

THREE WISHES



BRADLEY PEARCE

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Dedicated to my Three Wishes: Emily, Rebecca and Harry.
I have been truly blessed.

Acknowledgement: Grimm.

What if you could relive time over again?
Would you right a wrong?
Or should you, let sleeping dogs lie?



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Chapter 01

The Clissold Arms' rectangle eyes blinked in time to the music.

Spilling colored tears over the sidewalk outside.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Inadequate speakers pounded at glazed eyed ravens twitching to the rock anthem.

Terry presses a hand against a headset, frantically trying to balance the sounds flooding his senses. Without warning, feedback shrieks from the speakers causing some ravens to shriek back in excitedly. Gareth looks up from a guitar riff to the Terry behind the sound console.

"Sorry..." Mouths Terry, raising a hand to apologize.

Rocking his body to the beat. Counts down the bars. Sliding faders to the bottom of the console that had seen better days, kills the sound system. Bright lights burst upon the small stage and four band members raise their arms to acknowledge their small group of adoring fans that had come to see them play.

"What was that all about?" Asked Sal arriving at the sound station.

"Hey man, don't blame me, its shit equipment... You know that." Terry bites back.

"It's your job to make sure it doesn't happen." Remarks Sal becoming tetchy.

"Just remember who got you this gig!" Terry reminds him.

"Steady down you two... It's no one's fault... Like Terry said its shit equipment, but it's all we've got until we get some decent bread... Now kiss and make up." Warns Gareth.

"Sorry Terry." Accepts Sal backing down.

"Yeah... sorry Sal." Offers Terry fiddling with console sliders.

"Come on, let's collect our wages and get out of here." Said Gareth keen to get going.

"Think I'll stick around for a while." Said Ness. His eyes locked a girl who had locked eyes on him.

"Whatever... Pack the gear in the van and you can do what you like." Gareth orders him.

"I'm getting a drink first." Said Ness ignoring him.

"I'm with him." Said Taylor following in his brother's wake.

"When in Rome..." Surrenders Gareth, "...You coming?"

"Yeah, I suppose." Terry concedes reluctantly.

“How’d we sound?” Asked Gareth.

“You were bitch’n man... Just need to balance it out... But on this old box it’s going to be difficult... I only wish we had better.”

“Hey... You can do it, you’re the best... You get us the gigs we’ll get you the money, okay?”

“Okay.” Accepts Terry.

“Let’s get our wages and a beer in us...” Throwing arm over Terry’s shoulder nudges him towards the bar to find Ness already pulling a babe for the evening.

“What’s your name?” Asked Ness.

“Shannon... Like your music.” She slurs after one too many shots. Eyes betraying her sexual starvation.

“Yeah, yeah... I’m Ness, and this is my brother Taylor... You wanna see our van?” Hoping the barely legal lass could read, between the lines.

“I’d love to, can your brother come too?” She asked now undressing Taylor in her mind.

“I wouldn’t come without him... Follow me.” Remarks Ness eagerly leading Shannon by the hand with Taylor following closely behind. The trio disappear without notice.

“Terry.” Said McCracken pushing an envelope towards him.

“Thanks Phil.” Pocketing the envelope without counting the cash wages.

“See you next week... You still on?”

“Yeah yeah, of cos... Thanks Phil.”

“What can I get you boys?” Asked McCracken the bar owner.

“Three pints thanks Phil... Ta.”

“Coming right up boys.” Pushing a glass beneath a nozzle and pulls slowly down on the large wooden handle.

“That’ll be three pounds fifty thanks.” McCracken looks at Terry, taken back by the request. “...Nah_ just messing with you Terry... Ha... You have to lighten up... Gareth sort him out will ya.”

“I’ve give him a slapping later.” Said Gareth grinning.

“Here ya go boys... enjoy!” Pushing three frothing pints in front of them.

“Cheers Phil!” Raising glasses to another successful performance despite the glitch.

“Where did the twins go?” Asked Sal looking about for the pair.

“Slack wanker’s... They’ve taken off so they don’t have to pack up... Those scousers!” Remarks Gareth.

“They’ll be back.” Suggests Terry hopefully.

“I doubt that... Oh well it looks like it’s just us then.”

“Yeah, finish these and get home, I’m shattered.” Said Terry.

“Lorraine wearing you out?” Asked Gareth suggestively.

“Something like that.” Terry ponders Lorraine’s insatiable sexual appetite.

“Where is she? I thought she might be here tonight?”

“Gone into town with the *girls*... Said she’d come *next* time.”

“She missed a great show... Think I nailed that riff down... Then that bloody spike... Damn I was good!” Gareth stroked himself deservedly.

“You were man... Down and dirty... Sorry about the feedback.” Apologizes Terry.

“Nah_ not your problem man. We’ll get there... We’re going to the top Terry... We’re going to the top!”

“Lennon use to say that too and look where it got him!” Terry reminds him.

“Yeah... Free babes, free booze, and he never worked a day in his life... He lived the dream Terry... And that’s what we’re going to do... And it all starts here!” Gareth said raising his glass to salute the hallow hall.

“It all starts here!” Parrots Terry looking to the third musketeer to commit.

“It starts here.” Affirms Sal raising his glass.

“Finish up... We’re outta here.” Said Gareth take the last swallow of his beer.

“Damn twins! They left their stuff behind... Christ they have shit for brains!” Curses Sal stepping over Ness’s bass guitar.

“Pack it up and get it in the van... I’ll have a word with them tomorrow.” Said Gareth.

“What’s happening? ... It’s Sunday.” Asked Sal thinking he had other plans, like sleeping in.

“Practice... You got someplace else you have to be?” Questioned Gareth.

“Oh_ man... Do we have? We know all the cover songs back to front.” Protests Sal.

“I want to try out a new song.” Confessed Gareth.

“Who’s? ...” Asked Sal curiously, “... The Kinks?”

“Nah, better... *Mine*.” Said Gareth proudly.

“Yours? Really?” Responded Sal looking to Terry shrugging shoulders. It was the first he had heard of it.

“Yeah... I’m sick of playing someone else’s shit... It’s time broke out on our own... What have you written? ...” Challenged Gareth. Only to be greeted with

silence, "... Yeah thought so."

"They any good?" Asked Sal now interested.

"We'll know tomorrow won't we? ..." Laughed Gareth, "...Come one give me a hand with this organ... Those bloody twins! If I see them..." He dare not complete the torture that would be involved.

Weighed down with heavy cases Terry carries them to the back of the van.

And waits for Gareth and Sal to appear with the keys. Looking up to the abyss and the ebony star lit abyss stared back at him. A car races pass sounding a loud exhaust. Reveling voices holler incoherent obscenities from an open rear window. Laughing off the verbal barrage, turning about in time to see Gareth and Sal lugging their own weighty cargos.

"Twins have the keys... You got your set?" Asked Terry looking to Gareth.

"Yeah..." Reaching inside a jacket pocket to pull out a bunch of keys. He fiddles with them to find the van's key, "... Here it is."

Opening the rear double doors only to be greeted by Ness's bare clenched white buttocks rocking into the rear end of someone. Taylor cradled the back of a girl's head against his groin.

"Hey guys! ... Won't be long." Called out Taylor seeing the rest of the band members watching on in shock and awe, "... This is Shannon."

Shannon raises a hand and waves awkwardly towards the open doors. She tries to speak but was gagged by something in her throat.

"For Christ's sake you two!" Protests Gareth trying to look away from the shameless pair.

Indifferent to the intrusion the twins carry on rocking into the young filly.

"Almost there... Ah-ah-ah-ah-aaahh_." Cried out Ness, only to have Taylor sing the duet with him. Gareth closes the doors, but not before he had seen or heard too much.

Surrendering, Gareth sits on an amp. Taking out a vapor and inhales deeply before sending a large plume of sweet fragrant smoke into the night air.

"Hurry up you two!" Gareth bangs on the doors.

The doors to suddenly open and out steps Ness giving a hand to Shannon helping her down, smiling.

Soon followed by Taylor zipping himself up and grinning from ear to ear. Giggling, she looks over the other band members as though they were items on a menu. Before her eyes stop at Terry.

"He's taken sweetie." Advises Sal grinning at the thought, perhaps Terry

should.

The twin's chuckle and start packing cases and speakers into the back of the van. Covering stains left from their carnal performance.

"Be seeing you boys." Said Shannon walking away adjusting her panties. Turning about to lift her top to flash her perky breasts in gratitude. Then disappeared back inside the bar.

The musketeers stare gob smacked at the sight of goddess walking away. Their minds deprived of blood. It was Terry who came about first.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow." He said still stunned as though he had been Tasered. Or so he thought.

"What's happening tomorrow?" Asked Taylor thinking he had missed something.

"Practice. The basement. At two." Gareth reminds him.

"Oh come on... It's Sunday..." Moaned Ness, "... What about Church?" He lies.

"Church? You guys aren't allowed within a hundred yards of a confessional after the last time." Sal reminds the scandalous nymphs.

"Oh_ yeah_." Said vaguely recalling the incident.

"Just be there! Not like you have a day job like Terry here, who keeps us in fuel to get us to these gigs." Gareth reminded the twins.

With heads bowed they scuff feet on the gravel. Annoyed at having their redundant plans of doing nothing taken away from them. Kicking a loose stone into a nearby parked car.

"There's going to be a surprise." Gareth offered an enticement.

The twins' eyes light up with interest. Looking to the other to second guess the possible treat.

"What is it?" Asked Ness wanting to know more.

"Just be there and you'll find out... Okay?"

"Okay." Responded the twins in unison.

"Get in and I'll drop you guys off."

"Nah, thanks... Think we'll stick around hear a bit." Said Ness. The tag team had not finished with Shannon, "...Got our money?" Looking to be paid.

"Yeah, yeah... Sorry, almost forgot... Here." Terry pulls out several notes from an envelope and hand them Ness.

"Is that all?" Counting the amount, barely enough for a few beers and feed.

"Split five ways... less savings." Advises Terry.

"Savings? What for?" Asked Taylor naively.

“Better equipment.” Terry reminds him.

“I’m happy with what I have.” Remarks Ness.

“I’m not... We can score better gigs with better kit... Been speaking with a bar in London... They keen to get us to play.” Terry baits the twins.

“London? ...” Questions Taylor, “... More money?”

“Yeah, but not without practice... Tomorrow at two at my place. Be there!”

“Okay.” Relinquishes Taylor shoving the notes into a pocket.

The twins head back to the bar doors only to see them open and have Shannon appear leading a captured young man by the hand.

“Boys.” Shannon teases the twins as she passes by.

Her prey too dazed to understand much of what was going on. And gazed through the twins as though they were not there, content to be lead to the land of milk and honey.

“Shannon...” Said Taylor grieving.

“Plenty more fish in the sea Taylor.” His brother reminds him.

“It was love... I could feel it.” Said Taylor watching her disappear into the back of a parked car.

“Come on! ... I know a *Judy* you might like... A red head... I’ll let you go first.” Offers Ness trying distract Taylor from his momentary broken heart.

The bar door closes behind them leaving Sal and Terry and Gareth in the car park.

“Those two eh? ...” Questions Gareth, “...Fucked up as they are, they’re alright.”

“Yeah... They’re alright.” Concedes Terry.

“So... You got something down in old London town do you? Keeping that a secret weren’t you?” Asked Gareth curiously.

“No more than your sudden interest in song writing... How long you been at it?” Terry asked curiously.

“Long enough... We’ll know tomorrow if it’s any good.”

“You write ‘em and I’ll get you the gigs to play them.” Offers Terry as an inducement.

“Us’ Terry... You’re as much part of the band as any member... That right Sal?”

“Yeah... Wouldn’t be here without you Terry... I mean that.”

“Thanks Sal... *The Ravens* are going places I know... I can feel it in my bones.” Terry looks up to the abyss as though it was watching over him.

“We’re the *King of the Teds of Muswell Hills* Terry! ... And we’re going to the top!” Gareth proclaims pointing a finger upwards just as a falling stars streaks across the night sky, “... Make a wish boys!”

“To the top!” Siren Sal and Terry and Gareth simultaneously.

Pondering what to make of the ominous sign.

Chapter 02

01:22AM on Denmark Terrace and the night sky speckling with billions upon billions upon billions of stars.

Terry watches as the van drives away into the night. Bellowing in its wake a cloud of fumes. Leaving him alone on the sidewalk outside a vintage brick terrace home. Sensing eyes were watching him. He looks into the darkened street. Long cloth eye lids open, lighting up windows and heads peer into the darkness as to the disturbance. Eye lids close and heads disappear. Returning to their beds. Returning the windows to darkness.

Another gig over and no closer to his dream. *The Ravens* had the talent to make it. He believed it with all his heart. Like Gareth he had tired of playing for chump change. Having outgrown playing the village bar. If his new songs were any good, it could well be the band's chance to be *discovered* and escape Muswell Hills.

Looking to the star drenched heavens. He ponders his insignificance. In despair. In hope.

Maybe the falling star was the sign.

A tingle of goosebumps ran over his body at the thought.

“Just do it Terry!” He told himself.

‘What are you thinking? ...You’re a hillbilly band, in a hick village... You’re never going to get out of this shit hole.’ A voice in his head berates him.

‘Don’t listen to him... You can do this.’ Another voice challenges the first.

Surrendering to tiredness and beer, allows the dyslexic thoughts to fade. Fumbling for a key he heads inside. Hoping not to wake his parents.

Thirty two years old and still living at home. Working a pizza outlet afforded him minimum wage. Saving what he could. Keeping the aging kombi van on the road and the band online. His mother ever hopeful he would find a nice girl and settle down. That nice girl was Lorraine.

Lorraine.

What to do with Lorraine?

Perpetually reminded by his mother to marry her and settle down. In the hope this would lead to a real job and he would give up on the foolishness of being a muso. On the delusion of stardom. Of *fame*. Those things happened to *other* people. Not to people from Muswell Hills. Maybe once. But that was a long time

ago. And despite the Preservation Society best efforts in trying to prevent it, times had changed.

Besides, Lorraine was the only one who could do her hair just the way she liked it.

Why he could not be like his brother Tim was a mystery to his mother. Working as an Actuary at an insurance company. Married with three children. His life working for the Man. Saving for a retirement, to see him through until he died.

In many ways Terry carried his father's torch. A flame that had all but been extinguished when his mother fell pregnant and the dream of being in a band buried was beneath a hasty gotten marriage license and a stack of soiled nappies. His father's dream of threading the boards was over.

But Terry still had a chance.

Closing the front door behind him, crept quietly up the stairs creaking like piano keys. Comforting music to his parent's ears that their son was home. Falling onto the single bed in still in his clothes, kicks off boots.

Thud, thud as they fall onto the floor.

A street lamp beamed through the open curtain window. Sending a shaft of street light into the room, lighting a poster on the wall of *The Kinks*. He stared at the poster as he did every night before sleep and prayed to whatever music God to be discovered. It had been a hollow prayer that had gone unanswered. Fearing it would continue to go unanswered if things carried as they were.

Gareth's new song gave him hope. It could be the break the band was looking for. Curious to hearing something new, something different from the tired rock anthems they had been covering. He would know tomorrow.

'*Today.*' He corrects himself.

Tired and intoxicated with booze, eyes roll in their sockets. Seeing the vision of the four faces watching him. Recalling the falling star, he makes a belated wish.

'*I'd do anything to be like them.*' He wishes. Eye lids close and he succumbs to the sandman.

Startled, Terry awakes to the sound of the van's noisy exhaust.

Hearing the old van pulling up outside. Creaking to a stop. Followed by familiar voices. Seeing it just after two. Scrambles to the window to see Sal and Gareth unloading the equipment.

"Damn! I must have slept in." Frantically pulling on his boots.

He looks about for his parents but they were nowhere to be seen. Figuring they must have gone out. Rushes to open the front door in time to discover the twins standing like at the door step with Cheshire smiles. He could only imagine what they had gotten up to the previous evening and he really did not want to know. The vision of the twins from the night before still vividly etched on his memory.

“Terry! Terry!” The twins sang out cheerfully. Not a hint of hangover in their eyes.

Gareth was a little more sluggish, carrying heavy amps like a lumbering gorilla.

“Here, let me help you Gareth.”

“I’m good... You get what’s left and lock up... I’ll set up and see you down stairs... Where your folks?”

“Out... I *think*.” Sleepy and half awake, heavy legs carry him to the van.

“That’s good... Might be a bit of noise.” Remarks Gareth back to him.

Terry unloads a guitar case and closes the van’s rear doors. Eyeing the street for neighbors who might object to the band’s practice session. The sky an unusual brilliant blue without a cloud in the sky.

‘Perfect.’ Thought Terry.

There was an eerie silence about the street. As though no one was there, but him. No a bird in the sky. Not a breeze in the air. Vibrant green leaves hung unruffled in the trees. His mind confused to the surreal surroundings. Neighbors watch from windows. Wary of the band’s presence. A dog barks. A cat screeches. A dustbin falls over and sounds a metallic clatter.

“Terry! ...” A voice calls out from the doorway, breaking him from the day dream, “... You coming in? Hurry up. We’re ready.”

Keen to get inside Terry closes the front door behind him.

Shutting out the outside behind him. Clambering down silent basement stairs to discover the band had already set themselves up.

