

# Disbelief



A Novel By  
**Angie Hulme**

**With thanks to:**

My girlfriend and namesake, Angela. I love you with all my heart, you keep me on track when I lose my way and never quite let me lose the light you created inside me.

My teacher and early mentor, Hilary. For giving me the courage to write.

My friends and surrogate family at [The Starlite Café](#) – for putting up with my ramblings and bothering to read my work when I arrived, shaking in my boots, to show it.

Anyone who takes the time to read this – you deserve a medal!

“Human emotions are created by humans and manipulated according to the whims of those in power or those vying for power.” – The Book of Wis and Witdom.

## **Chapter 1**

Amanda hopped off the bus and watched it drive away. She set off for home, just two minutes away. She didn't look the picture of happiness, head low with fast, wide strides, but on her hidden face was a smile ... and in her hidden mind were thoughts of the night she had just had.

Janice was her name. They had met a few months ago in one of those timeless classic film cliché moments that never actually happened in real life (so she thought); their eyes had met across the Café at dinnertime on Thursday. Amanda had looked away quickly, but Janice got up and strolled over. She sat down and smiled, a shy smile that somehow exuded the right kind of confidence.

Janice was beautiful, in a way that wasn't obvious. She had thick brown hair, pulled back into a loose ponytail, hazel eyes that flashed green and gold, and that incredible smile...but while all this might make her pretty, there was something else behind her eyes that made her face shine.

'Hi.' Janice said and gave a little wave.

"Hi." Amanda replied, trying hard not to think too much for fear she might say or do something stupid.

"I'm Janice Rown."

“Amanda Gosser.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Not uncomfortable, more the silence of two people who fit together trying to work out a way to say it.

“Couldn’t help noticing you across the way there. I’ve seen you around, never sitting still though; this is the first chance I got to come talk to you.” Janice smiled a little.

“I don’t sit down much at work; this is my luxury because my boss is away at a conference and not making me eat my food while running back and forth. I...couldn’t help noticing you either...” Amanda blushed and ducked her head.

Janice smiled, that was pretty cute. She waited for Amanda to raise her head again, she had nice eyes, very dark – almost black but not in the scary way that those eyes were usually made to sound on some serial killer in a book, they were black, but a nice kind of black. Her hair was short, probably black too, but it was dyed electric blue.

Amanda looked up and caught Janice watching her. She fought the urge to duck again and smiled at her. Janice smiled back.

“So, Amanda, are you perhaps...single?”

Amanda nodded and tried to adopt a composed attitude, failing miserably.

“Well, maybe we could go out for a meal or a drink this weekend?”

Amanda nodded and smiled, wider than she had intended. She almost wiped it away again, but when Janice smiled back just as wide she didn't bother.

"I'm free all weekend." Amanda answered.

Janice smiled and wrote her phone number on a napkin. "Swop ya."

Amanda took the napkin and wrote her number on another.

"I'll call you tonight." Janice smiled.

Amanda nodded. "I'll be home around 7, any time after that is good."

And that was it...they had chatted for another half hour or so, about work (Amanda was training to be a journalist - Janice was a paediatric nurse), relationships (or lack of), and anything else that came to mind, until Amanda had to return to work.

Janice rang that night at 7:05. On the first ring Amanda jumped. On the second she almost ran away. On the third, she picked up and said hello.

They chatted for three hours, about nothing in particular. They found out about likes, dislikes, they laughed a lot and talked seriously a lot. And at the end of it all they arranged a date for Saturday night.

So that was it. From then they began to spend every weekend together, parting only to sleep. Soon the weekends became weeknights together, and phone calls running into the morning hours.

Every time they were together seemed to be better than the last. And Amanda was almost floating as she strolled quickly up the hill. She was safe in the bubble that Janice always crated around her. And happy with the knowledge that Janice had been enjoying their time together as much as she had. It had been whispered into her ear as they kissed goodnight and parted for different buses.

She hummed to herself as she walked home, thinking about Janice. She was very much the protective type, which was funny because Amanda never really thought she needed protecting until she had felt the security of it. Not until Janice had shielded her from a drunken yob one night, trying to chat her up in the pub. She was also an angel. Smart and funny and full of useless information that was fascinating to Amanda. And she had a heart just about as big as a mountain, though Amanda could see she kept it hidden a little.

Janice opened her front door with a sigh, dropped her coat on the hanger and missed, then dropped herself down onto the big comfy sofa in her living room. She flicked on the stereo with her remote and played whatever she had left in there last. It turned out to be a rather depressing blues cd so she got up to change it.

Looking through her cd collection she remembered the many conversations about music with Amanda. They had similar tastes, and a lot of the same albums. She put on

the Shirley Bassey cd they had discussed at some point that night. Dropping back down on her sofa she laid her head back and let Shirley fill the room. Thanking yet again that she had no neighbours, she turned up the volume.

She had moved in three years ago, getting away from her parents as soon as possible. She had come out to them and everyone the year before, and things had never been quite the same. They didn't treat her much differently, or say anything bad. But they had a certain air of distaste when they talked to her – or about her. And flat-out refused to allow any friends in the house, despite Janice's protestations of "What could you possibly expect us to be doing!" and "My God what do you think of me!" and "I'm still your daughter you know! Just cos the people I have crushes on are have the same genitalia as me doesn't make some kind of disgusting alien being."

But protests were pointless and useless. Her parents were old-fashioned, stuck in their ways – and their ways were that homosexuality was wrong. In 'their day', male 'fruits' were arrested, later they were simply sent to a sanatorium to be cured. And the fact that female homosexuality was simply ignored by the law because the Queen who made it refused to believe it could happen didn't help matters much.

So Janice moved out once she got a good footing in her job. She had never had any neighbours. Most of the street was deserted. It had a reputation as a gang haunt about ten years ago, so people had simply moved out and nobody moved back in. Janice laughed and took out a mortgage on the house anyway. She knew the street well enough, and knew there were no gangs on it anymore. Not that there was much than a bunch of scared residents even then. It was quite possible that paranoia had turned a group of friends

who liked to roam around a bit on the streets, and occasionally get rowdy, into gang members with drugs, guns, knives and killings.

Janice shook her head and turned her thoughts back to Amanda. That was what she wanted to think about right now, as always. She could still feel the goodnight kiss, warm and shy on her lips, growing more confident as arms wrapped around her back. Janice wished they hadn't had to part, she always wished the same. Hopefully one day soon they wouldn't.

It was love at first sight when she had first seen Amanda racing into the Café and ordering to go...and she was pretty sure it had been the same for Amanda when she had finally sat down and noticed her.

Since then it had gotten so much stronger, so much more. And tonight...they were ready to take it further...without pushing it, next time it happened. They had talked about it a little before; they were both virgins and wanted to take it slow. Janice laid her head back on the arm of the sofa and smiled to herself as she sung to Shirley.

Amanda turned the corner that led into her street. Her house was 100 yards away.

They were her adoptive parents. Her mother had died in the labour room; nobody ever knew who her father was. When Amanda found this out, after searching for her birth mother, it took over two years to convince her that she hadn't killed her own mother. She still felt a twinge of guilt at happy times, thinking her mother should be here

to see this or she should be turning to her mother to tell her the good news. But her parents were good to her.

They were not quite friends; there were still the boundaries of authority while Amanda was growing up, but they were Amanda's most trusted confidantes. They shared everything, and when Amanda had first begun wondering if she was gay she had talked to them about it for hours. About the girl she had a crush on...about the boys she turned down. About the girl who she thought liked her back. They had been supportive, encouraged her to explore her sexuality and see what became of it. If she explored dating girls and it wasn't for her, nothing lost and knowledge gained. If she found it was for her, then she had found the truth and she should stick to it. And so she had.

She came out quite happily, with the support of her parents, when she left school. Waiting was just a survival tactic, an attempt to avoid the cruel tongues and fists of other kids who were essentially ignorant, or those whose opinions had been shaped by the words of their own parents. It mostly worked. She got a few stares, a few harsh words. She'd had to fight for herself once or twice. But they were mainly cowards who shouted from afar, or ran when she threw a punch back.

Then that day she had met Janice...six months ago? It seemed like yesterday. Amanda knew she was in love, and knew Janice felt it as strongly as she did. They had discussed spending the night together, and had not done so yet thought the tension was sometimes almost unbearable. Tonight they had discussed it again and realised they were both ready. When it began to happen next time, they could let it, naturally, as long as both were comfortable. Amanda saw more than once, right on the tip of Janice's

tongue, the question of whether she would move in with her. But it was left unspoken...for now. Amanda knew, hoped, it was just a matter of time.

And her parents had always been there, for her first date, for when she was dumped, for everything. She had told them on the very first date with Janice that she thought this one was special. They had promised to wait up for her so she could tell them while it was all still fresh.

Amanda whistled a tune that had been on in the pub, she couldn't quite place it, one of those dance numbers people were cloning endlessly at the moment. She didn't see the group until one of the boys stepped in front of her and she crashed into his chest

Amanda was a small girl, but strong and feisty, the boy was both tall and wide. And his friends were no less intimidating. She heard a girls voice say from somewhere to her left, "Ewww, get away from her Daniel!"

Daniel grinned and stepped back. "Come 'ere Liz. Maybe she wants a kiss."

Liz screamed in mock-horror, and Amanda looked around quickly while they laughed. There was Daniel, and Liz - who was make-up, and blonde hair, and gum, and tight jeans, and boots. There was another boy, quiet, the same height as Amanda but probably twice as wide.

Amanda could fight, but she wasn't stupid. She needed to get away, or at least get 30 more yards closer to home so they would hear her when she screamed. While they still

laughed, she shoved past Daniel, tripped over his foot, and landed on the ground with a sharp crash of her teeth. She tasted blood, felt pain, realised she had bit her tongue.

Daniel picked her up by the hair and showed her to Liz. “See Liz, this is a dyke-bitch. They hate men and want to make every woman they meet just like them. They like to be in twos at home, one plays the man with a big fake dick and the other plays the woman. But when they go out they like to have big orgies, and bring in straight women like you to make you one of them. See, these people are like weeds. They never stop growing, and they ruin everything they get to.”

Amanda struggled through all of this and tried to yell, but he clamped a hand over her mouth. She bit him and he grunted but kept hold of her.

“So what do you play bitch? Let's see, you look like a man. Short man hair, man jeans, man baggy shirt...so where's your bitch then, huh? Where's that bitch you fuck every night with your big fake dick!?”

Amanda screamed into his hand and he laughed. As he did so his hand moved slightly. She fought to get a better grip on it and clamped down with her teeth as hard as she could.

He bawled at the top of his voice. “YOU FUCKING DYKE-BITCH GET THE FUCK OFF ME!!!!”

He threw her to the floor and examined his hand. "You better not give me some fucking dyke disease with that, bitch." He motioned to the other boy who stepped forward and picked her up easily. Liz giggled.

"'It 'er Daniel. Go on, 'it 'er."

Daniel grinned and nodded. "But first I want to show this bitch what she's missing. Liz, suck it." He opened his fly and released himself from his underpants. Liz knelt down and began to suck it. The boy holding Amanda gripped tighter with one hand and unzipped himself. Daniel stopped him.

"No man, wait Liz, up. We got somewhere private to take this."

Liz giggled and the other boy nodded and zipped up. Daniel zipped up too and flicked his head in the direction of the park.

Amanda was dragged there with a hand clamped over her mouth, dragged along the ground when she fell. It was 1am, quiet. They saw one person walking towards them and Daniel growled at Amanda to stand up straight and smile.

Amanda stood up straight, and the hand was taken from her mouth. When the stranger, a man with a tiny dog, came near, the dog began to yap furiously and pounce at the ankles of Daniel, Liz and the other boy.

Amanda took advantage of them all bouncing around trying to avoid being yipped and hissed at the stranger. "Help me! Please! They're hurting me!"

The stranger looked at his feet and pulled the dog away. He cast a single look at Amanda as he hurried away.

“Clever girl.” Daniel said. “Rome. Do the honours.”

The other boy nodded and punched her in the kidneys. Amanda collapsed to the floor and screamed silently as her voice box was pressed to cut off any noise.

Rome dragged her along until she forced herself to her feet and staggered beside him. Eventually they reached the park. Just a big mass of grass with a football pitch marked out and a playground in one corner, a sign on the fence proclaimed it the Recreation Ground – called the ‘rec’ by everyone around. It was never closed, but it was deserted at night. She was pulled over the fence and along the grass to a far corner where Rome threw her on the grass and Daniel stood on her chest just firm enough so she couldn’t escape.

Liz pulled her hair and blew bubbles with her gum. “Dannyyyy, what you gonna doooo?” she whined.

“We’re gonna teach this dyke-bitch the value of a real man, right Rome?” Rome nodded eagerly.

“But Dannyyyy...you said we were just gonna mess around, scare her a bit, when you saw her coming up the road. You saaaaid.”

“Look, if you don’t like it you don’t have to watch, you can go home.”

Liz looked hopeful. “Really?”

Danny nodded. “Yeah.”

“But what ya gonna dooo to her?”

Amanda grated at the whining coming from the girl’s mouth.

“We’re gonna put summat manly into her, whether she wants it or not! We’re gonna show ‘er what a real woman does!”

Liz shook her head. “Nooo, don’t do that Dannyyy. She didn’t do any ‘arm. Just let her be, you scared ‘er, like you said. Let ‘er be.” She took Daniel’s arm and tried to pull him away. He threw her off roughly.

“Shut up and fuck off. I’ll tell you when to speak your mind, and it’s not now. Ok! I’ll be around tomorrow and you better have those damn pornos ready for me. It’s the only bloody way I can get hard with you around.”

Liz cast him a bitter look. “I ‘ate you!” she cried miserably. “I do. I bloody ‘ate ya!” Daniel gave her a shove and she tumbled to the floor. Casting Amanda a sad look, she raised her eyebrows and nodded before clambering up and running away.

Sirens wailed loudly as two police cars rushed to the park. A phone call had come in from a girl who hadn't left a name - there were two males in the park with a female who needed help. The four officers leaped out of their cars and over the fence and over to the corner which was described to them.

Two shadows were punching and kicking something on the ground. One looked up and yelled to the other they both flew away through a hole in the back fence and down the embankment below.

Two officers followed and lost track of them in the dark brush. They came back wearily to tell the others and found them horrified, sanding above the barely recognisable body of a young girl. Her clothes were in tatters as she lay, glassy-eyed, in rivulets of her own blood. Hey body was bruised and bloody, and her head was mashed almost out of shape by the ground.

One officer stepped aside and retched. Another radioed in for an ambulance. A third, the oldest and more experienced, put his fingers to her neck, feeling bite marks, but no pulse. The fourth gently placed her legs together, trying not to notice the trickles of blood still coming from in-between, and covered her with his jacket before running back to his squad car and returning with a blanket for shock victims.

The officer who had checked the pulse searched the torn clothing and the ground for identification. He found a wallet in the dark and used his torch to see what was inside. A press card for a fledgling journalist, a donor card, a 'Stand Up And Be Proud' card from a gay and lesbian organisation, a little money...he didn't want to see any more and put

the wallet in his pocket. He knew who the girl was. Her father was a friend of their Commanding Officer.

They waited in silence for the ambulance to arrive. When it did, and the girl was placed inside, covered on a gurney, two officers climbed inside to stay with her. And two remained behind to go and see her parents.

The phone rang at 4:14am and Janice started up from the sofa. She often fell asleep there listening to music. It was one of her many interesting quirks she thought. She stretched and cricked her neck before walking to the phone. Who could it be? Surely a phone call at this time of the morning couldn't bode good news...unless it was Amanda, unable to sleep and feeling lonely? Janice brightened at this thought and picked up the phone with a chirpy "Hiya!"

It wasn't Amanda on the other end.

"Hi, um, Janice?" a male voice, gentle, it sounded teary. The words were being put together slowly, forced out...

"Yeah...what's wrong?" Janice knew immediately it was Amanda.

"It's Amanda...she was...on the way home. Some boys...the park..."

Janice shook and thumped down to sit on the floor.

The phone was passed over and a more official voice sounded.

“Janice? This is Officer Caron. I’m afraid there’s some bad news. Three other officers and I were called out to the park close to Amanda’s home. Amanda was there...with the boys, they ran away...Amanda was...”

There was a pause as the officer held his hand over the phone and asked how much he should tell. Janice heard the muffled reply that he could tell everything.

“She was raped and beaten. When we found her...it was too late. I’m sorry.”

Janice dropped her jaw and froze solid. The phone was passed back and a female voice came on, controlled but shaky.

“Janice? This is Stacey, Amanda’s mum. I-I can come down, pick you up. You can see her.”

Janice nodded then realised she was on the phone and murmured a yes. She gave her address and let the receiver fall to the floor. She sat upright, cross-legged, until the doorbell rang. She got up stiffly and opened the door. In front of her stood a petite woman with straw-coloured hair. She was probably pretty, but tonight she just looked about as bad as Janice felt. Her clothes were creased and her eyes red. Janice realised she looked about the same, realised she had been crying the whole time she sat on the floor.

Stacy held out her hand and Janice took it, shaking it limply. She felt herself pulled forward as Stacy hugged her tightly.

In a daze, Janice got into the car and drove to the hospital in silence. Stacy passed her a handkerchief and Janice realised she was crying again. But she wasn't alone this time.

When they arrived Stacy put her hand on Janice's knee. "I want you to know...she loved you, more than anything. She talked about you non-stop, everything you did, and said. She had a photo of the two of you framed by her bed. She kept every film stub, everything you ever bought for her, something from every date you had - for memories she said, when you got old together."

Janice nodded. "I know...she loved you too, you and her dad. She practically idolised the pair of you..." she choked off a sob and Stacy squeezed her shoulder.

"It doesn't look good, Janice. She's...she doesn't look like our Amanda. But we thought you'd want to say goodbye, say...something."

Janice nodded and mouthed a thank you. She didn't trust herself to speak without crying.

"She was a donor; she had her card with her. We...said yes to it. There's people who can be helped, who can live, and we know that's what Amanda wanted."

Janice nodded. "I know she did. She made me get a card too." She coughed out a bitter laugh. "Not that we ever thought we'd need it."

Stacy hugged her gently and climbed out of the car. Janice followed her into the hospital morgue where a policeman waited with Jonathan Gosser, Amanda's father. He came over and grabbed his wife in a teary hug, then let her go and turned to Janice. After a second of looking at each other, he hugged her too.

"She's in a private room, so we can see her, before they - the undertakers - come to get her. Go in, we'll wait outside, take as long as you like."

Janice nodded and hugged him again. He wiped his tears and forced a smile.

"She told us what a wonderful girl you were. She always had the best taste."

Janice couldn't find any words to reply and stared at her feet instead. Jonathan took her shoulder gently and moved her over to the room. Janice opened the door, entered, and closed it behind her. There were three stools by a metal gurney. The gurney was covered with a grey-white sheet, outlining the shape of Amanda's body gently.

Janice stepped forwards and softly turned down the cover from her face. She gasped and held back a scream. Turning to the corner she dry-heaved and leaned against the wall for a moment. Talking to the figure behind her she slowly turned back round to sit on a stool.

"Amanda. How could they, anyone, do this to you? How could they! You don't even look like you anymore. I know you're not...my Amanda is gone. I'm talking to a shell without a light. My Amanda...lit up the room when she walked in...she made everyone smile when she did...made everyone laugh...everyone happy." She broke down

and sobbed on the sheet, leaning her head on the arm of what once was her Amanda. The arm dropped as she raised her head, tears running her cheeks, and she took hold of the hand. Dirty, muddy, nails caked with blood and dirt, ragged and broken from trying to fight.

“Oh Amanda...I swear. I swear on my life, and every night we had together, and every night those bastards are making us miss...I swear I will catch them if it takes me a lifetime! And when I do, I will rip them apart with my bare hands for doing this to you!” Janice snarled at the wall and clenched her fists. “No. No, you wouldn’t want that...but I will find them I swear, and I won’t touch them, I won’t hurt them. But I will teach them a lesson that will turn their hair white, and *this* I swear by everything you were, and everything you would have been!”

Janice stood and kissed the broken forehead. “I love you, Amanda, I always, always will. I promise to take care of your parents.”

She backed out of the room and into the arms of Stacy and Jonathan.

“We can’t stay...there’s nothing we can do. They need...need to do the thing where they...get the parts for other people...before she’s picked up.” Stacy muttered.

Jonathan nodded. “Janice, would you...I mean, we’d like it if you...if you wanted...you could come home with us. We have a spare room...or you could use...”

Janice nodded. "I'd like that, thank you. I-I'd like to...see Amanda's room. Not, not stay in it. But see it. I've seen it before, you know we've been there when you weren't, but...I..."

Jonathan nodded. "I understand, and of course you can see it. And...our house is yours. Food, drink...anything."

Janice nodded and forced a half-smile. They walked out together, Janice in the middle, holding hands.

## **Chapter 2**

Janice was dreaming. She was in the park where Amanda was attacked. She looked at the ground and saw the grass still stained with blood the rain earlier in the day was unable to wash out. It was dark, stars twinkled in constellations above and Janice thought vaguely that one day she needed to learn about them.

She looked around her and started to walk slowly to the place in the fence where the boys had escaped. Her feet moved silently along the ground, she tried to stop but was pulled along anyway. She gave in and let herself be guided. When they reached the fence it shimmered a little as she passed through, and she looked behind her, knowing she should be surprised. She slid down the hill, avoiding the trees and passing through the bushes and branches. Just before it leaped off the wall to hit the road at the bottom she was stopped.

Looking around her and back the way she had come she could see the path the boys had taken, following the broken branches and skid marks her eyes reached the spot where she stood. On the floor, lying on top of the mud was a ring. Janice bent and picked it up; it was painted silver, cheap and plain apart from an engraved pattern of zigzags. Janice put it in her pocket and looked around again. She knew she was dreaming and tried to remember the place. She turned to go back up the hill and was stopped by something she couldn't see. She tried again...this time she was pushed gently backwards.

The invisible thing spoke in her mind.

“The ring belongs to a boy named Daniel. The other boy was Rome. There was a girl, Liz, Daniel’s girlfriend. But she tried to stop him. She was the one who called for help. I know what you swore in that room. But don’t harm them. If you want revenge the police will do it for you, but don’t make yourself into one of them, don’t destroy yourself over me, Janice.”

Janice took in the words and digested them. She sensed the invisible barrier lift as the final three words floated through her head...

“I love you.”

Janice woke up and looked around. She was rumped and sweaty, sitting on the floor in-between Amanda’s bed and the wall. She picked up the photo album on her knee and looked into the face of an 18 yr old Amanda. Closing the album she heaved herself up off the floor and felt her bones creak as she stretched. Looking at the clock she grimaced as she saw she had slept there for three hours, it was 3:30am.

Her eyes slipped to the picture frame by the clock. It was of the two of them, taken by a passing stranger. They were in front of a lake, their trip to Windermere. Amanda’s arms were around Janice’s waist. Janice was grinning and hugging Amanda’s neck. She picked it up and held it to her chest. A tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped at it absently as she opened the back of the frame and removed the picture. She looked at it, her finger brushing Amanda’s glossy face gently, then folded it, picture outwards, and slipped it into her shirt pocket and closed the door quietly as she left the room.

