. My lips don't move, forcing him to suck my face like he's some desperate fish fighting the side of its tank, desperate to be noticed. I'd always hoped that after thirty-something years of marriage I would still want to suck the face off my man, but the reality is that the appeal disappeared somewhere in the '80s.

I push him away, more forcefully than I had planned.

He backs off and nods, looking at me and then looking to the floor. 'This time it will be different, Gloria. I really promise you that.'

'We're in our sixties. How could it not be different?'

'You know what I mean,' he says, and then finally pushes the door.

As it opens, I breathe a sigh of relief. I half-expected the key card not to work, thinking that my credit card's feeble limit had already been reached, that our inability to survive in a place like this has already become clear to those at reception and that they had cut us off from ever being able to experience what awaits behind that door. For the last 48 hours I have been convinced that all of this is a dream, but as I follow Stan into the room, I finally start to allow myself to think that this is real, that this is something I deserve.

I pull our suitcase into the room and look around in astonishment. It's huge, easily the size of a small suite. Stan is in the middle, his arms held out wide as he shows off what he has found for us. He quickly turns, pointing out all the things I can see for myself, before he stalks his way towards me.

'Didn't I say it would be great?' he says, stroking a finger down my arm. 'Didn't I say that I would give you only the best from now on?'

I silently nod as I look around and count the pieces of furniture. There are so many: different chairs for different purposes, and more tables and dressers than I could ever spread our few possessions around. And then I see it – the imposing four-poster bed. It takes up one whole corner, a declaration of importance.

He's suddenly behind me, taking my breasts into his grubby hands, his gravelly voice ringing in my ears. 'Didn't I promise you the bed would be perfect?'

'Perfect for you,' I say and then push him away. I walk towards the bathroom, not wanting to picture that bed for one more second. 'I'm going for a shower. It's been a long journey.'

'I could join you?' he says, his face full of sickening hopefulness.

I quickly shake my head and only then do I think to force a smile. My desperation to get away from him combines with my need to get through the next few hours, and I come up with a solution

that has him touching me as little as possible, without arousing too much suspicion. 'I need some lady time,' I finally say.

'Well you come back quickly, babe,' he says and winks. He watches me leave, picking up the phone. 'I'll get us some champagne. It must be at least ten years since we've ordered room service.'

'More like twenty,' I mutter, slowly closing the door to the bathroom. I lock it, quietly, yet symbolically putting a physical barrier between us. I turn around and take a look at my opulent surroundings. The room is white marble from floor to ceiling; the many bath sheets are all crisp and white and folded to perfection. I look at the oversized shower, then at the bath in the other corner and I smile, allowing myself this small victory as I look through the vast selection of toiletries I have not been able to afford for such a long time.

I think about starting with a shower and then moving onto a long bath, but however exciting that sounds I know that I will do it alone, with him always and forever in the next room. As sad as that feels, it is far preferable to having to spend it with his hard cock poking at my back as his slippery tongue lashes at my neck. That lost its appeal somewhere in the '70s.

I can hear Stan shouting things to me but I let the shower drown him out. I let it splash water all over my body and I don't make any attempt to answer him. When I've finished scrubbing my body, washing off the effects of the long journey, as well as any trace of him, I smother the sponge with a new product. I take my time to rinse and repeat, lathering my body and washing off every trace of the past. I inspect each new bottle, breathing in the scent of my future, rubbing them all over my body like I'm marking my new territory and I dare anyone to try to take it away from me this time.

When I finally walk back into the bedroom I expect him to jump in front of me, immediately throwing his overbearing desires to make everything good in my face with a complimentary glass of bubbles. Having relaxed I feel ready to do battle again, to show enthusiasm where none exists, but I'm met with only silence and I don't see him at first, until I look over to the bed and see him lying on the pure, white sheets, his body spread-eagled and his cock hard.

'Please!' he says, somehow knowing that I'm back in the room; his cock pointing to the ceiling, the black mask and restraints lying casually next to him.

I sigh but don't say anything, as the life I desperately want to leave behind invades this place I hoped would become neutral ground. My head shakes, feeling a familiar sense of anger, as that odour of leather and sweat, which reminds me of only an unhappy past, starts to smother the pure and floral scents of my new future.

'Oh, please do it now. Oh God, Gloria, please do it now.'

'You've sniffed poppers, haven't you, Stan?'

‘Oh, God, yes, just before you came out. Come take hold of it now. Oh, please, now!’

I turn and move to the window, sitting down in the oversized armchair that’s angled perfectly so that I can see everything happening in the big, exciting world outside. ‘Not right now. I’m not in the mood.’

He’s still pleading, his cock jerking as he teases it himself and I quietly stare out to the unknown. I try to get as far away from him as possible, my gaze casting its way down the street. It’s quieter than I expected for Central London, yet the streets still have a frantic feel to them. People don’t seem to be walking with the confidence I remember when I was here in the early ‘80s, the last time that Stan and I stayed in a swanky London hotel.

I turn to him, forgetting his devious plan for our afternoon. ‘Don’t you think the streets are a little too quiet, and the people around here seem a little frazzled?’

He stands up, muttering to himself, putting his pants back on as his little man tries to poke through the hole in his baggy briefs. ‘And what would you know about what London is like?’

‘I know it should be different to this. It didn’t feel right when we got the cab from the station, it didn’t feel right when we checked in, and it doesn’t feel right now.’