“That was quick.” Remarks Terry finding it highly unusual.

Noodling, Taylor tapped the keys of the electric piano. Ness plucked the heavy steel strings of the bass as though it was his lover. Sal bashed bright orange sticks at a snare drum in time with a tune in his head. Gareth tap-danced nimble fingers on the neck of his electric guitar.

Plugging in the remaining cables to the console, Terry pulls on a head set. Pressing cans against his ears. Feeling a warm comfort about them. And checks

the feeds from each of the instruments.

“Ness?” Asked Terry for a sound bite.

Ness plucked out a riff of his own and looks over to Terry. Giving him the thumbs up.

“Taylor?”

Taylor taps out a few bars of a cover song, “... We’re good.”

“Gareth?”

They were expecting the usual practice piece, but what they heard was different and they all struggled to place chords to any tune they knew.

“What was that?” Asked Taylor taken back by the musical titillation.

“A song I’ve been working on... What do you think?” He asked looking to others for approval.

“I like it... *Play it again Sam.*” Asked Terry keen to hear more.

Gareth carries on where he left off. Sal begins to tapping lightly on the rim of the drum as he picks up the beat. Taylor feels the rhythm and lays down a series of soft chords, getting harder and louder with every repetition. Not wanting to be left out Ness plucked the blues out of the song.

Terry flicked the record switch on the tape machine. Sounding too good to be true. Gareth had submersed himself in the song. Letting it take him over. Fingers slid up and down the neck of the Fender as though he were possessed. Varnish worn to bare wood. After countless bars, he began to sing. Adding another layer. Adding a voice to the new creation. Terry slides faders up and down, turning knobs to find the perfect tone. Sensing Gareth was counting down to the end the others laid off with Sal giving the final drum beat.

“What the heck was that Gareth?” Asked Ness taken back by the surprise.

“I call it *Tears like Rain*... What you think? ... Shit eh?” Gareth rejected the song.

“It was brilliant man, that’s what it is!”

“Shit man I didn’t know you could write.” Said Sal.

“You really like it? ...” Asked Gareth taken back by the enthusiasm, “... Terry, what you think?”

“It was okay... If you like that sort of thing...” Trying to keep a straight face, seeing Gareth’s disappointed reaction, “...Ah_ gotcha! It was bitch’n man... Sic! ... I got it down on tape, have a listen.”

“Really?” Asked Gareth taken aback by the band’s reaction.

“Really.” Responds Terry pressing the replay button.

With mouths open, speakers regurgitated the performance back to the band

members. Looking to each other grinning from ear to ear. Picking out the subtle blemishes of their first attempts. Heads rocked in time with the rock-blues.

“Wow... It sounds better on tape than in my head.” Remarks Gareth.

“Why don’t you guys have another take? ... I’ll put the kettle on... Tea anyone?”

“Love one.” Said Gareth.

“Yeah love one, ta man... Could go a biscuit.” Asked Ness.

“Me too.” Calls out Taylor not to be left out.

“I’ll have a look... I’ll be right back.” Said Terry disappearing up the strangely silent wooden stairwell.

Behind him he hears the band kick off again with the familiar tune. There was a spring in his step as he flew up the stairs as though he was weightless. Sensing something was amiss, he could not put his finger on it. Nor his foot.

‘That’s weird...’ Thought Terry, unable to place what was missing.

Placing the kettle on the stove Terry listens to the song drifting up from the basement. If Gareth had any more like that up his sleeve he could see the band performing in London.

Eyes fixate on the kettle bellowing steam profusely from its spout.

Filling the small kitchen with a mysterious mist. In that back ground the song played. Terry picked out the individual tracks. Gareth’s riff dancing with the whistling kettle. The two entwined as one. Louder and louder they became. Entangling themselves. Wrestling for dominance over the other.

Grabbing the octaves by the throats, Terry tries pull them apart. The kettle’s screaming soon had the upper hand. Strangling the guitar riff, fading into the engulfing mist.

To be replaced by his mother’s voice.

Chapter 03

“Terry! ...” A chirpy morning voice calls out to him through the mist of steam,
“... Terry! Wake up!”

Eyes begin to blink and a sudden intrusion of blinding morning light causes them to close again. His mother standing over him.

“Mother!?” Asked Terry confused looking about for the screaming kettle.

“I brought you a cup of tea.” Placing a cup and saucer beside the bed.

“What time is it?” He asked confused by re-awakening.

“Ten o’clock.” His mother reminded him.

“Hey? ... It can’t be?” Squinting at the alarm clock.

“Time to get up sweetie.” Said his mother picking up his boots and placing them against among his other shoes.

“I was just down in the basement with the band.” Remarks Terry looking about the room.

Faces on the wall poster as though they were laughing at him. Only to be distracted by his mother’s voice again.

“The band? You’ve been in bed the whole time sweetie... You really should get more sleep. These late nights are not good for you. Why don’t you find a real job and settle down like your brother.”

“I know who Tim is Ma... One day. But not today. You sure the band isn’t here?”

“Get the cuppa’ into you and come down stairs for breakfast... I’ve made some scramble eggs, you’re favorite.” Picking up his laundry and taking it with her.

“Thanks Ma...” Watching her leave, “... That was weird.”

Struggling to recall the dream.

‘It was a dream, wasn’t it?’

Terry checks his watch to re-confirm the time. Disoriented he stares at the poster on the wall and the four faces now grinning back at him.

“What you looking at?” But the poster refused to answer.

‘What was the song? ...Rain of Tears? ... Tears of Rain? ... How did it go again? ...’ His mind tries to hold onto the fading dream, *‘...Shit! ...’* Catching a bar here, a bar there. But soon those too slipped through the fingers of his consciousness. And soon he was left only the title. *‘... Damn it was a good*

song.’

Feeling cheated to have come so close.

“You bastards!” He cusses the four hillbillies.

Sitting on the side of the bed and takes a mouthful of the lukewarm tea rejuvenating him. Washing away the bad taste in his mouth and bringing life back to weary bones. And drags himself to the shower hoping it would revive himself.

“Lovely sleep love?” Asked his mother seeing him at the kitchen table.

“No.” Replied Terry staring at the scrambled eggs.

Taking a bottle of sauce covers the eggs in thick red blood.

“What time are the band coming over Terry? I need to tidy up.” His mother asked.

“They won’t mind Ma... Two, I think. We’ll be in the basement.”

“Keep the noise down... I don’t want the neighbors complaining.” She reminds him.

“Yes Ma... It’s only ‘till they find another place to practice. Sal’s dad knows someone who might have an old warehouse just out of town.”

“That’d be nice dear.” Said his mother not really listening.

“Yeah.” Said Terry shoveling egg and toast into his mouth.

“Don’t rush your food Terry... It’s bad for you digestion.” She mothers him.

“Yes Ma... I need to check the net, get some flyers ready... Might have a gig next month in London if all goes well.”

“That’s nice.” Not Listening.

“Yeah.”

(Scrape-Scrape). Scraping the last of the mouthful of breakfast from the plate, then rushes from the kitchen table, “...Gotta go.”

Booting the laptop to life logs into the band’s profile.

Five messages waited to be answered and he quickly scans the subject lines. One catches his attention and he opens it first. The London bar was keen to secure the band and wanted them to commit to the date in four weeks. Types a reply to say that the band would be there.

(Send). And hitting the key before he could change his mind.

The gig meant money. And the one thing they needed more than attention. Was money. Prompting him to text the band members of the commitment before they had a chance to say otherwise.

The dream lingered in the back of his mind. Taunting him. Poking at him as

if to say, *'remember me'*. Teasing him, only to have it taken away.

He felt cheated.

"Fuck off!" Terry said a loud to the thoughts in his head, just as his father appears at the door.

"Excuse me?" Catching his father by surprise.

"Not you dad... Sorry... Just thinking aloud." Shrinking back into his chair.

"Oh, ha... That's okay... How's it going?" He asked.

"Had a few hits to the website... I've lined up a gig in London next month."

"London? The big apple... Wow... That's terrific!" Catching his father's attention.

"Gareth's written a new song apparently... We have practice at two if you want to listen in."

"That's great... Unfortunately you're mother however has other plans for me... Wants to go to the shopping center... Sorry." His father apologizes knowing where he would rather be.

"I'll record it for you."

"I envy you son... You know that? Don't you ever give up on your dream Terry, like I did."

"You never gave up dad... You just passed the batten on... We'll get there."

"Have fun... Catch you at dinner time." Said his father.

"Have fun with Ma."

"I very much doubt that." He chuckles.

Terry closes the lap top and heads to the basement to get it ready.

It was like he was retracing his steps. There was something unnerving about it. The steps squeaked with every step he took. Taking in the dimly lit space. Sunlight streamed through the portal windows high on the walls. Flicking a switch and bulb fills the shadows with light.

Pushing boxes out of the way makes room for the band to set up. Somehow recalling where each had positioned themselves. Then he spies the tape machine. Covered in a thin layer of dust since its last use. The power was off and in some way, he was relieved it was.

His mind toyed with the thought of turning it on.

'Nah. Don't be silly.' He told himself looking at the machine daring him to.

He hesitated. And turned it on anyway. The hum of the internal fan filled the silent void of the basement. An inflamed red button stood out from the others. Taunting him to press play.

'It was just a dream.' He reassured himself.

Who would blink first? A hand reaches forward. Then a finger. He presses down on the play button and closes his eyes.

Silence. Static. Silence. More static.

“Ha!” He laughs to himself.

Feeling disappointed and embarrassed at the same time. What was he expecting? A ghost recording of a dream. And he kills the play switch relieved there was nothing on the tape.

“You’re too old to believe in ghosts Terry.” He told himself.

Taking a broom, begins to sweep the floor of dust only to create a haze in the air.

01:47PM. His parents would have had left for the shopping mall.

Leaving him alone. Outside he could hear the distinctive sound of the van’s straining engine and rattling exhaust. Rushes up squeaking wooden stairs. Appearing at the doorstep to discover the twins standing there.

“Terry, Terry.” The twins sang out cheerfully. None the worse from the previous evening’s mischievous exertions.

“Set up in the basement, I’ll be down soon.” Said Terry having a feeling of *Deja-vu*.

Gareth was struggling with the heavy amps like a lumbering gorilla.

“Here... Let me help you with those Gareth.” Terry offered.

“I’m good... You get what’s left and lock up the van... I’ll see you down stairs... Where your folks?” He asked expecting to see his parents at home.

“The Mall... I think.”

“That’s good... Might be a bit of noise.” Laughed Gareth back at him.

This was all too familiar. Gathering the guitar case, closes the van’s rear doors. Eyeing the street for neighbors who might object to the band’s practice session. Grey ominous rain clouds had gathered. The sun struggled to break through. Birds sang out a song of imminent rain. Leaves on the trees rustled in the growing breeze. A man walking his dog looks at Terry strangely as to why he was staring at him.

“Terry! ...” A voice calls out from the doorway, “... You coming in? Hurry up we’re ready.”

White lace curtains conceal faces watching from behind. A dog barks. A cat screeches. The sound of a metal rubbish bin knocked over resonates from nearby alleyway. A dog yelps in pain.

Keen to get inside Terry closes the front door behind him. Shutting himself from the outside that was after him.

Clambering down creaking basement stairs to find the band had set speakers and amps in identical positions to before.

'Before? What before? Get a grip Terry!' He tries to gain a grip on reality.

The band went about tuning instruments. Ness plucked the heavy bass strings. Taylor tapped softly on keys of the electric organ. Sal tapped orange sticks at a snare drum in time with a tune in his head. Gareth's nimble fingers worked up and down scales.

'Nothing Terry had not seen a hundred times before.' He told himself.

Plugging in the remaining cables, pulls a head set over his ears and checks the feeds from each of the instruments.

"Ness?" Asked Terry for a sound bite. Ness plucked out a riff of his own. Terry gives him the thumbs up.

"Taylor?"

Taylor taps out a few bars of a cover song, another thumb goes up.

"Gareth?" He asked without thinking.

Gareth unleashing a guitar riff that caught every one's attention. Terry froze, while the others were unable to place the tune.

"What was that?" Asked Taylor titillated by the musical entrée.

"The song I've been working on... What do you think?" Asked Gareth unsure if the others wanted to hear more.

"I like it... *Play it again Sam.*" Asked Ness keen to hear more.

Goosebumps run over Terry's body, followed by a cold eerie chill. Looking to him as if it was one of Gareth's practical jokes. Gareth begins to play again. Sal joins in as before. Tapping a foot to detect the beat. Taylor feels a rhythm of the twelve bar blues. Ness plucked gently along with him. Grinning at one another.

Terry listened to the tune unable to concentrate. He wanted to wake up. Again. Pinching himself, he feels the sharp pain. This was no dream. Gareth let the song it take over him. Artisan fingers worked the neck of the Fender as though he were possessed. Varnish worn bare. Then he began singing all too familiar words. After a while the others laid off as Sal gave the final drum roll.

"What the heck was that Gareth?" Asked Sal.

'Tears like Rain...' Responded Terry automatically to confirm his worse fears.

"How'd you know that?" Gareth asked looking at Terry suspiciously.

“I know that song.” Said Terry.

“How could you? ... I only wrote it last week. There’s no way you could know it.”

“I had a dream last night... All this?” He looks about the room and the faces looking blankly back at him.

“Don’t go *postal* on us now Terry... We need you... This is one of your jokes isn’t it?” Asked Gareth about to laugh.

“It’s in the lyrics...” Said Terry, “... I can hear it.”

“Good one Terry, you really had us going then... *Ha-ha-ha.*” Laughs Sal.

“Yeah_ good one Terry... You got me there... *ha-ha-ha.*” Laughs Gareth.

“Freck’n brilliant song Gareth, we going to use it?” Asked Ness keen for another jam.

“I suppose... We’d have to practice it... Don’t see why not... Terry?”

“It was Sic man... I got it down on tape, have a listen.”

“Really?”

“Oh damn! ... I forgot to turn it on... Shit.” Said Terry pressing the replay button without rewinding the tape.

Static begins to play like before. But before he could kill the machine, speakers regurgitate the performance. Looking at each other with mouths open, grinning in disbelief at hearing themselves play. Feet tap and heads rocked in time to the creation being born before them.

“Wow... It sounds better on tape than in my head... Good one Terry... You nearly had us again! ...*ha-ha-ha.*” Laugh Gareth.

“Yeah... *Ha...* Almost had me too.” Looking at the tape ghoulish tape machine. Giant spools rotate slowly.

“Could go a cup of tea after that... Terry would you mind?”

“Sure... Biscuit Taylor? Ness?” Asked Terry knowing what they wanted before they did.

“Yeah, love one, ta.” The twins call out excitedly.

“You guys have another take... I’ll be right back.” Weary legs step on creaking steps to the kitchen.

“Thanks Terry... Okay from the top... Try to keep up... Watch for my changes, two-three-four!” Gareth calls out.

Placing the kettle on the stove he stared as though it were corruptible in the events that had just unfolded. His mind straining to comprehend what had just happened.

“Get a grip Terry... It was just a dream...” He tells himself, “...Yeah, a dream with a song you know the lyrics to.”

Watching steam billowing from the spout of the kettle whistling incessantly to be put out of its misery. He waited for the kitchen to fill with steam. Waited for the demonic riff to interject. That never came.

This was one dream he would not be waking up from. And he found himself rocking to the catchy tune. And mouthing the now familiar lyrics.

“Biscuits?” He catches himself. Eyes searching the pantry cupboard.

Chapter 04

Terry is awoken abruptly by an alarm that rang out like the bells of hell.

An arm reaches out to stifle the satanic intrusion. Replaced by visions of Lorraine's naked body fade in the bright summer morning light.

"Ah_." He moaned fighting back the bright light.

Straining to open eyes, pulls a sheet over his head. Defying the need to be get out of bed. Reluctant to leave the thought of Lorraine's warm body pressing against him. Loins throbbed. Rubbing it only made the irritation worse. Then rolled over hoping to suffocate the swollen beast. Only to have his mother appear at the door. And extinguish the flame.

"Thanks Ma." Laments Terry losing interest in Lorraine.

"You're welcome dear... I need to do the laundry." She reminded him.

"I'll bring them down."

"Suit yourself... Breakfast's ready."

"Thanks Ma..." Watching his mother disappear from his room.

Any thoughts of Lorraine's nakedness now evaporated and replaced with thoughts of his mother and laundry.

"I've got to get my own place." He tells himself.

Standing, arms stretch and reach upward. Rubbing eyes then scratches his crotch. Wondering how he was going to function on the little sleep he had gotten. Checks his watch. His shift at the pizzeria would not start for a few hours. Enough time to get online and check the number of hits the band had had over night. Gareth's song echoed in his mind and he found himself singing it to himself. It was catchy. Maybe the band could slot in next time at the Arms, before the London gig.

Finishing breakfast, he cracks open the laptop and waited for the band's profile page to load.

Like himself, the net responded sluggishly.

"Thank God for that..." Finally seeing the home page appear, "Hmm... Forty seven visits..." Up on the thirty eight from day before, "... Not bad." He conceded.

Updating the profile with an appetizer that the band had a new single coming

out, *Tears Like Rain* and fans should watch out for details of their gigs. And signs off.

Love and Peace.

The Ravens.