She walked slowly to the park, thinking, wondering whether the dream was really as true as it seemed or whether it was just what she wanted to see. But there was only one way to find out. She crouched over the spot where Amanda was found and touched the red grass with one trembling finger. The dream was real. She would find the ring, and she would find them. And she would show them revenge.

Looking around her she moved quickly to the hole in the fence and slid through it. Looking down the hill she could see the path of broken branches and crushed brush, and she followed it, watching carefully for the spot she saw in her dream. Once sure she was there Janice bent to study the ground, kicking the surface mud gently with the toe of her trainer. Soon she saw that silvery dullness and picked up a ring. It was the same one, painted silver, zigzag pattern.

She put it in her pocket and clenched her jaw as a wave of hatred washed over her with force enough to knock her backwards into a tree branch. Snapping to at the sharp pain in her back Janice trudged back up the hill. "I'll find you. I swear it. And I'll make sure you pay for what you did to her you worthless bastards."

The thought of the girl, Liz, popped into her mind, and she pushed it away. She would think of something, some way to teach that coward not to let some brain-dead idiot shove her around. But she could wait.

Janice stuffed her hands in her pockets, one curled round the ring until it dug a groove in her palm, and stole back into the house. She lay in her bed, the picture of Amanda and herself held close to her chest, and made a plan. She would scare them, scare them into going to the police, scare them so bad they'd be begging for jail.

But how? Janice was never a creative girl. Always the one in Art class to copy what someone else had already done. In English, always the one to plot-steal from whatever book she had read. But that was okay, because usually the books she had read were horror, or mystery. How to scare two boys who would beat and rape a harmless Angel? Oh, how indeed.

### **Chapter 3**

Today was the funeral. Janice had done nothing to track down the boys, nothing at all in fact. She had stayed with the Gosser's, they had asked her to, but she hadn't ventured out of her room much. Neither had they so nobody really noticed. The plan was almost complete and soon Janice would have to find them. She wasn't looking forward to going into the world again, and for today to be her first day out probably didn't bode well to the superstitious.

However she was up, and dressed, and waiting for Jonathan to be ready. The room was full of mingling people, all in black, talking of their sympathy in soft voices to Stacy and Jonathan. Janice was included, they knew who she was, but she politely waved people away, declined company. They left her alone when they saw she wanted it and Janice was glad, talking wasn't what she wanted to do right now. She rested her face on her hands and held back tears, thinking of Amanda, the way she looked, the way she felt. Remembering everything they did, every smile, every word, everything they touched together.

Janice spoke to no one during the service. She watched the words from the Vicar, and the condolences from strangers, and gave back nothing but a nod of the head to acknowledge them. She felt empty, so hollow that even the tears she cried were made of air. Outside she listened to the intonations of faith and the sobs of everyone around her as Amanda was placed in the ground. She followed the line to the graveside and threw a handful of mud onto the coffin lid. As it gently thumped on the wood Janice forced away an image of Amanda knocking to be let out.

She followed the procession again to the function room on the cricket club. The usually bright room had been discoloured. The paintings covered with black, the bar staff changed from their red and white uniform to respectful grey. Even the grass looked strangely dull under the clouds. Janice sat alone with a bottomless pint of beer, accepting sorrowful handshakes and avoiding anything more.

Then something made her look up. Just entering were two boys and a pale-faced girl, looking around nervously. They hadn't been at the funeral, Janice wondered vaguely who they were. Just then they spotted her looking. The boys hurried to the bar and vanished, the girl turned paler still as she shuffled over to sit down beside her.

“Janice...?”

Janice nodded and eyed the girl. Blonde hair, dark roots. Make-up trying to hide the puffy eyes and bruised cheekbone. Dark brown eyes failing to look her in the face, hands fidgeting on her lap.

“Liz.” It wasn't a question and Liz looked startled for a second before exploding with terror.

“Yes...I-I'm Liz. Look, I tried to 'elp, I tried to stop 'im, I called the p'lice, I didn't mean...please...”

“Please what?” Janice asked coldly.

Liz shrugged in defeat.

“Liz, I know what you did, and I can see you took your punishment.”

Liz ducked her face.

“Don’t hide it, I’m not gonna lecture you about why you need to get away from that asshole – you know all the reasons yourself and if you were anything but a coward, you would do it.”

Liz blushed and looked up as the two boys arrived at the table. One – Danny, Janice guessed, hiding a sneer - jerked his head to motion Liz away. Liz shook her head.

“I’m talkin’, Danny.”

He curled his lip at Janice and flashed his eyes at Liz before stomping away with Rome.

Liz looked at Janice for approval and Janice nodded at her. “It’s a start, keep doing it and you might get away before he kills you too.”

Liz gasped at the word and Janice frowned at her.

“What? It’s what they did to Amanda.” Liz flinched at the mention of a name and Janice gave a small laugh.

“Look, I’m not gonna be your new friend and I’m not gonna pretend to ever forgive them for touching her. Or you for letting them get so far before you decided it might be wrong. Just get the hell away from him and don’t come near me again.”

Liz whimpered and slid off her chair. Slowly she tried to creep past Danny who spotted her and gave her an evil look. She turned and half ran out of the door.

Janice turned back to her beer, ignoring the threatening glare from Danny and Rome. They didn’t need to know what she knew, Liz would never say. There were better ways and better places

“Amanda...” Janice muttered into her glass. “I miss you...I love you...”

She finished the drink and left without saying goodbye.

Back at the Gosser’s Janice paced her room. She knew what she was going to do now. She would start tomorrow. Her hands itched to be around their necks, to hit them till they begged her to stop. But no. Amanda was right, whether it had truly been her or not, what she had said was true. To take herself down to their level could never make anything better. But to simply tell the police, show them the ring and hope Liz would turn confessor was too risky. And not good enough.

She heard Jonathan and Stacey return and call for her. She went down to greet them, more at ease than she had been these last days, and sat with them till late. Talk was little, but the silence was comfortable and Janice found herself glad not to be alone in her house. She had to go back tomorrow, to get used to life alone, and to have the freedom she

needed to deal with Danny and Rome. But tomorrow was soon enough, one more night surrounded by warmth, by Amanda, before she went back to her empty house.

She slept peacefully that night, her hand resting under the pillow where the photograph of herself and Amanda lay. If she dreamt, they were forgotten as she awoke the next morning at 10am. She could faintly hear the TV downstairs as she dressed and threw her few belongings into the once-black backpack she had had since she left school. Taking a last look in Amanda's room, and leaving a kiss hovering in the air, she entered the living room and dropped her pack by the door.

Stacey was watching the TV with her back to Janice. Jonathan was frowning over a crossword and looked up as she entered, "Looks like we failed to entertain our guest, my dear."

Stacey stood, and her eyes flickered to the bag.

"No. I think we entertained as much as we were wanted. But unfortunately we can't be a crutch forever." She appraised Janice and smiled lightly. "Jon will give you a lift if you like, I know it's not far but it'd make me feel better."

Janice nodded and Jonathan got up and grabbed her bag. He took it out to the car as Stacey hugged Janice tightly. "It was good having you around and not just ... because ... you know...Amanda...we..."

Janice stopped her. "I know. It was good to be here too."

“Promise you’ll come visit?”

Janice grinned and nodded before turning and walking to the car.

Jonathan spoke little as he drove, and Janice didn’t mind. But as they arrived at her front door he turned and touched her shoulder gently. “I know...your parents don’t wanna know much anymore. And, well, if you ever need one, in an emergency...”

“Thank you.” Janice spoke softly to hold back the tears.

“And you can come visit any time, for as long as you want.” He sounded sincere and Janice smiled.

“I will.” She leaned over and hugged him, picking up her backpack from the floor. “Thank for everything...the lift and the bed, and...everything.”

Jonathan smiled and watched her into the house before driving away.

Janice dropped her bag on the floor in the hallway and slumped against the wall as the emptiness rebounded off her chest and the cold sunk in.

## **Chapter 4**

After throwing down her bag and losing an hour in empty daydreams, Janice shook herself back to earth and dragged to the shower. Beneath the rising steam she began to feel more human, even humming a little as she planned her day's work.

She opened and swallowed three beers before she put on her jacket and stepped out. She walked the half mile to the park telling herself the idea was to begin from there. Once she arrived at the spot, now rinsed entirely clean by rain, she knew that wasn't strictly true. She crouched down and bent her head to get that moment of courage that the beer couldn't. The courage of anger.

She heard voices and looked up, a young boy throwing a football across the grass, a grandfather in a flannel grey jacket laughing and smiling. This was no longer a place for Janice to be.

She strolled over the field, scanning the road for two boys.

"Afternoon miss." The old man greeted her with a friendly nod.

"Afternoon sir."

"Lookin' for summat? You look a li'l lost..."

Janice grabbed her chance.

“Yeah. I’m an old acquaintance of Danny and Rome. You know them?” She saw a nod and went on. “I’m in the area, thought I’d surprise them, only it’s been a few years and...”

He nodded and smiled as if he knew all about old friend and was happy to help them reconnect. “You’ll wanna go over the road to your right, then left. No 147. No doubt somebody’ll be around soon. That’s where Danny lives and Rome never leaves his side so they’ll turn up eventually.”

“Thank you very much.”

They exchanged friendly nods and Janice picked up a little speed.

The house was so stereotypically nondescript that it was almost unique. Plain, brownish brick, faded green door, number plate to one side. A small grassy area surrounded by a knee-height wall, a horse-chestnut tree dumped carelessly just off-centre, dropping spiked shells to the ground.

Scanning the upstairs windows Janice spotted a Blackburn Rovers scarf hanging down the window to the left window and guessed that this was Danny’s room. She noted this to herself and looked around. Across the road she saw the remains of a fence, the area behind it covered in just enough brush to give her a hiding place of she crouched. Checking the street quickly, she sprinted over to it and dived behind a thick pile, grazing her knees on the junk of many pleasant passers-by.

Uncomfortably she watched, aware that she had neither food nor drink. Hoping that they came home before the scratch in her throat and the growl in her stomach became more than just a minor annoyance. But luck was not a friend. As the sky began to darken Janice gave it up for the day. She could return first thing in the morning wait for them to go out. She stood and stretched, grimacing as every stiff bone cracked and groaned. Looking around she climbed onto the street and set her feet towards home.

Eating a microwave pizza she thought dejectedly about her day. Wasted completely, and tomorrow she was going to be covered in aches. But hopefully she would wait no longer than an hour or two before the house cleared. She pulled the silver ring out of her pocket and studied it until she felt her eyelids droop. Leaving the ring on the table she undressed as she moved through the house, throwing her clothes into the laundry basket before she went to her bedroom and collapsed into bed.

She didn't sleep right away. It wasn't her aching muscles, or the butterflies partying in her stomach. She was picturing the look on the faces of Danny and Rome when they encountered her first attack. After that it would be easy to follow them a little, make them jumpy, throwing in little things... Janice gave a stony smile when she imagined them finally cracking and confessing to the police. Hopefully in tears.

She drifted to sleep and the night passed peacefully. Janice awoke to her 6am alarm the next morning with no memory of the dream. She sat up quickly before she remembered yesterday's exertions and took a sharp breath as the pains struck. Swallowing painkillers she found a clean pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, covered with a blue jumper, and went downstairs for a fast breakfast. After throwing down a bowl of

cornflakes and making a thermos of coffee and pack of ham sandwiches, she grabbed a warm jacket, checked her pockets for all she needed, and locked the front door behind her.

The walk went quickly as she hunched through the morning coldness and when she arrived at the house it was still dark. She crouched in the same spot as the day before and watched as life began to appear inside. Dozing slightly, she saw both parents leave in work clothes and she let her eyelids droop a little while she waited. Eventually the upstairs curtains opened. Looking up Janice realised it was now fully light. She saw Danny, then Rome, climb out of bed and dress. Then she let her attention wander once more until they left.

It wasn't long before they did. The front door opened and they slouched down the road and round the corner out of sight. Janice ignored her screaming muscles for ten more minutes before she stood and stretched a little. She looked at her watch, 9:30am, and slipped across the road, up the gateless garden path and to the back door.

The kitchen window was badly made; she took out her small tool kit from her pocket – brought in case it came in handy – and extracted a long slim ruler. Slipping it through the crack she carefully lifted the catch. Pushing open the window she expected a creak, but was greeted instead by a faint squeal of annoyance. The kitchen was almost bleak. Murky grey all over, even the appliances were grimy enough to blend in.

Janice walked through quickly and peered into the living room. The difference was almost scary. Blue walls, white carpet with a shaggy leopard print rug. The furniture was shades of dark orange and green. Janice blinked once then shook her head slightly

and walked through. There was a small square hallway covered in all-over mauve and a stairway to match.

“Someone watched waaay too much Changing Rooms.” Janice muttered before sprinting up the stairs two at a time. The landing was lightened to a pale puce, Janice saw, and the four doors were natural pine. Noting which was likely to be the room she wanted, Janice began down the landing to the right.

She opened the door to reveal a pale yellow bathroom, took it in quickly and closed the door. The next room was the guest space. A huge sofa sat against the far wall, too big and plump to be anything but a sofa bed. Around the room were display cabinets full of model cars and small trinkets. There was a TV and a small stereo by the door.

Janice moved to the third door and looked inside. The master bedroom was easily the biggest, a huge double bed covered in a red quilt. Pink carpet and burgundy walls and ceiling finished off the theme. Photos hung from the walls, views of huge buildings and views from the top of huge buildings.

Janice closed the door and walked into the next room. The scarf was still hanging down over the window and posters littered the walls. A team shot of Blackburn Rovers, and a few pictures of big breasted blondes. Janice ignored them and went to the closer of the two beds; the one Rome had risen from. She peeled back the quilt and top cover slightly to reveal the pillow and took one of the pillowcases, laying it on the ground and smoothing it before repeating the action on the other bed.

She took a red felt-tip pen from her back pocket and carefully wrote

## CONFESS

In the best copperplate she could manage.

On Danny's pillowcase appeared the word

## KILLERS

Janice grinned nastily and replaced the pillowcases and covers. She wanted to explore the room a little, but her deed and crimes turned her to the downstairs window and out of the house. She closed the window, easing the catch back into place with tremulous hands, and crept back down to the road, futilely trying to blend in with the wall. When she was close to the street she saw no one and pelted across, diving headlong onto her sandwiches and suppressing a cry as her knee hit a rusty can.

She unpacked the sandwiches from their cling film and sipped hot coffee, watching the house absently, waiting to see the show. It was a long wait. The parents returned at 5am, practically crashing bumpers as the screeched their rustbucket into the driveway. They kissed a greeting and wandered into the house. Danny and Rome returned after 8pm. Janice was hunching down in a corner, unable to hold in the remnants of coffee any longer, she threw herself down, barely stopping the flow and missing the wet patch by a centimetre. She waited till the door closed behind them and crawled almost on her belly to her vantage point, hoping the show would be soon and she could go home.

Another hour and the light in their room came on. Janice saw Danny looking around strangely, as if sensing something was wrong. Rome spoke and he shrugged. Then they sat on their respective beds, the flickering of a TV showing faintly until 1am. By this time Janice was shivering, hungry, thirsty and positively annoyed. But she filled her mind with Amanda, touches, kisses, unspoken words, and felt almost warm inside. Then she had a sense of urgency and broke out of her daydream to look up.

Danny was pointing at his bed, speaking fiercely at Rome. Rome was stabbing a finger back at his and speaking angrily back. They argued for some time, Janice not hearing a word. Once Danny came to peer out of the window and Janice ducked further down, but the night and the light in the room was on her side. He turned back and snapped an order at Rome. Together they removed their pillowcases and exited the room, returning 10 minutes later with fresh ones. Presently the curtains closed and the light was extinguished, concealing the shadows moving in the room beyond.

Janice stood and followed her ritual stretching and groaning in discomfort before waking quickly home. Once there she showered and went to bed, turning her alarm on for the following days work. She dreamed only once. Amanda was in her room.

“Be careful, Janice. Don’t go too far.”

Janice brushed away the warning and was enveloped in her lover’s arms.

## **Chapter 5**

Danny pushed the record and play buttons down and counted off 10 seconds in his head.

“So...uh...this is my confession.” He smirked and walked from one side of the room to the other and back again. “I-we, Rome and me, we, ya know, that Amanda girl. We killed her.” He took a swig from a beer can, shook it and threw it into the over-flowing bin in the corner.

“We did it and, shit, Rome thinks she’s been haunting us. Ghosts don’t fuckin’ exist, but Rome thinks they do and so I’m confessing. We’re in separate rooms and both talking into teeny fuckin’ mics. So, I’m gonna tell it from the night we did it. We were drunk. Me ‘n’ Rome’d been drinking, ‘n’ Liz too – but she’s innocent, she didn’t do jack shit. She called the pigs anyway.

“It was late ‘n’ we’d been downin’ all night, competition, ya know. I got hot, beers make me fuckin’ horny, Rome got hot an’all and went to the bathroom ‘n’ wanked off ‘n’ I shagged Liz ‘n’ stuff. So, ya know, we felt like a walk after. Then we saw this bird, not a bad looker. Me ‘n’ Rome went to go chat ‘er up a bit, ya know, ‘n’ Liz pointed at her and said she was a lesbian. So I figured we could make ‘er not, ya know, give ‘er a good fuckin’ shag with some decent equipment ‘n’ stuff. So we tried to say hi ‘n’ tell ‘er we were gonna do ‘er a favour but she tried to run the fuck away! So we grabbed ‘er and stopped her fightin’.

“But there’s streetlight all over the fuckin’ place, and nosy neighbours, so Rome got ‘er and we took ‘er to the rec. So everybody knows what happened there, Liz got scared and ran away, me ‘n’ Rome shagged her fuckin’ good! But then she kept layin’ out punches at us so we kept hittin’ ‘er back, self-defence, right? But then we heard the fuckin’ pigs comin’ so we ran down the hill. Rome lost ‘is ring somewhere when he fell but those dumb fucks never found it, neither did we till today.

“But, look, Rome says that chick’s hauntin’ us now. I bet ‘e’s bawlin’ like a baby over there now, fuckin’ fag. But shit, he made me do this so, uh, he said we could get it out and carry on, so, fuck, anythin’ to shut him the hell up. Anyway, someone’s been messin’ with us, prob’ly that fuckin’ pussy but he says not. Breakin’ in here and writin’ shit, he says there’s more stuff but fuck it, whatever. I’m not tellin’ this story for ‘im anyway.

“I’m done, shit I’m glad I did that lezzie bitch. Homos’re takin’ over the fuckin’ place, pussies’re all tryn ta protect ‘em like its normal and shit. Bollocks. It ain’t natural ‘n’ I know that bitch got sent to hell. My Dad says they all do ‘n’ that means what me ‘n’ Rome did was a good thing. There’s no room down there or here and totally fuckin’; not up there with God and angels and shit for bitches like that who don’t follow the rules!”

The door opened, and Rome entered quickly.

“Fuck, Rome, what the fuck d’ya want? I’m doin’ like ya said...

Rome ignored him and closed the door.

“It’s pretty cool what you can buy if you know where to look, ya know?”

“What the fuck’re you...”

Rome raised the gun and screwed on the silencer.

“Got this off Brooks, man, pretty cool huh?”

“You crazy fuck what the...” Danny’s scream was cut off as there was a high-pitched bang, no louder than the thud he made as he dropped to the floor. Blood leaked from his chest as he tried weakly to speak. Rome knelt beside him.

“This is the only way, Danny. That spirit will haunt us forever unless we give her some justice.” He placed the tip of the black silencer to Danny’s eye. “A sacrifice of two to save one soul.” Rome closed his eyes and bowed his head as he pulled the trigger.

He rewound the tape and listened to it, shaking his head in parts. Then he depressed record and play and spoke himself. “Quite a mouth my friend has on him, some strange ideas too. Listen close and I’ll tell you some more.

“I’ve known Danny since the first day we started at the infants. My Dad left Mum when I was three. I never knew why, I’ve not seen him since and Mum is always too drunk to care. But Danny’s parents liked to let me stay. They were good to me. Took a few years but me and Danny were best mates and I ended up staying here pretty much every night. I still do. Go back home once a week if I can to check on Mum, but I live here. Danny and his Dad...well they’re half-religious, I dunno, they don’t practice it they just believe there’s a God and they believe stuff he sad. Danny’s Mum, I dunno really, I never

asked. But they treat me like another son so I don't mind. I don't believe in God though. I never really believed in anything 'till now.

"But the story...well Danny got that night told. What happened was pretty much true. We wanted to chat up the girl cos she was pretty hot. Danny kinda went overboard when Liz said she was gay and I joined in, cos it's what I do. We took her to the park, Danny shoved Liz when she tried to stop us shaggin' 'er and she ran off - she called the police. And everything went crazy, she fought the whole time but...ya know what it's like when you know something is probably a bad idea but you do it anyway because you don't know how to stop, or cos it barely seems real? That was it. We shagged her, 'n' we punched her 'n' kicked her when she tried to fight. Then she didn't fight, but we kept doin' it anyway till the pigs came. I fell on the hill 'n' lost my ring, but we got away good.

"Liz tried not to come over anymore. Even when Danny threatened 'er she said no. I was actually happy about that, she pissed me off with her giggle and her hair twirling and Danny going all fuckin' macho every time she appeared. He was kinda pissed too, but he got over it. We did go to the funeral together though, that bitch sat talkin' to the dead girl's girlfriend and fuck I thought she was tellin' her stuff! Danny went totally apeshit on 'er after and then Liz was really gone for good. That fuckin' muppet was always punchin' the girl. I didn't like 'er but fuck I'd never've hit her! He thought he was pretty righteous though - in everything.

"He wanted total control, cos 'is Dad put it into him that women were supposed to do be, like, slaves or some shit to the men. And 'e kinda took it on 'imself to hit out when she didn't. And he thought he was righteous in what we did to Amanda, struttin' around saying how there was one less dykeing sinner in the world or some crap like that, I think

he mentioned once that we'd prob'ly get a reward when we died and went to heaven. But whatever, man, like I said I don't believe that shit.

“Anyway, weird shit kept happenin’. Like, a coupla weeks after the funeral we came home and watched TV and stuff, but, I dunno, it didn’t feel right. We were both all jumpy and shit. So, we were goin’ to bed, ‘bout 1 I think, and there was shit written on our pillows! Uh, mine said ‘Confess’ ‘n’ Danny’s said ‘Killers’. That prick started yellin’, blamin’ me then Liz – then both of us. I spent an hour telling him I didn’t do shit. I told ‘im maybe it was Amanda’s ghost ‘n’ he pulled ‘is fist up but dropped it down after I pulled mine up ‘n’ he turned off the light and growled at me to ‘Just go to fuckin’ sleep, asshole.” He never did believe me though.

“But shit kept happenin’, man. Little shit, like, one day we got home ‘n’ that Rovers scarf was hangin’ on the door instead of the window. I got fuckin’ scared, man, but ‘e just reckoned one of us moved it ‘n’ forgot. But even littler things too. Like, the bin would be full when we left but empty when we got back – and whatever was in it didn’t go into the bins outside or anywhere cos I looked once, or the beds’d be made when we left but pulled down like we were about to sleep in ‘em when we got back. Or shit would be moved, like, summat that one of us left on the desk’d be back in its place or over the other side. Ya know? Shit man I can’t sleep in this fuckin’ room anymore. But Danny just shrugged and made excuses. His Mum started emptying the bin or doing the bed, we just forgot we’d moved stuff or put it back, shit like that.