He comes over and kisses me, wrapping his arms around me like I should somehow feel safe just because he’s here. He smiles, making sure our eyes connect. ‘It only feels different because we’re different now. We are never going to have to worry about money ever again.’ He holds out his arms in celebration. ‘We’re rich!’

‘Not until we meet with them tomorrow and the money is in our accounts.’

‘Honey, do you have to keep saying *our* accounts?’

I nod, entirely sure that there will forever be two accounts. ‘The money will be split, and I’m not having this conversation again.’

He nods back, knowing better than to start this again. ‘From tomorrow everything will be fine. *Our* money will be in *our* accounts, and *our* marriage will be back on track.’

‘You had better hope so because we only have this place for one night.’

He steps away, his hands planted on his hips. ‘Do you think I would have wasted our last remaining savings if everything wasn’t guaranteed?’

‘It was the last of *my* savings that we used, and the last few hundred on *my* credit card.’

He smiles and nods. ‘And it’s *my* lottery ticket.’

I keep quiet, knowing that the power I hold comes from the past, and the power he now has comes from the future. I must remember what is still to come, and until I have half of that money in my account I need to keep my place.

He lurches forward and kneels down in front of me, taking my hands in his. 'You're my wife, so what is mine is yours. We've shared the good times and the not-so-good times together, so my win is a reward for both of us. Now we can start a new life.'

I simply nod, knowing the game we are playing. He squandered our savings and threw our life away but he's still my ticket to a happier world, and so I kiss him. I kiss him so hard that his cock rises to the occasion. I grab it and I tease it, just how he likes it. I don't jerk at it like some violent monster, trying to quickly placate it. No, this moment requires me to play the game. Two, maybe three, dirty sprays from that ugly, veiny, red thing, and only one more fake orgasm from me and then my escape plan will start in earnest.

He suddenly pulls away from me. 'The champagne still hasn't arrived.' He walks to the phone, his eyes still on me. 'We need to start celebrating, don't you think?'

I nod and continue looking out of the window as Stan taps away on the phone. I watch the few people scrambling around beneath me. 'I haven't seen a black cab or any other car pull up outside since we got here.'

Stan doesn't hear me as he taps a finger on the oak table. 'No one has picked up yet. Can you believe this? It's supposed to be one of the poshest hotels in London and no one has bloody answered.'

'Give them a minute. Perhaps they're just busy.'

'They might be busy, but it's still their job to answer the phone and make our stay a comfortable one.' He heads to the bathroom, finds his white bathrobe and puts it on. 'I'm going to go down there and give them a piece of my mind.'

'Why are you doing that?' I ask, knowing that Stan getting involved in anything is never a good idea.

'Gloria, we deserve some bubbles, and I'm going to get us some, okay?'

I pick up the phone and redial the number, hoping that someone will answer and solve this minor issue, wanting to stop Stan going down there and giving them grief. Much to my relief, someone answers. 'Could I possibly get some champagne to room 412 please?'

'I'm not room service,' the voice says, slow and ever-so-slightly sarcastic.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I say. 'Could you please put me through to them?'

'Room 412, you say? I'll be up in a few minutes.'

The line goes dead but I take this as a success. I don't bother to mention how abrupt his tone was to Stan: the risk of him demanding to see the manager is just too great.

'Well done to my darling wife,' he says, and drops his gown on the floor, the poke in his pants back for another round.

I turn on the TV and start flicking through the channels. ‘After some bubbles, perhaps,’ I say, giving him a quick glance, and seeing that pathetic, sad face staring back at me.

I watch the news as he watches me. Despite the immediate future looking bright and hopeful, I can’t help but feel that this is the lowest point in my life. I feel depressed, my husband is sat next to me and the grey world outside seems bleaker than I have ever known it. Only Stan and Gloria could turn a stay in the best hotel in London into something so shit; everyone else’s dream just the climax to my lifelong nightmare.

‘Someone was shot outside Ikea yesterday,’ Stan says, focusing on the TV, quickly revealing that I’m not concentrating at this important moment.

‘What?’ I say and turn up the volume.

‘Well, coming out of that place it was bound to happen.’

I tut at yet another view of his that has changed. ‘It’s nice – we have been there lots of times and you never complained before.’

Stan shakes his head, frowning at me like I’m stupid. ‘We haven’t been there in years and we will never set foot inside there again. It will be only the best for us from now on.’

I don’t answer and instead I realise that Stan is right. I’ve been to Ikea a lot lately but not with him. I think about how many times Antonio and I have been there in the last few months and I suddenly see the how easily I could have been caught. It was all I could afford to help him sort out his little place and it desperately needed some colour, some organisation, and most of all a woman’s touch. The few hundred pounds I spent on kitting out mine and Antonio’s little love nest is the only secret I’ve ever kept from Stan, and it still pales into insignificance to the thousands he squandered. Despite the big dent it made in my small, secret savings account, it was worth it all to see Antonio’s bright young face when we finished decorating. That day was the most pleasurable one of my dreary existence, as I watched my Spanish lover do all the work, admiring his ripped, smooth torso, covered in splashes of white paint. When he finished the last wall he smiled at his work, then silently ripped my skirt off and took me in every position we could think of.

I remember every bit of him was primal. He had teased me for hours as he stretched and worked, before silently letting his pants fall around his ankles and my lips settle around his monster cock. The smells and juices that ooze from Stan would normally make me feel sick, and since at least the ‘80-s, I have refused to go down on him unless he has showered thoroughly, but with Antonio those scents were like an intoxicating drug to me. That night he fucked me into heaven, and every night since then, I have wanted only him.