Shutting the laptop leans back and allows himself a few moments relief. London but three weeks away.

“London... Here we come.”

Decides to text Lorraine with the good news. And waited for a reply that never came.

“Hmm...Must be busy.”

Arriving at the Pizzeria just before his shift was due to start, Mario the owner catches him slipping beneath the counter donning an apron.

“Terry!” He calls out enthusiastically.

“Morning Mario... Hey, sorry I’m late!”

“No problem Terry... Setta uppa... And I’ll fire uppa the ovens.” Advises Mario.

“Sure thing Mario.”

Retrieving trays of toppings from large fridges Terry organizes the work space. Mario fired up wood burning ovens and tuned the radio into an Italian station. *Amore*, sang out with Mario waltzes about the bakery floor to the amusement of those watching on. Twirling and flinging doughy pizza bases into the air.

Lorraine waves out to Terry from outside the store window.

“Did you get my Txt?” He asked.

“Yeah, yeah... That’s wonderful! ... Wow London. The big time eh?”

“Maybe... Gareth has a new song. You should hear it. Got it on tape at home if you want to come around later.”

“Yeah, yeah... What time you finishing here?”

He looks up to the clock showing ten past ten.

“Seven... When Freddie arrives... You?”

“Six... I’ll stop by after I finish at the dressers.”

“Kay... See you then.” Terry leans over the counter and waits for her to do likewise.

Lorraine looks about the pizzeria for people watching and leans towards him and gives him a kiss that aroused Mario’s interest.

“Get a room-a!” He calls out boisterously, grinning ear to ear.

“I wish.” Said Terry wishfully.

“Tonight.” She said winking at him as though there was more to the visit than the listening to the tape. And he watched her as she walked from the pizzeria.

“Someone’s go to *luckie* tonight.” Said Mario.

“I doubt that... Not with my parents about I won’t.” Defused Terry Thoughts of his mother catching them was like a cold shower.

“Trust me Terry. That women doesn’t seem like the kind of women who would worry about your mother... I know-a what-a I men-a?” Mario’s imagination rampant with entangled bodies.

“You do?” Terry looks at Mario suspiciously.

“Been married three times-a Terry... I *know-a* about-a women-a... Trust me.”

“Okay then...” Taking on board Mario’s failures, “...We’ll see.”

“You band-a people have these groupie women-a no?” Mario inquired inquisitively.

“Not that I’m getting any, no... But I can’t speak for the twins... They seem to have no trouble pulling women... Or themselves I suspect.” Terry blurted out.

“Oh... Mamma D-Mia!” Mario’s imagination goes into over drive.

Time passed slowly.

Making pizza after pizza after pizza. One after the other after the other. Operating on auto-pilot. Sleep deprivation only made the time pass more slowly. Catching himself yawning he wondered if he would any strength to satisfy Lorraine’s appetite. Mario sang out boisterously in Italian to the amusement of the patrons. The minute hand refused to move any faster. Five became six and finally after a several more hours became seven.

A rush of customers came into the store at the last minute. Freddie was nowhere to be seen. Terry looks about outside the store window for him. Evening shoppers wandering aimlessly up and down the Mall.

Suddenly a long greasy haired pimply face young man enters with a customer and whistles out for Terry his shift was over. Throwing a grubby duffle bag into a corner pulls on an apron.

“Freddie!” Exclaimed Terry relieved to see him.

“Busy?” He asked.

“Steady... Just picked up now... You all good?”

“Yeah... See you have a new song?” Freddie asked curiously.

“How’d you know?”

“Saw it on line man... When you playing it?”

“Maybe the Arms, we’ve got London in three weeks. We need to get it down first.”

“London... Choice.”

“I’m outta here... Catch you tomorrow.” Said Terry keen to leave.

Terry wrestles to remove his apron before hanging it up on a hook. Throwing the net and blue rubber gloves into the rubbish bin.

“See you tomorrow Mario!” Terry calls out from the doorway before leaving.

“You too Terry... Good-a luck-a with Lorraine you stud-a! ... Don’t-a do-a anything I wouldn’t do-a!”

“Yeah right... Ha.” Terry leaves before customers had a chance to catch his embarrassment.

“Terry... You have a visitor.” His mother calls out from the living room hearing him coming through the front door.

“*Lorraine*... You’re early?” Said Terry surprised to see her there.

“I can leave if you want?” She teases him pulling a fake pout.

“No, no of course not... Give me a moment change out of these clothes. I’ll be right back.”

Terry races up the stairs and changes hurriedly. Spraying himself with deodorant in the hope of burying the smell of the pizzeria. And rushes back down the stairs to appear at the door of the living room.

“Hey!” Reappearing at the living room doorway.

“That was quick.” Said Lorraine grinning.

“Just going to play Lorraine the new song Ma.” Terry advises his mother.

“Don’t be too long... Dinner ‘s almost ready.” Calling back from the kitchen to sounds of rattling pots and plates in the background.

Lorraine pulls Terry by the hand keen to get to the basement. Terry’s father looks over the top of his newspaper, reading glasses half way down his nose and grins at his son before he disappears from the room. Catching a hint of anxiety on his son’s face.

“Such a lovely girl... Why can’t Terry settle down with Lorraine?” Asked his mother.

“Let the boy be... He’ll settle down when he’s ready.” Shaking the paper and resumes reading.

Flicking on basement switch, a single bulb illuminates the darkness of the empty space.

Boxes stacked against a wall and a sturdy workbench against another.

“Give me second to rewind it.” Fiddling with the tape machine hoping the song was still on the tape.

“It looks pretty old... Why don’t you get a digital one?”

“When we get some coin together... It suits us for now... Okay... You ready?” He asked.

“Yeah... Let’s hear it.” Biting a lip with anticipation.

“You’re the first to hear it outside the band.”

“Really?” She said surprised.

“Yeah.” He said softly. And presses play.

Crackling static sounds spat from the speakers. As though a ghost was trying to contact him from the *other side*. Suddenly the song plays. Lead in by Gareth’s guitar. Wrapping itself around the two lovers as Lorraine wrapped her arms around him. Pressing her sexually heated body against his. Her body rocking to the rhythm and beat.

“It’s good... Gareth write this?”

“Yeah... Good eh?”

There was no answer, just a kiss. She nudges him towards the workbench and leans against it. Her hands reaching for his zipper.

“*Hey... My parents...*” Terry looks up to the ceiling.

“They won’t be down...” Fingers continue their search.

Eyes look up to as she lowers herself before him. With no resistance from him who keeps looking over to the stair well. Hoping his mother would not appear and kill the moment. Fingers fumble for the volume knob. The song filled the room and drifted up the stairwell hoping to ward off the parental jinn. Hoping the volume would also stifle Lorraine’s moans. Breaths quicken as Lorraine leans on the work bench.

‘Stop thinking about your mother you fool... Think of Lorraine...Think of Lorraine!’ He tells himself being distracted.

Fingers grope and fumble beneath a blouse hoping that will rejuvenate the erectile dysfunction. Trying to concentrate, moans and groans and thrusts. It was all over before it had begun. Then realizes his oversight.

“What’s the matter?” Lorraine asked curiously feeling something amiss in his enthusiasm.

“Nothing...” Terry lies, “...We should have used a condom.”

“Don’t worry about it... I’m on the pill.” She tells him.

“Oh.” Zipping himself up looking to the stairwell for legs that could appear

at any moment.

Lorraine adjusts her panties and skirt. Brushing off grime from the bench. The song had all but finished and she asked him to play it again.

“It’s good...” She told him, “...Does he have any more?”

“Dunno, I suppose so... This could be the break we’re looking for. What with the gig in London three weeks.”

Lorraine leaned back and listened to the tune again. Her mind in two places. Weighing her options. Resting her head on Terry’s shoulder.

“Mother will come looking for us.” Warns Terry.

“She know where to find us...” Beginning to dance to the song.

Pulling Terry towards her. Twirling him around. Smiling and giggling, intoxicated by the new sound, “... *Brilliant* Terry. Tell Gareth I said that okay.”

“Yeah I will.”

“*Spread the word*... Tell everyone you know. The more hits we can get on the web site all add up for us.”

“Okay...” Lorraine checks her watch, “... Shit! I have to be at the salon, I’m covering for Marilyn tonight.”

“You should have told me, I wouldn’t have held you up?” Asked Terry.

“And miss *this*? ... Never!” Leading Terry up the basement stairs.

Lorraine appears at the living room in time to see Terry’s mother setting the table.

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner Lorraine?” His mother asked.

“I’m fine Misers Davies... I’ve already eaten thank you... Maybe next time.”

Lorraine grins at Terry.

“Next time then...” Terry’s mother responds, “...Say hello to your mother for me.”

“Will do Misers Davies... Bye... You too Mister Davies.”

His father looks over his paper and raises heavy eye brows to acknowledge her departure.

And grins. There was a spring in her step. Noticing Terry stood like a mischievous school boy. As though he had committed a carnal act of some kind in the basement.

And chuckles to himself, eyeing Terry proudly.

Chapter 05

“Won’t be long... Just catching up with Gareth at the Arms.” Terry calls out closing the front door behind him.

Standing at the gate looks up and down the street. A summer breeze blew gently over him as the sun hung on the horizon reluctant to fall any lower. Deciding he would surprise Lorraine before stopping in at the Arms. The walk would settle his stomach after his mother’s heavy meal of bangers and mash.

Strolling through the Mall he passes the pizzeria and looks inside, seeing Freddie serving customers. Looking up in time to catch him waving out. People loitered the Mall. Browsing store windows. Enjoying the cool evening air. Terry pushes open the salon doors and expects to Lorraine standing over a woman doing her hair.

“Terry?” Calls out Marilyn inquisitively seeing him enter.

“Hey... I thought Lorraine was covering for you tonight?”

“Not that I know of... She left hours ago... Sorry.” Said Marilyn confused.

“Oh... Sorry, I must have got it wrong... If you see her, tell I stopped by.”

“Sure Terry... I’ll tell her.” Responded Marilyn.

“Hmm! That’s weird?” Closing the door quietly behind him.

Checking his watch, sure he had heard her right. Heads from the Mall and crosses the road towards the Arms. The two story brick building stood out from the surrounding houses. A giant colorful mural of tall trees adorned a wall of the bar. Adding color to an otherwise dull appearance to the car park. An overhead sign hung motionless over the main doors. Void of any iconic image found on so many pub signs. Stating in large bold white lettering on a rustic background...

THE CLISSOLD ARMS

Standing outside at the main door he looks back towards the Mall.

His mind still searching for Lorraine. Perplexed that she was not where she said she would be.

‘There had to be a simple explanation.’ He told himself.

Sounds leaking from within distracts him from thoughts of Lorraine. Pushing open the doors to find people milling over meals and pints of beer, engaging in social banter. A jukebox played a tune. Muffling the chatter. Spying Gareth leaning against the bar talking to Sian, the daughter of the owner. She was

giggling and smiling at him.

“Hey Gareth.” Terry pulls a stool up beside him.

“Terry... We’re just taking about you.”

“Really?” He asked with surprise.

“That’s nothing compared to your new song.”

“New song?” Asked Sian excitedly.

“Yeah seems Gareth here is not only a brilliant guitarist but is also an incredible song writer... Maybe he’ll play it time we’re here... What do you say Gareth?”

“There’s still a lot to do but why not... But yeah, maybe. Okay”

“I can’t wait.” Sian eyes lit up with excitement.

“Tell your friends... *Spread the word.*” He tells her.

“I will! ...” She responds, then sees a customer needing serving, “...I will.”

“*Spread the word?* ... You sound like a preacher Terry.” Remarks Gareth.

“It’s called marketing Gareth... The number of hits on our website has double since we told everyone about the new song.”

“Really? ... But’s only been a couple of days? And we haven’t even played it yet.”

“Well word has gotten out and it travels fast in Muswell.”

“No pressure man.” Gareth responds taken back.

“You got any more up your sleeve you’re not telling us about?”

“A couple... But they’re all work in progress if you know what I mean.”

“Well keep at them, we could use them if a record company comes knocking.” Encourages Terry.

“A record company?”

“Why not Gareth? You saying you’re not good enough?”

“Oh_ we’re good enough, but are we ready?”

“When will we ever be? Strike while the iron is hot.” Terry encourages him.

“Yeah I suppose.” Gareth stares into his beer, unable to see Terry’s ambitions beneath the froth.

“Leave the promotional stuff to me and you focus on with making great music okay. That’s why you pay me the big bucks remember?” Terry reminds him.

“But we don’t pay you... You pay yourself.” Remarks Gareth.

“Well things are going to change one day... You coming?”

“Where to?”

“The top Gareth... The top!” Terry reminds him laughing.

“Yeah... *To the top!*” Gareth raises his pint glass and salutes him.

“You think the van will make it to London?” Asked Terry, worried if old girl had the legs to get there.

“Don’t see why not. She made it this far.”

“With all our gear and bodies? It’s okay around the Hill but London and back?”

“She’s as solid as a rock so long as we push her too hard. You know what women are like.”

“Yeah, yeah... Speaking of which, have you seen Lorraine? Said she was working at the salon this evening, only that Marilyn said she wasn’t there.”

“Nah... Haven’t seen her for a while now... Why don’t you bring her down this weekend?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that... Where the twins? Or dare I ask?”

“Best you don’t, but since you have, last time I saw those two they were heading out that door with Mary McKinnon.”

“Oh Jesus... She’s laid more pipe than BP!” Remarks Terry.

“Say that again.” Said Gareth sipping on his Guinness. Chewed on it and swallowed. Leaving a white frothy mustache on his upper lip.

“Where’s Sal? Thought he might be down tonight.”

“He’s out somewhere getting his leg over some girl last I heard... Hey, there’s Leigh... Who’s the girl?” Asked Gareth watching on.

“Jane.” Informs Terry.

“Not crazy Jane?” Asked Gareth wary of the woman.

“Same one.” Gareth watches what appeared to be a psychotic primal mating ritual.

Stroking Leigh’s back, then presses her ample bosoms against him. Then as if she had not trespassed enough she kisses him. He accepts the unsolicited tongue lashing with some of his own. At this stage bar staff turned and looked away. They had seen enough. But the show had only just begun it seemed.

“Get a room!” Utters Gareth beneath his breath. There was something a grown man should not see.

Eyes follow her movements. Only to see her crawl between his legs. Leaving patron’s wondering what was going on between the odd couple.

“He does know, *you don’t stick your cock in crazy?* Right?” Asked Terry quietly.

“Apparently not.” Cringed Gareth watching Jane beginning to undress.

With her libido supercharged Jane begins to remove a top exposing a tight

fitting singlet cradling her ample breasts. With no hint of bar. Terry turns away, before they pair took it to the next level. Gulping down the last of his beer Leigh stands and leaves with her leading the way.

“I thought he lived with Laura?” Asked Gareth.

“Not for much longer it seems.” Speculates Terry watching them leave. Thankfully.

“You wouldn’t read about it would you?”

“Not in a million years man.”

“Seems you and me are the only two not getting any.” Laments Gareth swirling the dregs of Guinness at the bottom of his glass.

“Yeah.” Terry lies, trying not to make eye contact, and takes a sip from his pint glass.

“Another?” Asked Gareth.

“Nah... Gotta get back... Practice Thursday right? Polish the song off.”

“Right... See you then, if not before.”

“Keep at those other songs.”

“We’ll see... You line up the gigs, we’ll play them... To the top Terry!” Remarks Gareth.

“To the top!” Calls out Terry reluctantly pushing himself away from the bar that was holding him back from leaving.

Lorraine stands silhouetted in the open doorway about to enter.

Adjusting her skirt. Brushing grass from it.

“Hey you!” Said Terry with some surprise seeing.

“Hey Terry, what are you doing here?” Surprised to see him.

“Wanted to catch up with Gareth and stretch the legs... What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be working.” Began Terry.

“Just finished... Thought I’d stop in for a quick one.”

“Oh... Marilyn said you weren’t working this evening.”

“Oh yeah_ sorry...,” An awkward silence followed as Lorraine quickly thought of a convenient alibi, “...Friend of mine *Sally*... At the other salon? Asked if I’d lean a hand... Just finished... I’m knackered... You not staying?” Diverting his questioning.

“Oh, that’s good then eh? Must have had my wires crossed, it’s been a crazy couple of days.”

“Stay for one, with me... Don’t leave alone with this lot.” Lorraine pulled Terry close and pressed her warm body against his.

“I suppose I could stay for one, but I have to get back... Have to work on the website.”

“It can wait one more day Terry. You need to relax more... Come on babe.”
Fondly coercing him.

“Okay, just one, then I have to go... You missed a great show... Crazy Jane was all over Leigh like a rash.”

“Leigh? The chef Leigh?”

“Yeah... We all thought they were going to do it on the bar.” Terry gets a distant look in his eyes imagining the coupling of bodies.

“Ah_ yuk how gross... Have they gone?” She asked looking about for the love birds.

“Yeah fortunately, I thought Phil was going to ask them to take it outside at one stage.”

“I reckon... Come on lover boy... You can buy me a drink.” Pulling him by the arm towards the bar. Seeing Gareth talking to Sian. Giggling and smiling.

Outside street lights were appearing as daylight surrendered to nightfall.