“But we’ve been gettin’ followed an’all. Eyes on us everywhere we go, the hair on t’back if me neck stands up or I’d look round and see summat disappear really fast like it

was tryna get away from us but wanted us to see it. Even in t'house, man, I can feel eyes following me.

“This shit’s been goin’ on for 4 months now! It’s Amanda’s spirit. She’s haunting us. I looked it up and everything. Her spirit is at unrest because she died violently, so she wants revenge and stuff. She left Liz alone I think cos Liz called the cops and then kept away from us, and I think when she was talkin’ to that girlfriend she was nice and sayin’ how sorry she was that it had happened. “But me ‘n Danny, nah, we ignored it ‘n’ went on. Danny fuckin’ bragged about it at me, ‘n’ I bragged back at ‘im.

“So she wants revenge, that’s what I read. ‘N’ the best revenge is the death of the people who did it, right? It’s in all the books, ‘Avenge my death’ someone on a deathbed begs so some hero goes off ‘n’ does. But Amanda got no hero cos there was no one there, so she’s doin’ it ‘erself. She’s watchin’ me now, ya know, always watchin’ me. I’m sorry Amanda ... Man she really fucked us yesterday though. We came home to...some scary shit. Just in our room like it always is.

“Danny’d decided we were gonna go see Liz. ‘E was still pissed I guess. She let us in cos ‘e was nice and promised ‘e just wanted to talk and all that shit people say when they wanna rip your head off. So we went in ‘n’ Danny started fuckin’ rippin’ man, yellin’ ‘n’ screaming. ‘E shoved ‘er against the wall ‘n’ started stranglin’ ‘er, man. I dun even know what ‘e was yellin’, it was all fucking gobbledygook when it came out. I dragged ‘im out, but Liz was already bleedin’ cos ‘e’d really beat her up this time, man. I was yellin’ at ‘im on the way home for it cos that was just fucked up.

“So anyway, me ‘n’ Danny came home ‘n’ opened the door, there. ‘N’...there was a body. Some...homeless guy or summat, all raggedy ‘n’ mucky. ‘E was...lyin’ on me bed. ‘E...was dead...’b’ there was a bat next to ‘im, a baseball bat. ‘N’...fuck man he was wearin’ my silver ring! That one I fuckin’ lost!

“My diary was on Danny’s bed. I’d been writin’ every day what happened and stuff. Danny thought it was funny I had a diary, kept callin’ me a pussy when he saw me write in it. But it was on ‘is bed ‘n’ it was open. ‘N’ it had an entry in it for yesterday, even though I’d not written yet, cos it was only 10 in t’ mornin’ when we went out. But someone, Amanda’s spirit, wrote in it, ‘ang on’.”

Rome jumped up from his position on the floor, leaning back against the wall and grabbed his diary from under his bed. He opened it to yesterday and cleared his throat. “Today we killed again. Last time was so good, and I didn’t want to admit it, but it was. Danny loved it too but we knew that along, right Diary? So we picked up a homeless guy on the rec, he was begging for money and we told him we’d feed him a hot meal and give him a shower. So we brought him home and up to our room. Danny got his baseball bat and hit him a few times, then I did. We beat him till he was dead and bleeding all over. God it was so good, me ‘n’ Danny actually got horny, can you believe that? We left the guy here and went out to the Beehive in Cherry Tree, picked up a couple chicks and shagged them round back in the alley.

“But, Diary, how do we get rid of the body? I don’t want to do it again. It feels so good but it’s so wrong and I know Danny wants to do it again, but I’m feeling really bad for this guy already. Diary should I go to the police?”

The diary snapped shut and Rome dropped his head and shuddered.

“That was it. Amanda wanted us to be caught for murder, any murder, so she left us a dead guy and wrote my own confession on my diary. But it’ll never be enough, Oh, no. Going to the police to tell them we killed this guy...”

He motioned to the body, cold and still, still lying on his bed. “Even if we told ‘em we killed ‘er too...it’s never gonna be enough. Hey, ya know Danny wouldn’t believe any of this? He closed my diary and told me he didn’t know what I was talkin’ about. He acted like he didn’t even see the fuckin’ dead guy! And the blood! He stood right in it and said it wasn’t there! Oh God...”

Rome held his head in his hands and tugged on his hair. “But no...it’ll never be enough...only the final sacrifice can lay a vengeful spirit to rest. All the books say so...”

He looked around him. “I hope you’re watching, Amanda. You’ll be able to leave soon, be free. I’m sorry.”

He raised the gun to his eye and held it there a moment.

“You know. I actually don’t mind gays, long as they keep their dicks to themselves. But I fuckin’ hate dykes. They’re just...how can a woman not wanna shag a man? I dunno...I just don’t get them. Fuckin’ dykes, I hate ‘em. Sorry Amanda, but I might as well be honest right now. I’m sorry I killed you though. Just cos I don’t like you don’t mean I wish you dead...it just happened...”

He shrugged and squeezed the trigger.

Janice slept restlessly in her bed, the sunlight blocked by heavy curtains. As the first shot went off in the bedroom she muttered in her sleep. The second almost brought her up but she fought it and fell back down. As the third shot sounded she threw off the covers and whimpered.

Her dreamless state faded up and she saw her parents standing there, arms folded. Her Mum spoke up.

“Look what you did you stupid girl. You wanted them to confess, now you killed them!”

Janice shook her head and looked at her Dad for help.

“You just don’t know when to stop, do you my girl?” he said

The dream spiralled into nothing, her parents’ voices echoing in her head as she tossed and turned in the bed, trying to wake up, trying to escape the accusations.

“They’re not! I didn’t kill anyone!” she cried. But it was no use, the voices continued.

“You always were a stupid girl weren’t you?”

“First those...women, now this? It was only a matter of time.”

“Why didn’t you listen to us dear? We could’ve helped you...”

“Ye-es. Got you a counsellor or something...”

“Because now you’re gong to be in big trouble...”

“And nobody is going to do anything to help you. You know why?”

“Because you’re just a silly, immature, deluded little girl.”

“Who got a bit annoyed and killed two fine young boys.”

Janice buried her head under the covers, crying now, desperately wanting to wake. There was a piercing scream in her ear and she flew upright in her bed, flipping the light on, drenched in sweat and ready to defend herself. But there was nobody there.

A distance away, a mother walked into a bedroom after receiving no answer to her knock. She saw her son, and her pseudo-son, lying on the floor. Patches of red around them, still leaking from their lifeless bodies. A second of shock, disbelief, and her hands flew to her mouth as she screamed.

Downstairs her husband started and raced up the stairs to find her. He saw what she screamed at and his face went white. Dragging her away he closed the door and pulled her close until they sobbed into each other’s shoulders.

## **Chapter 6**

The funeral was a bleak affair. The death of the two boys standing in the shadow of their self-confessed deed to make any conversation awkward.

“I’m so sorry about the lads.” One half-stranger muttered to Milly. Then followed an uncomfortable silence as both women avoided the obvious.

“They weren’t bad kids, not really.” The other woman said at last before skittering away to gossip. Milly and James Morris knew the gossip as well as anyone. Their two boys, Danny and Rome, had confessed to murder. Then Rome had killed Danny and himself.

But the gossip was only as true and informed as gossip can ever be. The boys had confessed, yes. Rome had killed Danny and himself, yes. But there was more than that...

James started, nudging Milly, as the Johnson’s entered. It was their daughter, Amanda, who had been killed those few months ago, now here they were, at the funeral of the confessed killers, with the girlfriend herself. They looked around, spotted them and walked over.

“James, Milly...” James shook their hands. His wife followed suit. The girl stood at the back uncomfortably.

“This is Janice.” Introduced Jonathan. She stepped forward, pale-faced, and, in turn, grasped their hands and dropped them.

That was when Rome’s mother decided to arise out of her stupor. She had turned up to the funeral, already half-drunk, in a taxi. Dressed up and drinking from a hip flask she had almost toppled into Rome’s open grave. Mercifully she had since been silent as long as there was a reasonably full drink of something in front of her. But now she spoke up.

“I know you ...” she slurred to Jonathan, Stacey and Jan. “Your kiddie was killed...” she slumped back and glared at the three of them, oblivious of the sudden silence in the room. “And you must be the girlfriend,” Janice nodded. “You know what they all saying about my son...my Rome, duncha,”

“Now Rose, let’s not...” James began, placing a hand on her arm.

“Fuck off. You think you sooo much better’n me ... takin’ me son away ... brainwashing’ ‘im against ‘is own mummy.” She pointed at James. “You made ma boy crazy! ‘E never killed no one...” she fell back into her seat, muttering inanely.

“Denial can be so tragic,” came a voice from somewhere in the room, a few titters followed, and conversation started up again.

Janice wandered off and the two couples were left, fidgeting awkwardly.

“We know...what the boys did. But...but we would never have wanted this.” Stacey said. “But still, it was maybe a bad idea to come...we just thought, if we showed up...” she shrugged and looked away.

Mill placed her hand on Stacey’ shoulder. “No, I’m glad you did.”

The boys confessed into a tape.” James said. “They relieved themselves of sin. But, Rome...then made himself guilty again by doing that...but, he was insane and those who sin in insanity cannot be judged like everyone else. I know they are both in heaven where they belong...” James looked away, embarrassed as his eyes filled with tears.

“Your daughter made ma Rome insane!” yelled Rose. “She was a ghost! He said on the tape! She haunted him and made him crazyyyyyy...” she trailed off and fell into her chest once more. This statement sank into the again-silent crowd.

James spoke now. “Perhaps it’s best if we called this to an end...”

Soon everyone had piled out of the Morris house, gossiping madly. Rose had been placed carefully into a taxi and Jan had left for home. Stacey and Jonathan remained at the request of James.

“Rome...was crazy. When he did what he did, to Amanda...the guilt drove him...” James cleared his throat and looked at Milly who carried on.

“On the tape, he said your daughter was...haunting them. The guilt, you see...he thought he saw a body on his bed, and he read an entry from his diary that wasn't there.” She stopped and eyed them for a reaction.

“I'm sorry. I really, truly am.” Jonathan's voice broke but he carried on. “We know the lads weren't a bad sort, Danny seemed pleased with himself but I swear to you it was just his front, he couldn't deal...”

“We should go, give you some peace.” Stacey said.

In the car on the way home they touched the subject briefly.

“Poor kids. Both – all three of them.” Stacey said, sadly.

“I...we...jail, we wanted them to go to jail or something but...not this.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

As they entered the living room they spotted Jan, curled up on the sofa hugging a cushion. Stacey ran to her and put enfolded her into a hug. Jonathan dropped his coat on a chair and fetched tissues and a beer each from the fridge and sat on the floor beside them...

Jan gulped down half the beer in one draught and wiped her tears. “I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...”

Stacey squeezed her. “Don’t carry on that sentence or I’ll be forced to kick you out on your arse my girl.”

Jan grinned faintly. “Uh oh...”

“Jan...the Morris’ told us some stuff that was never released to the public. We thought you might like to know. It’s not good, but...it related to Amanda and we wanna give you the chance of knowing everything you can...” Jonathan said.

Jan nodded. “Tell me. Anything, I don’t care what it is. Tell me.”

“It seems that Danny was somewhat pleased with himself...though James swears that it was only because he couldn’t deal with it any other way. But, they are a religious family to some extent and...I dunno. But Rome felt guilty...he drove himself crazy, Jan. He thought Amanda was haunting him and he shot Danny saw...a dead body and he read from an entry in his diary that wasn’t there and then he killed himself.” Jonathan finished this in a rush and downed his beer.

Jan took this in silently. “He...was crazy? His mum was right ... he ...” she stopped and Stacey hugged her again.

“Honey, he felt guilty. It happens, what he did was so awful he felt so bad...” Stacey tried her hardest to be comforting, not knowing the real reason this statement hit Jan so badly.

“I have to go...” Jan muttered. “I...stuff to do...don’t wanna impose...” she pulled free of Stacey and raced out of the house before either could object.

Jonathan moved to sit where Jan had been and he held his wife tightly as they both cried for the memory of their daughter. For the memory of the day she had been taken away from them by the stupid actions of two dead boys. For the memory of one of those boys, driven crazy by his own guilt. For the thought of Jan alone without the person she loved. For themselves, for a life without their only daughter.

Some hours later they pulled away from each other, eyes stained with old tears. “I miss her, Stace.” Jonathan spoke softly. “I miss our Amanda, all the things she did...I miss our daughter...I miss our friend. What’re we gonna do without her?”

Stacey shook her head. “I miss her too, babe. But...we can’t...we’re still here...we gotta...I dunno, carry on and not forget her...”

They folded into each other’s arms again, for the comfort only two lovers can give each other. Later that night in bed, the conversation became the type everyone dreads. Where to go now, the loved one is lost and the past can only move forward. What happens next can only be decided by moving onwards to see.

“We could adopt again...” muttered Jonathan, gloomily.

“No. We can’t, at least not yet. We’d be trying to find another Amanda and there isn’t one...the poor child we got would never be good enough.”

“I know, I know that really. I guess I just feel...”

“Empty.”

“Yeah.”

They lay together in silence for a minute.

“What about Jan?” Stacey asked

“Maybe she shouldn’t adopt either.” Jonathan attempted a grin

“Funny boy.” Stacey kissed him. “I mean, what can we do with her? She doesn’t have anyone, not like I got you.”

“Um...she’s a bit old to adopt love...” Jonathan looked confused.

“No, don’t be daft. But, maybe she could stay here...or...”

“Nah, I doubt she’d wanna do that. She’s independent, and she’s coping well. It’s just today, with the funeral and the memories and all – look at us, we wrecked completely.”

“Yeah but she didn’t have anyone to even give her a hug!”

“Yeah, cos she didn’t want anyone to give her a hug – she ran off. Honey I know it’s bad but she knows we’re here, she’ll be around tomorrow, all sheepish, you bet. Then you can hug her till her eyes pop out.”

Stacey giggled. “Lovely image, thanks.”

“Welcome. But Stace, what do we do? Jan’s a big lass, she can look after herself and we’re here for her whenever we can be. But, I hate to be selfish and all, but what about us?”

“Us...well I guess we just gotta keep livin’. Not much else to do but live or die.

“You’re right, as usual. My little philosopher, always with the answers.” He hugged her. “I guess there’s no quick-fix way either?”

“Not a hope in hell.”

“Bugger. Well I guess I can live as long as I still have one of my girls.”

Stacey smiled and snuggled into his shoulder. “You got me alright. But Jonathan...Amanda’s room...?”

“Can be cleaned tomorrow...” he said slowly. “We can keep stuff around the house, stuff so we don’t forget...we can keep some stuff in the loot I suppose. But tomorrow we clean it and...give it to one of the charity shops – Scope maybe.”

“Right y’are boss.” Stacey played lightly, though her heart was heavy at the thought of having to ‘clean’ out Amanda. “It’s for the best...before it drives us crazy too huh?”

“Yeah.” He replied quietly, thinking about Rome. “Don’t wanna go crazy now...”

The phone rang by Stacey’s head and she picked it up quickly.

Janice heard Stacey’s voice saying hello and almost hung up again. She was embarrassed about running out on them this afternoon, and half-scared she would let the wrong thing slip.

“Stacey...”

“Janice! Hi, are you okay? We were a little worried about you.”

“I’m fine...I’m sorry about, you know, I just needed some time.”

“Oh we understand, don’t apologise. You know we’re here for you when you need us, but sometimes you just gotta be alone.”

“Yeah. Thanks Stacey.”

“No worries hon. You wanna come over? You can stay for a bit if you like.”

“Thanks, but I’d better not. Get too used to being there then I’ll never learn to be on my own.”

“Okay hon, the offers always open though. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks. I’m gonna go get some rest now, I’ll call tomorrow or summat.”

“Sure, you get some rest. Call whenever you like.”

Janice hung up and rested back in her chair. In her hand she twirled a silver ring

“Dead body...the guy was crazy, sure as hell...but somebody made him crazy.” She muttered to herself absently. “He thought Amanda’s ghost was haunting him...but she wasn’t...she was in my dreams, but in his? No it was me...I made him crazy. I made him kill his best friend...I made him kill himself...I drove him crazy.”

Slowly the frowning expression vanished and a smile replaced it.

“I drove him crazy! They killed my Amanda and I drove one crazy enough to kill ‘em both!”

The smile faded as guilt took over.

“I only wanted them to confess though...”

She sat quietly for a while, remembering the dream she had the night it had happened. Her parents speaking to her like they did when she came out to them. Amanda coming to her aid.

Janice sat in her chair and stared at the wall until she slept.

## **Chapter 7**

Janice passed that night in a half-dream. Not really sleeping, tossing and turning in bed, padding to the kitchen to make hot chocolate. But mostly sitting back in that chair, staring at, looking through the silver ring. An onlooker sitting in the room may have thought her feeble-minded.

Occasionally her head dropped into her chest, jerking up again a few minutes later, her face showing no realisation that she had almost fallen asleep. Once in a while she whispered to herself. The words catching in the air before her and dropping into nothing, “Crazy...was me? No...was ghost...killed...I?”

Once she leapt to her feet and glared around suspiciously. But then she sat once more with a faint smile, head tilted as she rocked to a lullaby only she could hear. Finally, as dawn tried to creep through the heavy curtains, she trudged to her bed and slept heavily.

Jonathan and Stacey worried.

“Nine days, Jonathan! Nine days, she hasn’t called, won’t answer the phone, or the door!”

“I know! Look, I’m worried too, but if she needs time there’s really nothing we can do but keep trying till she reappears.”

Stacey groaned and slammed her hand down on the table, overbalancing her empty glass.

“I knooooow! That’s the bloody problem!”

Jonathan moved to clear the table quickly.

“She’ll be back, love. Just don’t give up.”

“I wasn’t planning on it darlin’!

“I didn’t suspect it for a second.” Jonathan grinned. “She’ll be back soon enough. She knows we’re here.” He kissed Stacey’s forehead and sat in his chair to watch the T.V.

“Oh crap!” moaned Stacey, glancing at the clock. “I’m gonna be late for my shift!”

She grabbed her bag from the sofa and raced out the door, blowing a kiss to Jonathan as she passed.

“See ya soon love.” He called, then to himself, “Hope those robbers don’t steal all the paintings in that ten minute crossover...” he chortled to himself and turned up the T.V.

“I really do hope you’re all right, Janice,” he thought.

Janice stepped out into the murky drizzle and raised her head into the misty droplets. She stood there a moment, relishing the coolness on her face, almost two weeks since she had been outside and she was glad she had finally made it.

She zipped up her jacket and walked through the puddles on the street until she reached the bus stop at the bottom of the road. Waiting under the shelter she watched the cars go by wishing she knew how to drive one. It was a thing she had never learned, not quite trusting herself and always happy to jump on a bus. They were usually a little late but they were cheap enough usually and went anywhere she might want to go.

The bus trundled up eventually and she paid, grabbed her ticket and sat down in her usual seat, close to the back on the left, just behind the wheels where the seat took one step up. Watching the world go by out of the window she almost missed the stop when the bus arrived at the boulevard in the town centre and had to push the bell madly and dive down the aisle and through the doors before the bus set off for Preston.

She wondered aimlessly through the Shopping Centre, avoiding the few shoppers out this weekday, staying inside the Centre to avoid the rain. But eventually window-shopping became boring, and the temptation became too much. Janice slowly walked over to the Refreshment Bar, the café where she and Amanda had first met. She pushed open the door and entered the warmth gladly. Without looking around she went to the counter and stood behind a large customer until she was served.

“I’ll have, uh, one of them raspberry buns and an egg salad butty please. Oh, and a pot of coffee.”

“Coming up love. That’ll be £6:12.”

Janice handed the lady, a middle aged woman with a big smile, a ten pound note, got her change and waited for her food. When it arrived she smiled and thanked her and found the nearest table.

Eating her food, waiting for her coffee to cool, she looked around and studied the few people in here. Nobody of great import, it seemed. Her eyes wandered lazily around the tables and stopped dead as they reached one girl sitting alone, three tables away.

“Amanda...” Janice breathed. She jumped up, leaving her food where it was and sat down across the girl.

“Hi!” She exclaimed, unable to hide her huge grin

“Er...hello.” The girl replied. “Do...do I know you?”

Janice looked confused” “It’s...Janice...”

“Well hi Janice, I’m Susan. Nice to meet you.”

“Susan...no, Amanda?” Janice stumbled over the words

Susan frowned and half stood

“Well, I must be going – got to meet my boyfriend, don’t wanna be late.”

“Boyfriend...go? Amanda...” Janice shook her head a little, and realised the girl in front of her was not Amanda. “I-sorry, I thought...”

“It’s okay.” Susan smiled softly and picked up her bag, turning to leave. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice...meet...” muttered Janice, red with embarrassment and holding back tears till a painful lump rose in her throat.

Susan turned back and studied Janice for a second.

“Listen...I don’t know who Amanda is, but, I’m sorry I’m not her. And I’m sorry that...whatever happened to her or you, I’m sorry it happened. I hope you find her.”

“Find...Amanda...dead...”

Susan winced a little at this. “I’m sorry to hear that. Look, you should go home, stay with a friend, okay? I’ll take you to your car, or a bus, do you need anything?”

Janice looked up stupidly then shook her head as the words made some kind of sense. “No. I-I’m fine, sorry, just for a second you looked...I’m fine. You go meet your boyfriend, I’m sorry.”

Susan looked at her, sorrowful at leaving her but knowing there was nothing she could really do. After a moment she patted her shoulder and moved away.

Janice moved back to her table slowly and finished her food almost without thinking. As she sat there with coffee cooling beneath her hands she scolded herself for making a fool with Susan.

“Are you okay love?” the waitress with the sunny smile was by her table, looking concerned

Janice looked up and forced a smile “Yeah, sorry, just got stuff on my mind.”

“Aw, I hope you feel better soon. You need more coffee?” she cleared away the plate from Janice’s food as she spoke.

“No, no, it’s ok. I gotta be off.”

“A’right love, thanks for coming.” The waitress gave a big infectious smile and Janice couldn’t help but smile back as she strolled back out into the rain.

Her smile faded as she hurried back to the boulevard to catch her bus. The rain had caught on well and pelted down in big drops, the wind pushing it into her face. Under the shelter of the bus station she shook her head, droplets flying everywhere, wishing she had thought to bring a cap. She sat and waited for the bus, watching the water trickle down the plastic windows, hearing it patter on the roof. Almost hearing her name whispered by the passing wind.

Back at home she hung her wet coat on the kitchen door and threw her clothes into the laundry basket, thinking to herself that she really needed to wash the clothes in there. She stepped into the hot shower gratefully and washed her hair under the steaming spray. When the hot water began to run out she turned off the shower and opened the curtain. In the mist there was a shape, a human form. Janice yelled and pulled the shower curtain over her bare body.

“Whoever you are get the fuck outta my bathroom!”

The shape moved forward a little and whispered her name.

“Amanda...?” Janice whispered. “No...can’t be...I’m just seeing things, like in the café...” but the shape persisted, moving forward a little more until Janice could just make out the shape of her former girlfriend.

“Amanda...” she whispered, “It’s really you...but you’re...”