‘Are you okay, darling?’ Stan says, tapping my arm.

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ I say, as I stand up and head to the bathroom.

Stan doesn't say anything as he watches me leave. I know his gaze is fixed on the door as I slowly close it again; his beady little eyes watching the lock turn, no doubt.

I turn on the shower and sit on the toilet as I leave Antonio another voicemail. There's still no answer but this time I tell him everything I've wanted to tell him for so long. I tell him about the lottery win and that I intend to spend all of my side of the winnings on our new life together. I whisper, ever-so-quietly, as I confess my plans for us both to escape the chains that keep us from being together forever; his student debts and my indebted husband – both of which will be a thing of the past in just a couple of days.

I put the phone down and imagine Antonio and I sitting on a first-class flight, the cling of our champagne flutes as the plane takes off. Stan will likely be at home, trying to figure out where I am and when I will be coming back. I won't leave him a note; I won't tell him anything. He will forever wonder where I have gone and he'll never be able to trace me. I will transfer the money to Antonio and we will live together in a Spanish villa by the beach. Antonio will swim every day as I lie on a sunbed. I imagine watching him walking out of the sea, water dripping down his muscled body, both of us smiling at what lies ahead of us.

We'll be happy and Stan will be nothing. While he wastes his share of the winnings I will build a new life with the kind of lover who should have been mine from the start, my real man – half Stan's age and double the man he will ever be.

I suddenly hear a tap on the door. 'Gloria, are you okay?'

I sit forward. I know he is not about to burst into the room and discover my darkest secret, but I clear my phone's call list anyway. 'Yes, I'll be out soon.'

'You won't believe it, they're saying zombies have started appearing and they have shot one in West London. The world has gone crazy, I tell you.'

'Okay,' I say, as if that's a half-good answer to what he has just told me. 'I'll be out to look in a minute.'

He says nothing back and for a moment I think he's gone, until I see a shadow moving, creeping across the small gap at the base of the door. I wait, wondering if he's listening – both of us quietly sizing up the other's movements. 'I'll get ready,' he finally says, and the shadow disappears.

My heart sinks as I let out a gasp. I imagine what will be waiting for me on that bed, his darkest desires overshadowing any genuine concern for the world outside. I load up my pictures of Antonio on my phone, using the secret app he showed me – his clever way of letting him always be with me – all of them taken by me and hidden by Antonio. I flick through them, taking every part of him in, from his cute young face; a few days' stubble on it, to his thick cock, bigger than I even thought was possible. The first few times he stripped off I always wondered why he wanted

to be with me, a woman twice his age. I would look at my body, my desperate attempts to make myself appear younger, and then I would look at his smooth, tanned skin and I never understood what the attraction was. But as we spent more time together, our experiences growing, I realised that what I offered him other women of his age never could. I brought depth and experience to his flat life, and as our love-making sessions got longer and more intense I forgot about the age issue, just as he stopped letting my lifelong wisdom and so many more stories than him be anything but a clear turn on. I think now of all those times together and how it couldn't just be about money, couldn't just be sex, and so could only be love, separated by decades but has now finally come true.

I hear the main door open and feel thankful that the alcohol has finally arrived. I decide that I'll down two glasses and do all I can to keep the memory alive of my darling young man. It should just about be enough to get me through the next half an hour or so.

I move to the door and wait for the attendant to leave. The leather gimp mask and assorted tools are no doubt laid out on the bed, and although I have a good idea of what they will have seen, I can at least choose not to let myself become a face in this desperate tale. The room service attendant will no doubt tell everyone about it but I will just be thought of as the secret mistress; a dirty little title without any real identity.

I suddenly hear a thud and I wonder what has happened now. I lean my ear against the door, wondering if they have already left. 'Stan?' I shout.

'I'm not Stan,' this voice says, sounding like it is coming from just the other side of the bathroom door.

I push myself away, back towards the toilet. I wait, and I say nothing more, realising that this dark voice matches the one I heard on the phone.

The handle slowly moves, making its way down until it's stopped by the lock.

I gasp, finding a boundary he is willing to push. 'Stan? Is that you? Stop playing around.'

The handle returns to its safe place. 'I told you, I'm not Stan.'

I feel scared, and involuntarily let out a whimper. I dial 999 and think about what I can say, ready to whisper, knowing that the precious lock won't help me for long. No one answers my call, no one seems to care. An automated message tells me that all lines are busy and that, wherever possible, I should seek local help and medical assistance. I try Antonio again but it won't connect to him, either.

I look around the bathroom and then at the base of the door, watching for a shadow that isn't there. I take a brave step forward and put my ear back to the wood, listening for Stan or for anything that will give me a clue as to what's outside. I picture the path to the main door in my

head and I think about whether I can make it out of here. Thinking of the bright new world that I am going to create with Antonio spurs me forward; I won't let circumstances or the actions of others hold me back any more. I take a deep breath, tuck my hairspray can under my dressing gown, and then unlock the door.

When I step into the room I see Stan on the bed, tied up with the gimp mask on. I think that maybe it was him all along, and that the person who delivered the champagne is long gone. I consider heading to the bed to take part in whatever new fantasy my husband has created. My overworked mind has obviously been creating nightmares. But then I think about that voice, so out of place for the world created by this hotel and this brand, and so I immediately check my path to the door.