In the car park, a car rocked with Leigh’s sporadic thrusting. Naked legs protruded from the far side. Trousers around his ankles. Groans and grunts and moans and squeaks resonated from within the chassis, before falling silent as two sweaty temporal lovers collapsed with sexual exhaustion. Jane pushes the suffocating mass away. Her itch had been scratched. His primal frustration relieved.

To become strangers again.

Chapter 06

Eyes blinked from green to blue to red to yellow. And back again.

Brilliant strobe lights flashed in time with beat of the music. The house was crowded with revelers waiting anxiously for the band's new song. Intoxicated ravens jiggled like teabags on strings. The faithful's appetites had been wetted. Chanting voices called out the title hoping it would prompt the band to begin playing.

Gareth looks to Terry who shakes his head. They would save it for the finale and have the fans take it away with them still ringing in their ears. Until then, Terry turned up the volume as the band played cover after cover. Cupping the headset over ears, he entered a world of high fidelity. Tweaking here and there, knowing the dreaded feedback spike could strike at any moment. For now the beast lay dormant. Ever watchful of dials and LEDs to detect its imminent presence. Winding down, Sal crashed out the final beat.

"Thank you Ravens... We're just going to take a short break and we'll be back real soon... Don't go away." Gareth shreds a few bars of *Tears like Rain* and leaves the fans calling out for more.

Taylor and Ness head to the bar keen for their free beers and chat to particular red head that had caught their eyes. Sal and Gareth catch up with Terry at the back of the house.

"How we sounding?" Asked Sal.

"Brilliant man... Keep it coming ... Save *Tears* until the end okay... Nice riff Gareth."

"Yeah, though you'd like that... Bit of a teaser for them."

"You guys have it down pat?" Asked Terry not wanting a train wreck on their first performance.

"Yeah think so... Worst case we can wing it like practice." Said Gareth hesitantly.

"You're not giving me a lot of confidence here Gareth." Terry frets anxiously.

"We've got it covered Terry, so long as the other's keep up, relax... Speaking of, where are they?" Looking about for them.

"Probably at the bar having a free beer." Said Terry removing the headset and heads to the bar to join them.

"Lorraine coming down?" Asked Gareth.

"Said she'd be here..." Said Terry looking about, "... Hey there's Leigh, I

wonder how he got on with that bird he pulled the other night?"

Leigh had assumed a solitary position at center bar, staring into a half empty beer glass. Pining the brief courtship that had ended the moment he ejaculated any feelings he had for the girl. Now seated at the far end of the bar, ignoring him like a spent cartridge. Jane now plying her seductive charms to another rubbing post that had wandered in and caught her interest. She had an itch that needed scratching. Disinterested Leigh gazed into his glass as though they were complete strangers.

"Would have been one of his longer relationships." Jokes Gareth.

"Get these down you boys." Said McCracken arriving with three pints.

"Thanks' Phil."

"Words out you got a new song... Going play it tonight?"

"At the end... Leave them wanting more."

"Keep this lot drinking and there could be something extra in it for you."

Winks McCracken

"Cheers Phil... We'll try." Said Gareth.

"You heard him... String it out, we could use the extra dosh... Pay for the gas to London town." Said Terry.

The weak juke box sang out a classic song but failed to fill the void left by the band and the sound of people talking. Gareth drained his glass and headed to the restroom to relieve himself. From one of the booth's a pair of heels protruded and he thought he heard Taylor's voice, soon followed Ness moaning.

Zippering up he bangs on the door.

"Five minutes you two!" Gareth calls out shaking his head in disbelief at the thought of what was happening behind the closed door.

"No worries man... Almost done." Calls out Taylor.

"Speak for yourself!" Complains Ness.

Back on stage, the lights dim and the sound amplified exponentially.

Ravens came to life and jiggered corpses back to the dance floor. Flashing lights exciting them to a frenzy. Their movements erratic. The air was filled with a sweet pungent smell and McCracken goes to search of its source.

Scantly dressed female ravens danced in a confined mush-pit jostling for attention. Taylor and Ness played erotically. Rolling hips in suggestive ways. Sal laughed seeing the lads playing up to the girls. Fluorescent orange drum sticks glowed in the pulsating darkness. Sweat dripping beneath his forehead beneath long straggly hair. Spot lights and heated bodies adding to the thermal

entombment. After another dozen anthems the set was coming to a close.

Midnight and McCracken gave the signal to start winding it up.

Terry nods his head and gestures a thumb up to Gareth. It was time to debut what the faithful had come to see. The band falls silent as Gareth turns to talk them.

“Okay... Just as we practiced it, follow my lead okay.” He reminded them.

“No worries Gareth, we’ve got your back.” Jokes Sal easing the tension.

“Okay everyone... Thanks for coming along tonight, hope you enjoyed the show...” Gareth speaks into the microphone.

A wild roar goes up among the squealing ravens. Clapping hands into the air. Hooting and whistling their appreciation. Gareth takes in the moment and raises his hand to quieten the walking dead.

“Know a lot of you may have *heard something...*” He falls silent and the ravens squeal their excitement.

“*Tears like Rain.*” Squeals a raven from the back.

Gareth grins hoping the song would live up to everyone’s expectations.

“Oh *that...* Yeah... I suppose y’all be wanting to hear it?” He played along.

A roar erupts among the faithful egging him on to play.

“I hope you like it... Okay boys from the top, follow my lead, and try to keep up... Two-three-four!” Gareth calls out bleeding into the opening bars.

The faithful fall silence. Stunned by the new creation being unleashed before them. Bodies begin to twitch with the appealing new sound. Gareth wailed spellbinding lyrics. Taylor and Ness found themselves improvising beyond their practice sessions. Harmonizing seamlessly with guitar riffs. Sal bashed on drums as though he too were possessed by the song. His head banging back and forth, long dark hair concealing a stoned face. Floor boards vibrated with bass and kick drum.

Ravens came to life again. Resurrecting their dance moves. Mobile phones captured the moment and were streaming the internet before the song had finished. Playing the extended version and Terry gave a nod it was going to an end. Counting down, easies sliders down. Killing the sound and raising the lights. Engulfing the band first in darkness. Then brilliant spot lights.

A roar goes up among the living dead. McCracken claps from the bar, takings were up. The band was welcome back anytime. Band members smile and grin among themselves. Exceeding their own expectations. Admiration flowed like waves over them and they rode every wave.

“Again! ... Encore!” Cried out a raven from the back. Echoed by another. Then another.

Gareth looks to the others who shrug their shoulders indifferent to the replay. Terry gives the thumbs up. McCracken was too busy counting money to disagree.

“One more time and that’s it okay!” Warns Gareth.

Re-booting the band again. More mobile phones capture the Kodak moment and the song goes viral.

Exhausted the band winds the song down and Terry kills the music one last time.

Cheers and whistles and hoots and hollers came from the faithful. Gareth is stunned by the response. What had begun a few lines in his bedroom could amount to this. And gasps at the thought. Before coming back to the reality hollering before him.

“*Spread the word...* Ya’ all come back now, ya’ hear.” Gareth parrots Terry’s catch phrase.

Causing Terry to look up from the console and laugh. Giving him the thumbs up. The evening was too perfect and expected his mother wake him from the dream at any moment. Revelers began to leave. Except a few faithful that hang off the bar watching the band pack up.

Taylor and Ness head to bar followed closely by Sal. There was not going to be repeat of the tag team in the back of the van while he was with them. Terry and Gareth caught up with McCracken who slides an envelope towards him. Feeling it a little thicker than usual.

“There’s a little something extra in there for you boys... We did a record take tonight... You write that Gareth?”

“Yeah, just a silly little love song Phil.” Said Gareth deflecting the admiration.

“You keep that up and I’ll be sad to see you guys go.” Said McCracken.

“What do you mean? We’re good here aren’t we?” Asked Terry fearing losing the slot.

“Of course, but I got a feeling you’re going to outgrow this place... Just saying.” Dejectedly.

Band members looking to each other and laugh at the prospect. The only one not laughing was Terry whose mind was already planning their next move.

“You okay Terry?” Asked Gareth seeing him go quiet.

“Yeah... He’s right you know.”

“He is? We’ll never outgrow this place Terry.” Said Gareth.

“You saw how they reacted your song.”

“Our song Terry...” Gareth corrects him, “...We’re in this all together. We can’t do any of this without you.”

“Get me a few more like that and I’ll get us into a recording studio... I know this guy up Merseyside... Maybe...”

“Merseyside? Those Scourers... It’s a long way to go to record?”

“He has connections ... If you know what I mean.” Said Terry optimistically.

“No... But you know best.” Said Gareth.

“*Tears* will turn the key, but it won’t open the door without the weight of a few more behind it.”

“I’ll try Terry, but it isn’t as easy as it looks... *Tears* was a fluke, I was coming out of a relationship...” Gareth falls quiet, the scars had not healed.

“Good... Capture that feeling. You bottle it and I’ll peddle it... You should break up more often if it means writing like that.” Said Terry chuckling.

“It ain’t funny Terry... It’s personal you know.”

“Yeah, yeah... I’m sorry man... Just saying... Find that zone again... You’re an artist Gareth. The band is your canvas.”

“And what are you?” Asked Gareth curiously.

“I’m the auctioneer... Selling the band to the highest bidder.” Remarked Terry.

“You’re *unbelievable* you know... Don’t know what we’d do without you... Cheers!”

“Slainte!” Calls out McCracken in Irish.

“Slainte!” Everyone raises their glass and taps them lightly together.

“The Ravens!” Calls out Terry.

Just then the door opens and in walks Lorraine. Brushing grass off her skirt. On seeing Terry at the bar waves out to him.

“Lorraine!” Calls out Terry signaling her to come over.

“Hey!” She responds.

“You’re late? You missed a great show... Thought you’d be popping in?” He asked unsure where she had been.

“Marilyn wanted to go clubbing at Rattle Snakes... Half price cocktails.”

“Oh... That’s good... So long as you had fun.”

Gareth excused himself to start packing up. More so to distance himself from infidelity he could smell coming off Lorraine. Terry was his best mate and did not want to see him getting hurt. At thirty two, this was something he would

have to deal with himself.

“Gareth really killed the song... Licked it to death... You missed history tonight Lorraine.”

“You’re talking another language Terry but I guess you’re saying it was good.”

“Good? ... The cover songs are good...” Terry raised a hand to indicate a level waist high, “... *Tears* is here.” Raising the hand over his head, “...You should heard them play.”

“I’ve heard it already remember?”

“Yeah, but tonight was different... They played it better than the tape and the fans added a whole new level.”

“If you say so... You going to buy me a drink?” Lorraine asked disinterested in what Terry was saying.

“Yeah, yeah sure... What you having?” He asked.

“Same ole... You know.” Happy to get a free drink.

“G&T thanks Phil.” Terry pushes a fiver towards him, only to have McCracken push the bluey back at him.

“On the house Terry.” Offers McCracken.

“Thanks Phil.”

The twins had mysteriously disappeared again but it did not take much detective work to figure out where they were.

Sal bangs on the back of the rocking van and tells the boys to hurry up with whoever or whatever they had on the spit.

“I’m not packing up your shit!” He bangs again, only to have moans and groans sound back at him. He hated to think what had just happened.

He waits a moment and the doors open to have Taylor and Ness pulling up their pants as an unnamed female adjusted her skimpy attire and smiled back at Sal as if he was next on the gravy train.

“I’ll pass thanks sweetie... Come on you two, inside... You’re are on *idiot check* tonight... Shouldn't be too hard for you seeing how you're qualified for it... *Unbelievable.*”

Chapter 07

“You see this?” Asked a tired executive behind a desk, eyeing a large glossy computer screen.

“What’s that?” Another executive looks up from a newspaper. A cigarette smoldered between two fingers, flicking ash to the wooden floor.

“*Some* band released a song last night... It’s gone viral... *The Ravens?* Heard of them? Muswell Hills?”

“What of it? Just another wannabe band from a hick town... One hit wonder... Let it go Archie.” Resuming to the paper.

“Yeah maybe.” Archie stares at the screen drawn to the blogs that had mushroomed overnight.

Watching a posted video clip making out a pub scene of party goers dancing to pulsating music. Sound quality was crap but he managed to detect the tune over the voices. The number of views ticked over while he was watching. Something was pulling him into the screen. Memorized by the flashing lights and curious melody. He could not seem to let go of it.

“You still listening to that crap Archie?” Calls out his partner.

“Yeah-nah... I just have a feeling about this one.” Responds Archie as though he had been hypnotized.

“Jesus, that’s what you said last time... You and your *feelings*.” His partner reminded him of his recent failings.

“Just remember who signed those acts on the wall Seth.” Looking about the walls adorned with gold and platinum framed records.

“Yeah, yeah... But your last two signs haven’t exactly stepped up. Have they?” His partner questioned.

“I know, but I really like the sound these guys are putting out... Can’t hurt to check them out in... Muswell Hills... Where the heck is that?”

“Just another nowhere place in the back of nowhere... Let it go Arch, don’t waste your time with them. I’m going to lunch... You want anything?” Asked Seth bored with the slow day.

“I’m good. I’ll get something later.” Never hearing Seth leave.

His mind focused on the screen as he tapped in a google search for Muswell Hills and the Clissold Arms.

“Fuck me!” Reading the history of the town.

“We’re had this discussion Archie... It’s never going to happen.” Warned

Melissa appearing at the door at an unfortunate moment.

“Not you... I was just talking to myself.” Pleaded Archie defending the charge.

“Whatever gets you off Archie... You see Seth? Got some contracts for him to look over.”

“Just popped out for lunch... Shouldn’t be too long. Drop them on his desk.” Archie stares at the screen disinterested in her.

“What you looking at?” Seeing his concentration to something on the screen.

“You ever heard of *The Ravens*?”

“No... Should I have?”

“Not yet Ms Helliwell, not yet.” Scribbling down the phone number of the Clissold Arms and dials the number on his mobile while undressing her with his mind.

“Do you mind?!” Noticing his perverted stare.

“Too late.”

“Bastard!”

“You’re welcome.” Accepting the accolade.

“Never! I’m going to lunch... You’re holding the fort.” She tells him about to walk out.

“Now Melissa Helliwell, don’t be like that... We can still be friends can’t we?” Jokes as he follows her fine ass and long legs out of the office while listening to a dial tone.

A call he had made a hundred times before. Looking about the walls at those that had been successful. Fingers tap in out the new tune playing in the back ground and waited an eternity before it was answered by a young female voice.

“Clissold Arms... How can I help you?” Asked Sian in a cheerful voice.

“Is the manager there?” Asked Archie scrolling the images of the old pub. Quaint and stylish, colorful yet rustic.

“Dad! It’s for you!” Sian calls out, her voice screaming through the ear piece.

Hearing the hand piece being placed on a hard surface only moments later to hear the rattling sound of it being picked up again.

“Phil McCracken speaking.”

“Mister McCracken ... Archie Sykes, of Sykes and Mayer Records... I was wondering if you had a moment to speak about a band you had play at your *fine* establishment recently.”

“Yeah sure... You’d be calling about *The Ravens*?”

“Yeah, that’s them.”

“How can I help?” McCracken asked,

“What can you tell me about them if I might be so bold to ask?”

“Not much other than they’re a local group... Play here most Saturday’s if you’re passing... You’d probably want to talk to *Terry*.”

“Terry? Who’s Terry?”

“Their manager slash sound engineer I suppose... He handles all their gigs... I’ve got his number here somewhere if you want it?”

“Wonderful, if that’s alright with you.”

“Just a moment...” Hearing the handset being placed down again and the rustling of papers.

Muffled voices call out to get other. The sound of the handset is lifted then McCracken breathing into to mouth piece as though he were panting.

“You there?” McCracken asked.

“Still hear.” Responded Archie anxiously. He had to get to the egg first before others conceived the notion of poaching the band.

“Got a pen handy?” McCracken asked.

“Ready when you are... Fire away.” Fingers twitching with a pen.

McCracken recites a long digit number and Archie repeats it back to him.

“I think they have a web site of some kind... But I’m not too familiar with those things if you know what I mean... I could ask Sian.”

“No that won’t be...” Only to be cut short by McCracken’s voice hollering out to his daughter.

“Sian! ... *The Ravens* have a web site thing? ...” A distant voice calls back to her father, “... Yeah, they got one... A Facebook page apparently whatever that means.”

“I understand completely Mister McCracken... I should be able to find them... Thank you for your valuable time...” Archie stroked him, “... Not a word to Terry if you please, I’d like to surprise him with a visit... They playing this coming Saturday you say?”

“That’s right Mister Sykes... You’re most welcome.”

“Archie please... I’ll be wearing a pink carnation.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you... If that’s all, I have a pub to run, you have a good day *Archie*.”

“You too Mister McCracken...” Hanging up the call, “... Facebook page eh?” Quietly tapping the keys in search of the mysterious troupe.

Nana-seconds later a list of Raven listings appeared and Archie homes in on the Muswell location. An image of a black raven appeared and blurb about the

group.

'Written by amateurs.' He thought, just the way he liked his prey. *Naïve.*

Thursday afternoon and another practice session in the woolshed.

His parents out Terry had the place to himself. Enough time to get in a dozen well-greased covers.

“Great gig last Saturday boys!” Exclaims Terry enthusiastically.