“Dead?” whispered the figure. “Yes, I am. But what does that mean really? My body no longer moves because my brain doesn’t work...my heart no longer beats...is that really all a person is?”

“What?” Janice asked, “I don’t...”

“There’s more to a person than electrical functions. But Janice, that’s not why I’m here.”

The figure moved forward again, Janice could see Amanda's features closely as her hand reached up to caress her cheek. It passed through and she drew it back quickly, barely noticing that it had suddenly gone cold.

"Janice...you killed those boys...I watched you break into their house..."

"Only once! I..."

"Janice, that's not the point. It's what you did when you were there that I was watching."

"I...I only played a trick..."

"Janice...Janice...you drove them crazy. Following them...moving their things around till they didn't know what was what..."

"What? No! I only ..."

"You drove Rome crazy so he killed again, and shot himself. He saw a dead body, Janice...you put that there, you put it in his head...it was you."

"I-I didn't...I only went in once, I know I did!" Janice felt tears run down her cheeks, dripping on top of the shower curtain still held around her. "Just once...I just wanted...why are you doing this to me?"

“Janice...I’m doing nothing...you know the truth...you drove them crazy...in a way you’re just as bad as they are...you killed them.”

“No!” Janice cried.

“Murderer...”

“NO!”

“Killer...” the figure began to fade.

“NONONONONO!” Janice fell to the floor of the bathtub, screaming

“Confess...killer...”

The figure faded completely. But Janice didn’t see. She covered her head with her arms and rocked in the bathtub, crying out “NO!” sometimes, mostly just crying. For hours she sat, until the steam had rolled away, until darkness fell over her. She looked up, saw the darkness and was afraid. She leapt to the light and flicked it on, looking around fearfully for any sign of the apparition. There was nothing.

Janice explored the entire house carefully, leaving on every light, looking in every cupboard, under every bed, in every corner. Finding nothing did nothing to ease her fear and she sat in her chair in front of the muted T.V., jumping at every movement of the wind, every creak of the settling house. Eventually the sitting became too much and she prowled the house a second time, checking thoroughly, checking the windows were

locked, curtains closed so not a crack of streetlight could show through. Again she felt no better and returned to downstairs with an empty feeling in her stomach.

Deciding to fill it with food she entered the kitchen, checked under the table, scared to lift the window blind in case she looked out and saw something staring back. She turned on the oven and threw on a pizza. Out of the fridge she pulled a bottle of wine and filled a glass.

Three glasses later the pizza was done and she took it out carefully and sliced it. She picked up her glass and the bottle of wine and took it all into the living room. The T.V. was showing the ten o'clock news and she watched it as she ate. The phone rang around midnight and Janice picked it up, knowing who it would be.

“Hey Stace. Sorry I...” she trailed off as the voice on the other end laughed.

“Not Stace I’m afraid.” It was a male voice, distant, faint.

“W-Who...?” Janice stuttered.

“You know who. And I know what you did last Summer.” The voice laughed hysterically at the joke. “No, actually I know what you did this year, baby-cakes. Amanda told me.”

Janice garbled incoherently.

“You’re a killer, I should know. You killed me...confess, killer.”

The phone went dead. Janice wrenched it away from her ear and stared at it dumbly.

The phone rang waking Stacey and Jonathan up. Jonathan groaned and rolled over again, Stacey tried to do the same but eventually picked up anyway.

“What?”

“Stace...? It’s Janice...”

“Janice! My God where’ve you been! Are you okay!”

Jonathan sat up and listened eagerly to the side he could hear.

“Sorry...I need some time...I...can I come stay with you guys for a bit?”

“Sure hone, but, what’s wrong? You sound...shaky.”

“I’d rather not say...it’s just...I just need to be with people for a bit. Can I come over now?”

“Of course you can, I’ll send him to get you. You don’t have to tell us what’s wrong if you don’t want to. But, you know we can’t help unless you do.”

“I know...may-maybe I will, I dunno. I just wanna see you guys.!”

“Okay, pack a bag, he’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Jonathan was already dressing as she hung up.

“I’ll be there in five more like!” he kissed Stacey and picked up his keys, half-running for door, pulling on a shirt as he went.

Stacey climbed out of bed and dressed quickly, hurrying downstairs to put on the kettle and make coffee. She tried to sit and wait for it to boil, but found herself standing by the window instead, waiting for headlights. The kettle clicked off as the headlights appeared at the end of the street. Stacey filled three cups and waited for Jonathan and Janice to arrive. The back door opened and Janice entered, almost shyly, followed by Jonathan carrying a bag of clothes and accessories. Stacey ran to Janice and hugged her.

“Don’t you ever disappear like that again, ok. Ever!”

Janice nodded dumbly and hugged back.

Dying to ask what was wrong, Stacey motioned to the coffee and they each picked up a cup, took a sip and swapped until they got the right one.

In the living room Janice huddled on the sofa, cradling her cup. Stacey and Jonathan sat a short distance away, trying not to crowd her. Eventually Janice looked up. Her face clouded for a second as if she had forgotten where she was, then it cleared and

she smiled. "Hey. I'm really sorry about...vanishing. I just needed some time 'n', I guess I shoulda said first..."

"Don't worry about it." Jonathan told her, "We figured that's what it was, just glad you're back with us now. But...we know something's not right...you can stay here as long as you want to and you don't have to tell us anything. That's a promise..." Stacey cut in as he trailed.

"But if you don't tell anyone we can't help you. Even if it's not something we can go beat up, at least we could talk about it."

Janice smiled at them both. "It's nothing, really. I just got a little spooked, too much time alone I guess. I just needed people."

"And you came here?" Jonathan asked, grinning and forcing a laugh out of everyone.

"Hey, um, if it's okay, could I...could I go to bed now? I just need some sleep, I'll be better in the morning."

Stacey nodded. "You know where the room is, I'll get you some sheets. You bring your pj's and toothbrush?" Janice nodded, put her coffee cup down on the table and followed Stacey upstairs.

Jonathan stayed for a minute, his mind turning over. Something was wrong, more than just a spooky night caused by a bit of loneliness. He shrugged regretfully;

there was nothing anyone could do if Janice didn't want to talk. So until she did, all they could do was to make her feel at home. He put his cup down and stood to go to bed himself.

Janice's cup flew off the table across from him, hitting the floor 3 feet away. He jumped and started, holding back a yell, trying not to startle Janice. He went upstairs and found Stacey, quietly motioning her to follow him. He showed her the cup and she looked at it thoughtfully, "I dunno babes. You swear you didn't touch it?"

"Yeah, I promise, this isn't a joke. I stood up, put my cup down, I was gonna come to bed. That one just...flew I guess, I dunno. I just heard it land."

Stacey frowned. "Strange. You think it's anything to do with..." she flicked her head upwards to indicate Janice. Jonathan shrugged.

"I don't know love; maybe it's nothing, cups fall ... maybe it just bounced." He picked the cup up, gathered the other two, and put them in the kitchen sink. Walking back in with paper towels to clean up the coffee, he saw Stacey looking carefully at the table and the spot where the cup had fallen.

"What's up love? You see summat?"

She shook her head and he bent down to mop of the coffee.

"This carpet needs a clean; I'll go rent one of those steamer thingies from Asda sometime this weekend."

“Ok.” Stacey said quietly, “Coming to bed?” she turned and walked to the stairs without waiting for a reply. Jonathan threw the coffee-stained paper towels in the kitchen bin and followed, unconsciously avoiding the spot he had just cleaned. He took a glance around the room before he clicked off the light and went to bed.

In the kitchen the paper towels rustled and rose out of the bin, floated through the hallway door and up the stairs. Coming to a stop in Janice’s room they floated gently down and were placed in her bin. They rustled slightly and Janice stirred in her sleep, muttering nothing. She shivered slightly, turned over, pulled the covers tighter around her, and slept on.

## **Chapter 8**

Marcus and Martha Newark were busy. Every month or so they held a small group event in their house, and tonight was another one of those. Right now, Marcus was yelling at his burned fingers as he pulled sausage rolls out of the oven. Martha was sucking painfully on the finger she had cut when Marcus yelled. She shook her head, amused, and went back to chopping up sandwiches.

Marcus and Martha were twins. Not identical in looks apart from the thick, black hair they both inherited from their mother, though many said they were exactly alike in mind. Martha was deceptively big-boned, but being 5ft 11 and favouring baggy clothes people often mistook her for slim, if not skinny. She worked a few nights a week on a loading dock in Liverpool and soon learned that to get any respect from the big hulks she worked with she needed to be able to lift more than then, and never show a figure, this was also the reason her hair was shorter than her brothers.

Marcus was a writer – he wrote weekly for a local newspaper, rubbish about gossip and who was sleeping with whom, and spent the remainder of his working week (which, Marcus being Marcus, was very little), making painfully slow progress on a book. As to what kind of book, when asked Marcus simply replied ‘Oh, nothing anyone will ever wanna read.’... He was as tall as Martha, the ‘older’ of the two who liked to tease his sister about being born a few minutes earlier. He liked to wear simple colours, blacks and whites mostly, baggy like Martha’s, but for comfort rather than necessity. He was described as plump by himself, but as cuddly by others. Basically he just carried a few pounds over the ‘British Standard Weight’ everyone was talking about, and carried it

well enough for anyone to see that his 'Standard Weight' was the exact one the scales might show.

The meeting tonight was something they had set up together when they had first moved out of the family home. Both 27 now, they had left home immediately after school – unable to stand the pressure of a dominant screeching mother who had spent their lives attempting to push them into College, University and then annoyingly boring jobs. Their father had died when they were fifteen. The two speculated privately that he was simply driven to his heart attack by the constant nagging he endured as much as his two children.

So once they turned sixteen they loaded themselves with A's and B's in their GCSE's and left home. They fell into average jobs and rented rooms in a house while looking for something they liked, something that would pay their way until they could do what they wanted. Soon their perseverance paid off and they got the jobs they still worked at, and then moved into a reasonably quiet street with a house to themselves.

"Hey sis, they're arriving." Marcus yelled from the living room where he was laying out the snacks. Martha walked out to look as the doorbell rang and she stared Marcus down until he cracked with a grin and went to open it.

Fifteen minutes later they were all settled and chatting away. Martha brought in the last of the drinks and made sure everyone had food then sat and waited for quiet. Quickly everyone quieted and waited for her to begin.

“Welcome everyone. Glad you could all make it; it’s good to see you.” She began and paused for a general assent from the group. She was the more natural orator than Marcus who tended to stutter when in a big group, his job and talent was to encourage the newcomers and the nervous into coming out of their shell.

“Who wants to go this week? Anyone have anything to tell before we go over recaps and whatnot?”

A pasty girl raised her hand slightly, quivering and pulling on her lank mousy hair.

“Adrienne! Glad you’re ready to talk, go ahead. We’re listening.” Marcus had moved close to Adrienne and patted her shoulder warmly. She smiled meekly and cleared her throat twice, took a drink, fiddled with her jeans and looked around the group from under her fringe like she expected to be attacked and eaten any second now. Marcus laid his hand on her shoulder and whispered softly into her ear. She smiled a little, nodded and gripped his hand.

“I like horror, see, its fun to watch. A lot o’ films aren’t scary, just funny, you know? It’s a fun thing, but I like to be scared a little too – but, like anyone else, only to a certain point. So I was watching a mini-marathon. No reason, just felt like it, I do that sometimes, just take a break and watch a bunch of films. It was fun till everything happened.

“Anyway, I was watching one, just a small cult thing, I’m sure nobody ever heard of it – I know I hadn’t till I picked it up in the far corner of a shop in town. So I was

watchin' it. It was pretty funny. Slashers always are – the people are stupid and predictable and you always know what's gonna happen and...yeah, anyway that's not the point." She chuckled nervously.

"I was watchin' this film and some dumb bimbo was about to get ripped open, you know the drill. Suddenly, I was lookin' at it, and the bimbo had my face. I screamed, you know? And I replayed the scene, like, 5 times and it was me every time! Really me, with the same clothes I was wearin' and everythin'... So I grabbed another film, the first one I picked up, one I've seen a bunch of times. I wanted to, I dunno, show myself it was just some trick of the mind I guess. But then I was in this film too! Not all the way, just when some daft girl was getting it. I went through every film I got, took me ages, and they were all the same! Every time some dumb bimbo got killed it was me! My face, my clothes, even my voice!

"That was like, two months ago and I thought I was goin' crazy, you know? I was freakin' out big time, kept watchin' the films endlessly but it never changed. Like I was there all the time, was meant to be there and everything. I was, I dunno, thinkin' of goin' to the doctor for help or summat and I saw you guys ad in the paper and I came last month and didn't say anything. I thought I was just bein' stupid till I heard you guys talkin'. But it's scary...I just suddenly appear on the screen...I brought a couple to watch, if you don't mind? I just...I need to know if it's just me..." she held up two videos and Marcus took them.

"Sounds good to me. Everyone?"

There were nods and murmurs of sympathy and agreement. Marcus put the first tape in the VCR and handed the controls to Adrienne. Everyone turned to face the TV, shifting nervously. The video started and Adrienne fast-forwarded a little.

“Here, this is the first one, see her? She’s gonna go outside in the woods and the branches are gonna, like, tie her up and stuff. When she falls and the branches reach out...that’s when it’s me...”

The congregation watched, almost holding their breath. The girl onscreen ran through the woods, looking back at whatever thing was following her. She fell on the ground and a branch caught her leg. She looked up...

Everyone gasped.

“It’s you, Adrienne, it’s you!” cried one of the girls.

Adrienne gaped. “Really? You-you see it?!”

Everyone was talking at once. They had all seen the girl change into Adrienne.

Adrienne paused the video. “Y-you really all saw it?”

“Looks like it.” Martha nodded. “Let’s see the second one.”

The second film went the same way. Adrienne forwarded it to a point just before the first girl was killed and pushed play. Again everybody saw the actress turn into Adrienne.

“Wow...that’s...” Adrienne shrugged. “I just can’t believe it...I mean...I thought I was goin’ crazy...”

They sat silent for a moment or two then someone spoke up.

“Hey, how long you been wearing those clothes?”

“Um...I put them on fresh today, why?”

“Cos...the girls in the film all had the same stuff on you got.”

“Oh my gawd she did!” exclaimed someone else, followed by more yells of assent.

There was commotion for a moment as everyone tried to talk at once. Finally Martha stood and raised a hand. The room quieted quickly. “I think we all want to ask the same question?” she looked around and saw nodding. “Good. Then if I may...” more nodding. “Okay. Adrienne, those clothes. When was the last time you wore them? Were you wearing them the first time you saw the film?”

Adrienne shook her head. “No, when I’m doing a horror marathon I tend to wear, like, trackie bottoms or pyjama pants, it’s a couch potato thing...”

“Okay. Did...anyone you know pass away recently?”

Adrienne shook her head. “Nope. Nobody I know of. Well, my sister had a miscarriage but...I never know whether that counts. Depends who you talk to...”

Martha nodded. “Okay. Well it could be important. Let me explain. The ad in the newspaper asked for anyone who was having strange, unreal, crazy experiences to call and come to a meeting, right? Well, see we all, here, have had experiences like yours. I don't mean we've all seen ourselves suddenly appear on a film...um...Robert here,” she motioned to a fair-haired boy with glasses, “has been having dreams that he was killing people, then when he came to us we found out that these people have all died around the time of the dream. And they all died violently. .

“Mace over here,” she nodded at brown-haired boy in a leather jacket, “had himself thinking she was going insane because he would see people in the street that weren't there, and they would beg for forgiveness or to be saved. We still don't know who they are...you see all of us have had something happening that we can't explain, something that makes us think we're going crazy.” There was a general nod from everyone. “We all act completely out of character for no reason at all. We have unexplained fears or dreams or visions of a sort.

“We all have some things we can't explain that have been happening recently. You see? And that's why we're here. We think something's going on. We don't know what. But were damn sure gonna try and find out, and we're damn sure gonna keep finding more people like you and me and us to join us. Something weird is going on and I guess we just all feel better if we're together. Someone gets scared or sees something or

whatever; they pick up the phone and call the person nearest to them. We meet here to let each other know what's happening. Like a support group...only scarier." Martha grinned at her analogy.

"Only our numbers never remain still, or even grow. Only decrease." Marcus muttered. The entire room flinched at half-memories of people they had seen only once or twice.

"So...what happened...you and Marcus...why did you...?" Adrienne faltered pathetically and ducked her head. The rest of the group looked at each other and voices chimed in.

"Yeah."

"You never told us why."

"We never really asked, but..."

Marcus stood and took over.

"Martha and myself, we're twins. We don't look alike but our minds are attuned. It happened fifteen months ago. We were watching TV. The phone rang. I answered it...something came out of the phone. It was...like smoke. It made the shape of a person, face and everything. I-we didn't recognise him. Actually we only guessed it was a he, it has a deepish voice so..."

Martha carried on. "He, it, came out of the receiver. And he just ... hovered ... then he said some words we didn't understand. Like a different language. And he flew at us, knocked out chairs over, ruined the house. He was screaming the whole time, really deep, like there were lots of voices...he went through the whole house and wrecked every room...then he went back into the receiver..."

There was a pause as everyone took this in.

"That was the first thing we saw." Marcus continued. "Since then we've seen plenty...ghostly things popping up, murder scenes, nightmares... the house gets moved around when we blink..."

"It was just after our Aunt Trisha died that it started..." Martha took over again. "We simply assumed it was related and looked for someone to help. Doctors told us we were joking or insane...even a psychic just laughed in our face! We almost thought there were just us, but Marcus suggested we run the ad in the paper and slowly all you lot started to arrive."

The group talked late into the night. This was the first time the twins had told their story and it had reinforced the fear that something somewhere was going badly wrong. At 2:30am they left in a huddled group, no wiser and no closer to a solution. The twins settled in their beds at opposite ends of the top landing and tried to clear their minds.

As Marcus lay in the dark he hears a faint shuffling noise in the far corner of the room. He sat up and looked over, seeing nothing. He reached out his hand slowly and

clicked on the lamp by his bed. There was nothing he could see, yet the shuffling sound continued.

“Who’s that?” he called quietly. “I know you’re here to scare me. Well done it worked. Now go away.” He tried to sound bold but his voice quavered a little to betray him. The shuffling sound grew closer. It was next to his bed. Marcus peeked over the edge fearfully and saw nothing. Then the floorboards blew open - suddenly the room was encased in fire.

“Martha!” he yelled as loud as he could over the crackling. “Marthaaaaaaaaa!” a tear ran down his face as he tried not to break down into hysterics. The fire crackled on, dancing around his room, at the foot of his bed, coming closer. The smell of burning was suffocating, yet the fire did not consume. It just edged closer.

Martha in her room jolted out of her half-sleep at the sound of her brother’s voice. “Marcus” she yelled back and leapt out of bed. Her feet stuck to the ice-cold floor and she screamed in pain as she leapt back onto the bed, more from reflex than natural thought, leaving the skin from her feet behind her. She sobbed into her hands as her feet burned and the room grew steadily colder. Icicles now grew on the walls and the ceiling cracked with ice.

A voice laughed in both rooms. Deep and booming, a thousand demons laughing as one. The noise escalated until both twins covered their ears. But the voice grew louder and louder until the pain made both cry in agony and fear that their eardrums would burst.

Suddenly it stopped. The fire crackled once and was gone. The icicles melted, a hundred years of thaw in ten seconds, and the water evaporated into nothing. Martha tested the floor with one hand and jumped at the door burst open.

“Marcus!” she cried and he ran to her. They hugged each other and cried desperately.

“Martha. Martha your feet...” he whispered once they let go. “Doctor...we need to see...”

“And tell him what, Marcus?” she asked him, grabbing a tissue to wipe a line of blood running from his left ear. “Just...get the first aid kit, we’ve got enough crap in there to start our own hospital.”

An hour later Martha’s feet were bandaged and the two huddled together in the living room.

“That’s the last time we sleep in different rooms, Marcus. Tomorrow I’ll shift my stuff into your room and you shift your bed into mine, okay?”

He nodded silently. The thought had sat in his mind also. But there was another thought in there too. “Martha...” he whispered. “Martha, what if it’s something we can’t beat?”

Martha shook her head. “I dunno, Marcus. But we have to. We have to try?”

“If it kills us? And the remaining group?” he asked.

“If it kills us...then it could be very bad...”

“Understatement of the century.”

“Marcus...we have to try, don't you see? We can see it. It's trying to scare us, whatever the hell it is...and it gets worse every time we find someone else...doesn't that mean something? Doesn't that mean it's scared of us?”

“Maybe it just likes to play.” He muttered dimly.

## **Chapter 9**

Three days later the twins were watching This Morning in the living room. Nothing strange had happened since the night of the last meeting – though whether this was because they now slept in the same room with a locked door and a nightlight each, or simply just because, was a debatable subject.

They had called another meeting for tonight. The events had been strong enough, forceful enough to leave within them a feeling of dread and lack of time. This feeling had caused them to call an emergency meeting.

The phone rang by Martha's head, seeming shriller in the tense atmosphere than it really was. The twins looked at each other fearfully. The phone had only played a part in one event, the first one, but once bitten twice shy had recently become the twin's motto.

Martha picked up the phone and held it gingerly close to her ear.

"Hello?" she whispered into it and almost laughed with relief as a human voice replied.

"Hi...is this a bad line? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, sorry." Martha cleared her throat.

“Oh, ok. I’m looking for Martha or Marcus Mewark. It’s about an ad in the paper?”

“This is Martha. Glad you called.”

“Thanks. So, what kind of stuff...I mean...”

“Well, how about if you tell me one or two things that’ve been happening to you – if it’s what we’re looking for...”

“I-I can’t do that, not on the phone. I...” the voice shook

“Oh, ok, so, answer a question or two?”

“Um...okay, sure.”

“Great. Well, first how about your name? I’m sorry, I was rude and didn’t even bother to ask.”

“No, I’m rude, shoulda said. My name’s Janice – most people call me Jan.”

“Well hi, Jan. Okay, so a question or two...have you found yourself doing and saying things that are completely out of character for you?”

“Have I? Oh gawd yes! Unfortunately...yes.”

“Okay. Um, strange things have been happening to you – things moving around. Other things vary so I can’t really-“

“Yes! Yes! Things moving around, other stuff...” Janice sounded excited, relieved

“Okay. One more. These things, they make you feel like you’re going crazy, like nobody would believe it if you told them, like you barely believe it half the time?”

“Holy crap! That’s it! Who are you? That’s exactly it!” Janice now sounded like she was dancing for joy. Martha smiled a little.

“I think you need to come to our next meeting. There’s a groups of us, we meet sometimes, the same kind of things happening and all .....” Martha went on to explain the reason for the group, how they thought something bad was going on.

“I’ll be there.” Janice promised as Martha gave her address and hung up.

“We’ve got another.” She confirmed her brother’s look.

“Wow.” He sighed and turned the TV back up.

Janice replaced the handset and stared at the address and time she had scribbled in front of her.

“Green Lane.” She thought. “Just up the road...tonight, 7pm.”

Bringing herself back to reality, she reached into a small cup on the mantelpiece and tore a small lump of blu-tak from the well-used ball of it inside. She stuck the piece of paper to the wall and went to sit in her chair, hunting for the remote control. The phone rang as she recovered the controls from the dining table. Janice promptly dropped it on the floor as she spun round.