I soon realise that it was not just my imagination, seeing that the coffee table, sofa and chest of drawers are all lined up against my only way out, creating a barricade. I let out another whimper, feeling there is someone behind me.

'Do you like what I've done to your place?'

I turn around to see a man standing in front of me. He's middle-aged, bald, and his blood-red eyes tell me more than I ever want to know. I step away but he moves closer. I look at him, trying to take in as much as possible, hoping that within the hour I will be reciting this in a witness statement to the police, who will have traced my call and come to my aid. He's wearing a suit jacket but I notice that underneath is a pair of jeans and a ripped t-shirt. The jacket is covered in red splashes, which I keep telling myself cannot be blood.

My heart beats faster with every little detail I take in. The name badge that says 'Robert' and the title underneath that states 'Manager'. I step back further and think about how much damage a blast of hairspray could do to his eyes, and whether that would give me enough time to pull all the furniture out of my way. Only in the last few seconds of my simple plan do I give Stan any thought. I make one quick glance his way and silently tell him that he's on his own; it was always going to happen, although I never would have dreamt up this situation in my worst nightmares.

'I think these places are far too orderly,' the man says, throwing a chair across the room. 'I think a little chaos is exactly what we need in times like these.'

I hold my hands out. 'Please,' I say, my eyes filling up and my whole body shaking.

'Just come here,' he says, his own arms spread out like he's offering some sort of silent assurance that he won't hurt me.

I don't believe him and so I take my chance, the only one I may get, and pull out the hairspray. I quickly aim at his eyes and press the top of canister. It's a new can, bought especially for my new life, and I let it all go now. It jets out a mist towards him and I hold down, firing as much of it as

I can. It seems to work: he staggers backwards and starts rubbing his eyes. It's enough for me to grab my chance as I turn and start pulling at things. I claw at whatever I can get my hands on, frantically pulling at the solid, luxury furnishings, whilst screaming as loud as possible that someone needs to help me.

I start to see that I won't be able to clear a path before he recovers and I realise that I have made a mistake: I should have hit him with something. I quickly turn, looking around for the heaviest thing I can pick up. It proves too late as I find him in front of me. I step backwards but he grabs me and smacks my head.

'You clever little bitch,' he says, before smashing our heads together. A daze falls over me as I realise that I'm on the floor and he is dragging me. I feel him lifting my body as I land on a sofa, the one nearest to the bed, and then I feel his breath on me. He is licking his way up my chin and across my face. 'I like the creative ones. The better the fight, the less pain I will cause you in the end, you have my promise on that.'

We are both disturbed by Stan as he suddenly moves and I hear the muffled screams coming through that thick mask. His naked body struggles, so obviously fighting against the restraints.

The man looks over at him. 'Oh, he's finally awake. I assume I was about to interrupt something between you.'

'No,' I say, my desperate head shaking. 'I was going to stay in the bathroom whilst we have guests. Two other men are coming over and they'll be here soon. It's what he likes.'

He turns towards me and punches me in the face, before jumping up and grabbing at his head and rubbing his eyes, like he's trying to make sense of this as much as I am. 'What a lie! You and I both know that no one is coming. Have you not seen the shit-storm out there?'

I shake my head as I try to make sense of where the pain is coming from, whilst tears flow freely down my cheeks. 'Please let us go and I promise I'll give you money.'

His thick hand is suddenly around my throat as he pushes hard against my skin. 'Oh, I bet you can. All you fuckers have now is your money. You live your lives of debauchery and promiscuity while the rest of society goes to hell, and then you think it is your money that will save you.' He pushes harder, forcing the back of my head deeper into the soft fabric of the sofa. 'Why should people like you survive all that's coming?'

'No, we're just like you,' I say, as he releases my grip a little. 'We won the lottery. We're collecting our winnings tomorrow. We can split it with you, I promise.'

He grabs my arm, and a knife appears from nowhere. 'You're nothing like me,' he says and slices my pale flesh like it's raw chicken on a board.

I scream out before the pain even registers in my mind. It's not long before he has me pinned close to the sofa, his hand around my throat again. 'When you get that money I already see what you two will become. You'll join them – the ranks of the so-called elite. You new-money people are even more clueless than the wealthy fuckers out there now, earning all those bonuses just for screwing over the little guy.'

I try to shake my head, hoping that this will allow me to take in some air. I look at his name badge again and I wonder why the manager of a hotel is doing this.

He catches me looking and laughs. 'I'm not Robert. The last time I saw him he was slumped in his chair with blood flowing out of his neck and down to his shiny boots and his immaculate beige carpet. A fitting end for a tool of capitalism, don't you think? He will no longer do his masters' bidding – keeping you people in a state of luxury that you don't deserve, whilst the rest of us fight in the arena of the real world.' He pulls a sock out of his pocket and stuffs it into my mouth as my answer; my pleading and begging seem of no interest to him. He pushes it down deeper until my mouth is filled with the tinge of iron.

'Sorry about the blood, but I didn't think Robert would need these anymore.' He leaps up and looks down at me, his face calm, and the knife still in his hand. 'Now, you stay there and observe. If you play nicely I will end you quickly, just as soon as we finish making love.'

It's too much to imagine, too much pain to endure after a lifetime of regrets, and so I scream out, my hands pulling at his sock until welcome air fills my lungs.