“Yeah, being noticed about the town... You? ...” Gareth asked the others, but they shook their heads, “...Oh.”

“Those two already have a big enough reputation without adding to it.” Jokes Sal looking at the twins smiling as though it were a compliment.

“How many hits have we had on the website?” Asked Ness.

“Twelve, nearly thirteen on Face Book and Twitter.”

“Only twelve?” Asked Ness feeling deflated.

“Sorry... I meant thousands... My bad.”

“Twelve thousand? ... Shit, we're famous!” Exclaims Taylor excitedly.

“We're a long way from being famous Taylor... But it's a start, give it time... Until then we need to practice and get more songs out. Gareth? Anymore *Tears* in the pipeline?”

“Maybe...” He says reluctantly, not wanting to jinx his luck, “... It's a work in progress.”

“Can we hear some of it?”

Pursing his lips Gareth thinks about it. Then sits down and picks up an acoustic guitar and fingers the strings, plucking at them to find the right key. Secures a capo in place and strums it again. Listening for the familiar tones.

“Okay, remember this is different to what we're used to playing... So fuck you if you don't like it...” He grins and chuckles, “...This one's *unplugged* guys.”

“Go ahead Gareth... I'm sure it's good.” Said Terry waiting in anticipation.

Adjusting a pony tail on the back of his head, scratches a short chopped beard of an irritation and begins to strum the softly. Rocking gently in time with the opening lullaby bars. Taylor and Ness had almost become disinterested, thinking Gareth had gone AWOL on the band. Forsaking the rock genre that had made the group what it was.

Suddenly the tempo builds, the strumming becomes louder, stirring emotions. Terry was feeling the same. Sal taps his sticks lightly on the rim of a drum. Ness plucks softly on the bass, mimicking Gareth's chords. Not to be left out, Taylor

wades in with his own intermittent chords.

Terry turns the tape machine on and begins to record. Praying this was not another one of his dreams. Rocking in time with the unfolding tune. Then Gareth began to sing. It was sad song, but love songs always are. He had gone to hell and back to find the right words. Verses and chorus linked seamlessly, adding a tantalizing signature riff to make it his own.

The song ended and Gareth fell silent. Band members all stared at each other. What was happening to the group? They had found a voice of their own.

“You never cease to surprise me Gareth... That was... I’d say brilliant, but it wouldn’t do it justice... It was *beautiful* man.”

“You get it down on tape?” Gareth asked keen to hear it himself.

“Yeah... Not joking this time.” Pressing rewind, waits for the click, then presses play.

Heads nod in agreeance that there was something there. Feeling it build to a crescendo culminating in Gareth’s majestic riff.

“The acoustic really makes it eh?” Said Terry noting the difference to electric.

“Thanks Terry... You dug that one out of me.” Said Gareth sincerely.

“Sorry man... What’s it called?”

“You don’t know?” Gareth asked with surprise.

“No idea, why should I?” Responded Terry.

“After *Tears* I thought you’d know.”

“No idea man... What is it?”

“*Show Me The Way.*” Advised Gareth.

“Oh yeah...*Show me the Way...*” Terry begins to sing the words beneath his breath, “... Yeah, yeah, I like that.”

Playing the tape again, the lyrics become clearer and Taylor plucks on heavy bass strings as he found the groove.

“Okay, enough of these silly love songs of Gareth’s ... Who wants to get down to some serious rock and roll... Who’s in?” Asked Terry switching the machine off.

Gareth picked up the electric and rips into *Tears* before anyone had a chance to object. Automatically Sal beats orange drum sticks against tight skins, as a kick drum boomed. Ness did what he did best and fingered the bass indecently. Leaving Taylor to fill in the void with of electric chords.

“That was the best session ever man... When you think we’ll play it?” Asked Sal

looking at Terry and Gareth.

“We’ll save it for London if we can lay it down in time.” Responds Terry.

“Kay... Great song Gareth! You’re a genius man...” Said Sal patting Gareth on the back, “...Think I’ll walk back to town.”

“No worries... I’ll drop these two off home before they find into trouble... Or trouble finds them.”

“I very much doubt that...” Warns Gareth watching mischievous siblings, “... Heading for a pint, you coming Terry?”

“Yeah sure why not.”

“Okay you two... Get your gear in the van.” Instructs Gareth greeted by two moans.

Gareth pulls the van into a park beside the wall of the Arms of painted colorful trees.

Memorized by it as though they had parked in a forest and digested magic mushrooms. Captured by the surreal mural. Gareth snaps him back to reality.

“Engine sounds okay... Shouldn’t be a problem getting to London town.” Said Gareth.

“Touch wood.” Said Terry tapping the side of his head.

Taking stools at the bar, the afternoon sun had yet to reach through grilled windows. There was coolness about the old tavern and a beer was about to make it cooler.

“Two thanks Sian.” Calls out Gareth.

“Coming right up.” She smiles as though she knew something they did not.

“What up with her?” Asked Gareth watching her go to the taps to pour the beers.

“Dunno, women eh?”

“Yeah women.” Said Gareth. He could never understand them. He could barely understand himself.

“Which reminds me... You need to fall in love and break up more often man... That was an amazing song.”

“Wish it was that easy Terry.... There was a lot of pain in that song for me... Personal you know?”

“Yeah, yeah... Pain sells.”

“Thanks for *understanding* man.” Said Gareth feeling the sentiment in Terry’s voice.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, not really.”

“Just tap those feelings Gee... Those bottled up emotions you have inside you.”

“It’s not that easy man... It’s emotionally draining to get them down on paper... I’ll try okay?”

“For the band, for *The Ravens*... It starts here, it’s happened before, it can happen again... Have faith.” Preaches Terry.

“I’ll try... No promises.” Gareth looks to the hallow ground of the stage. Envisioning another band that had stood there as decades before.

““Kay.”

Sian arrives with the beers and Terry pushes a fiver her way.

“You’re money’s no good here...” She smiled, pushing the note back at Terry, “... Enjoy.”

“It’s already happening Gareth... See.” Said Terry.

“What is?”

“*This*.” Looking to the pint, “...Cheers man... To the top!” Terry raises his glass tapping against Gareth’s, unsure what to make of the free beer.

“To the top!” Repeats Gareth.

Sian smiled at him. Gareth smiles back.

If there is such a thing as love, it begins with a smile.

Chapter 08

“What was that all about the other day?” Asked Marilyn shampooing an elderly woman’s hair over a basin.

“What?” Asked Lorraine innocently. Shampooing another woman’s hair over her basin.

“You know... With Terry.” She dropped a cryptic clue.

Elderly eyes dart between the two young vixens hoping to pick up scandalous gossip.

“Oh that? ... Nothing... He got my nights mixed up apparently.”

“Yeah_ right.” Marilyn grins hurriedly drying the woman’s hair and pulling a noisy hair dryer over her head hoping to drown out their discussion.

Lorraine prepped her client and placed her beneath another dryer hood. Curious eyes continue to dart between Lorraine and Marilyn. Deafened by cones of silence. Frustrated they were no longer able to listen in. Surrendering to their captivity, the women flick through tabloid magazines in search of other flirtatious scandals and illicit affairs.

“So... What is it with you and Terry?” Marilyn steps away from the women.

“You know...He’s okay I guess... But...” Lorraine struggles to commit to the relationship.

“But what?”

“He’s works in a pizza joint... Living at home with his parents... Hardly marrying potential is he?”

“What about the band?” Ask Marilyn excited about their upcoming London gig.

“The band isn’t going nowhere... Never will.” Lorraine tells it as she saw it.

“That’s a bit harsh Lorraine... They’re good, you should have heard them the other night.”

“They’re okay, but they’ll never get out of Muswell Hill... No one ever does.”

“So where were you the other night?” Marilyn asked curiously.

“Just out.” She grins at the thought.

“Don’t hurt Terry okay... He’s doing his best you know.” Marilyn cuddles Terry.

“Maybe I want more...” Said Lorraine revealing her true colors.

“More what?”

Lorraine giggles and grins.

“Jesus girl... If Terry finds out...”

“He won’t find out... He’s too busy with his little *band*... Anyway it isn’t serious between us.”

“Not to you maybe.” Said Marilyn looking back at the two women fixated on their magazines. And checking the clock on the wall.

“I’m keeping my options open...” Declared Lorraine.

“Yeah well just be careful in case he finds out.”

“He won’t find out... Anyway, you’re one to talk... Who is it *now*?”

“*Sean*... He’s a *darling*... An accountant of some kind...” She tries to recollect.

“An accountant... Boring... Have I met him?” Lorraine fished for details.

“Works for a bank... He’s rolling in money... You keep away from him... You’ve got enough on your plate without stealing mine.”

“The only thing Terry is rolling in is flour.” Chuckled Lorraine seeing the funny side.

“Why do you hang out with him?”

“He’s a booty call when I need it.”

“Does he know that?”

“Does it matter? He’s happy isn’t he?”

“I suppose... But I wouldn’t want to see him get hurt.” Worries Marilyn.

“He’s a big boy... He’ll get over it.” Dismissing Terry’s feelings.

“Christ Lorraine, you can be a cold bitch sometimes.”

“Time!” Lorraine calls out hearing the buzzer sound. Ending the conversation.

Like synchronized swimmers dryer hoods lift away to reveal permed curled hair.

“Perfect Misers Beazley! ...” Marilyn complements the woman, “... I think the blue rinse looks wonderful on you.”

The two elderly woman smile contently at each other. None the wiser of the young women’s scandalous conversation.

Saturday night and the crowd at the Arms was building.

McCracken could not pour pints fast enough and feared the kegs would run out. A man enters the bar unnoticed. A stranger to the town. Locals watch the sharply dressed young man, a pink carnation in a button hole for his sports jacket. No doubt from London passing through. A right dapper the locals

thought. Unlike the teddy-boys that played pooled and waited for the band to arrive.

Finding a gap at the bar waits for the bar maid to serve him. Eyeing the aging interior, Archie could almost smell the legacy leaching from its walls. Goosebumps tingle over his body at the thoughts. Distracted, does not notice Sian asking him what he wanted to drink.

“Oh sorry love, didn’t see you there... Ah a pint of bitter would be fine... Keep the change.” Said Archie pushing a ten pound note towards her.

“Thanks Mister...” Sian smile at the gesture and pulls down on a heavy handle over a glass, slowly rises with a frothy head, “... There you go, enjoy.”

“Cheers... What time does band start?”

“Usually nine... Shouldn’t be much longer.” Looking at Archie suspiciously. Looking more like a *suit* than a *muso*.

McCracken spies the man and they make eye contact. Archie gives McCracken a subtle nod, who returns it with one of his own. Leaving the man to enjoy his beer. The band was unusually late that evening. Checking his watch to confirm his suspicions.

“Wonder what’s keeping them.” He asked Sian looking towards the window.

“Shit! ... We don’t need this now...” Curses Terry, watching steam bellow from beneath the bonnet of the van.

“It’s the radiator hose.” Ness said stating the obvious.

“You reckon?” Responds Terry.

“Yeah... Look at all the steam!” Ness points to the obvious again.

“What are we going to do? How we going to London next week in this?” Asked Gareth watching as the steam bellowed into the air.

“My old man knows a mechanic... Could do us a favor... Throw him some cash... Under the table if you know what I mean.” Said Sal eyeing the extent of the possible repairs required.

“I suppose, but we don’t have a lot of cash... In the meantime we need to get to Arms... *Damn* we’re already late... Phil going to be expecting us.” Exclaimed Terry.

“I know, I know... Let me think...” Said Gareth, “... Get me that old rag from the back would you Ness... I have an idea.”

Ness disappears and comes back with long oily rag handing it to Gareth who tears it length ways into two long strips and begins to wrap it tightly around the leaking hose. Binding it as tight as he could to stifle the hissing steam.

“That should get us to the Arms... Okay get everyone!” Calls out Gareth.

“Take it easy on the old girl Gareth.” Warns Terry closing the bonnet down.

“She’s make it there, maybe back if we’re lucky... Sal’s old man can do the rest.”

Gareth turns the key and the van splutters to life. Eyes watch for steam to erupt from under the bonnet. Nothing. Moving away slowly Gareth picks up speed. The temperature gauge climbed and climbed higher.

“Just another hundred yards baby... Do it for me.” Gareth coaxed the van to hold together.

Pulling into the car park just as the rags gave way and steam bellowed copiously from beneath the bonnet. Gareth kills the engine.

“How do we get home?” Asked Taylor looking at Ness who then looked at Terry for the answer.

“We’ll worry about that after the gig... Hurry up, Phil is expecting us. Grab your gear and get inside and get set up.” Instructs Terry opening the van’s rear doors.

Archie looks up from the bar and sees the apparent band members arriving.

Sinking back to the shadows so as not to be seen. He was there to listen and observe. If they were as good as the media clips, perhaps they would talk. It all depended on what his gut told him. Removing his jacket to blend in, sits back and sips quietly on the pint. Gauging the people about him. Locals. Regulars. And a handful of from out of town.

“Sorry we’re late Phil... Van troubles.” Terry calls out to the bar.

“No worries Terry... Go get set up.” McCracken calls out, “...Leigh, get off your lazy ass and give them a hand.”

“But I’m finished for the evening.” Leigh protests moving from his seat.

“You’ll be finished for good if you don’t move your sorry ass... Now get moving and help them get their gear in...” Informs McCracken taking no nonsense from the chef. “... There’s a beer in it for you.” McCracken appeals to Leigh’s weakness.

“Why didn’t you say?” Said Leigh sliding a cemented backside off the stool.

Archie looks up and puts a face to Terry’s name. Typical appearance, demeanor, and troubles. Not a penny to rub together to fix their van. He had seen it a hundred times before. It would not take much to bait him and sign. Looking about the room for other agents that may have come to listen. None that he could see. A good sign perhaps, perhaps not.

“The early bird gets the worm.” Said Archie stroking his own ego.

Waiting in anticipation as band members went about setting up microphones and speakers and amps and lighting. Noting the wear and tear, soon judged they were struggling for cash. Like every other struggling wannabe band. Living from hand to mouth playing cover songs. Waiting to be discovered while they found their voice. Their recent release, but a cry from the cradle.

Archie would be there to pick them up. Nurture them. To tell them how wonderful they were. And possibly, just possibly, make himself rich. Pander them with hotels and limousines. Screaming women and publicity. Heralding them with fame. Their bank accounts dry as a salt bed. Bleed by *overheads*. Commissions and operating expenses. Administration costs. *Inter-alia*.

Lights dim and voices hush to a whisper on hearing the band’s sound checks.

Terry gives them the thumbs up to band that they are about to begin. Gareth turns to the band and tells them what he wants to begin with. Without hesitation they nod their heads in agreeance.

“From the top... Keep up and watch my changes.... Two-Three-Four!” Calls out Gareth and wades in with *Tears*.

Revelers on the dance floor cheered their prayers had been answered. Mobiles come alight. Lights flashed with the beat of music. Shrouding Archie intermittent light. Then intermittent darkness.

‘Crude but effective.’ He thought taking in the sound.

Nothing that quality gear and studio time would not iron out. But what else did they have? Nothing had appeared on the internet. Not yet. Were they a one hit wonder as Seth suggested? Or was there more? The lead singer was all over the song. The others appeared to be along for the ride. Archie had options. Sign the band. Or just sign the lead singer. Bands were families. Like long term relationships. Things got messy when they broke up.

Sipping on the beer, leans back and simply enjoys the melody. Watching the young people soak up the music. Dancing as though it was already a hit on the charts. He grins. Perhaps there was something here. Recalling his recent failures that paled by comparison to that before him.

The song ended and ravens chowed their appreciation. Gareth raises a hands in appreciation and led the band into the next song. A cover song he could play with his eyes closed. Then another cover. Then another.

The band winds down and Gareth signals the band would be taking a small break.

“We’ll be right back... Ya’ all don’t go away now yah’ hear!” He calls out to the adoring fans. Young women scream out his name.

This was Archie’s chance to introduce himself. Seeing the lead singer heading over to Terry, while the others headed for the bar. Archie made a bee-line to Terry. And waited for Gareth to arrive before stepping forward.

“You must be Terry...” Archie extends his hand.

“Hi.” Said Terry hesitantly wondering who the smartly dressed strange gentleman was.

“And you must be...” Archie extends his hand to Gareth.

“Gareth.” He responds. Looking to Terry for explanations shrugging his shoulders.

“Sorry... Let me introduce properly...” Archie reaches for a card from his jacket and hands it to Terry eyeing it suspiciously, “... Sykes and Mayer Records, London... I was wondering if you had a moment to talk.”

“Records?” Asked Terry curiously taken back by the word.

“That’s right... Know you guys are in the middle of your session, but I just wanted to say I liked your music... Especially that first song... *Tears of Rain*... You write that Gareth?”

“Yeah... How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess.” Archie lied.

“So how can we help you Mister... *Sykes*?” Asked Terry nervously.

“*Archie* please... It’s not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you.” Archie plied his sales pitch.

“How’s that?” Asked Gareth.

“Have you anymore songs like the *Tears*?” Enquired Archie suspecting there was.

“Yeah... Maybe... But they aren’t finished. You wouldn’t be interested in them.” Said Gareth sensing the mounting pressure it would put on him.

“It’s my business to be interested... Imagine what you could achieve with decent gear and studio time?” Archie baited the lads.