“No! Leave me alone!” she cried, covering her head with her hands. The phone kept ringing. “No. Stop it! I’m not gonna answer you!” she whimpered at it, shrinking to the floor. The phone stopped in mid-ring. Janice looked up, shocked by the silence, to see that the phone had answered itself.

The receiver flew an impossible length toward her and hovered by her ear. She limply tried to bat it away but it dodged and came closer. “Go see your little friends ... killer” It croaked. “It’s already too late...” laughter cackled through the house and faded away.

Janice looked up. The phone was hung up. The remote was lying by her leg. The house was normal again. She staggered to her feet, hanging onto the edge of the table, and spotted the new addition sitting in the middle of it.

It was a photograph of three people. Amanda in the middle, Danny and Rome flanking. All three were pale, their eyes flashing red, teeth long and pointed, snarling at her. As she watched, another figure appeared behind them, a black spot on the grey. As it came closer the figured began to grimace, their eyes faded black and slowly they started to wither.

The figure came closer; Janice recognised it and shook in fear as the three crumbled into dust and fell onto the table. The figure came to the front and waved at Janice, grinning. It was herself. She looked normal, human, happy, but there was an essence that wasn't quite right. The figure pointed sideways.

The view changed as if on camera, swivelling round to show the Earth, hanging in space. Slowly, like the three, it faded black and withered into dust.

“THIS IS WHO YOU ARE!” a voice boomed from nowhere. Janice screamed.  
“THIS IS WHAT YOU BRING!”

The picture vanished, leaving only the dust behind it.

Janice screamed, hearing the voice, playing the picture over and over. She sank to her knees, burying her head in her arms. She screamed until her voice was hoarse, until her throat was numb with pain. Then she cried silent, empty tears as she led herself on the floor and curled up, rocking side to side.

The doorbell chimed Janice out of her haze soon after. She struggled to her feet and into the hall. At the door was a Royal Mail deliveryman.

“Mornin'. Got a package I need you to sign for.”

Janice took the box and put it on the floor while she signed the LCD screen.

“You okay? Don’t look so hot if ya don’t mind me sayin’ so.” He said, sympathetically.

“Huh?” Janice became forcefully aware of her pale face and the straggled appearance she was carrying.

“Uh, yeah. I’m-just, stuff...I’m fine, honest. Thanks.” She gave him a small smile.

“Okay. You get well. Bye now.” He touched his cap and was gone.

Janice closed the door and took the box into the living room. Inside was an answering machine. Once hooked up, she recorded a speedy greeting and grinned. “Try get me now, assholes.” She told the phone. “It’s called screening and deleting.”

The past few days had been hellish for Janice. After assuring Stacey and Jonathan that it was just a bad dream or two, she had just spooked herself, and promising to call soon, she had returned home. The house was empty and cold and no sooner had she entered than the phone began to ring. Since that it had rung regularly every hour or two, always the same voice, always the same message. She was a killer. She had to confess. She brought destruction wherever she went.

Things would move from where she put them to anywhere in the house when she turned her back for a moment. The radio or TV would turn on in the middle of the night, scaring her out of a dazed sleep. Janice now slept downstairs, waking every time the phone rang, forced to answer it by some urge she couldn’t control. Eventually she had picked up the Yellow Pages and ordered an answering machine, confident that she could

hold herself back from the phone long enough for it to pick up for her. Suddenly she wasn't so sure it would do any good. If the phone could answer itself like that, what was to stop whatever it was leaving a message she couldn't stop herself listening to over and over? What was to stop it from simply answering itself before the machine cut in?

She tried to push the doubts away, telling herself tonight would make things better, and these people – whoever they were – would be able to help or at least give her some mental protection. Janice looked at the clock, 11:45.

“Only 7 hours...” she sighed, settling in her chair and turning the TV on.

## **Chapter 10**

“We have to do something and we have to do it fast!” Martha said. “We have to find out what it wants, what it doesn’t want...We have to ...”

“How? It’s random, meaningless crap.” Marcus sighed. “Johnny fights giant bees. Alisha sees dead people in her bed. Nathan’s roof collapses on him. But it’s all an illusion. But not for all of us ... your feet did get burned by ice. Jan...that’s the worst yet. Those three dead people are no illusion! This thing made those boys kill, then made Janice do a couple of things, then drove them crazy itself. Now it’s driven Janice up the bloody wall to join the rest of us!” he heaved his shoulders a little. Marcus rarely spoke more than was necessary – and never in front of a group.

Janice took his pause. “So it seems random. But it can’t be! There has to be something that connects...something...”

“Why?” asked Marcus.

“Because...” Janice faltered.

“Fear.” said Alisha quietly.

“Fear!” echoed Martha. “It takes our deep dark scary stuff, for me and Marcus its being apart, it always gets us apart, does different things. Adrianne – you’re afraid to die,

no, of being killed.” Adrienne nodded. Suddenly there was a chorus, as if a blind had just been lifted to reveal the sunlight.

“I’m allergic to bees; I get chased by them...”

“My Grandma died in my bed when I was 6, I found her. I keep finding...”

“Me and my brother played in an abandoned house, the roof collapsed on him...”

Everybody told their deepest fear; it seemed they were all related to what had been happening to them.

“Jan? What about you?” Marcus asked gently.

“I...loss of control, order, people I love...I’m afraid of chaos.”

The room fell silent for a moment before Martha forced out the inevitable question.

“Why? Does it feed on fear? Why does it do this?”

Marcus was the one to reply. “Why does a runner run, an artist paint? Why do we do anything out of choice?”

Janice covered her ears, shaking her head. Marcus went on.

“Maybe...it does it because it’s fun. Because it’s good at it. Because it’s a hobby. Maybe...it does it...because it can.” He finished.

Janice fell to her knees, gripping the side of her head. “Nonononono!” she cried. “It can’t be that! There’s a reason, it, needs it to live or...”

“Why, Jan? Some things in this fucked up world just...happen. Just because they do,” spoke Marcus as he put his arm around her shoulder gently. “We’re all strong people here. And so are you. Fears can be beaten, people do it every day.”

“But...I can’t. Not like this...not ...”

“Why Jan?” asked Martha.

“Because everything happens for a reason. There has to be a reason. Because without reason, there’s no meaning, just chaos.” Janice whimpered.

Suddenly a bright light beam flashed upwards from the floor. It hovered stationary for a moment before bending towards the wall behind the T.V. The beam sank into the wall and slowly the glow began to shape into words.

‘I am Runihura’

Read by every person in the room.

‘Soon I collect all.’

The light faded and flickered out, but the two fragments were already imprinted on every eye, in every brain.

“What’s a Runihura?” someone asked

“It’s a name,” replied Janice. “It gave us its name.”

“Why?” spluttered Martha. “Why tell us? And why warn us?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Marcus said. “Ego, joke, scare us more. Makes no difference.”

He stood and motioned for everyone to follow him into the next room.

“This is the Geek room.” He introduced. “Computers, games, music, books. All in here.” He walked to one corner and sat on a chair in front of the computer, reaching to switch it on as he did so. “It gave us a name. Doesn’t matter why. But...means we have something to look for.”

“The ‘net!” Martha exclaimed. “Of course! – Marcus you’re a bloody genius! Okay, how’s this. We’ll stick here and do the research, you guys get home and come back tomorrow, see what we found.”

“Want me to go to the library?” asked a small, blonde boy called Robert.

“Yes! Good idea, take Nathan and Sara and go to the library... Tomorrow you can fill in any gaps we have, or things we missed, with stuff you find there. Not sure how

Blackburn library is for this kinda of info though...still, anything could be anywhere. Thanks, Robert.” Robert nodded and grinned, proud of himself.

“I’ll stay too.” Janice said. “I make great coffee, and another perspective always comes in handy if you find owt cryptic – plus, the name sounds Egyptian and I have a whole database of info in my head about that. Besides, safety in numbers, if we get too close to something we dunno what it might do.” Janice shrugged and smiled at her own obscurity.

“Janice, you’re a treasure!” Martha almost hugged her. “Alright, see you lot tomorrow. Hopefully with positive info.”

Everybody left, leaving the three to stare at the monitor and drink coffee. Eventually, however, they got too tired to concentrate. As Marcus put it, they needed to sleep or risk missing something important. Janice was piled on top of thick blankets in a sleeping bag on the floor between the twins’ beds. But nobody slept much, less to do with the coffee and more with fear, anticipation, and apprehension.

Six hours later, at 10am, the alarm clock shrilled. All three shot upright with a yell of terror before realising the culprit. Marcus pounded the alarm with his fist and shook his head, trying to laugh at his racing heart. Slowly they all climbed out of bed and down to the computer once more. Janice cleared the cups and made more coffee, then they all sat warming their hands, staring at the screen once more.

Finally Marcus turned around. “We’re pretty much exhausted. Just finding the same info, we’ve out-searched 5 engines! I think we’ve got all we’re gonna get.”

Taking this in, trying to recap what they had learned, all three moved into the living room and sat silently for a few minutes.

“So what did we get? I mean, I know what we know, and Jan very kindly enlightened us of the Egyptian ways and all. But...” Martha shrugged, looking helpless for the first time in her life.

Marcus nodded. “What does it mean? I dunno, girls. I really don’t. Maybe if we talk about it together, get it steady and firm to tell the guys tonight. Maybe someone who’s not been looking at it all night, maybe they’ll be able to have an idea.”

“Good point.” Martha put on her resolved face. “So what did we learn? What do we know?”

They talked all day, beating against knowledge, rumour, and myth. Finding no level ground. When the group began to arrive they all but collapsed in their chairs, trying to gather their strength for the night.

## **Chapter 11**

When everyone was gathered and drinks were served, Martha stood up and waited for the room to quiet before realizing everyone was already too nervous to talk.

“So, we did research and found out lots of stuff. We’re waiting on a guy to get back to us, but we’ll tell you about that later. Jan is pretty much the resident expert; at least she has some knowledge of Egypt and things like that. So she’s gonna tell you all about it. Jan?”

Martha sat down and Jan stood up slowly, looking around her. She almost lost her nerve as she saw the hopeful look on every face, half-expectant, half-daring to think she might bring a solution to it all. Looking away from this she collected her thoughts and began to speak.

“Ok, well first you need to understand a little about the Gods in Ancient Egypt. Most people have heard of Amun-Ra at some point, the Sun God. Like most ancient cultures, they worshipped the sun as a life-giver. Amun-Ra literally means ‘hidden light’; he was the creator of the universe and main God of the Sun. Unlike most of today’s religions, and even in comparison to, say, the Hindu beliefs, Egyptians and all the ancients believed in many, many Gods. There was one for everything, at least. The Pharaoh was the receptacle of Ra on Earth, and Ra was the principle God for the great majority of their ancient civilization.”

Janice breathed more easily ... this was a subject she knew about. The only thing she had to do was keep to the topic.

“The citizens were given pretty much a free reign with God worship, like I said the principle God was Ra. However, there were so many others, and all good for different things, that there was never one common God that every village worshipped. The places on the Nile would worship one of the Gods believed to bring flood and good Harvest, for instance. And they could worship any number of Gods, really. There's too many to start naming and they were useful for so many different things.

“There was little of any 'Evil' Gods, no particular Devil or Fallen Angel mythology; there was God of the Underworld, Apep, basically created to explain why the Sun disappeared every night. Um, Seth was the God of storms, or destruction, but if he were happy, he would destroy enemies of the village. You see? Even what is generally considered to be bad, would come in pretty handy. All the Gods, if unappeased, would bring plague or destruction on the village, but as long as they were happy, they would bless whatever was their particular forte. Of course, each village - not being in major communication with each other - may have a slightly differing definition of their Gods' talents.

“Ok, so, with the amount of Gods there were some who were, if anything, barely known even to those who wrote the texts. And our man, Runihura, was one of these.

”According to the legends, Chons, God of the Moon was seduced by Rakatum, one of the handmaidens of Atum, the God of the setting sun. From this union came twins, a boy and a girl. Brother-sister God combinations were not unknown in Egypt, Kek and

Keket, Gods of Darkness for instance. But the girl was born 'without life', the texts say. And the boy was cast aside by his mother who blamed him for his sister's death. She didn't even bother to name him – Runihura came about later.”

Janice paused and took a long drink. “Am I making sense so far?” Nods and affirmations came, and she nodded and continued.

“After being cast aside by his half-human mother, he wanted to destroy the world of humans. He had the ability to bring darkness out of light, and he could feed on the darkness to give him strength. He was named Runihura meaning Destroyer because he would bring out the deepest fears in a person, make them real and feed on their fear. Eventually he would take them completely into his arms and suck them dry. According to what we read, he was little known, probably because the Priests in control didn't want people to know something of such Evil existed.

“Where there's evil there's people to follow it, and that was something they didn't want. He was probably made angrier by this, but in the end, it saved him because when the ancient civilization fell and the Gods were, in a sense, destroyed he was left alone because nobody knew of him. I dunno, I guess he existed and that made him real, but nobody bothered to discount him and destroy him so he survived. This is all speculation and stuff. But that's basically what we've found out.”

Janice nodded to Martha and sat down quickly.

“Wow, thanks Janice.” Martha said. “Like I said we're waiting for someone to get back to us, hopefully with a little information on how to defeat him. But this is our

guy, he's survived and he's bringing out our fears to feed on. And when he said 'soon' we figure he means to, what was it? Take us in his arms and suck us dry. There's not much info about him, because he was basically ignored. But the guy we're waiting for seems to be proclaimed as an expert in the lesser Gods, and most of the info we got was from his website. Hopefully he can tell us...something."

The room was quiet as everyone took this in.

"So..." began an older girl, Michelle. " He...brings out our fears, feeds on them, then sucks the hell out of us and kills us?"

Martha nodded.

"All because his mum was a bitch?"

There were a few stifled giggles and agreements.

"Pretty much. And still a big dangerous brat." Marcus replied. "What we need to concentrate on is a way to get rid of him."

"We talked about it a little." Martha said, nodding. "The best way would be to simply not be scared of anything anymore, but that's pretty much the domain of cheesy Hallmark horror films. It's just not possible, to the human mind, to simply not be afraid of something that's scary."

"Couldn't we, like, ask another God to help us?" wondered Sara

“We thought of that.” Janice put in. “It’s one of the questions we asked the guy we’re waiting for – his name’s Raman by the way. But we’re not sure, really, I mean they’re all meant to be dead, and we wouldn’t know how, and there’s no guarantee they’d care anyway after being shunned for so long. I dunno. I’m still trying to accept that there’s one god of any kind still running around, much less tryna kill us. We just have to wait and hope that Raman comes through, soon.”

There was a bang, a flash, and suddenly a figure appeared in the middle of their makeshift circle.

“Hi everyone!” grinned a half-transparent man with dark hair, briefcase and pinstripe suit. He waited patiently while the group screamed, moved away, and quieted down a little.

“Thank you for not running for the door. I do hate having to hold people in. So. I’m Runihura, how are you all?”

No reply.

“Well, I see the attitude here. No problem, I can be polite for all of us.”

“Polite?!” roared Janice. “Polite?! You come to us, for no reason, scare us half crazy, feed on it, you’re gonna kill every single one of us – and you’re bothered cos we didn’t offer you a cup of f\*\*\*ing coffee?!”

Runihura raised his hand, and Janice was forced back into her seat. “Now, now. I understand you may be a little annoyed at me. You’ve obviously done some research. The Internet is a wonderful thing, is it not? I should’ve learned by now that inveterate politeness in humans has long since vanished into nothing. I apologize, insult away.”

He crossed his arms and waited, eyeing the room with a half smile. “No? Okay then.” He smiled at everyone warmly.

Martha stood and faced him. “What are you doing here? Why are you doing this? And what’s with the...lawyer outfit?”

“Ah, questions, thank you, now we can begin a discourse. I will answer all your questions within reason. I am here to say hello to you all. I’ve been torturing you for a while now, and decided it was time we met. It’s a personal preference that I meet people before I kill them. I’m doing this...because I can. Because I want to. Because I like it. So well done Marcus, you’re a very astute young man.”

“You’re doing it because your mum was a bitch and you’re a big f\*\*\*in’ pussy, more like.” Muttered a voice from the back,

Runihura smiled modestly and reached out his hand. The boy who had spoken flew forwards and landed, terrified, by his side,

“Ah, Ron. Nice to see you. How’s those spiders?”

Ron shook his head and whimpered. Runihura shrugged and continued, still keeping Ron by his side. “And ... well, I like this appearance. Gives me a professional look, don't you think? Actually I thought it rather suited me.”

“Why don't you show us what you really look like,” Marcus growled.

“Oh, oh, I'm so sorry. Did I offend your ingrained religious stereotype sensibilities?” the lawyerly figure before them vanished to be replaced by a circle of fire. In the middle was a giant red creature. The fire leaked from every pore, the horns atop his head writhed painfully. Every muscle bulged and every bone cracked.

“Is this what you would prefer to see?” boomed a thousand voices, rebounding in their heads until their eardrums almost bled.

Almost as one, they were screaming, “No.”

Another flash and the lawyer was back. “So you prefer this then. Good, me too. Anyway, I see you've been doing your research. Fun isn't it? Figured out how you're gonna defeat me yet? Ha! There's not a spirit being left who has the strength to make a dent.”

“Runihura.” Martha began, then stopped.

“Yes my dear?” he encouraged.

“Don’t call me dear...”

He shrugged. “Whatever. What do you want to say?”

“Why do you do this? I mean, yeah it’s powerful and fun, maybe even tasty. But ...did you never just want to be good? Find out people’s deepest desires and bring them true? There’s enough happiness from that to feed off and not harm anyone. Is this all because your mum blamed you for your sister and cast you aside? Cos that was a long time ago, and it’s nothing to do with us.”

“Hmmm...yes I could do that happiness thing, and that’d be just as much fun in its own way. I suppose I simply don’t want to. It started because of my mum. I tried to like you humans, I really did. Only ... you’re all so selfish and self-serving and blind and stupid and ... I just couldn’t bear it. Course at one time I decided I wanted to simply kill you all and be done with it, but then I realized you’re just too tasty and easy to scare.

“There’s darkness in every single person. I like the ones who give into it completely, and I like the ones that imprison it completely. Shows strength of character, courage, I like that. I don’t hurt those people. But the rest of you are just so ... awful. Trying so hard to pretend you’re good, but never fooling even yourself. There’s so little goodness in most of you that you can be guilted into doing anything. You’re all so weak and pathetic.

“And really, really tasty ... but listen, I really do have to get going now. I’m proud of you all, nobody ever managed to get a whole group together, much less find

out anything about me. I wanted to congratulate you all, really good job. And because of that ... I'll let the rest of you live a little longer, a day, two, three...and when I get bored I'll come for you.

“I won't kill you all at once, but over a few days you'll all die. And I promise I won't hurt you a bit, cos, ya know, usually I like to hurt a little...or a lot ...”  
Runihura grinned, his smile looked warm and friendly, but his eyes were cold and dead, dancing with dark fire.

Another flash and he was gone. Ron fell to the floor and remained on his knees.

The group once more sat in silence, nobody daring to speak, to think. One or two held back tears. Others held back anger. All held back fear.

Eventually Janice forced herself to speak. “We ... better all go ... somewhere. Think, don't be alone...but...”

Martha and Marcus nodded and a general assent brought everyone to their feet. They quickly arranged to sleep at each other's houses, to get clothes and remain at least in pairs.

After a while they dispersed, reluctantly and quietly, leaving only Janice, Martha and Marcus. Janice looked at the other two sullenly, trying to hide her fear.

“We're all gonna die,” she said quietly.

## **Chapter 12**

“Nobody is going to die,” snapped Martha.

“And how d’you plan to stop him? Gonna appeal to his better nature again?”

Janice raised a sarcastic eyebrow at Martha as she spoke.

“I don’t know how. Maybe Raman will have at least a hint for us! I don’t care! Nobody is going to die!” Martha was shouting now, almost hysterical and she knew it. Marcus stepped closer to them, a calming presence, saying nothing.

“Nobody is going to die before I’ve killed myself trying to stop this bastard. But realism is my curse, Martha. I have to accept the possibility that Runihura, bringer of chaos as he is, might kill everyone before we manage to tickle him. It only means I’m gonna try harder to stop him.”

“I know, Jan. I’m sorry. It just...hit me...what he said, so calm, like he was inviting us on a picnic. He really is a destroyer. He really does bring chaos. But I’m not afraid of chaos, Jan. I don’t wanna accept that he’s gonna kill us all. But I guess I gotta accept that he might. And you’re right, again, it’s only gonna make me work harder.”

The girls nodded at each other, panic-rift closed, friendship cemented, teamwork laid. Challenge issued.

“I’ll never stop believing we can destroy him.” Marcus spoke at last. “Even if we fail. Somebody has to, someday. I’m writing everything down, gonna put it where people can find it. If we fail...if we die...somebody else might not.”

“No.” Janice whispered. “No. I’ll kill him. I don’t care how. I’ll do it.”

“Jan...we are gonna try our best, but-” Martha tried to speak but Janice whirled on her, eyes dark with fire.

“After what he did...to all of us, to me...I will kill him! Don’t you understand? He took those boys and made them kill my girlfriend, losing her was a fear I didn’t even realise I had until she was gone. I went crazy for a while and did one dumb thing to them...he took the idea from me and he carried on until he drove them to hallucinations, suicide...He made me the killer by doing what I wanted to do but was too scared. Then he laughed at me for it! Danny, Rome, Amanda...none of them ever deserved what they got. But they got it anyway. Amanda was an incredible girl. I was – am – in love with her. Danny and Rome...weren’t the nicest guys in the world, but they weren’t stupid, they weren’t bad, not really All three of them...he-he took away the opportunity they had to be...anything they wanted. Now they’ll never be anything, because he never let them have the chance. And I will kill him for it.”

Janice reached into her back pocket and threw a cassette down on the table.

“This is what the boys made before...I begged their parents to let me borrow it, to listen to it. They couldn’t see how to say no after what they had done. I made a copy. Listen to it. See what...who they were, and see what he did to them. See what I was too

afraid to do. See how I gave him the idea, how I gave him three people without even meaning to.”

Janice whipped round and half-ran out of the house. Her eyes dripped tears and she swiped at them aimlessly as she sped down the road. Not knowing where she was going, her feet brought her instinctively back home. She entered her house and fell onto the chair, her chest heaving with dry sobs.

Slowly she calmed down and entered the kitchen to wash her face. It was only then she saw the mess the house was in. All over things were strewn around, chairs broken, things thrown against the wall to shatter. Her TV had been dropped into the back yard. Her fridge/freezer left open, the smell was overpowering.

Amidst the chaos, somewhere between panic and catatonia, Janice saw the writing on all the walls.

“You are a killer.”

“You can never destroy me.”

“I am a God ... you are nothing.”

“Give up or suffer the pain.”

There was more, but Janice had already raced back out of her house. Once again running on instinct, she found herself in front of the Gosser house. The car was there.

Jonathan and Stacey must be in. Yet Janice didn't want to knock, didn't want to fall onto them, have to lie and hide what was wrong. She turned and walked away.

Martha and Marcus listened to the tape in silence then placed it back in its case. They looked at each other blankly.

"I-I think I understand why Janice..." Martha stammered.

Marcus nodded.

They sat, unmoving, for a while longer before realising their inaction. Marcus stood and went to make dinner in the kitchen. Martha flipped on the computer to check for a reply from Raman. There was one.