I see the rage swell in his eyes as he quickly leans back down and punches me. He hits me again and again until I stop moving. I sit quietly this time, letting him stuff the sock back in my mouth without resisting, as he uses the other one to bind my hands together. I don't dare fight back and I don't even think about the end that will come. I think only of Antonio and how, at any cost, I must get out of here and find my way back to him.

The man soon leaves me and makes his way to the bed. I watch my husband as he registers the weight of someone else next to him, and then starts wriggling and struggling. He runs the cold blade up Stan's thigh and around his wrinkly testicles, making the sounds coming through the mask even more desperate. I know this is a scream like no other; nothing like any of the noises I have ever heard him make. I have helped my husband become primal many times, his wildest kinks simply a mindless chore for me, but I have never before heard a noise like this.

Our intruder lets out a laugh, and I realise that he has been observing me as I watch my husband. 'I think you both enjoy this.'

I shake my head, desperately trying to tell him that I am not enjoying this, and that I have never enjoyed these moments. I think back to the hundreds of times I have been forced to tie him up,

as tight as I possibly can, making escape near impossible. I remember the countless whines and moans he would make as I worked his cock to a climax, always making sure none of it hit me. Then I would quietly release a restraint, always just one, leaving the rest to him as I retire to a long, lonely bath. I thought that life was nearly over for me, but now it's on show for someone else to see, someone who believes I actually got happiness from it. I think of those decades of silent bitterness, always hoping for escape, always held back by having no money.

'I shouldn't be cruel, your husband clearly has some needs,' he says, putting the knife down next to one of Stan's legs.

My heart starts to slow down, just a little. He seems to relax; his movements with the blade become just that little less sinister. He starts to run his finger down Stan's chest, first teasing his nipples and then ending on his belly button. He plays with Stan's floppy cock and strokes his hairy, grey pubes as if it's just the two of them, together in this new nightmare. I soon realise that he's doing a better job than I have done in the last couple of decades. I huff, almost involuntarily, when I see his cock jerk. Only Stan, my pathetic husband, could eventually get some kicks out of this.

'I think he likes it,' the man says, grinning over at me.

I don't say anything but sure enough, Stan's cock grows and I see him reach his lowest point in all our long years together.

The man seems absorbed in this moment, giving my husband all the attention he has lacked from me since the day he first brought home the harnesses that would chain me as much as they would him. I silently watch, forced to endure all of Stan's moans and noises. He's not really here anymore and I know that it no longer matters who has hold of him. His dark world is a simple one; a few sensations and the power of his imagination are all he needs to get off now.

'Is that it?' the intruder asks, his hand enveloping the entire girth of my man.

I say nothing, thinking only about Antonio, thinking about how even in Stan's youth he was nothing compared to the man I have now, the one I desperately need to find and keep.

'Is it?' he shouts, pulling Stan's cock as he makes his demands of me.

I make my muffled 'yes' through the fabric that still restrains me, as I look at what is presented before me and realise how much more I could have had.

'Would you like it now?' he says, grinning over at me.

I shake my head, not wanting to imagine him forcing me to grind up and down on Stan's body as he gets his kicks. I know how that will go, how quickly it will be over, and how the man will inevitably decide that I need far more than my husband can give me.

'Oh, I think you do,' he says, pulling Stan's cock up as much as it will go, forcing his body to lift up with it, his bum rising just a little up off the bedsheets.

I shake my head again but I don't think he's listening. He's not interested in what I want.

'I'll give it to you,' the man says, his eyes wild. He grabs the blade with his other hand and with one quick slice he cuts Stan's cock clean off. He throws it over to me, the thing I have held so many times now detached from the real world and sitting on my lap.

I hear fresh cries from Stan travel through all his boundaries; the longest and darkest scream that comes from this new, harsh reality. There is nothing he can do; blood spurts out of the gaping wound. The man screams too, and as a haze comes over me I realise that what I can see on his face is pure delight, as he watches the blood that is quickly draining out of my husband cover his clothes.

I see the devil in front of me stand up, his triumphant yells echoing throughout this apparent paradise. I look down at the lump of skin on my trembling lap; the remaining blood now soaking into my white gown.

It's the last act, enough to take me away, and as the tingling in my hands signals the collapse of my mind I think only of Antonio. I think of him on that beach, my protector and lover; he would never have got us into this mess.

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I wake up to muffled moaning and it takes me a moment to realise where I am, then the memories come slowly flooding back into my mind. I think of the man, of Antonio and of the future I had so hoped would come true. And only then, tracing the source of the constant whimpers, do I think of Stan. I look over at the bed and see that he is still tied up; the once clean and white sheets are now covered in the fresh stains of my drained husband.

'Don't worry, he'll be dead soon,' the man says. He's at the other end of the sofa, perched on the corner and looking at me. His face is still covered in the blood of his last victim, my partner of so many years, and the knife is still in his hand.

He moves towards me and I cower, my most basic instincts the only thing still with me. I pull away until I fall onto the floor, and then I simply kick out towards him and drag my body across the carpet. I know that even considering all the despair I have experienced – my husband ruining my life, my constant fears about Antonio leaving me – nothing will compare to the horror of what is approaching now.

He's telling me to be quiet, to calm down, but all I can do is scream through the bloodied and dirty sock that belonged to a man who has already fallen victim to this monster. He suddenly picks me up, pulling me towards him.