“Studio time? We can’t afford that.” Fends off Terry. Money was short. Studio time as expensive. Well beyond his humble savings.

“Don’t worry about the money... I’ll take care of that... I’d really like to hear any other songs you have... Covers are okay for pubs and weddings, but... They don’t sell *records*.” Archie uses the magic word.

“We’re playing a London pub next week... The Shakespeare Tavern... Heard of it?” Said Terry keenly.

“Know it very well, my office is just across the river... Send me the time... You have my contacts on the card. I look forward hearing something new... Then we can talk *proper*. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. See you then.” Said Terry.

Archie extends his hand again and shakes on it. Taking out a bill fold pulls a crisp fifty pound note from it and hands it to Terry.

“What’s that for?” He asked reluctant to take the money.

“Think of it as a gesture of appreciation... You guys are good, very good... You could top the charts one day if Gareth’s songs are as good as *Tears*... I’ll be seeing you.” Archie makes his way through the crowd of young people soaked in alcohol and narcotic substances. A sweet smell hung in the air.

Gareth looks at Terry. And Terry stares numb founded at Gareth.

“I guess we can afford to get the van fixed now.” Terry laughs.

“Shit man... I don’t know if the songs are ready... Let alone any good.”

“Gareth trust me... *They’re good*... You heard Archie, he’s in the industry and he knows good music and what sells.”

“What about your contact in Merseyside?” Inquired Gareth confused.

“Do you see them standing here tonight?” Asked Terry looking about the faces.

“Yeah-nah...” Said Gareth anxiously looking about the unfamiliar faces fading in and out with the lights.

“Just nail down *one more* song and we’ll rehearse the heck out of it in seven days... You guys know the covers back to front.”

“I *might* have another.” Gareth scratches his beard.

“C’om let’s get a beer before the twins drink our share!” Said Terry pulling Gareth to the bar.

“Yeah.” Numbed by the unexpected turn of events.

Time slowed down and voices became muddled. His mind racing with a thousand thoughts screaming for his attention. But he could not hear those either.

Chapter 09

A faint haze filled the small attic room with a bitter sweet scent.

Crunched balls of paper littered the floor. Gareth sits on the side of a bed scribbling illegible lyrics beneath questionable chords. Singing softly over the strummed strings. Piecing together a troublesome verse. Playing it repeatedly to engrain it into his mind. Crosses out a dubious chord and replaces it with another less so. He had been at it for hours. Fingers raise a crudely rolled joint to his lips and takes a long slow drag. Allowing it to soak into his already hemp stained bones.

The day outside had passed unnoticed. Finger tips beginning to become tender. Satisfied he had made progress for the moment he lays back on the bed and stared at the angled ceiling to a poster of his idle Knopfler. The virtuoso stared back down at him.

'It's what it is... It's what it is now.' A voice offered advice, before blowing on the breeze out the bedroom window as the dying sun's rays reached into the room.

The sunset conjuring emotions. That would become lucid thoughts. That would become songs. A piece of the puzzle revealed. Creations that seemly sprung from thin air. And as easily as the lyrics appeared, they crumble to dust. There was an urgency to capture them. On a scrap of paper. On a door frame. On the palm of a hand. Lest they be forgotten and lost back to the universal ether.

Perhaps he had cheated. Perhaps an Angel had whispered in his ear.

All he could do was to surrender and go with of the emotions. Closing eyes, as the cool breeze to blow over him. Outside the sound of Lorries and buses. A scooter. Cackling like a witch. In the distance a wailing siren. His attention now caught by a bird's singing. Mimicking the falsetto in his mind. Fretting imaginary notes with twitching fingers. Feeling at peace, about to succumb to the warmth of the afternoon sun caressing his body. Only to have the tranquil peace disturbed.

Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz...

He let the mobile ring thinking who would be calling him. Then it got the better of him.

"Fuck it." He reaches for the cheap flip-flop and opens it, seeing the familiar caller ID.

“Hey... Just thinking of you.” He lied, his sleepy voice detected by the intruder calling.

Soft words were spoken. The sun stroked his inhibitions. Soothing him.

“Yeah, London... How’d you know? ... Oh, the web site? ... Yeah, next Saturday... Shakespeare Tavern, Terry arranged it all... I know, I know.” He listens drifting between worlds. Feeling something begin to rouse at the sound of the voice and suggestive tone.

“Why don’t you come? ... I could meet you there? ... Yeah? ... We could go out afterwards, I know a place... Yeah... Don’t laugh... I love you...” He waits for the reply, that doesn’t come.

He feels cheated as doubting thoughts cross his mind.

“So you’ll come? ... No_ I didn’t mean that... You know, to the show? ... Yeah, yeah, please_... I have to see you again soon...” There was an awkward moment of silence as the intruder left him hanging, “... Good... I’d like that... See you there... Yeah.... Bye.” Closing the mobile and kills the call.

There was no last moment, *I love you.*

Perhaps it was just physical. Perhaps he had read more into the relationship than he had hoped. Still, his love would be at the show. A night on the town afterwards. Glowing with content, the sun blanketed him and the bird returned to sing its lullaby. The pair resumed their impromptu serenade. His thoughts drifting to undressing his lover, to feel their naked body next to his. The moment was too good to last and again his world is shattered by another incoming call.

Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz...

Letting the mobile ring as his mind wondered who would be calling him now. Perhaps his lover again and he reaches eagerly to the side table. Opening it and sees Terry’s number.

“Hey... Just talking about you.” He half lied, “... What up?”

Listening to Terry sounding anxious about having the songs ready on time.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t sweat man... Just finished the third song just now... Yeah, relax man... Yeah.... How’d you get on with the radiator hose? ... Yeah.... We’re good to go? ... Great.”

Then Terry laid it on him.

“Oh_ come on Terry... You can’t be serious? ... Tonight? ... I’m knackered man, I’ve just spent all day finishing the song... Sorry man, count me out... Yeah you heard me... You want these songs or not?” Gareth drew a line and challenged Terry to step over it.

An awkward silence ensued before Terry blinked first, conceding tomorrow

would make little difference.

“Tomorrow morning yeah... The basement... Yeah, yeah, see you there at eleven... What? ... Ten? Jesus Terry you’re a slave driver... I suppose, but can’t guarantee the twins will be awake by then? ...” Shaking his head at the thought of the early practice session, “... I see you then... Yeah, bye.” Killing the call before Terry added any more covenants. “...Unbelievable.”

Whatever drowsiness that may have lingering at the beginning of the call, had been startled from him by the end of it. Annoyed, his mind could not settle. The bird had flown away in protest. The passing serenade was over. Flown away to another lover. He knew exactly how what that felt like. The scars of his recent relationship failures now dried ink stains on a page.

A cloud had covered the sun and the room dulled in color and warmth. Reflecting his gloomy mood. Laying back, clutches at the pillow hoping to rekindle his lover’s voice. Now contesting with Terry’s voice. Unable to shake Terry free he sat upright again and looked at the Sanskrit he had scrawled on a page. Looking somewhat different to when he first wrote them.

“Shit! ...” Seeing a flaw, then another, “... Ah fuck it.” Conceding he had deluded himself.

Screwing the paper into a tight ball, throws it towards to rubbish bin. And misses. Summing up his unproductive attempt. And begins again. Tuning his musical antenna in search of a frequency where poets and song writers found inspiration. And listened with his heart.

“You’re no help.” Remarks Gareth looking to the ceiling poster for help.

Knopfler remained silent.

What Gareth had to do, he had to do on his own. To see beauty where others saw nothing. To capture like fluttering butterflies, the essences that were love. Pain. Joy and sorrow. Flicking a lighter he ignited to one of his own. Rolling a callused thumb, sparks fly from the flint to re-light the extinguished joint. Resuscitating it and himself back to life. Taking a long slow drag. He begins to pen a new song. *Love Me Not*. Rekindling the unanswered love after his lover’s call. Feelings betrayed. Promises clashed with doubt. The unrequited love not going unnoticed. Love was tender, fragile. Fleeting.

Pouring his soul into the lyrics, the melody cloaking itself about them. What had not existed moments before had spontaneously materialized on a scrape piece of paper in an attic bed room. Gareth wipes away a tear.

And collapses back onto to bed exhausted.

10:07AM and Terry looks out his bed room window.

Hoping to see or hear the band's van arriving, but sees no sign of it. Tempted to call Gareth, restrained himself. They had five days to perfect three new songs. Examining the card again, googles the record company and it appeared everything he said it was. Having signed several noteworthy artists. Affiliated with other studio and production companies. They were no small time operation. Alluring images of gold and platinum adorned the web site.

Then he heard it. The unique sound of the van approaching as squeaking brakes bring it to a halt. It was like music to his ears. Voices call out to unload and get inside. Followed by a loud heavy frustrated knock at the door. Terry rushes down stairs and opens the front door.

"What took you?" He asked anxiously.

"The twins, what else?" Remarked Gareth glaring back the chuckling misfits.

"Get set up down stairs, I'll bring in the speakers and amps." Offers Terry heading to the van.

"Thanks man."

"You look like shit Gareth."

"Thanks man, you don't look so good yourself..." Seeing the lack of sleep on Terry's face, "...I feel like shit... Been up all night putting the final touches to the songs."

"Champion Gee..." Terry smiles knowing he had his three songs, "...Any good?"

"We'll soon find out... Let's get down stairs and get it over with." Said Gareth lugging guitar cases in both hands.

"Okay listen up everybody..." Terry interrupts the troupe from their warming up, "...We only have five days to get the three songs down pitch perfect by Saturday."

"Three?" Asked Taylor wondering what the other song was.

"Yeah... Gareth has been kind enough to burn the midnight oil to get something down... As you know Archie Sykes from the record company will be there, so I don't want a train wreck oaky?"

"What's the new song Gareth?" Asked Sal curiously.

"I call it, *Love Me Not*."

"I like the title." Twirling the orange drum sticks enthusiastically in the air like circus act.

"I haven't had much chance to practice it myself, so we'll do it unplugged if

that's okay with you?"

"It's your song man... You hum it, we'll play it." Sitting back giving Gareth space to play.

Opening a battered guitar case covered with an array of colorful travel stickers, pulls out an equally tired looking acoustic. Plucking at the strings, turns screws to tune it. Then strums it to hear the smooth harmonic tones. Satisfied it was tuned plays several lead in chords and finds the rhythm the words would ride upon. A foot begins to tap out the beat and shoulders begin to rock gently as though it was massaging him.

Others look upon him in amazement. Words sung as though he were talking to a lover. Tears begin to whelm in his eyes, but he breaks through them and picks up the volume and pace.

"Who are you? What have you done with Gareth? ..." Asked Terry, causing the others to laugh, "...That was amazing man."

"Thanks man." Said Gareth wiping away tears.

"Who's the girl?"

"No one you know man." Deflecting the inquiry.

"That was beautiful man... We'll come back to that one later okay... Start with *Tears*... There's still work to do there... Then we'll tackle *Show me the Way*."

"How long we going to be?" Asked Ness curiously.

"As long as it takes..." Advises Terry, "...And tomorrow and the next day."

"Oh__" Complains Ness.

"You want a record deal or not?" Asked Terry looking at the blank faces staring back at him.

Ness and Taylor shrug their shoulders indifferently. The band was a way to have fun, and get laid. Sal nods his head, knowing the dedication that was required. Heads turn to Gareth. Unsure whether he wanted any of *this*.

His songs were an extension of his being. Feeling like he was being put on a pedestal for the world to scrutinize him. Not comfortable with the idea, but something inside him cried out to be heard. To be discovered. Fame and fortune appealed to him, as it did all the band members. As did leaving Muswell Hills in the rear vision mirror. But he could not do it alone.

"Okay... Let's do this! ... Watch my changes and try to keep up... From the top... Two-Three-Four!" Gareth begins to strum out an acoustic version of *Tears*.

Each reedition polishing upon the last. Terry feed the artisans of rock with tea and cucumber sandwiches raided from his parent's pantry. The kettle whistled in tune with the love songs being born in the maternity ward of his parents' basement.

At the end of the practice, tender finger tips packed away out of tune instruments.

"Same time tomorrow!" Terry calls out to the van as it was driving away.

Only to be answered by Gareth raising a birdie finger from the driver's window.

Followed by a friendly wave.

Chapter 10

Packing the gear away, Gareth closes the rear doors of the van.

And examines the van's rough aging exterior. Hoping she had one last gig left in her to get them to London.

"Think she'll make it?" Asked Terry apprehensively, reading Gareth's thoughts.

"Yeah, she'll make it... And back if we don't push her too hard." Gareth could smell the distinctive rustic fragrance of oil and rustic body odor.

"You think the band is ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be Terry... It's been a hectic week, I'm drained. I'll be glad when it's over."

"Yeah, me too... But it well be just the beginning if Archie likes what he hears... Finger's crossed."

"Yeah, but it's all happening a little too fast for my liking." Gareth expresses his worry.

"I know, but it could be our big break... Worse case we're back at the Arms playing for beer money... You want to be a weekend warrior forever? Your songs are *magic* Gareth... Don't you want to know what the rest of the world to hear them?"

"Yeah, maybe." And wondered if the rest of world outside Muswell would appreciate them as much as those within.

"Your songs are *relatable* Gareth... They connect with people... They share your pain... You speak for them."

"Jesus Terry... You never give up do you?"

"Not this time Gareth... We're going to the top! ... But I'm going to the Arms for a pint first, you coming?"

"Yeah... I'll drop these two clowns off first, last thing we need is for them to go AWOL, or get fucked up before we leave tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, what are the chances of that?" Responded Gareth looking at the urchins.

"Pretty high..." Gareth looks to the interior of the van, "Emphasis on the *high*, if you know what I mean."

"Have a word to them... We're not due in London until six, so best we head off at noon, give us plenty of time to find the place and set up."

"Sounds the plan... I'll see you down at the Arms... Bring Lorraine, I miss

her.”

“Should I be worried?” Asked Terry jokily.

“She’s safe with me Terry... She only has eyes for you man.”

“I wonder sometimes Gareth... She’s been acting kind of weird lately...”

Terry searched for the words to express his doubts.

“Women man, they’ll mess with your mind, no one can understand them... Leave the love songs to me... Get the pints lined up... I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah see ya’.” Said Terry returning inside to change.

Friday night and the Arms was busy.

Local residents drawn in like moths. Lured by pies and a pints and social banter. The juke box played a classic in the background. The sound of a cue ball striking other balls echoed from a back room. There was a homeliness about the place. Walls wallpapered patterned with golden vines and plump cherubs with bows. High ceilings gave a feeling of space.

Terry takes a stool by the bar as McCracken pushes a pint glass in front of him.

“Thanks Phil.” Said Terry unenthusiastically, before sighing.

“You okay Terry... I thought you’d be excited about tomorrow.” Remarked McCracken.

“I am... Just tired after a week of rehearsals getting the new songs ready I guess... Worried it’s all just a dream and I’ll wake up... Again.”

“Again?” McCracken asked curiously.

“Long story...” Terry could not begin to describe the obscure oracular occurrences.

“If you say so... New songs eh? No chance you could play them here?” McCracken inquired.

“Next weekend okay? See how we go in London town...” Terry savoring the hand pour. Rejuvenating his British spirit. Taking a deep breath and exhales the anxiety that had been building up. Then Notices someone sitting beside him, “... Hey Gareth, that as quick... You did slow down before dropping off the twins I hope?”

“They’d be so lucky... Dropped them off at Mary McKinnon’s place. She should keep them occupied for the evening.”

“Unbelievable those two... Where’s Sal?” Asked Terry looking about for him.

“He’s coming down later... You know where this *Shakespeare Tavern* place

is?” Asked Gareth curiously.

“It’s just off Waterloo Road, next to the station, you can’t miss it... We’ll find it no worries.”

“If you say so... And this Archie guy will be there?” Gareth probed.

“So he said... I dropped him a line.”

“Cheers Phil.” Taking a mouthful of beer.

“This is just the start Gareth... Hey, if it means we getting more London gigs and more money, imagine was you could do with better equipment?”

“A craftsman never blame his tools Terry... But it would be nice to replace the gear we have, it’s on its last legs... Held together with duct tape and a prayer... What if it fails in London? It’ll be a right train wreck... *Ha.*” Laughs Gareth.

“Don’t jinx it man.” Responds Terry, touching wood. Then the side of his head.

“The gear has held together this long... It can hold together a bit longer... Worse case your new friend Archie can buy us new gear if he likes us that much... That’s if he wants to keep hearing us.”

“You make a good point.” Said Terry seeing the up side.

Arms wrap around Terry’s waist and for a moment thought it was Gareth getting too friendly.

“Hey! It’s you.” Said Terry jumping with surprise seeing Lorraine appearing from nowhere.

“Who else did you think it was? ... One of your other girl friends?” Asked Lorraine with a fake pout.

“You’re the only girl for me.” Said Terry naively.

“Bet you say that to all your girlfriends.” Lorraine teases him.

“I leave that to the twins... Hopefully they’re tucked up in bed by now.” Looking at Gareth with a growing grin.

“What’s so funny?” Asked Lorraine looking at Gareth.

“Nothing... How are you doing?” Gareth changes the subject.

“I’d be better when Terry buys me a drink.”