"Marcus! He replied." She called. Marcus came quickly into the room, carrying a plate of sandwiches and two cans of pop.

"Well?"

Martha read the e-mail to him.

"Dear Martha and Marcus. I was fascinated to hear of your college project." Here they gave small grins. Telling Raman they were doing a project had seemed less insane than trying to convince him they were trying to fight the God himself.

“I’ll be only too glad to help you in any way I can. You already have all the information from my website on Runihura and his history, so I’ll work on the assumption that I don’t need to repeat it.

“Rumour and speculation says that Runihura is most definitely the ‘evil twin’... His sister was made of light while he was made of dark. As they were created to complement each other (like the other brother-sister Gods) the death of the girl would have thrown this completely out of balance. It’s probable that Runihura would have been the same as he was even if his mother had paid him the attention he craved. Eternal darkness would be enough to drive anyone crazy, and I’m quite sure that’s the reason he became evil.

“You say your project is aimed towards the destruction and/or defeat of Runihura. This is a difficult one to answer, as you know the God’s were destroyed when the more modern religions arrived and Runihura was simply unknown enough to escape destruction.

“Without going all the way into it, the only possible way I can see to defeat him would be to invoke the power of his sister.

“When the God’s were destroyed it was only their celestial bodies, the bit that people worshipped. Their powers, again says speculation, should still be in existence somewhere and available to anyone who is strong enough to call them.

“The problem is that anyone not strong enough to handle them would certainly be destroyed most spectacularly.

“I hope this helps initially, I put some links below so you can read up on calling the powers, etc. If you need any more help, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Martha looked up excitedly to see Marcus in suspended animation, a sandwich halfway to his mouth and forgotten. “We can beat this guy. If we can call his sister’s light, we can kick his ass all the way back to the Ancients!”

Marcus edged her out of the way and opened the links one by one, scanning the pages quickly. “If we can find someone strong enough, and reckless enough to do it. If the speculation is right. If we can figure out how...”

The front door opened and Janice found them a moment later. She looked red and flustered. Martha jumped up and sat her in a chair. Marcus brought her the plate of sandwiches and got another drink from the kitchen. Both sat anxiously, watching her, waiting for her to return to herself.

Eventually a sandwich moved to her lips and a bite disappeared. The can was opened and drunk quickly. Janice looked around her. Light dawned in her eyes as she remembered where she was and what had happened.

“My house...it-it’s destroyed. He totalled it, all inside. Everything...” she described the way she had entered the house. The realisation of what had happened. The jagged splinters from her chairs and tables. The glass and plastic from her TVs and radios. The writing all over the wall. Then she told them how she had run and found

herself at the Gosser's house, how she had walked away from them afraid. How she had picked her way back here by half-memory.

They comforted her with food, hugs, promises to help clean up. And told her about the e-mail they had received.

"We think we can gather the power of his sister, but we need someone with the strength of a Goddess or it might kill us all." Marcus refrained, for now, from talking about the rest of the details. The links Raman had given them were very informative. But his common sense told him the reaction he would get, and he didn't want Janice running to do this alone.

"I'll do it." Janice said firmly. "I can handle it. Let me do it."

"Janice, no. We don't know – someone not strong enough can't handle it! We can't be sure you are. No-one can do this until we know nothing's gonna go wrong. "

Janice shook her head. "No. It has to be me. I'm the one he's done the worst crap to. I'm the one who has more reason to hate him than any of you guys. You know it's true. He brought three lives to an end to get to me! He's bringing hell and chaos into every one of us. Fear, hate, anger – they all turn into strength, Marcus. It has to be me."

Her speech and tone left them wordless and pale.

“Jan. There’s other people involved here. From long ago, from now. From the future if we screw up. You can’t decide this alone. We won’t let you. We’ll talk tonight – as a group. Ok?”

Janice nodded and shrugged. “Fair deal.”

“There’s a test.” Marcus spoke quietly. “To see who’s the strongest, who’s best for it. Some...small force, I dunno. I’ll tell you about it when the guys arrive, we can all do it. Whoever passes or does best takes the risk, if they want to. Whoever, Jan. That means you or anybody else. All right?”

“A test. Sounds fair. You can all watch me pass,” came the stubborn reply.

“You can make up for it in other ways, Jan...” Martha touched Janice’s arm gently. “You didn’t do anything but think a bad thought or two – we all do that, it’s not your fault someone was listening. So you did one small, silly thing. You can live till you’re 80 and do a million great things till it’s gone away. You said he took away three people’s chances to be anything they wanted – what if he takes away yours?”

“What if he kills you? What if this power you want to take in kills you?” Marcus added, almost hopefully. But Janice shook her head and said nothing. The twins could only look desperately at each other and resign the decision to whatever ‘test’ was to come.

They avoided vocalising the subject by staying apart for the afternoon. Martha curled up in her room and read. Janice half-watched a video. Marcus disappeared into

the computer room. By the time the guests began to arrive, however, they were together again and anxiously waiting for the meeting to begin.

The house filled up in flows of two, three, four until everyone had arrived by 7:30.

Everyone but Ron.

“Maybe he got scared. I mean, he was so close to the Runi-guy. Paralysed, couldn’t get away. I’d be pretty freaked out if I were him.” Suggested a normally quiet girl, Naomi.

“Nah. I nattered with him last night, he was scared shitless, but that wasn’t gonna stop him comin’.” Put in Ron’s best friend, Mace. They had met in one of the meetings a short while ago and, though completely different on the surface, had quickly become like brothers.

Without speaking, Marcus picked up the telephone and address book from the top of the TV and exited into the computer room once more. Everyone fidgeted, trying to hear him. Trying not to hear. Knowing the truth already.

Marcus re-entered, his head down. Replacing the phone and address book, he raised his eyes to Martha. “I spoke to Ron’s girlfriend.”

Ron was 23. From what they knew, he was a retail manager. He was a blunt, very outspoken but very friendly man. Always reliable, always jumping into everything feet first. Falling asleep at night to dream of being bitten by poisonous tarantulas – waking up alive, yet covered in bite marks.

“She said...something – things bit him. He was covered in lumps. They’re searching the house and everything, and they’re gonna exterminate anyway. But she said, the doctor said, they looked like giant spider bites. But they can’t find any spiders. They’re all pretty...confused...right now. I wish I coulda told them something...” he trailed off and dropped into his chair, falling almost gladly into the deathly silence of the rest.

## **Chapter 13**

The mood remained sombre as they all took in the news. The group was now one less in number, and if Runihura's promise was right, it could begin to drop sharply at any time.

Marcus forced himself back on track and cleared his throat. Everyone turned to him, hoping for something, some news that was good. "There's maybe a way to kill this bastard."

A small roar of gratitude.

"Um, Raman got back to us with some interesting stuff." He related the e-mail to them all, and they nodded grimly.

"So who's gonna do it?" asked Mace. When Marcus shrugged, he stood up. "Let me. Ron was my best friend. Let me do it."

"Ron is - was friend to all of us, Mace. We can't all fight over who gets to be the big hero. If the wrong person does it, they'll die. Only someone with an incredible amount of strength can do it," Marcus explained. "There's a test, to see who's strongest. That person has the option to go further, nobody else. Whoever that person is, they don't have to agree. I can't guarantee anyone's safety in the test, much less the big thing, for all I know we'll all end up dead. Nobody has to take the test if they don't want to, either."

Janice waited patiently for him to come to a halt and began to fire questions.

“What do we have to do?”

“Um, it’s like a ritual. We need some an image or picture or the Goddess to circle round. Then a small verse, and then the test is performed.”

“A verse? In English? Who’s gonna say it?”

“It’s just five lines, repeated five times. It’s in Arabic, but I think if the pronunciation is right, the meaning doesn’t matter. I’ve been practising today. That’s why I’ve been holed up on the computer. I’m gonna say it. I can still be a part of the test so it works out good.”

“What’s the test? What do we do?”

“Well, we get the image – I think it’s usually a statue, but it says any image so I printed out a picture of an engraving. Then we circle round it and I do the verse. Then, I guess the test performs itself, there’s no more info, just says the test will be performed.”

“And if it doesn’t work?” asked Martha.

“Then we try it another way. And if it hurts us or kills us, then Marcus’ notes have to be left where somebody can get them. It’s all we’ve got!” Janice realised she was shouting and sat down, embarrassed.

“I know, Jan. We’re gonna do it.” Marcus calmed her. “Anyone wants to back out of the test, go home now. Come back tomorrow. It’s okay if you don’t wanna do it, but we can’t have you around – just in case. I swear nobody will think badly of anyone who gets up and walks out now.” He paused for a minute, giving all the chance to consider what they were about to do, what could happen.

Nathan stood. “I-I can’t...I know I’m not strong enough so you won’t miss me. And, if it goes wrong, if there’s only me left...I can do something before he gets me, maybe...I...”

Marcus nodded. “I’ll get my notes, look after them. Put them where they’ll be found if it all goes wrong, if something...gets...you before you have time to do anything.” Marcus left the room and returned with a handful of paper, written and printed notes. He handed them to Nathan. “Come back tomorrow, same time, we’ll fill you in.”

Nathan nodded and tried to apologise to everyone. He was stopped before he could, and hugged by most of the group. Everybody telling him to take good care of the notes. If the worst happened, it was up to him. He left with a final smile and a promise to take care of the papers – whatever happened.

“I kinda hoped someone would back out, just cos somebody needs to look after that stuff,” Marcus said. “I have copies of everything myself, but...” he shrugged.

“Do we do the test now, Marcus?” asked Naomi.

He nodded and left the room. A moment later he returned with more sheets of paper. On the floor he laid one, face up, showing the image of a Goddess. "This is her. It's the only picture of her I could find."

Everyone remembered what they had been told and sat in a circle around the image. Marcus paced the room, muttering to himself, trying to be sure he had the pronunciation correct. He knew the verse by heart now. Reading it off paper would have been no help because of the language, but he had learned the words and the sounds.

Finally he joined the circle and looked around. Everyone nodded back at him to show they were ready. He gripped his sister's hand beside him, and then Janice's on his other side, then loosed them and took a deep breath. He rolled the verse out carefully, painfully, repeating it five times. All in the circle were pale and shaky. After the fifth verse he stopped.

Nothing happened.

Everyone looked around them, half-disappointed, half-relieved. Then they saw the image in the center shimmering. The image of the Goddess rose off the page and turned to stand on its feet in the air between them. Slowly she turned around, seemingly looking at them all.

She stopped after a full turn, facing Marcus. The shimmering image moved towards him. As it came closer Marcus' head began to throb. His eyes pulsed behind his closed lids. His heart pounded, trying to break through. His ears exploded and he screamed in pain and fell to the floor.

The image turned to Martha next. One by one the entire circle felt the pain and fell backwards onto the floor. Curling up into a ball, lying flat out in shock, whimpering, crying. The pain in all of them was immense.

Then the image came to Janice. The last hope. It moved closer and she felt the throb in her head, her eyes breathed, and her heart skipped a beat. Her ears blocked and her nose bled, but she didn't cry out, and she didn't fall. The Goddess hovered face-to-face with her and the image reached out her hand. As it touched Janice's cheek she felt a burning pain on the soft flesh.

Then it was over. The image flashed back into its picture. The pain was suddenly gone. Everyone sat up and looked around them, eyes mostly blank, still feeling the memory of the pain like a phantom limb.

Then Marcus touched Janice's cheek. She winced and realised that pain was still real. Jumping up as fast as her shaky legs could, she went to the mantelpiece, the mirror sitting over it. On her cheek was a burning symbol in the shape of the Egyptian vision of the sun ... one disc with rays shooting downwards to her neck, stopping at her jawbone. Coloured black, but seeming to burn inside.

Janice turned back to everyone, mouth open. They looked back at her, mouths open.

“You won, Jan. It is you.” Marcus said. “If you still want to do it...”

“I still want to do it.” She gave a ghostly smile. “Toldya so.”

The twins smiled back softly.

“Mace. I swear I’ll kill this guy, ok. I only knew Ron a little – all of you, actually, I’m new to all you guys and you don’t know me. But I give you my word that you can trust me, and I swear I will kick his ass back into the Ancient times.”

Mace came forward and hugged her. “I know you will. And we’ll all be here cheering you on, doing anything we can.” He turned to Marcus. “Speakin’ of which, what can we do? What happens next to Janice?”

Marcus shrugged. “I didn’t get much research time; I’ll do it for tomorrow night. I needed to get the test right...”

Mace nodded at him. “Nice one, mate. Can, er, can we go ‘ome now? I’m fuckin’ knackered from that test.” Around him there were many agreements, including Martha and Marcus. Jan yawned her answer widely.

“Yeah. Same time tomorrow. I think we’ll be ready for the next step by then.” Marcus nodded to himself.

Soon everyone was sent yawning on their way, to their own houses or someone else’s. Safety in numbers was the only security they could pretend to have. The three remaining collapsed into bed, barely managing a ‘Goodnight’ before being swept off to their dreams.

Marcus dreamed of a ship on the ocean. He was the Captain, and pirates were attacking them. The Captain of the pirate ship was dressed as a lawyer, with a pinstripe suit and briefcase. As he climbed on board Marcus realised it was Runihura. He walked toward Marcus, ignoring the fighting around them.

“Still in the same suit? No washing machines where you live?” Marcus muttered, sourly.

“You can never win, you know that don’t you? That girl you’ve got there, no chance. I’m too strong. There’s something you misunderstand about Gods, Marcus. I didn’t remain alive because nobody knew I was there so nobody could destroy me, what sense does that make? It’s not the amount of people believing that give a God strength, else how could I have survived?” He smiled a bright white toothy grin. His teeth were sharp and he clicked them playfully.

Marcus stared at the teeth, unable to look away. He broke his trance as he felt a pain in his stomach. Looking down, a cry on his lips, he saw claws flashing his blood at him, the same blood flowing from his stomach. A gash had appeared and as he watched, Runihura grabbed both sides of the loose flesh and pulled them apart, exposing Marcus’ insides.

Marcus woke, screaming, trying to hold his stomach in, and feeling the dampness of blood but no pain.

Martha drifted off peacefully to dream of walking through a field of grass, cows chewing on every side, looking at her in that suspiciously, doe-eyed way. She grinned at them and kicked playfully at the grass, ragged from the flat teeth of the cows. They seemed to see she was harmless and moved closer, taking small sideways steps. She looked at them and waved, laughing as they edged closer. She spun round and saw they were edging closer all round her.

She moved towards on and reached out her hand to pat its flank. The cow next to it mooed loudly, and another reached out its long nose and snapped at her hand like a big, dopey dog. She jumped backwards with a yelp of fright. Suddenly the cows slowly moving closer seemed less doe-eyed, less harmless. She realised they weighed twice what she did, their jaws were strong, and their hoofs were hard. Spinning around she tried desperately to find a small space, enough to run through and make a break for safety before they realised what she had done.

There was no space. Rows two, three thick the cows edged ever closer until she could feel their breath on her clothes. They turned to face her head on, more cows crowding in as spaces on the front row became available.

Martha whimpered, trying to scream for help, making no sound. Behind her a cow lunged forward and clamped down on her hand, grinding it between its jaws. The bones scraped and shattered, and Martha found her voice to scream. But nobody answered as she was kicked to the floor. A cow stood over here, one hoof on her chest, ready to push through. Other cows clamped down on every part of her. The rest circled, aiming a kick when they could, trying to shuffle in, swapping places. The cow above her

chest moaned softly and all the cows let go. Bones shattered, blank with the pain, Martha saw the hoof raised a little and screamed silently as it plunged down onto her chest.

Screaming in unison with her brother, she flew upright in bed, checking all over, seeing bite marks but feeling nothing broken.

Janice's dream was dark. She could see nothing, there were objects in her way and she crashed into them, bruising a shin, a hip, a shoulder. Somewhere she could feel eyes on her. She moved around, hands held out uselessly in front of her, blinded by total darkness not even her good night vision could crack.

A chuckle sounded to her left, hollow and throaty, rasping like sandpaper. She whirled in that direction and swung her fists into nothing.

The laugh came again, from behind her. She whirled and hit out again.

Now from her right, whirling around she found nothing yet again.

More laughter now, coming from every side. She swung pathetically, crying her anguish with each flailing punch.

Suddenly a click and there was light, blinding her. She screamed in surprise and terror, covering her eyes from the light...and the glimpse of three chuckling things. They moved forward, still chuckling inanely. She uncovered her eyes, unable to resign to whatever fate they might have planned. She looked them in their eyes.

Or their eye sockets. Each person, thing, surrounding her was rotting, dead. Maggots writhed in their stomachs and worms poked out of their noses, mouths. But their eye sockets were black. As she watched, turning around to see them all, pieces of flesh slipped off them to the ground.

She saw she was in her house, before it was trashed, but with her furniture moved around, disconcerting her. She saw the people in front of her were Amanda, Danny and Rome. Rome still carried his gun. Amanda and Rome dived forwards and grabbed her arms, throwing her to the floor and pinning her down, Rome held the gun to her head and cocked it. Janice gagged and choked on the smell of putrefaction. Fighting back bile as worms and maggots crawled onto her.

Above her, Danny smiled, cracking flesh to the floor as he did. He pulled down her trousers and underwear and knelt in front of her. Janice screamed as she realised what he was about to do. Danny pulled down his trousers; they fell into dust as he did so. His erection crawled with maggots and insects. He grinned horribly and moved closer between Janice's legs. She felt the tickle below as the maggots crawled onto her, and the push as Danny went inside her.

Janice felt her mind snap ... writhing, screaming, scraping her throat raw as she hit out in her bed, drowning out the screams of Marcus and Martha.

## **Chapter 14**

Marcus and Martha forgot their terror as they leapt out of bed to pin down Janice. She flailed and, as they tried to grab a firm hold, caught Marcus a blow by his eye. He stumbled and fell backwards, pushing himself straight up again and ignoring the flare of pain. Together, they managed to hold down her arms and legs ... then looked at each other across the screaming woman.

“What the fuck do we do now,” shouted Martha over the noise.

Marcus looked around quickly and motioned for Martha to restrain Janice. She grunted and grabbed hold of arms and legs with a hand each, straining as Janice freed herself and rained blows upon her captor.

Marcus pulled the sheets off their bed and hurriedly flipped Janice over facedown, sitting on her legs and tying one blanket around her arms as he did so. Once done, he added another around her legs and panted as he turned to his sister.

“You ok, sis?” he roared above the noise. She nodded and got up.

“Tie her to the bed - that can't be comfy. C'mon.”

Together they picked up the body and put it onto Martha's bed. Quickly Marcus undid the knot on the blanket around her arms. Martha grabbed both wrists and held them close to the metal headboard. Marcus tied one end of the blanket to the post and the other he wrapped in a figure eight around Janice's wrists. Then he undid the knot at the

kicking legs. Again he tied one end of the blanket to the metal frame at the bottom and the other around the ankles in a figure eight.

Then they both collapsed breathlessly onto his bed.

“What the fuck?” was all Martha could manage.

“We all dreamed ...” Marcus panted out.

They said no more while they caught their breath, minds racing with their pulses. After a few minutes Marcus stood up and beckoned Martha to follow him out of the room. They walked downstairs. In the living room they could still hear the screaming, but at least their voices could rise above it easily.

“Before we discuss anything, we gotta stop the screaming. We gotta calm her down.” Marcus said, guessing his sister was about to begin on the subject of dreams. Before they could say any more, the phone rang. Marcus picked it up apprehensively.

“Marcus, my boy. Alfred here.” It was their neighbour

“Oh, hi Alfred. Listen I’m real sorry about the noise...”

“Yes, I should hope so. I mean, you have your book club meetings or whatever they are and they go on late, and I don’t mind because you’re good kids, you two. But, son, it’s not 4am yet. What’s going on over there? Somebody’s screaming blue bloody murder, and it’s waking up half the street! Only reason they aren’t over there beating down the

door is because every head that peeks out the door is told that I'm dealing with it – passed the message on, you see. Not everyone is as understanding as old Alfred.”

“I know, Alfred. I'm really sorry. It's a friend of ours, she's...we're not sure what happened but something...we're gonna deal with it, quiet her down, I promise.”

“Well you better, son. You know me, I'm ok - but someone else just needs to dial 999, and you're in for it.”

“I know, Alfred. I promise we'll sort it out, get her to be quiet ... somehow. Try to pass that message on, okay?”

“I will, sonny. Just you make sure you get it quiet soon. People need to sleep. If they don't get it...”

“I know. I'm real sorry, Alfred.”

“Okay lad. I'll let you go sort it out now.”

“Bye, Alfred.” He put the phone down. “Alfred...the noise, everybody's awake. He's passing the message down the street that we're gonna shut the noise up. We have to somehow. If they call the cops, we're pretty screwed.”

Martha nodded. “Um...we got some sleeping pills if we can make her take them. But...I dunno...”

Marcus went into the kitchen and returned with two dishcloths. “I hate to even think it...but...we have to stop the noise or we’re gonna get a helluva lot of trouble before we can even think about what to do.”

Martha nodded. “I’ll hold her head.”

They gathered their strength and moved upstairs quickly ... before they changed their minds. Martha went to the bathroom and grabbed her bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet. She filled a plastic cup with water and returned to the bedroom. She put the water down by her bed and shook two pills out.

Marcus nodded at her to try a couple more. “Four won’t harm her, but it will hopefully knock her out.”

Martha shook out two more, and then picked up the water. Marcus took them. Martha grabbed Janice’s head and brought it as far upright as she could. Marcus slipped two pills between the gnashing teeth and poured water down her throat, splashing much on her front. Reflexively, Janice swallowed the water with the pills. He sighed small relief, pushed two more in and repeated his action. Janice swallowed again.

He put the glass down and nodded at Martha. She screwed up her forehead and tightened her hold on Janice’s head. Marcus gathered the two rags together to create one thick gag and wound it around the lower half of her face, tying it at the back. Averting his face and trying to ignore the eyes that screamed murder at him.

Once gagged, Janice was laid back down on the bed where she screamed in a more muffled fashion, not loud enough for neighbours to hear. Her eyes flew from one to the other, wishing death on them as they burned with terror and hatred. The twins felt a duty made of guilt and friendship to remain with her until she slept. Slowly the pills began to kick in, and the trashing slowed down. Her eyes shut ... then flew open over and over. Eventually they stayed shut, and Janice lay still.

The twins went downstairs again and flumped on the sofa.

“What the hell do we do now?” Martha asked of no one.

“Internet?” was the only suggestion Marcus had.

“Why not.” They went into the computer room and sat quietly as the machine booted.

Upstairs Janice slept fitfully. Never quite waking, tossing around and kicking out. Sometimes running, fighting, moaning as she fought the drowsy, pill-addled dreams.

A few miles away in Darwen, Nathan woke to his alarm. He climbed out of bed, rubbing his eyes, and opened his curtains before realising that there was no light. He frowned and looked at his clock, 5:30am. This time of day, even during the winter months, the sky would at least be greying by now. “Huh. Weird, mebbe there’s a big storm...” He turned on his clock radio, tuning it to Virgin, and listened for the news as he dressed. It came and went, the weather reporting no incoming storm, no extra darkness, nothing but the usual cold and rain.