'Sssshhhh, I told you it will be quick.'

I shake my head, not sure what I'm denying. He ignores my muffled pleas and sets me back down on the sofa, pulling the sock out of my mouth and then cutting the fabric tying my wrists. I feel a simple and immediate sense of relief as my body sucks in as much air as I can take, like I'm quenching a thirst I have never experienced before.

He moves back to his perch on the edge of the sofa, and then he pushes the knife into the cushion, like he's thrusting a sword into the ground. He looks at it and then looks over at me. 'I promise I won't use this on you. Your husband has taken the blade so that you won't have to. I'm sure you appreciate his sacrifice, don't you?'

I look over at the remains of my dying husband. One simple cut has made an unimaginable mess that can never be fixed, but I don't feel sympathy for him. I'm not sure that I feel anything; my own situation now seems far more real than whatever he is experiencing. I watch, seeing that his faltering heart still beats, although it's clearly a struggle and the end must be near. I curse Stan – only he could survive such an experience, still lingering on when the rest of us would have taken the hint by now.

'He's only alive because he's lying down. But it won't be long now and I don't imagine that he will feel much of anything anymore. Does that give you comfort?'

I shake my head. 'I get no comfort from knowing you are a vile murderer!'

He simply laughs, immune to anything I tell him. 'If you were to survive my visit then you would meet many more of me in the new world, I can promise you that.'

'What are you talking about? And why are you doing this?'

'It's not that simple to explain what is coming but it will change everything. You see, I have seen things and I know that you have to be fit to survive the storms that are approaching. Do you think you're fit enough, Gloria?'

'How do you know my name?'

He smiles. 'You filthy rich have created such a cushioned life that you take for granted so many of the basic things. The computer flashed up your name when you called, and so I decided to pay you a visit. You could say that fate brought me here because if you hadn't called for champagne then the chances are I wouldn't have visited this room for some time. You might have moved on by then, or you might have been asleep by the time I arrived. I might simply have cut both of your throats in the night.'

I whimper again, my whole body shaking.

‘But instead, I was brought here. Our destiny is to meet for longer than the quick slice of my blade, of that I am sure.’

I shake my head, showing both my surprise at his honesty and my denial of the plans he has for me. I think about my options and spot a glimmer of hope: there may still be a chance of talking my way out of this. Perhaps the money could be my ticket out of here. If I can only get out of this room, I can get away and into the arms of my Antonio.

He is still staring at me, still looking me up and down like he is sizing up his prize. ‘You can tell a lot in these situations and I’m a good judge of character. For instance, I can tell that you don’t love him, and yet you are “Mr and Mrs” on the computer.’ He walks over to the bed, to Stan, looking down at him. ‘Explain this to me, please. I’m very interested.’

I shake my head, my worn-out mind not able to grasp the complexity of this moment. Nothing makes sense in this new, cruel reality and I have no answer that would help him understand.

His face turns red in response to my continuing silence, and it’s not long before he pushes down on Stan’s chest. He thumps it hard with both hands, forcing another scream out of my husband and causing blood to jet out of the gaping wound.

I start to scream and cry, the horror of what he has just done coming back to me; the fear that beats through my own veins so entirely real.

‘Tell me!’ he shrieks, getting ready for another thump on Stan’s chest. ‘You have until your husband takes his final breath to help me to understand the very interesting, yet ultimately complex inter-personal relationship you two have, so I suggest you start talking!’

I hold out a hand, begging him to stop, silently asking for more time.

He takes a deep breath, as if calming himself down, and then nods as he sits back down next to Stan. He rests his body on the blood-soaked sheets as if he doesn’t see a difference in what they are and what they shouldn’t be; doesn’t see what he has caused.

‘We won the lottery and we’re here to claim our winnings. We have never stayed in a place like this before. We have fought to make enough money to live on and now just want to start a new life.’

He nods again, matter-of-factly, as he takes it all in. He seems to absorb every word that I say. ‘How much did you win?’

I take a deep breath, trying to figure out what motivates him – other than killing people – then say ‘20 million,’ staring at him and hoping it will be enough. I consider offering him half the share, all of it even, but I’m not sure he is in the same place as me anymore. ‘We just wanted to have

some happiness for ourselves and then help other people, like charities and those in need, those just like us.'

He laughs, then gets up from the bed and comes towards me, like a predator stalking its prey. When he reaches my face, he takes a long sniff, sucking in all the air around me. 'You really want me to believe that, don't you?'

I close my eyes, unable to bear having his angry eyes or hellish face so close to mine. I try to imagine him believing me, try to imagine him simply leaving the room, giving me a few minutes to do what must be done to Stan, then allowing me to walk out of the building and into the arms of the nearest policeman, or anyone in authority.

I feel a hand on my throat and I gasp as his fingers push against my skin and his grip tightens. 'Why should I believe that? Tell me one thing that will make me believe you.'

I open my eyes and stare at him, at the man who has become my judge and probable executioner. 'Because I am a good person, I'm in my sixties and I would never able to spend that much money in my lifetime. If you don't believe me then let me sign it all over to you, to do with it what you please.'

He smiles and then slowly licks his way up my face, starting from my neck and not stopping until he reaches my forehead. 'You are a nice person, Gloria. I can tell you are one of the good people, but I still can't believe you. If you truly cared about worldwide poverty and the state of our planet more than your own well-being then you wouldn't be staying in this hotel. You wouldn't be preaching to me dressed in an expensive bathrobe, drenched in the scents of high society, and you wouldn't both be pursuing such perversions of the mind. If you were pure then you would not be in this place of judgement.'