“Phil... Usual for Lorraine please.” Pushing a bluey across the bar.

“Cheers man.” Handing her the Gin and Tonic.

“What time you heading off tomorrow?” She asked.

“Noon... You coming?”

“Is there enough room in the van?”

“We’ll make room... Besides, who knows London better than you eh?”

“Where is this place?”

“Southbank... Off Waterloo Road, near the station... *Shakespeare Tavern*... You been there?”

“Never heard of it... Can’t be too bad if it’s central city.” Responds Lorraine more interested in her drink to arrive.

“Yeah I suppose... Archie is going to be there. The guy from the record company.”

“That’s great.”

“The band’s been rehearsing Gareth’s new songs all week, they’re amazing.”

“I don’t know about that.” Said Gareth modestly.

“They are, trust me.”

Lorraine eyes Gareth over. Groomed beard and pony tail distinguishing himself from Terry’s unkempt awkward nature. There’s was something about Gareth that said he cared about his appearance. Almost feminine. Smelling his cologne that drew her closer. She stands between the two young men and leans her head on Gareth’s shoulder.

“Is there something I should know about you two?” Asked Terry playfully.

“No.” Two guilty voices responded together.

“She’s safe with me Terry... You know that.” Gareth wraps his arms around Lorraine and kisses her cheek. Smelling a cologne that was not his own. Nor Terry’s.

“Get a room.” Jokes Terry returning to his pint glass.

Lorraine squeezers Gareth’s soft hands sending a message he did not want to receive. And he stares back at her with a strange look. Lorraine purses her lips at him behind Terry’s back. Taking him by surprise. And he grins at her. Releasing her from his hold feels the warmth of her body leave him. Rekindling his own lover’s touch.

She was sensual, wanton. But not for him. He could never betray Terry. *This*, was never going to happen.

Even if it could.

08:00PM and Archie leans back in a large leather chair and sighs.

Swiveling his chair around to stares out the window upon the millions of people swarming like flies on the streets below. The waning summer sun about to surrender to the nocturnal world beginning to surface from the undergrounds. Head lights began to appear. The soft glow of his computer screen the only indication to those outside that life existed within the glassy tower above them.

It had been a long day and it was growing shorter by the moment. The search for new talent was never ending. The billion pound music industry waited for no one. It was dog eat dog and Archie was not one to be eaten. Alluring contracts, so water tight the prey had no chance to escaping. Fine print that no one bothers to read until the trap is sprung and by then it is too late.

Contracts that blinded bands with fame and fortune. Sex, drugs and never ending recording sessions. Baffling them with a meager bottom line after the record company had deducted their outrageously exorbitant fees and overheads. Less commissions of course. It's all there in the contract had any one bothered to look.

Thoughts drift to the band from Muswell Hills. And he checks a diary, hoping he had not missed their London performance. Sees it was down for tomorrow evening. Surfs to the band's web page. Liking what he saw. Their meager *Likes* of a month ago had jumped into the tens of thousands. Recalling his visit to see them. There was something about the lead singer that reminded him of Seth. Unable to put a finger on it, he let it slide.

'Terry.' Thought Archie. That's the one he should target.

Charm him with the lure of gold records, crocodile smiles, and illicit promises. Archie smiles pleased with himself. Admiring the large framed platinum discs lining the office walls. It was not personal. It was business. This was the music industry. If Archie did not take the band under his wings, it could well be another vulture with lessor scruples than himself.

"You still here?" Asked Seth appearing at the door. Smartly dressed. Polished brown penny-loafers. A silk yellow tie with a stylish gold clip. Double breasted navy blue jacket. Looking a right dandy boy.

"Just leaving... What are you still doing here? I thought you took off hours ago?"

"Just come back to pick up some papers... You're not pursuing those cowboys Archie? ... Com'on man... You should know nothing ever comes of these hick town bands... One hit wonders... Save our money and invest locally."

"Hear what you're saying Seth, but I have a feeling about these guys... They going to pitch a few new songs tomorrow... If you want to tag along."

"I'll pass... I have a hot date." Said Seth.

"I don't want to know."

"Don't knock it 'til you try it Archie... I'm outta here... Good luck with your *boy band*."

"Don't knock them 'til you hear them."

“*Touché* my good friend... See you Monday, I’d be expecting a full report.”
Instructs Seth.

“See you Monday.” Watching him leave.

Swiveling the chair around made him feel giddy. Outside the day had dimmed further. Lights of the city coming to life. Sparkling reds and oranges and whites. Beckons siren imminent danger. Taxi lights shines so bright. Looking into the distance to the London Eye now lit up in spot lights. A pristine white circle silhouetting against a darkening night sky.

Having failed with his last two *finds* his run of bad luck had to change.

A restraint of trade clause shackling the band’s ability to record for anyone else for the next five years. Failure never goes unrewarded in the music industry.

Chapter 11

“Where are they?” Asked Terry anxiously looking up and down the street for the twins outside their home.

“Mary said they left her place midnight... She kicked them out... There’s even things she wouldn’t do apparently.”

“I find that hard believe, but knowing those two it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Eh?” Responds Gareth confused by the logic.

“Try their mobiles again... Damn!” Panics Terry.

Sal pulls out a mobile and taps the screen several times. And waits. And waits. And waits. About to give up, it answers.

“Where the heck are you two? Terry is having kittens here... We have to get to London remember...” He listens to a tired hungover voice, “... Yes, it’s today, when did you think it was? ...No it’s not next weekend, it’s today you mullets, where are you? ...Where? ... How the heck did you get there? ...Christ you two are unbelievable... Stay right there, don’t you dare move an inch, you hear me?!”

Sal kills the call and shakes his head.

“Where are they?” Asked Gareth.

“At a mate’s place on the other side of town. In the wrong direction of course... They don’t sound to flash if you ask me.” Informs Sal.

“We still have six hours, hopefully they’ll sober up in time... *Unbelievable!*” Remarks Terry optimistically.

“Get in, Sal can point the way.” Instructs Gareth, revving the engine, keen to get going. Fumes bellowed from a rattling exhaust.

Lorraine squeezed between Gareth and Terry. There was something sensual about being sandwich between the two men. Recalling a time with the insatiable twins in the back of the van. She squeezes her legs together at the thought.

“You okay?” Asked Terry sensing her discomfort.

“I’m good.” She grinned.

Half an hour later and as many side streets. Every moment getting further north away from London. Gareth pulls the expiring van to the curb, straining under the weight of equipment and people. Soon to be added to.

“Where the heck are they?” Terry looks at the two story terrace brick home. Immaculately kept rose gardens betrayed the two misfits that resided inside.

“Wait here, I’ll go get them.” Sal opens the side door of the van and goes to

knock on the front door.

Thump!-Thump!-Thump! He shakes the front door on its hinges with a heavy fist.

He waits and waits and waits. And waits. Thinks he hears muffled voices coming from within.

Thump!-Thump!-Thump! He knocks again, loud enough this time for the neighbors to here.

Distinct voices could now be heard coming from inside, followed by female laughter, perhaps two. Perhaps more.

“Hurry up you two, or we’ll go without you...” Sal threatens the urchins now appearing at an open door still dressing themselves. A stale pungent smell drifted from the interior causing Sal to step back to catch fresh air, “...Get in the bloody van! Now!”

“Sorry!” Squealed Taylor pulling up his trousers almost tripping over himself in the hurry.

Climbing into the side door of the van closing it before Sal had gotten in.

“Hey you two, wait for me!” Sal calls out banging the side of the van.

“Hurry up! ...” Squeals Ness, “... Haven’t got all day!” Causing the twin to giggle hysterically.

“Hi Lorraine!” Calls out Taylor.

“Hello boys!” She calls back affectionately.

“Keep an eye on those two Sal... Feel free to open the door and throw them out on the A1 if the mess up back there!”

“With pleasure!” Responds Sal eyeing the two sheepish looking urchins.

Cocooned in the rocking interior of the van the pair settled down and leaned back on amps and speakers to have a nap.

“You guys get any sleep last night?” Asked Terry over his shoulder.

But to no reply.

“Obviously not... Christ I hope they don’t flake on the stage.”

“Don’t worry Terry, they’ll be fine.” Remarks Gareth.

“I hope so.”

“I’ll carry them okay?” Said Gareth keen to belay Terry’s growing anxiety.

“How you doing? Get any sleep last night?” Asked Terry looking at Gareth, sensing a tiredness about him.

“Managed some, kept thinking about the gig... Still think we’re rushing things.” Watching Muswell Hills getting smaller and smaller in the rear vision mirror.

Terry catches the view from the passenger's side mirror.

Day dreaming, he wished it was true. Never having to go back to *that* life. The road was forward. Away from Muswell. The sky line of London loomed in the distant horizon. Glass buildings reflecting the sunlight sprung forth from the asphalt like tall pointy mushrooms. Weaving its way along narrow suburban streets, the van becoming incongruent with its surroundings. Curious faces peer out from the window. Curious faces stare curiously back at them.

Terry points to a street for Gareth to take. Eyes dart back to a map book. A maze of colored crisscrossed lines from an ancient time. The ominous dome of Saint Paul's appears above them. Finding themselves in London proper. Pushed and shoved by encircling traffic. Unable to resist if they wanted to.

Red double decker buses towered over them. Dwarfing them. Black polished Hackneys appeared in funeral procession. Pigeons of every shade of speckled grey had crapped on anything that had stood too long in one place. Before being frightened to take flight, frightened by the noisy van and a smoke stack exhaust.

"That way! ... That way!" Calls out Terry frantically. But too late for Gareth to make the turn.

"Christ Terry! A little more warning would be nice... We have to go around again." Protests Gareth unable to change lanes in time without a collision.

"Sorry... That's the one we need to take onto Waterloo Bridge and we're there."

"Kay." Responds Gareth gauging his run for next time.

Terry looks over to the dashboard to check the water temperature. The new hose was holding. The fuel was low, but more than enough to get back. The twins in the back fallen asleep. After another circuit, Gareth turns the van onto the road that led over the bridge. Pulling heavily on the steering wheel to make it to avoid hitting an on-coming car.

"Sorry! ... I'll get him next time." Jokes Gareth, laughing off how close he had come to the collision.

Turning unnoticeably slow. The London Eye loomed beside the dirty old river. Gareth glances momentarily at the mega Ferris wheel before having to have to look back at the road ahead of him.

"Through the roundabout and about quarter mile on your left... Then the first right."

"Got it!" Gareth changes down gears to slow the van and eases the buckling chassis along the unfamiliar streets.

Slowing down beside the curb and a pub with a sign stating they had arrived. Painted with an image of the Bard's head surrounded by entangled branching roses.

SHAKESPEARE TAVERN

“Kill it... We're here.” Terry peers up at the weathered brick and tile building.

Gareth pulls into a gap reserved for deliveries. It would do for now.

“What if we get towed?” Asked Gareth looking up at the sign stating it was reserved for deliveries only.

“They won't tow us with those two asleep in the back.” Looking back at the sleeping twins unaware where they were, “...Let sleeping dogs sleep... We'll wake them later.”

Sal opens the door and climbs over the sleeping corpses. And quietly closes the door behind him fearful of waking them.

“Someone needs to stay with them in case they wake and wander off again... Lorraine you mind?” Asked Terry.

“My pleasure.” She smiled, looking back at the sleeping nymphs.

“Come on Gareth, Sal... Let's check the place out.” Said Terry leading the way.

In the background dwarfing the tavern, the Waterloo Station and other claustrophobic towering buildings. Restless, the city streets yawned and groaned. Desperately in need of sleep.

The midday sun poked its fingers between the buildings to find three young men standing on the sidewalk outside the tavern.

“We're early, that's good.” Said Terry checking his watch.

Pulling open the double green doors to discover an entry bar,

“What the...?” Wondering if they had the right place. Stepping back outside to reaffirm the sign.

“You sure this is the place Terry?” Asked Sal looking about the darkened interior.

“Yeah, yeah... The doors are open, must be.”

“Can I help you boys?” A rasping voice calls out. A head peers out from an office door on hearing the bar doors squeak on their hinges.

“We're the band... *The Ravens*... You open?”

“Not for another few hours.” A gentleman appears from the office and approaches them wiping his hands against trousers as if he had been eating his

lunch.

“Mister Duncan?” Asked Terry confirming he was the bar owner.

“Please, call me Alistair... You must be Terry... You’re a little early.”

Shaking Terry’s hand.

“Yeah sorry, didn’t want to leave anything to chance.”

“Fair enough, you come a long way? Asked Duncan looking the tired troupe over.

“Muswell, Muswell Hills, just north of here. Not that far, but far enough for the old van...” Terry tries to look through a window to see it... Will it be okay out there?”

“Yeah, yeah, no worries... We’ll put a sign on the dash, I’ll get you some letterhead... It’ll be fine.” Informs Duncan.

“Thanks... This is Gareth and Sal...” Gareth and Sal raise their hands, “... Two more in van sleeping it off in the van, if you know what I mean.”

“Not really, but why don’t I show you the stage and you can set yourself up, ‘Kay?”

“Thanks, what time we kicking off?” Asked Terry taking in the size of the interior.

“Nine... ‘Til late, is that okay?”

“Yeah of course, anything that keeps the beers flowing.” Remarks Terry.

“I like you thinking Terry... This way, the stage is over here.”

Following in Duncan’s footsteps. The trio take in the size of the tavern, appearing larger on the inside than the outside. Wondering if their amps and speakers would be sufficient to fill the acoustic cavity. Then as if their prayers had been answered, Gareth spies two large speakers either side of the stage.

“Those speakers? ... Lights?” Gareth began to ask speculatively.

“They’re part of the establishment, feel free to plug into them if you like... The bands we get through here don’t generally have sufficient speakers and amps... If you know what I mean?”

“Wow... You’re kidding me?” Exclaims Gareth.

“Nope. Knock yourself out.” Invites Duncan.

“Terry I’m in heaven!” Declares Gareth.

“Power points, there, there and there... You’ll find them... I’ll leave you to it... Pints on the house, collect your wages afterwards okay?” Directs Duncan extending his hand again to cement the agreement.

“Thanks.” Said Terry overwhelmed.

Duncan walks back to the office to complete his lunch, leaving the trio to

orient themselves to their new surroundings.

“Looks at those Marshals!” Points out Gareth imagining the sound that could be pumped through them.

“Don’t know Gareth... Not sure if our console could handle all that juice.” Terry looks about for an accompanying consol. But doesn’t see one.

“You’re a magician... I know it can... You can buy a new one with the money we make form this gig okay?”

“Okay... But I’ll handle the controls. I don’t want you guys touching your knobs unless you want to see a cluster-fuck happen.”

“Have faith Terry... Nothing can go wrong. This is our destiny, I can smell it.” Gareth inhales the dry air of the tavern. Sal looks at him and sniffs but smells nothing other than stale air.

Terry paces out steps and measures the amount of space they had.

“Shit man... It’s massive... Three times the size of the Arms.” Said Terry looking to the dance floor and tables, “... Okay let’s get the gear inside and set up, I want a sound check sooner than later to set the dials... Go wake up those two slaves in the van.”

“Copy that Terry... It will be *my* pleasure.” Said Sal heading to the doors.

Leaving Terry and Gareth to look over the cables and leads that bleed from the back of the speakers and amps. Shaking his head, he was beginning to have concerns about the console’s capabilities.

Sal appears on the street to find Taylor leaning against the front of the van.

As though he were keeping watch. No sign of Lorraine to be seen. Detecting a slight rocking, shakes his head at Taylor who grins slyly back at him. Reluctant to head back inside without the twins, he keeps watch at the doors in case Terry should inadvertently appear. Pulling out a vapor, takes a long hard drag and exhales a thick white cloud. This was not the day to give up smoking.

Trying to desperately think of a way to stall Terry from knowing what everyone else knew about his girlfriend. Glances at his watch and back at Taylor. Tilting his head to the tavern’s doors indicating Terry could appear at any moment.

“Come on you two... Hurry up.” He mutters beneath his breath.

Chapter 12

“What took you so long?” Asked Terry seeing the twin’s lugging in their cases.

The question goes unanswered as Sal follows soon after lugging the kick drum. Lorraine sheepishly follows as though nothing was awry. Innocently looks about the open barn taking in the cold empty space. Soon to be filled with intoxicated London party revelers. A medieval wrought iron chandelier hung from solid beams above.

“It’s bigger than the Arms...” She notices, “...Which way are the rest rooms?”

“Just over there.” Terry points the general direction.

Sal unloads and heads out again, commandeering the twins to join him.

“What was that about?” Sal asked on the other side of the door.

“What?” Responded Ness ignorantly.

“Lorraine.”

“She came onto us man... We didn’t do nothing.”

“Really? Christ, I hope Terry never finds out. You two walking dicks grab the drums and console, I’ll take the rest.”

“What about the amps and speakers?”

“Don’t need them, manager said we can use his... We’re going to need them, seeing how big that place is.”

“Choice_! Pump up the volume man!” Exclaimed Taylor excited by the prospect.

“Com’on you two... Terry will want to do a sound check... I’ll lock up here.”

Watching the delinquent twins struggle with guitar cases and drums.

Sal shook his head in disbelief. Slamming the door of the van in frustration. It was only a matter of time before Lorraine pushes her luck, and her ass too far.