Frowning and muttering absently to himself, he dressed and trod down the stairs. Opening the door that led from the hall to the living room, he reached his hand over to flip on the light. But before he quite reached it he felt something grab his wrist. He yelled and pulled back instinctively.

The hand that had grabbed had expected this and turned into a claw to scratch ribbons as he jerked away. Nursing his hand, trying not to whimper, Nathan tried to see into the blackness. When nothing moved ... when there was no sound, he edged across the wall until he was right beside the light. Then he flipped it on.

The room was empty. His hand was dripping blood onto the carpet. Concentrating on his relief instead of his feeling that something really was there, he hurried into the kitchen and shoved the hand under the cold water tap. As the cold numbed him and washed blood down the drain, he awkwardly bent down and pulled the First Aid box out of the cupboard below. Opening it one-handed, he extracted disinfecting swabs, a gauze pad, a bandage and some medical tape.

Slowly the strips stopped bleeding, and he pulled his numb, throbbing hand from under the freezing water. He wrapped a towel round it to dry and sat at the kitchen table, trying not to think about what had just happened. But his mind refused to cooperate. Images of what the beast with the claws could be kept flashing into his head, each looking worse than the last.

He brought himself back to earth by twisting the towel a little on his injured hand, relishing the sharp stab of pain that turned his mind back to it. He took off the towel and

examined the damage. Four strips of skin had been torn away - it looked deep. He tried to flex his hand painfully, but found it mostly unresponsive. Not sure whether this was because of the pain, the surface injury or if the claw had managed to find a muscle or nerve, he promised himself a visit to the doctor if it were no better tomorrow.

Nathan picked up the disinfecting swab, wrapped in paper, and opened it with one hand and his teeth, spitting dryly as a drop squeezed into his mouth. Gritting his teeth and biting back a shout of pain, he pressed the swab onto his wounds. He held it and counted thirty before letting go and forcing a grin at himself. "Baby," he muttered with a smile, throwing the swab into the bin. He unwrapped the gauze pad and bandage the same way. He dabbed the still weeping cuts with his towel, resigning himself to having to change bandages over and over every time it felt a little stiff or soggy.

Balancing the gauze delicately on the cuts, he slipped the end of the bandage under his injured hand and rested it there to hold it down. He wrapped the bandage around twice, close to the wrist, to hold it on, and then lifted his cut hand, trapping the loose end as he bound it up. Finally he held the roll of medical tape between in his mouth while he tore off a piece with his good hand, almost ripping out his teeth in the process. He taped the bandage down and threw the litter away.

After a minute of sitting he puffed out his cheeks and blew air. Standing, he drew himself up as tall as he could, simulating bravery. Nathan knew he wouldn't rest until he had checked the house for intruders and made sure everything was locked. He left the kitchen and entered the dining room.

As he looked under the table he felt a surge of dizziness. He stumbled back and leaned on the wall, closing his eyes until it went away. Finally it did, and he took a deep breath to continue. As he tried to step away from the wall, he found his injured, bandaged hand wouldn't budge. He pulled it, thinking the tape had just stuck to the wall, but it still didn't come off.

Looking closer he saw that it wasn't the tape, but the bandage itself that was fastened to the wall. "What the..." he frowned and looked closer. The bandage was bubbling. The wall was bubbling. There was a strange feeling in his hand, like it was bubbling too.

As he watched, the bandage and wall disappeared into each other, taking his hand with them. He yelled hoarsely and tried to tug away, grabbing his hand and yanking it as hard as he could. There was a tearing sound and he fell to the floor, pain once again drowning out anything else he was feeling.

Raising his hand to his face, Nathan saw bone, muscle, tissue, but no skin. His mouth dropped open as he turned to the wall and saw his skin clinging on, bubbling, merging. He tried to stand and found his trousers had fixed him to the floor. Slowly he realised the bubbling feeling was back ... on his legs, his back, everything that touched the floor was bubbling. He screamed, panicked, and once again threw himself loose with a scream of agony as he left his skin behind.

Mind clouded with petrifying fear, he stood where he was. Gazing as he melded into the floor. Then the bubbling began in his feet. He tried to pull away, once again thinking, not quite consciously, that skinless was better than melted with a house. But

this time the threshold of pain he had just insulted so many times held him back, pinned him to the floor. His feet melted into the house, fiery with white-hot pain, pulling the skin down, leaving only his tissue and skeleton behind.

Nathan could no longer scream, no longer struggle. Anything his mind may have once thought of was now gone. Blasted away by the agony, the insanity, the vision and the pain of what was happening right now. He was dead before he saw his thighs pulled away, but not before he saw a man in front of him, wearing a lawyer's pinstripe suit, carrying a briefcase. In that moment of clarity before he left forever, he had one thought.

“Why the hell does he dress like that?”

Runihura heard and chuckled. “Well, aren't lawyers just about the scum of the earth to you guys? Thought it might help your image of me. But instead everybody keeps asking why...I need a new look.”

He shook his head at the confusion of people and remained a moment more to admire his work as the last piece of skin was stripped, the remains falling to the floor with a crash. Then with a final, self-satisfied chuckle, he faded away.

## **Chapter 15**

While Marcus and Martha researched vainly

Not long after his own house skinned Nathan alive

Another of the group was suffering

A slight, fair-haired boy, Robert was happy to duck his head and slouch home alone at the end of their meetings. To him the only thing numbers meant was misery, not safety.

He didn't speak much, mainly trying not to be noticed, visiting the meetings only to feel safe and comforted for a short while

At 13, Robert was too shy and feminine to be liked by most of the boys, too small and cute to be anything but a toy to most of the girls. Not cheeky enough to even be a likeable clown. At school he was subjected to something much more than idle teasing, but, as nobody bothered to beat him up, those in charge were loathe to label it bullying under the misapprehension that words can't hurt and only physical wounds can scar. So nobody really noticed, or cared much even if they did. Teachers were too afraid of parents to mention the 'B' word unless some kid or other was considerate enough to leave a suicide note. Parents were too busy in their own world of 'He's my perfect boy, he doesn't mean to hurt anyone, he's just boisterous' to ever realise their shining star was borderline psychopathic

So Robert never told, never complained. Beaten down by his foster parents, silenced by taunts, lost somewhere between self-hating misery and vague hope that somewhere in the future something had to improve. He learned to duck his head and let is ride over him as best he could, turning to walk out of school if it got too much, taking the detention for it in his stride.

As for home life, Robert lived in suspended fear of his half-remembered mother. He was removed from her care when he was just old enough to be able to remember the rasping voice, the stinging slaps and salt-filled juice. He was placed in care after his third trip to the hospital, dehydrated and suffering from salt poisoning. Suspicions finally forced doctors to take a closer look at his mother

Munchausens Syndrome by proxy, they said, and bundled him off to a home when his mother told them she had no idea who his father was. Robert never bothered trying to find out what had happened to her. But the name stayed with him, as fresh as his fear of eating salt in any quantities

Munchausens Syndrome by proxy. Medical books at the library gave him a definition. It was a bitter thought that, boiled down to the basics, he had been dehydrated and overdosed him on salt three times because his mother wanted attention

As Robert would sit in his room, listening to his foster parents argue in circles about nothing on one of their increasingly rare appearances at home, or hearing nothing but the faintest tick of his bedside clock, all this passed through his head for the countless-millionth time. After wandering these well-worn tracks, the same things always rooted in Robert's 13-year-old head

His mother, her smell, her voice, the loathing in her eyes. The taste of the salted juice she forced him to drink endlessly. The foster parents who had taken him in after two weeks in a home, and ignored him ever since whenever they remembered to visit home. The teasing boys at school, the sickly cooing of the girls. But recently one more thing began to reverberate and stick in his mind. One word. Suicide

Then he had come. He appeared in his room one afternoon while the house was empty

He was tall and stocky, dressed in the England Home kit with a football under one foot. He had grinned at Robert and waved. His eyes flashed red, orange, violet. Robert looked at them and knew deep down he was bad, but the smile was so friendly. And Robert was so lonely

He never gave a name, and Robert never asked, perhaps fearing that asking for more than was offered would somehow offend or ruin everything. So he called him Footy because he always appeared in the same England kit with the same football. It was a better name than any other that came to mind, and his new friend answered to it readily enough

It made school more bearable, knowing there was a friend somewhere, that when he returned home the house wouldn't be empty for long. All day on weekends could be spent doing anything Robert wanted to do. They played football a lot in the back garden. But it was small in mostly inadequate. After a while, fetching the ball endlessly from

grumpy neighbours' gardens became tiresome. But one Sunday six weeks ago Footy had a new plan

He wanted to play football in the park. He had always resisted this suggestion before, never giving a reason, but now he wanted to go. Robert had grinned widely, both looking forward to showing off his friend who was a skilled football player - and to having more room than they needed to kick around. Maybe some of the kids from school would be there to see

They walked to the park and took over one of the goals that were set up only during the football on-season. Footy stood between the goalposts; Robert kicked penalties - failing to score every time. Soon they swapped and Robert missed every save as Footy plugged every shot past him easily. By now people had noticed them. Some kids from school stood a short distance away, cheering and calling to them

Again they swapped places. Footy stood in the goal face as before. Robert rested his ball on the white penalty spot, grinned at Footy, turned and took a few steps for his run-up - waving at the small audience as he did. He was far enough away, he turned around

And stopped dead. Footy was no longer between the posts. Robert looked around, hoping but not really expecting, Footy to reappear laughing at his joke. But he didn't. Even his football had left the penalty spot blank

Robert's ears suddenly tuned in to the shouting he had thought was complementary. They weren't cheering, they never had been. They were laughing so hard some of them had to hold their ribs, jeering and shouting and guffawing

"Wassup Robert? Imaginary friend run away?"

"Great goalkeepin', mate! Fresh air is so hard to catch innit?"

"Hey Robert, seen the tooth fairy lately? I hear she likes to play too!"

All this and more, blending together, becoming a roar. Drowned out by the pounding of Robert's heart, the blood rushing to his face. He was too hurt to even cry as he turned and raced back home. Leaving the spectators laughing, shouting, perfecting their taunts ready for school the next day

The week had been, quite literally, hell. The entire school knew the story by the time the first bell had rung, and even some of the teachers had to conceal an amused smile. Sometimes the cruel laughter was so loud it seemed to deafen him. But he went every day that week, scared to go, miserable, but scared that staying home would mean a phone call from school to his foster parents, asking where he was, mentioning the teasing, mentioning the reason why

Now Robert sat on his bed, pretending not to cry. Eventually he had simply not gone to school. Eventually he preferred to risk the wrath at home. As it turned out they cared little, when the inevitable phone call arrived, his foster mother simply said he was

sick ... ignoring the stories she was being told. He was just very sick. They didn't even punish him

“You're a strange boy, Robert.” She had just got off the phone and lowered herself to speak to him. “But whatever. They think you're ill, okay? If you ever decide to go back, just stick to that. And if we get a truant officer banging on the door, you gotta go back. Deal?” she had left without waiting for a reply

So Robert stayed home. One morning he had spotted an ad in the paper as he was glancing through it idly. He called the number and soon met Marcus and Martha, and the group. They seemed to like him, to sympathise, empathise. He sure liked them. But he was distrustful, now even more than before. He sat quietly, said little, described his story and told of the visions he'd been having ever since that day

Always the same. His mother would appear, bent over, crooking her bony finger at him, croaking intelligible insults, offering him salt. Even as he described it, he felt ridiculous for being scared, but nobody seemed to think it was pathetic. So he stayed and kept on meeting with them

When Runihura had appeared that first time, Robert had nearly choked as he forced himself not to yell out his friend's name. But Footy had never been his friend, not really. And it seemed now that he was some kind of God?

Robert's mind turned away from the past for a moment. He listed in his head once again, why he was stupid to have blindly trusted Footy

He appeared out of nowhere, always when Robert was alone in the house – and granted that there was an 80% chance of nobody being around, but a 100% success rate could now be considered somewhat suspicious

He changed his clothes in the blink of an eye without even moving, always fitting in with whatever activity Robert had decided on for the day

They went places, anywhere, without travelling. The feeling of having moved was there, but no memory of stepping into a car or even moving off his bed ever remained. And there was never any missing time between leaving and arriving to suggest that they had. Robert would simply blink and be wherever he had requested

Footy never paid for anything. He would walk into a place, pick up whatever they wanted to buy, order food, get ride tickets, anything, and he would get all he asked for. But Robert never saw him exchange a single penny for it

He and Robert always won. From the penny machines in arcades, to the ring toss at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, they always won the biggest prize. And Robert could open his eyes and look at the proof any time

Robert turned his mind away from this. It was pointless to do the whole routine every time. He moved and sat down at the desk by his bed, picked up a pen, drew a few sheets of notepaper towards him and began to write

The phone woke Janice out of her drugged sleep. She had slept all afternoon, not peacefully, but at least quietly. Marcus grimaced as the screams, muffled by walls and cloth, started up once again. Martha picked up the phone as he darted upstairs

“Hello?”

“Hello.” A male voice. “Is this the residence of Martha and Marcus Newark?”

“Yes sir.” She replied, automatically calling him ‘sir’ in response to the official tone in his words and voice

“This is Detective Cotton, Lancashire Constabulary. I wonder if it may be possible for me to pop round for a short chat? I assure you you’re in no trouble.”

Martha looked up at the ceiling, thinking of Janice

“Well, sir, we have a guest over right now. She’s recovering from some trauma, and we don’t want to risk upsetting her. Could we possibly come to see you at the police station?”

She crossed her fingers, hoping he would ask no questions

“That would be fine. I’d hate to cause any disturbance. Blackburn station. Just ask for me at the desk, I’ll stick around till you get here. Will you be able to find someone to take care of your friend? It really would be easier if the two of you were here.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll call someone over right away. As long as we’ll be back soon.”

“Of course, Miss. We’ll have you back as soon as we can, it won’t take long. Like I said, you’re in no trouble, just something I need to talk to you about quickly.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s good to hear. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Martha turned to go upstairs after Marcus. Standing not two feet away was Runihura, wearing an England football kit, resting his left foot on a ball

“Uh-oh...got yourself in trouble with the coppers, eh?” he tutted

“What do you want? And since when did Ancient Egyptian gods play football?”

He grinned. “Aw, it’s just a private joke between me and Robert.”

Martha’s heart skipped a beat

“Robert? What the hell did you do to him, you sick fuck?! Funny joke, I get it now. Didn’t you do enough already?”

Runihura raised his hands in defence

“Hey, hey. I didn’t do anything! I was resting up today, thinking, reminiscing...Course I must take credit for what happened, I didn’t do it myself but I am

the cause.” He smiled proudly. “But his genius, bringing you two into the picture. I mean...wow! I hadn’t even thought of that!”

He spread his arms in mock surprise and chuckled happily

“Don’t do that.” Marcus said from behind him, shutting the hallway door

“Don’t do what my dear boy?” Runihura widened his eyes in innocence

“Don’t giggle like that.”

“Why? Makes me sound too much like I’m human?”

“No, actually it makes you sound like a psychopath. It’s a little disturbing and I’d prefer you didn’t do it.”

Runihura tilted his head, considering for a moment. Then a flash of light and he was dressed in a bloodied apron, a leather mask over his face, brandishing a chainsaw

“No, no, this is a psychopath.”

He changed again. He now wore a blue, flowery dress and a ladies wig. He raised his left hand to show a kitchen knife

“This is disturbing.”

Another flash. Now he wore a giant hat, covered in was fruit. A long gown, brightly coloured. In his hands was a pair of maracas

“And this is enough to drive you insane if you have to look at it all day.”

He flashed again, this time he wore his usual lawyer’s suit. He was grinning broadly at his joke

“Okay then. Common ground. That better?”

Marcus shook his head. And stepped closer

“No. Better is when you aren’t here. Best is when you die.”

“Die?!” Runihura laughed madly. Then he abruptly stopped. With a flick of his wrist, Marcus was thrown backwards through the door he had just closed

“Oh, I’m not the one who’s going to die. Say hi to Janice for me if her excuse for a brain ever returns.” He nodded cordially at Martha and was gone

Martha ran over to her brother. He was lying crookedly on the floor, holding his head

“Marcus! You hear me bro? You okay?”

The two had always had the mythic connection between twins and she could almost feel his pain

“Stay there, don’t move.” She ran to the kitchen, grabbed the first aid kit from a cupboard and ran back again

“Okay, Marc, you hear me now?”

He moaned and nodded slightly. He raised himself a little on his elbow and Martha helped him sit up, leaning him against the wall he had just hit

“Okay? Where’s it hurt?” she was fishing in the kit for pain patches to put over the worst injured places. Marcus shook his head as she brought them out

“I’m ok. Just painkillers...lots...” Martha nodded and ran back into the kitchen to get a glass of water. She arrived back and fed him two painkillers

“Where’s it hurt?” she asked. Marcus pointed to his back, his left shoulder, and the back of his head. Martha turned him over to lie on his front so she could check. His back was already purplish with bruises. His shoulder had a jagged piece of the wooden door stuck in it. His head had a giant bump. But there was very little blood from the shoulder, and everything else was at least intact. They both took this is a good sign

Martha ran and fetched a pair of tweezers from the bathroom and pulled out the wood from his shoulder. She winced as he drew in his breath sharply, but the wood was out and had left no splinters. She stopped the bleeding with a cloth and covered it in

Savlon, placing a large plaster over the cut. She rubbed a gel painkiller into the bruising on his back, as gently as she could

“Can’t do much with your head apart from painkillers I guess.” She finished, helping him over to the sofa in the living room

“S’ok. Feel better. Pain stuff is working. Who was on the phone?”

Martha realised she had forgotten all about the call from the Detective and related it to Marcus now

“Okay, who can we get to look after Jan?” he said

“Marcus you can’t go anywhere!” she protested

“Sounds like I have to, sis. Call Naomi. She’s studying to be a nurse, right? She should be home from college by now.” It was 5pm

Martha nodded and got on the phone

Naomi arrived in a rush half an hour later, breathless from the hurry. Marcus and Martha remained long enough to fill her in on Janice’s condition, the phone call and why Marcus was injured before racing out the door. Naomi waved them goodbye and went to visit Janice before settling down on the sofa with the T.V, waiting for the group to arrive so she could fill them in on what she knew

## **Chapter 16**

Marcus and Martha Newark.

There fone number is in the adres book I left by this note. This is written for them; please make sure they get it, theyre the only people who'll understand.

Im sorry for doing this guys. You know my story and everything and I just couldn't take it anymore. I did this myself I swear but it's because of you know who and you know what that Im doing it. Don't be mad at me for leaving you I like you guys a lot but I never did much anyway and Im just weak and a coward so I can't deal with it anymore.

Im sorry if you hate me now and Im sorry if I make trouble by writing this to you. I didn't mean to, I just wanted to be left alone and stuff and maybe be friens with you and the guys. Im sorry.

To everyon else, Marcus and Martha are my friends. They only helped me and its nothing to do with them so don't be mad at them. But make sure they get this cos they might get mad or upset and I don't want to make them upset. They bene my only friens.

Robert Newland.

This was the note Martha and Marcus returned home with. When they entered they found the group already gathered, sombre, waiting for their return. Naomi had filled them in with all she knew, the comfiest chair had even been left free for Marcus to take.

But Martha sensed something else in the air and saw they were missing two more of their number.

“Where...” she hesitated, not wanting to hear the answer. “Where’s Jessie and Adrienne?” Jessie was a likeable dark girl, always with the hint of a smile on her and ready to throw out even the weakest joke during the earlier meetings, just to get a faint smile. She had been going through mental torture daily at the hands of her Uncle, her mum’s brother, who was white, racist, and never accepted the fact that she had married a darker man. He had followed her around and abused her mentally for years before he finally lost it and beat her father into unconsciousness. He was in jail for that and drug-running, with a heavy restraining order against contacting any of the family, and Runihura had brought him back over and over again to repeat the word-abuse he had done for so many years.

Now Jessie and Adrienne – who had been seeing herself as the victim in horror films – were not there. It took Marcus only a few moments on the phone to confirm the truth they all knew and dreaded.

“I...told them I was a good friend, we were supposed to meet...both of them talked to me. Jessie...drowned in the canal. They don’t know why, whether it was suicide or...not.” His voice shook as he spoke. “Adrienne...just vanished. She was in her room,

when her mum called her down to eat she wasn't there. The T.V. was still on, one of her films they said, her clothes were there, but she had just gone. Just, into nothing."

Upstairs another bout of screaming cut through the silence.

"Janice is awake." Muttered Martha and followed Marcus up the stairs.

"Bring her down." Marcus said, standing over Janice and smoothing her hair to clam her down. The screaming stopped and Janice lay still, glaring up at the two of them.

"What? Why?" Martha frowned.

"Remember what we read? 'A Goddess was generally able to cause or cure all the ills of the world on a whim.' " He quoted. "So, if the Goddess herself could've made her well...maybe giving her the power, like was the plan, would help."

Martha stared at him. "But Marcus, what if it doesn't?! It's only a rumour anyway, who knows if the Goddess could have helped, nobody says a straight out yay or nay. What if...what if we gather it and put it into her and she's not strong enough anymore? Or what if she still is, but it doesn't cure her! Don't you know what she could do? And how could we ever stop her?!"

Marcus looked his sister square in the face.

"If we don't try we'll die anyway. Followed by who knows how many others in the future. There's a chance that we can still fix her mind with those powers. I'm sure as hell

there's no other way to help her! Even if there was, you wanna explain how we know her and why she's gone bloody loopy?"

Martha bowed her head and nodded.

"I guess I know. We gotta do it. You know how?"

Marcus nodded.

"Okay. I got her arms." Martha untied Janice's arms from the bed and Marcus untied her legs. Immediately she was freed she began kicking, trying to escape. She didn't scream, and they were thankful for that as they carried her down the stairs, fighting all the way. They sat her in a high-backed chair and tied her securely once more.

The group watched her, warily.

"Okay guys. You know what happened, you know as much as we do. The only chance we've got is to go right on and do what we were going to do in the first place. Call up this power and put it into Janice. Then hope it works." Martha spoke now, leaving Marcus to smooth Janice's hair some more, it seemed to be the only way to calm her.

"And if it doesn't work," Martha continued, anticipating the same questions she had just asked, "Then we do what we can to keep her still while we figure out a way to take it out again. Either way, the only hope we seem to have or surviving is that this works. But like we did before, if you don't want to do it, whatever reason. I know you guys have jobs and friends and girlfriends and boyfriends and everything else. We don't

want you to stay if you don't want to. You can walk out now and nobody will say anything against you."

Only four others remained alive, aside from the twins and Janice. Each sat now showing the same thoughts and expressions as everything ran through their head.

All four stayed where they were and nodded for Martha to go ahead.

Janice's char was moved to the centre of the room. Marcus had retrieved all the information he needed from the computer room. The portrait of the Goddess needed to be touching Janice's skin. After puzzling for a moment, Marcus rolled it into a tube and stuffed it down her sock, where she couldn't reach and ruin it.

They sat around her in a circle, Marcus, Martha, Naomi, Sara, Michelle and Mace. Janice glared around her as far as she could, struggling to break loose. But her eyes were empty, there was nothing conscious happening in her mind. Marcus forced himself not to look, the hollowness disturbed him in a way he had never known. Looking down at the paper in front of him he began to carefully read along. It looked like gibberish. This incantation was much longer than the other, and Marcus was forced to write down each syllable in phonetic style, admitting to himself that he probably would forget otherwise.