I can't answer him, cannot deny what is so obviously true. We are both distracted by coughing coming from the bed and I look over to see Stan's body convulsing as his head moves from side to side.

The man is quickly beside him, putting his face next to the mask that hides my husband from me. I pray that he doesn't take it off; I don't want to see him, not like this. He licks the mask and then spits across the room.

'There isn't much time, Gloria. He will be dead soon, and once he passes then it will be your turn. I still don't understand enough about you two, about how you have come to be in this moment.' He turns to look at me. 'There is more to you, I can sense it.'

'You are murdering my husband!' I scream. 'What more can you possibly want to know?'

He walks back towards me. 'No, that is where you are wrong. You are slowly torturing your own husband. You haven't once tried to go over to him, to offer comfort or to even ask me if I

can ease his suffering.’ He sits on my lap, gently placing his body on top of mine. ‘You could have asked to borrow the blade at any time, and with one simple slice you could have ended his life and allowed the judgement to start on yours.’ He stands up and walks over to the blade, picking it out of the sofa. ‘Do you love him, Gloria?’ he asks and stares at me.

I pause for a moment, remembering some of the many times I asked myself that question, all those many years ago. I have known the answer for so long yet done nothing about it. I finally shake my head and then let it bow down in shame.

‘I knew that,’ he says, and then looks down at Stan’s pale body. ‘I think we all knew that.’

‘I could end his suffering now if you would let me,’ I say.

He looks at the knife and then back to me. ‘I think that would be the right thing to do.’

I stand up, cautious, not sure if my captor will ever actually allow me to do such a thing, or even if I am capable of slicing my husband, or this evil man, should the chance present itself. I don’t really know what I’m doing; none of this seems real yet I know it is happening.

He moves closer and fearlessly holds out the knife, despite it being obvious what I am thinking of doing. He calmly nods, looking at me, almost smiling. ‘Let us finish him and then decide what we will do with you.’

I nod back, playing along in a game I know I’m never going to win. I take hold of the knife and see that he is standing at arm’s length from me, making a swing unlikely to succeed. I look at the bed and at the body of my husband. He doesn’t even look like my Stan anymore – he’s just the shell of the man I chose to stick with. I move closer and our intruder takes up position at the other side of him.

I don’t know what to do and so I lean myself onto the mattress, trying to avoid anything stained with the horrors of this last hour. Stan’s body isn’t moving anymore and I’m not sure if it is over already. I think of the pillow, the easiest option for both of us. But then I have these cruel, selfish thoughts. I need to use the knife; I need to have the weapon in my hand and find the opportunity when I can strike. I start to see Stan as a practice run, wondering how I should do it. Perhaps this is my payback for all his years of inadequacy, or perhaps this is the kindest way to end the torture he has been going through. I look at the intruder to see that he is staring at me, his face wild with excitement. It’s so obvious that he gets his kicks from the pain of others.

‘Let’s get his mask off him,’ he says, excited, like my husband is a present waiting to be unwrapped.

‘Perhaps we should leave it on?’ I say, not wanting to see those dying eyes. Right now, he can’t see me and I cannot see him, and that is the way this should end.

This man gets hold of my hair before I see him coming. He pulls hard, forcing my head to land on Stan's chest. I feel the touch of his curly hairs, the smell of blood and sweat, his body now as lukewarm as our forty years of marriage have been. He eventually lets go of my hair and allows me to sit back up. 'You will look into his eyes at the end, just as I will look into yours. It's the fairest thing we can do.'

I slowly nod, now clear that I should throw myself into this moment, as I prepare myself for seeing Stan's fearful and confused face.

The mask comes off quickly, and I realise that the intruder didn't secure the rear fasteners. It was too loose – something Stan would never approve of. He always had to have an entire vacuum around him when held captive, his body and senses sealed in a world he couldn't escape from. I almost feel like apologising to Stan for the half-arsed job this monster did of securing him, but instead I take one final look at his gaping wound and get ready to tell him not to look down; to tell him that it isn't as bad as it must feel.

As the leather mask comes away from his head I see that there is a trail of blood dripping down his chin, and then I see his eyes, which are grey and unmoving. I look down at him but I don't actually feel upset; I don't even feel pity. I feel angry. Angry that he has left before me – this was my escape, my chance to walk away and leave him scared and alone, never to know what had happened. And now, as I look at the two men before me, I realise I have not even found that dignity to be the first to get out of this lifetime trap.

The man who has just officially become my husband's killer starts moving around, his hands digging into Stan's mouth. 'Look, Gloria, he actually bit a part of his tongue off. It must have been the pain or the shock. I wonder if he intended to do that.'

I look across the bed and see what a horrible thing man can turn into. Money, greed or power could never change him from what he has now become. I look down at Stan, at his mutilated body. 'He only ever wanted to bring me to London to collect our winnings and then start a better life. That's all he hoped for and you've taken that away from him.'

He pays me no attention and continues to examine the body, checking for a pulse and then putting his ear to Stan's chest. 'He has already passed away, Gloria. That's such a shame. I was looking forward to seeing you push the blade into his flesh and the remaining blood spill out from within him.'

My body shakes as I look down at the weapon in my hand and I realise how tight a grip I have on it. I let go, just a little, seeing the immediate indent it has made on my skin. I look back at him and then make my grip firm again.

He looks at me and then back to Stan, his mind obviously preoccupied with whatever he is planning to do next. He doesn't seem bothered that I am still holding the knife, but I'm distinctly aware that it is my only chance to get out of here and that he will soon turn all of his attention onto me.

'Are you sure he's dead?' I ask, knowing how obvious the answer is to that question.

'I think so,' he says. I don't know if he is playing along or is genuinely not sure. He checks for a pulse once more. I find his thoroughness scary, thinking about how it might soon be my turn to face this nightmare.

He bends his head down and pins his ear to Stan's chest, then waits for a second to see if anything happens. I know that this is my moment and as he starts to talk about how you can tell if a person is really dead, I visualise the best place on his body to drive this knife into. I settle on his neck, hoping that it will sever an artery or perhaps enter his head and slice through his corrupted brain. I move quickly, turning the knife in my hand until it's at the right angle to do as much damage as possible, and then I lunge towards him.

Everything seems to move slowly. He moves his body back, forcing me to thrust forward. I lunge quickly, stretching over Stan's cold corpse. The knife stays on course until the last moment, puncturing the skin and penetrating his shoulder, but I know this alone is unlikely to kill him. I imagine that he must have been almost hoping that this would happen – my assault upon him ending any truce that might have existed between us and now justifying any attack he will now make upon me.

He screams out in pain as I feel the blade hit a bone, my determination driving it onwards. He falls back onto the floor and I think about leaping over the bed and continuing my assault. But then I remember his strength, and the possibility that this wounded bear still has a good deal of fight left in him, and so I decide to drop the knife and make my way towards the door.

As he shouts and screams, I try to get the coffee table out of the way. I pull at the top of the sofa, but my blood-soaked hands are not able to get a firm grip on it, then I manage to get hold of the bottom and start dragging it away from the door, knowing that more obstacles still stand between me and my freedom.

I look over to see he is getting up from the floor, his hands pulling at Stan's legs in order to help himself up.

'Clever, Gloria, very clever. Your punishment will now be even greater – your pain now prolonged.'

His words are enough to give my body strength I didn't know I had. The sofa moves a little, enough for me to get to the small dresser. I pull at it and with one shove it lands on the floor. I can see the door and my freedom but then I see the lock and the handle that has been broken off.

I turn around to see him standing up, the knife now in his hand, blood running down his shoulder. He looks at the door, to where the handle should be, and he laughs. 'Your judgement and death in this place was always inevitable.'

As he starts to make his way towards me I give in and run to the bathroom. He staggers in the same direction, but just in time, I push the door closed and manage to lock it, just as he gets hold of the handle.

I stagger backwards, sitting down on the toilet seat, all the time watching the handle move up and down. His screaming is drowned out by his banging on the door and I don't know how long it will hold. I look around for a better weapon than the last one, but in this moment of darkness I see nothing but Antonio's sweet face.

I pull out my phone and dial his number, knowing that it will never work. I wait as the network decides what it will do; I seem to remain in that limbo between a ringing tone and a voicemail that seems to last for an eternity. When it starts ringing I feel a rush of hope, even when I think about the impossible odds. All I know that he has gone to his family in the south of Spain. When he got the message a week ago, he left immediately; he didn't know what had happened, but his family had said it was urgent. Now I need him here, far more than they ever will.

'Hello?' the voice says. It is obviously Antonio, but he sounds different somehow. I can barely hear his voice over the background noise of shouting and cars beeping.

'Antonio! Oh, God, Antonio! Where are you? I desperately need you.'

'Gloria?' he says, sounding doubtful. 'This is a difficult time for me, for all of us. I cannot talk now and I must go.'

'Please don't... please don't do that,' I shout, trying to force my desperation down the phone line and into the mind of my only real lover. 'I really need you. Listen, I'm still in London. I have so much to tell you, but someone is attacking me.'

He doesn't say anything in return. The noise in his background is deafening and sounds like many sirens are all around him.

'Did you hear me, Antonio? Someone is attacking me and I need you!'

'People are being attacked everywhere. You see what is happening? You must see it?'

I don't answer, seeing the handle stop moving and the door start shaking as my personal devil bashes against it.

I don't know what else I can do, what else I can say and so I start to cry. 'Antonio, I'm so scared. Please help me.'

'I cannot help you because I must get home to my family before it's too late. You must realise that this is goodbye, Gloria.'

'No, please!' I scream, competing with the sounds of crashing fists against thin wood, as I look up to see his angry face appear through the hole he has just created. 'I love you Antonio, I love you so much.'

But he doesn't say anything back. I hear the line go dead, and the next thing I see is the hand of my attacker reaching through the hole and unlocking the door.

I look around one more time for a weapon, realising I have wasted my precious time on a youth who would never have stayed with me, never have protected me in my darkest hour. I was only ever a limited something for him; some company for one small part of his long life. I realise that now; at this end I finally accept that I have never found what I really wanted. I have never experienced true and mutual love, and for that I can only judge myself.

The man I only know as Robert bursts through the broken door and I don't even try to stop him. He takes hold of me, spitting blood and sweat all over my face, shouting all manner of graphic threats about what will happen now that he has me.

'The money,' I say, my one last attempt. 'I'll give it all to you.'

'Your money means nothing,' he says, as he drives that bloody and well-used dagger into my lonely heart.