He pronounced each syllable carefully, never looking up, his brow furrowed with concentration. Around the circle everyone sat quietly, eyes closed, waiting. Even Janice was now still. Everything around was deathly silent, broken only by the soft sound of Marcus' voice.

He came to the end of his chant and closed his eyes, waiting for what may happen next.

Slowly a wind began to gather in the house. Picking up speed until everyone on the floor had to consciously not fall over. Janice was tied and could not keep herself upright, her chair toppled over on its side.

As everyone opened their eyes to see Janice lying on the ground, still, and as blank as ever, the wind died down. The lights flickered out and the room went dark, no light from the street seeped in through the veil that they felt drop over all of them. Yet through the absolute darkness they found they could all see.

As they watched, Janice's chair was righted and her bonds untied themselves. Released, she remained unmoving, but her eyes now chased around the room, looking for something – or watching something only she could see.

The sun-scar on her cheek glowed yellow and the rays shot out to the side, passing over the head of Mace and hitting the wall. Then the light faded away and all was still for a moment. Then the darkness lifted as gently as it had fallen. Janice was standing in front of her chair, the scar on her cheek glowing the same yellow.

As everyone stood cautiously, watching her, waiting for her to move, her eyes clouded then became clear. She looked around her and settled on Martha.

“Hey.”

Martha jumped as if expecting a bolt of lightning then realised she was safe and leapt forward to hug Janice tightly. Everyone quickly followed, hugging Janice, glad she was herself again, glad they were safe from her.

Janice hugged back for a while then gently pushed them away. She moved in front of the mirror above the mantelpiece and touched her glowing scar. Then she faced Marcus.

“You took a chance there. Thank you. I don’t remember hearing...anything or what happened or...anything. But somehow, not sure how, I still know what you did. You too Martha.”

Janice smiled widely.

“Guess I’m back and better than ever, right? I’m assuming this thing that’s racing through me right now is the power of a Goddess?”

Nods all round.

“Excellent. I’m a Goddess.” She flashed an evil grin. “So now you must all obey me or I will destroy you!”

For the first time anyone could remember, they all laughed. A real laugh, not forced for politeness or relief. But their humour was cut off by a familiar voice.

“Hi folks.” Runihura had arrived. This time he was dressed as a Roman Centurion, ready for battle.

Janice faced him squarely.

## **Chapter 17**

“Oh, hi Janice, feeling better? I heard you were under the weather, wanted to give you this.” He held out his hand, there was a bunch of flowers. He shook them a little until Janice relented and took them tentatively.

They burst into flames and she dropped them to the floor, stamping to put them out. Soon they lay extinguished and charred on the floor.

“Aw, shame, you made a big burn mark on your friend’s carpet. That’s not nice...” he simpered.

“Yeah, you’re such a funny bloke.” Janice spat at him, moving forward as everyone else edged behind her.

He smiled grimly. “Oh I can be funny. But I can also be mean.” He reached out a hand and Mace shot towards him. Janice tried to move in the way but not quick enough. Runihura held Mace by his head, ignoring the squirming, squeezing until he yelled in pain.

“Wanna go for it, sweetie?” he asked.

“Let him go and I’ll kill you quickly.” Janice replied.

Runihura laughed aloud and increased the pressure on Mace’s brain. Blood now ran down Mace’s face from beneath the tightening fingers.

Janice tried again.

“Let him go. And I’ll fight you fairly.”

Again he laughed. “You will fight me fairly? Wait a minute aren’t I the one who can squish your friend’s head like a melon? And you’re trying to bargain with threats? You’re a pretty funny girl, you know that?”

Janice raised her hand tentatively, not consciously sure what to do, but knowing instinctively. She threw it out in the direction of Runihura and he shot backwards into the wall behind.

But he didn’t drop Mace. Instead he flexed his hand cut off the screams of pain as his fingers plunged through his skull and deep into his brain. He dropped him to one side and stood up slowly.

“That hurt little girl. But well done on killing your friend. That makes four deaths caused by your existence, huh? Not bad for a whimpering little thing like yourself. My turn.”

He raised his hand and shot a ball of lead out of it. He was a perfect aim. The ball hit Janice dead in the face and she flew backwards with the force, landing on Naomi and Michelle. The ball of lead dropped to the floor.

“Give it up now, all of you. I will kill every one of you. And you three.” He looked between Marcus, Martha and Janice, “Will die slowly. I gave you the chance to sit down and let me do my work, but you refused. You will pay. And as for you three.” Now he looked at Michelle, Naomi and Sara. “I’ll still be nice. You won’t even see me coming.”

He flicked his wrist and the lead ball vanished. He flicked again and Mace vanished.

“There you go, even cleaned up my own mess, didn’t even leave a brain-stain.” He smiled at his rhyme. “Blood and brains can be so hard to clean up.”

He wiggled his fingers in a wave that looked, to the six of them, disproportionately grotesque, and vanished.

Everyone crowded round Janice who was laid half-unconscious on the floor. Martha shook her gently, Marcus tapped her on the cheek. Naomi doused a kitchen towel in cold water and gently placed it across her forehead.

She was bleeding from her broken nose, her eyes were already blackening, her lips were spliced open, and as she came around she spluttered once and coughed up two front teeth.

She looked around, dazed, the events of the past few minutes returning to her. Amazed to be alive, she felt the stinging pain bring her back to earth.

“Janice. Don’t move, we’ll get you help.” Naomi ordered. But Janice forced herself upright. She raised her hand, palm facing towards her broken face. Her palm glowed warmly for a minute and as they watched, Janice’s nose righted itself. Her lips sealed and healed. Her half-closed eyes opened and the bruising faded. She opened her mouth and they saw her teeth had grown back. Lastly the blood on her face and clothes, and on their hands, faded away.

Janice lowered her hand and shook her head slightly.

“Woah, that feels really weird.” She said.

“Felt weird! You shoulda seen it!” replied Sara.

Janice looked at Marcus and raised one eyebrow slightly. He nodded and turned his back to her. She moved her hand to the bump on his head first, then down to his shoulder, and lastly his back. Then she tapped him and he stood up smiling.

“Wow! That feels great, thanks Jan! Now who wants food and drinks? Or more specifically, coke and Micro Chips.”

Everybody nodded a yes, not feeling particularly hungry but knowing they had to eat. They relaxed and waited for him to return. When he did they ate in silence. Finally Janice spoke.

“So, guys, we need to talk about...this. We need to talk about our dead loss just then, and the fact that I killed one of us. And our impending doom might do well for discussion at some point.”

“You didn’t kill him, Jan.” Martha argued. “You saw him, he was gonna do it anyway! You put him out of his misery, and that’s something most of the world can never bring themselves to do.”

“Well ok. I know you’re right, there, I do. It’s just...everyone I come in contact with lately seems to be dying really quickly. And, I know it’s not my fault but...I can’t help feeling like its cos of me.”

“I know, Jan. But you also know that it’s not because of you.”

Janice nodded. “I know.”

Marcus suddenly jerked upright.

“Guys. Those dreams. Everything happened...I forgot, those dreams we had. Janice, Martha, did he say anything? I’m sorry Janice, to put you back there but we need to know!”

“S’ok Marcus, I think I’m pretty safe right now.” Janice told him.

“Why?” Martha asked.

“He said something, in my dream, I forgot. It’s like, when he gave us his name...he gave us something else, me anyway. And we all had those dreams, remember...I thought he maybe said something to all of us.”

“What’d he say to you?” Janice asked.

“He said...he said we had it all wrong, about what makes Gods or something. Um...” he screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember. “He said it’s not the number of people that believe in a god that give him strength. Or else how could have survived.”

Martha and Janice ran through their dreams over and over, but found nothing and shook their heads.

“Ok. That’s ok, I just wondered. Listen I think I’ve got it, if it isn’t the number of people who believe in a god that give them strength...then the opposite of that is...”

“The number of people who don’t believe is what takes away their strength.”

Martha finished.

“Exactly! The whole God worshipping thingy is nothing but an ego trip! It’s when people don’t believe, then it saps their power.” Marcus had jumped to his feet and started pacing the room.

“So, nobody believes in him, so...I’m confused.” Sara admitted.

“Its passive disbelief, they don’t know he’s there so really they can’t believe or not.” Marcus answered.

“So, if we show his name to as many people as we can and they don’t believe...” continued Martha.

“He’ll get weaker and I can kick his pathetic little arse!” concluded Janice, now on her feet too.

Marcus shot through the double doors into his computer room, talking back at them as they followed.

“And how do we get people to know his name, but not believe he exists?” he switched on the computer. “We plaster his name everywhere, the new Messiah or some crap, and watch everybody laugh! I’ll make posters.”

“And I call into radio shows and yell the same thing down the airwaves.” Added Michelle.

“And I’ll make giant boards and stick ‘em in front of...churches and...anywhere I can. Sara, wanna help?” Naomi put in.

“Stationary Box’ll have cardboard and all the stuff we need.” Sara answered in reply.

“Alright, I’ll-” Janice began.

“You’ll stay here and rest.” Martha cut her off. Janice nodded.

“That’s a better idea.”

“I’ll go knock on doors and ask them if they’ve heard the word.” Martha grinned.  
“Just like a Jehovah’s Witness. But...not around here...cos they all know me.”

With agreements all around the house emptied of half its occupants, leaving Marcus, Janice and Michelle. Naomi and Sara would be back soon with cardboard and supplies, Martha promised to be back when her feet got tired.

Everyone was occupied in their tasks. Marcus was tapping away at the computer to make a poster design that would catch people’s eye and make them read and disbelieve when it fell through their letterbox.

Michelle was calling into every radio show she could find after Marcus printed her out a list of phone numbers and giggling hopelessly for five minutes between every call.

Naomi and Sara returned quickly and commandeered the loving room floor to make huge signs with giant colourful marker pens.

Janice felt useless, sitting on the sofa and watching, but nobody would let her help. Eventually she gave up and trundled up the stairs to lie down. It was only then that she

realised how tired she was. Closing her eyes, hoping she wouldn't dream, she drifted off to sleep.

She woke when it was dark and heard voices downstairs. Realising she had been asleep for hours, and everyone was probably back she rubbed her eyes, shook her head to clear it, and went to join them.

They were waiting for her, talking about nothing, avoiding the obvious subject until she arrived.

“Hey Jan. Nice sleep?” Martha greeted

Janice nodded. “How'd everyone do?” she felt ashamed as soon as she asked the question, like a master guiding her slaves. “Sorry, never mind.”

Marcus seemed to understand. “It's ok. I know I'm happy with what I did. I did the posters, printed out 200 and threaded them through every letter box I could.”

“Well I think I lost count of the houses I went to at about 250...got many doors slammed in my face, called many names...but managed to convey the general message of Runihura, Messiah for the new World to basically everyone, occasionally through the slammed door.” Martha grinned, she had obviously enjoyed herself.

“We made 30 signboards and we stuck them to lampposts all over the place – we even got some right in front of churches so the God Squad can happily scream blasphemy and not believe anything.” Grinned Sara.

“Yeah, police nearly got us a coupla times but we did it.” Confirmed Naomi, also grinning.

“Hehehe, shit I musta rung about 50 radio stations, local, national, pirate...all of ‘em. They all hung up on me! Every single one!” she guffawed heartily.

Janice felt almost sad; while she had been sleeping dreamlessly they had all been out doing the hard work and even enjoying themselves. Again Marcus picked up her thoughts.

“Don’t worry Jan, plenty for you yet. Tomorrow this stuff will be all over the country, you know how people talk. But we’ve got plenty of people to not believe already. And you are at full strength, because nobody knows about you. So be ready anytime, that’s all you have to do.”

Janice looked at him gratefully. “Thanks Marcus.”

“No problem. Now we just sit and wait for the moron-God to turn up.”

“We best stay together.” Martha put in. “If he turns up he’ll probably be happy to go for us one-on-one if he’s weakened. The second one of us is on our own you know he’ll arrive.”

“Long as you wait outside the door while I’m on t’bog.” Sara noted, bringing a laugh from all of them.

Suddenly the mood seemed easier than it had in forever. Now they had taken action, done something to hurt the enemy, now all they had to do was sit and wait for him to show up so their not-so-secret weapon could blast him wide open. The mood had lifted a step; just enough for them to shake off the overlying depression and smile, maybe even let a little hope in.

“You know, guys...I’ve kept thinking somewhere in the back of my mind, through all of this. Maybe it’s not real, maybe it’s...like the first scary story a child writes. Um, like any second something big will happen and it’ll look really bad, but then the kid’ll finish the story with ‘And she woke up and it was all a dream.’” Jan spoke quietly as if it would lessen the embarrassment of a scornful laugh. “It was the only thing that kept a lid on me for most of this. Cos, obviously when I didn’t wake up from the dream...cos that’s what happened, I just didn’t wake up...” she trailed off.

“Yeah.” Joined Martha “Whatever that dream was Jan, I’m sorry you had to go through it. And I know what you mean about the child’s first scary write. Waking up and it all being a dream is the easiest way to look at a scary thing and deal with it. Like when they have a nightmare, there’s a mum or a dad who’ll race in when they scream, and cuddle them all better. It makes them feel secure in the scariness.”

“Yeah.” Janice looked at her in surprise. “That’s exactly it.”

“As you grow up you realise the scariest things aren’t dreams.” Marcus said, almost to himself. “The scary things are the real world, people and things you have to do, places you have to go, being forced to see something you don’t want to see cos it

might...blind you or drive you insane, or make you as bad as the things you don't want to see. You can't wake up from that. Then you can remember the dream-monsters fondly, because they couldn't hurt you, not really." Marcus shrugged, flushed with revealing something so private.

"Wow. You three belong in a cave on a big hill, sitting round a fire discussing the problems of the world and being consulted by desperate lonely people." said Sara, quite seriously.

Martha smiled. "Actually that sounds like bloody paradise after all this! Maybe I'll save up and buy me a big cosy cave for Christmas."

They all swapped tired smiles and rested back in their chairs, half-asleep and too lazy to sort out sleeping arrangements. But eventually Marcus stood and stretched.

"Bedtime." He said. "We can fit down here on the floor...we got two sleeping bags, one is Janice's. Me and Martha can drag our mattresses down I guess. I know we have an air-bed up top of my wardrobe. And there's the big soft comfy sofa. So we'll drag everything down here and those who don't already have a bed or a bag to sleep in can fight over the rest." He looked around for approval, got it, and went upstairs with Martha.

Soon everything was sorted out, everyone was in their sleeping plots and happy.

"Night." Marcus said, checking the alarm and clicking off the light.

"Night." Echoed 5 voices back at each-other.

Soon, despite nervousness, fear, apprehension, the exhaustion took over and all six were asleep, comforted by the warm yellowish glow from Janice's scar.

## **Chapter 18**

The clock radio clicked on the next morning, causing them all to stir and yawn, not wanting to rise.

But they inevitably had to, and heads slowly appeared, followed by shoulders and eventually the rest.

It was Sara who noticed the radio conversation, having one ear tuned in to listen rather than both ears tuned out to all but a background murmur.

“Oi, listen.” She called. They all stopped. Two dj’s were talking.

“...and leaflets through people’s doors. I think we even had one of them call into this station.” The first was saying. “Runihura, whoever he is, is suddenly all over Blackburn of all places. The church ministers are screaming blasphemy, everyone else is screaming with laughter!” the dj himself seemed to be stifling a laugh. His partner spoke.

“Yeah, and remember all those calls to the radios...there’s loads of stations like us who put the shows on the web or whatever, so anyone can listen to it. Who knows where in the World this has got to by now!”

“Damn, you’re right. Good job whoever y’are! I think one of our guys did a web search...yep, here’s the info. Runihura is some Ancient, half-existent, unknown Egyptian...thing...”

“That’s it?”

“Pretty much...”

“Heh. Bunch o’ bleedin nutters on the loose again. Anyway, here’s a song that’s set to hit the charts this Sunday with a bang...”

Marcus switched off the radio, cutting short the first beats of music.

“We did it.” He said, his face shining. “This is Virgin radio, mates, all over the UK, live webcast 24 hours a day...”

“Anyone can pick up on the topic! They picked up on the leaflets and everything. And anyone who hears the stuff they just said on there, or does that web search themselves, is gonna sit back and laugh!” finished Janice.

“That dumb fuck is gonna be weak as a kitten!” proclaimed Naomi.

“But what if he won’t come out?” asked Michelle, dampening the mood. “What if he knows he’s weak and just...hides or summat.”

“She’s right.” Nodded Marcus. “He’s a bully. He won’t come out of choice if he’s weaker. But he’s also a cocky shit.” He waited to see if anyone would pick up his own half-formed idea. Janice grabbed at it.

“We call the bugger out! He always knows what’s going on; he has to be watching, right? Let’s see if the spineless dickhead dares to come take me on.” She called the last sentence out loudly, looking around the room.

“Come on yer baby!” joined Sara.

“Your move, dipstick.” Came from Michelle.

“Let’s see if you got anything now!” yelled Martha.

“Gonna hide? Gonna cry? Admit it; you got bettered by a bunch of lowly mortals.”  
Taunted Naomi.

“What are ya, five? Can’t even play the game you invented? I can’t believe we actually thought you were a threat!” roared Marcus.

“ALRIGHT!” Runihura appeared in front of the T.V, still dressed in his Roman Centurion armour. He was pale and slightly gaunt, a little shorter than when they had seen him last.

“Run out of costume ideas?” asked Janice, partly curious, partly to buy time for everyone to back well behind her out of the way.

“No.” he muttered. “This is what I had on last time, remember. I can’t change anymore, not without...”

Janice had to consciously hold shut her mouth as he trailed off and drooped his head. But instead;

“Aw, the likkle baby gets so tiiiired...You wanna nap baby? Baby wanna likkle sleep?” she cooed as sickly as she could, desperately trying to keep a straight face, trying to draw him out to make the first move.

He was mad; she could see it as his eyes flashed under his frown.

“Shut up!” he growled.

“Awwww...is de ikkle baby gonna cryyyy? Such a cranky baby when he doesn't have his nap.”

Janice badly wanted to laugh, and she could sense the frown behind her suppressing theirs. But it was working. Janice saw him flinch at every word, saw the effort in his face as he tried to remain still and not use his strength.

Since he had arrived, Runihura had gone ghost-white and so thin he was almost transparent. Even his suit was beginning to look a little frayed.

Janice abruptly changed her angle.

“So c'mon baby-boy. Wanna go for it? Wanna get your crying arse kicked by a girl? Go on, give it your best.”

Janice closed her eyes and spread her arms, open to his attack. Without moving she created an invisible shield between them, hoping it was strong enough.

“Come oooooon...all those people you’ve killed and you’re goin’ soft over li’l me?”

That did the trick. Runihura snarled and out show his hand. A semi-transparent stream shot out towards Janice, rocking her a little, but dispersing as the shield absorbed it and held.

For a moment he forgot his weakness, too enraged at being tricked to care. He shot out his hand again, and this time a ball of fire flew towards Janice.

It pierced the already weakened shield to hit Janice full on in the chest. She fell back and hit the floor, fire spreading quickly over her.

Behind her the others screamed. But Janice simply smiled through the fumes and stood up. The human torch reached out one fiery hand and seemed to grab a lick of flame from the place the ball had hit. As the hand moved away, the fire opened and Janice pulled it off her like a coat. She balled it up once more and waved it at Runihura. He was now near collapse as he looked back at her, seeing his defeat.

“Please...” he begged. “I-I swear, I’ll be good.”

“Don’t listen, Jan. Do it.” Martha advised.

“That was already the plan, sweets.” Janice replied and gently tossed the fireball at Runihura.

As he shot up in flames, out of strength to resist, she created a vacuum around him and lifted it off the ground, holding the fire in and everything else out of danger.

They watched until it burned to cinders, lying ashen and orange in the air. When it finally extinguished in a billow of smoke Martha appeared with a black bin-bag. Janice lowered the mess into it and Martha tied the top and took it outside.

“Wow.” Commented Sara. “Clean.”

Janice grinned and shrugged. “Was always taught never to start a fire in a friend’s house.” It was a weak joke, but it was enough. They all collapsed, laughing, the relief setting in through the tiredness.

Together they sat until dark speaking only in answer to Marcus’ occasional offers of food and drink. Not sleeping, though barely awake, too exhausted to do anything but simply sit.

But when night fell they found stores of fresh energy and began to acknowledge life once more, praising Janice and hugging her until she blushing threatened to leave. Talking for the first time of the friends they had lost.

But the subject soon became too exhausting and they turned conversation to idle things, T.V., music, work, home, light and easy conversation.

Around ten, Janice realised that her scar had been hurting for some time, and the pain was steadily growing worse.

She looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece and gasped. The comforting yellow was now a painful red.

As they all watched, scared to move closer, but doing so anyway, wanting to comfort their friend in pain, Janice buckled to her knees as the pain in her head threatened to blind her.

She opened her mouth and screamed, the noise cutting through their blood and curdling that of any neighbours unlucky enough to hear. Quickly the scream died down and became a silent wheeze as everyone crouched round her, desperately trying to help in ways they didn't know how.

But all they could do was stare and call her name uselessly, trying to hold her up, terrified as she collapsed forward onto the floor. A thick line of blood crept from her ears, her nose, her mouth.

Horrified, the five helpless spectators forgot how to even call her name as she lay face-down on the floor between them.

Naomi turned her gently over onto her back, checking for breathing, pulse, anything. But there was nothing.

Martha shoved her aside. “Call an ambulance, don’t just fucking sit there!” she screamed at nobody. She pumped Janice’s chest, blew air into her lungs, resisting the others trying to coax her away. Sara called for an ambulance.

Finally Marcus couldn’t watch her struggles anymore and pulled her away roughly, holding her tight and wincing as she punched and struggled to free herself.

“Scar’s gone.” Sara noticed when Martha had calmed down into silent tears.

The scar had indeed gone. And so had Janice.

When the ambulance arrived Marcus let them in, mumbling incoherently through the lump he held in his throat.

And as the ambulance later travelled Janice to the morgue, where the autopsy would confuse doctors by revealing that her brain had simply imploded.

As the police were informed of an unusual death and sent to ask the usual round of questions.

The survivors tearfully agreed their story, they knew nothing. Janice had complained of pain in her head, collapsed in front of them, nothing they could do.

And after the night was over, the police had left them alone and free of suspicion.

They sat together in the living room, bowed their heads and cried for all those killed by Runihura in the past. For their friends, now missing or deceased. For Janice, saving them and countless others at the price of herself.

As dawn they all crawled into their sleeping zones. Exhausted from recent events, from tears and the guilt that inevitably followed any survivor.

Before they all slept, Marcus spoke the only words issued that night. Painfully pulling each word out of the heart of every one of them.

“You repaid the debt you thought you owed, Jan. To Amanda, to Danny and Rome, to everyone. And you saved a lot of lives, including ours. You’re a brave one, Jan. And a good one.” He sighed. “Sorry you had to go, gonna miss you. Never gonna forget.”

And his words were left to hover in the air, to melt into all five survivors as they slept safely, deeply, peacefully, thankful of the exhaustion that kept the dreams away.

A mind is a sensitive thing, easy to break, hard to fix. There was a lot of healing ahead. But tonight...

There was blissful nothing.

The End

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