“Over there.” Directed Gareth indicating a corner space to place his guitar cases.

Long black cables crawled like snakes across the floor as Terry tries to untangle them, and traces their origin. Sorting what he thought went where, goes about setting up the sound system. Collapsible legs spring to the floor and the console of knobs and sliders stands erect like a new born giraffe testing its new found legs. Giving the console a jiggle and shake to ensure its sturdiness.

Matching jacks to the tavern speakers and inserts them... *Click! ... Click! Click!*

“That should do it... What’s this one for?” He wonders examining an extra plug. Red and ominous. Screaming out that it served an important function. Retracing the cable found it contacted to the light system. Unlike anything he had used before. Figuring it was just a matter of feeding an output into it.

“Hmm.” And he shoves it into an empty port socket... *Click!*

Lorraine had taken a seat at an outer table, exhausted for some reason and watches the band go about setting up. Becoming bored she looks to the large window and wonders what laid beyond.

“I’m just popping out for some fresh air.” She lied.

“Okay, you know where to find us.” Calls back Terry, not looking up.

Fiddling with knobs and sliders. Watching needles on dials jiggling back and forth. The anxiety of the incompatibility of the two systems now forgotten. Pulling on a headset, he was now in his element.

“Okay Gareth... Give me something... I’ll build you up, don’t touch anything your side.”

“Kay.” Responds Gareth, picking up a scale of notes and back again.

“Nice... Give me a riff.”

Gareth unleashes *Tears*. Picking at the strings like a Spanish guitar, the tempo infectious, sweaty. Causing the others to look up at the strange new sound.

“That was amazing Gareth... You going to use that tonight?”

“Maybe... We’ll see.” Leaving it there, before strumming a few bars. Happy with the surround sound the larger speakers were outputting. Picks up an acoustic and repeats the exercise.

“Nice Gareth... You’re good to go. Okay you two... Give me something.”

Ness begins plucking the bass and rocks gently to the rhythm of the cover song. Taylor harmonizes with soft chords on the electric organ. Terry cups a can against an ear and listens for closely. Thinking he picked up an alien signal. Twirling a finger in the air to tell them to keep playing. Watching needles dance across the dials like fluttering eye lashes. Turning a knob here, pushing up a slider there. Happy to have stifled the distortion for now.

Points a finger at Sal to join in with a foot drum.

Boom!-Boom! ... Boom-Boom-Boom! Boom! ... Boom! ... Boom-Boom-Boom! Orange sticks twirl in the air and Sal taps out a drum roll. *Ratta-tat-tat... Clang. Ratta-tat-tat... Clang. Ratta-tat-tat... Clang.* Banging on skins and cymbals. Coming automatically to him. Looks about the cavity of the tavern as

though he were preoccupied with another thought. Gareth joins in, followed by the twins.

The harmony of sounds weaved together to become one cloth. *The Ravens*.

After several bars, Gareth begins sing into a microphone on a stand.

The sound system reacts violently and a surge of input coursed through its black veins. Causing the needles to peak. Refusing to budge. Feedback squawks loudly from the speakers. Duncan pokes his head out the office door. He had like what he had heard up until them.

“You guy’s okay?” He calls out.

“Yeah, yeah. Just a spike, we’ll fix it.” Calls back Terry frantically trying to massage channel sliders responsible into position.

Telling Gareth to keep singing. With the precision of a neurosurgeon, Terry isolates the offending input. Tweaking it here and balancing it there. Rocking head and shoulders rock in time with blaring beat through the headset. Pushes a thumb in the air to say, he was happy with the settings. With the sound check over, encouraged the band to play another. The twins protested only to have Sal look at them in a way to suggest they should keep playing.

“Okay guys... Give me *Tears*, then *Show Me The Way*, and finish with *Love Me Not*... Then we’ll take a break okay? Last chance to get it right... You have the play list Gareth?”

“Yeah, all sorted. Start with covers and finish with our songs... Leave them wanting more.”

“That’s right. You have it Gareth.” Calls back Terry pulling the headset back on.

“You sure you don’t want to mix them in early?” Asked Gareth.

“Nah, they can wait... The more beer the bar sells the more for us. Okay?”

“Okay. You know best Terry... Okay you Muppets, you heard him... From the top... Keep up and watch my changes.... Two-Three-Four!” Calls out Gareth.

Terry watches cautiously as the needles dance back and forth in time with the pulsating music.

Thinking he had subdued the problematic beast. The only thing untested was the lighting. How difficult could that be? And dismisses the problematic thought. Looking out the windows with the late summer sun streaming through them. Wondering where Lorraine had taken herself.

“That’s a wrap for now guys... Stretch your legs, be back here by six okay!”

... Sal? ... You want to baby sit those two? ... Don't let them out of your sight okay?" Asked Terry cautiously.

"No worries... Okay you two, let's find a beer... My shout." Said Sal shadowing the lads out the door, "... What was that all about with Lorraine?"

"She started it... We were asleep and she... You know..." Ness began to explain.

"You could have said no!"

"Why?" Asked Ness credulously.

"She's Terry's girlfriend for one thing!" Warns Sal glaring at them.

"I don't understand..." Said Ness.

"She's Terry's girlfriend!" He repeats himself to the deaf mute.

"Well she doesn't act like his girlfriend! ... She started it!" Complained Taylor.

There was no point arguing with pair.

"From now on... She's off limits from now on... Keep your filthy little cocks in your filthy little pants... Right?"

Two faces screw up at being told to zip it.

"Right?!" Sal iterates the warning.

"Kay... *Suppose.*" Taylor voices his frustration.

"Terry has scored us this gig front of some hot shot record company guy... Don't screw it up!"

"Kay." Chimed the drooped heads. Scuffing feet on sidewalk like two school boys being scolded.

"Right... Stay in sight." He warned following closely behind them.

"What about you Gareth?" Terry asked keen to head out together.

"Think I'll stick around here. Need to make a call. Keep an eye on things here."

"You sure? Just heading over the bridge."

"Yeah, I'm good... You knock yourself out."

"Okay... Call me if anything crops up." Suggest Terry.

"Get out of here, I'll be fine."

"See you soon." Terry heads out the door.

Catching Sal and the twins disappearing around a far corner. No sign of Lorraine. Looking up and down the street and over to the van with its dark interior void of life within.

'Where'd she go? Probably found a cocktail bar knowing her. Oh well.' Terry

heads off towards the imposing station.

Sounds of the city were like a thick fog after the cocooned stillness of the tavern.

The perpetual groan of the tiresome wheels of commerce turning over and over and over again. Walking through the invisible mist of sound onto the main road that lead over the bridge over the dirty old river. The Thames. That rolled endlessly to the sea. And into the night.

Like a magnet he is drawn along a path of the bridge and stops half way. And takes in the brown water lane flowing beneath him. Narrow tourist craft cruise back and forth. Embankments littered by moored boats and restaurants and cafés punctuated by humans sipping on lattes and cappuccinos.

Claiming their right to coexist in the brick and concrete jungle. Patches of green had sprung up. Trees and grass. Shrubs and bushes. Strange rain clouds were gathering above. Throwing an eerie shadow over him and him alone. Thinking he felt spits of rain on his face. He looks up to the threatening heavens. Others go about him unaware of the eminent danger. Seagulls squawk and begin to head inland.

The London Eye moved undetectably. Perhaps stopping. Perhaps not. Contemplates a ride if he had the time. Checking his watch he still had several hours before getting back to the Tavern. Looking to other side of the bridge decides head back to the Station.

Standing below Victory Arch.

Imposing statues commemorating the Great War look down upon Terry. Inspecting the meager twenty-first century individual. Ready to strike with pitched fork and shield. They let him pass, as they did the hundred thousand souls that transited the archway each day.

Making his way around people making their way around other people wonders onto the main floor of the station. Greeted by an immense overhead roof supported by massive crisscrossed iron beams. Daylight streamed through the opaque glass. CCTV cameras and speakers hung like spiders from the ceiling. Below them, the old blended with the modern.

A large four faced clock took central position. A romantic lotion came over him that Lorraine would be waiting for him beneath it. Only to see a woman with a pram rocking it to sooth a crying baby. She was waiting for someone, and it was not Terry. It was not his baby.

Then he hears it. At first it was a sound. Then it became a voice. A distant echo bouncing off polished tiled walls. Indiscernible to the untrained ear. It was

coming from below. From the underground. He follows the tantalizing acoustics. Ears sniffing for direction and he descends into the bowels of the station. Falling escalators carry him deeper and deeper. Benign faced commuters stare back at him.

“What’s he doing here?” One asked another as they pass in opposite directions.

Terry looks back hoping to detect who had said it only lose sight of the voice. Confused by the remark. Stuck on an escalator descending into the abyss. Distracted again by a voice drawing his curiosity. People move like homing pigeons. Obvious to others about them. Strutting from one platform or another.

He followed the voice. Bouncing off the walls. Stopping at a junction. The voice had stopped. He waits. Silence. Other than the muffled voices of those moving around him. He stands still. Bumped here and pushed there. He is subtly reminded to keep moving.

“What’s he doing here?” A wheezing whispers to another in passing.

Turning about hoping to spot the culprit. Only to see the back of indiscernible heads.

About to give up and head back to the surface, the singing begins again.

Standing on a bench spies a young woman busking against the wall some distance away. There was something about her that took his breath away. Perhaps it was the red berry beret. The one you would find in a second hand store.

Chapter 13

Open before her, a tired black guitar case littered with coins and paper notes.

Singing with an angelic voice that reverberated about the curved walls. Magnifying her presence. Approaching her, Terry throws a coin into the case. And catches her eye. She smiles while carrying on singing. He stands back captivated. And waits for her to finish and claps.

The only one on the platform that did. She smiles again unsure what to make of the gesture. And mouths *thank you* back to him. There was something cute about him.

Taking a nearby bench, Terry waits for the next song. Only to see her begin to pack away the guitar. Picking the takings for the day from the case. It had been a good day.

“Hey.” Terry approaches her.

“Hey.” She responds.

“You’re good.” He stammers. Tongue tied.

“Thanks... Helps pay the bills.”

“Yeah, so I see.” Responds Terry becoming lost for words to keep talking.

An awkward moment ensued between them. Then found himself and remember why he was in London.

“Sorry... I’m just in town doing a gig at the Shakespeare Tavern tonight... *The Ravens*...” Hoping that would break the ice, “... And I heard you singing. You *really* are quite good.”

“Thanks again... *The Ravens*? Can’t say I’ve heard of them? Local band?”

“Muswell Hills, just north of here.”

“I know the place... You play?” She said recollecting the village green.

“Nah_ *just* their manager and sound engineer... I’m Terry.” Extending his hand.

“Julie... Nice to meet you *Terry*.” Extending her hand.

He feels a soft gentleness about her. And yet there was a familiarity about her. As though he knew her from somewhere. Suddenly he is overcome with a feeling of *déjà vu*. His nostril irritated by the smell of... cigarette smoke. He looks about for someone smoking, but sees no one.

“What you play?” She asked curiously.

“Mostly covers, but we have a few of our own now... Got a recording agent coming in to listen... Drop by if you’re passing.”

“Wow... Might just do that.”

“You want to grab a coffee... My treat.” He blurted out without two thoughts of Lorraine.

Julie hesitates momentarily, then relents.

“You’re not an axe murderer are you?”

Terry hesitates momentarily, then realizes she was being kidding. He hoped.

“Nah, I stopped doing that years ago.”

“Okay then... Not every day I get a shouted a coffee... I know just the place. Give me five.”

“Okay, I’ll just be over here.” Responded Terry awkwardly.

‘Fuck, what if Lorraine catches me having coffee with her?’

It was too late to pull out now. There was something about Julie that Lorraine did not have. An innocence. The irritation annoyed him. In a nice way.

“You coming?” Julie calls out watching Terry stare into space.

“Sorry?” He asked distracted by a vision of Lorraine lecturing him.

“We going for coffee, or not?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry... Just day dreaming.”

“Do that a lot?” She asked curiously.

“Don’t think so.” Or so he thought.

“Want to see something amazing?” She asked keenly.

“Sure, why not?”

“Follow me day dream boy.”

Terry followed like a love sick puppy as she lead him down a series exits, takes him along a side street. Arriving at what appeared to be a derelict door way. Spray painted with colorful graffiti. Above which a large neon sign pulsed out a sign...

THE VAULT

Unsure what lurked within. He enters a subterranean culture for the wacky, weird, and wonderful.

“What is this place?” Terry asks feeling a little out of his depth.

“The Vault... Wild eh?”

“Yeah, you can say that again.” Greeted by the symphony of painted curved walls. Baffling his visual senses. Starting to feel out of his depth.

“You vegan?” He asked curiously.

“Sometimes... You?” She responds.

“*Sometimes.*” Recalling the vegetables that came with his mother’s bangers and mash.

Taking a small table covered with a checkered green and white cloth, waits for a waitress to take their order.

“Where’re *you* from?” He asks breaking the ice.

“Lutton... Heard of it?”

“Yeah... Can’t say I’d want to visit it.”

“You know what they say about the best part of Lutton is?”

“No what?”

“Leaving.”

“Ha... Yeah... I know what you mean.” Laughs Terry.

“I’m really excited about your band... A recording agent... Big time eh?”

“Yeah, I really feel I’m onto something ... You know?”

“Yeah I know... But it’s tough out there... The music industry can crush you.” She informs him.

A waitress stands over them chewing gum like a cow chewing cud. Waiting impatiently for them to order as she taps her foot to a tune only she could hear.

Looking to a black board menu Terry hoped to see something that had been killed recently.

“Fancy some carrot cake?” He asked Julie.

“Love some.” She lied.

The apathetic waitress walks away in no hurry. Lazily tearing a page from a pad and pushes it across the counter. As if it was no longer her concern. And carries on chewing the bubble gum cud and pulls out a mobile. Finger swipe up and down and sideways. Only to end up where she began.

“You write any your own songs?” Terry asked wanting to know more about the mysterious woman. Lorraine had all but ceased to exist.

“Not really... I have a few... But they’re not very good... You know how it is.” She confesses. Why was she flirting to this strange man? There was something about him. He had kind eyes. A gentleness. A feeling of déjà vu comes over her. A tingling of goosebumps run over her body. Like a chill, she rubs her arm.

“You okay, you cold?” Terry asked.

“I’m fine, must have been a gust of a cold air. You didn’t feel it?”

“No, don’t think so.”

The coffee and cake arrive and partitions the temporal lovers.

“Your band has its own songs? ... Any good?” Deflecting the attention from

her.

“Gareth, he’s the song writer... The other day came out with *Tears*.”

“Tears?”

“*Tears like Rain*.”

“Catchy title.” Julie cuts away a small piece of cake with icing and places it in her mouth. Terry follows the small silver fork. Lips close about it and devour the sacrificial vegetable.

“Terry... Terry... Wake up...” Julie teases him, seeing him begin to day dream, “... You’re funny you know that.”

“So they say...” He lies, “... Like I was saying, then from nowhere, Gareth writes another, then another...”

“Wow, that’s amazing... You going to play them tonight?” She asked interested in the man sitting opposite her.

“Yeah, that’s the aim... At the end of the show.”

“Sounds amazing... What time you say you’re playing?”

“Start at nine... Should finish by one, if we’re lucky... You going to come?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for all the carrot cake in Luton...” Laughs Julie, “... Shakespeare Tavern?”

“Just across the road from the station, can’t miss the place... Look for a beat up old van outside.” Jokes Terry smiling back at her.

“Oh... Is that the time... It can’t be? We just got here.” Terry looks to the wall clock and confirms it with his watch.

“Time flies when you’re having fun... Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“It’s *The Vault* Terry. It has a time of its own. Maybe the world outside now is not what it was when we came in.”

“You believe in that sort of thing?” He asked seeing a mystical side to her.

“Sometimes... Don’t you?” She asked watching his reaction.

“Yeah, sometimes.” Unsure how to respond, recalls the weird dream he had had.

Who was this woman taking over his purpose for breathing? Making him felt like he had two left feet. With memorizing brown eyes. Like his brother before him, he would marry her. Have children and wait to die. Amused, she watches his distant look while picking at the carrot cake. If it meant delaying her return to the small flat she shared with her sister. Quietly pulling a grimace face as she swallowed.

“How is it?” Asked Terry.

“Delicious.” Hiding the fib behind a smile.

“I’ll go fix them up... Don’t go away!” Said Terry approaching the counter, fumbling for money from a pocket.

“I’ll be right here.” Reluctant to leave.

Standing back on the street.

The world had remained unchanged from when they had entered. Unsure if she should hug him or shake his hand. Or just simply walk away.

“I’ve got to go this way, but I’ll be back.” Said Julie looking over her shoulder.

“I have to go this way.” Indicating the way back to the Tavern. Hoping the others had returned, more so the twins.

Julie throws out a hand and Terry takes it and hold it lightly without shaking. Hoping she would never let go.

“Okay... I’ll be seeing you then...” Said Julie unwilling to release his hand, “...Tonight.” Moving away slowly.

“Tonight... Shakespeare Tavern...” He reminds her again, taking backward steps. Unwilling to distance himself from her.

“I know... You told me.” She teases him.

“Just checking... See ya’ then.” Said Terry.

“Okay... See ya.” Biting a lip and feels a warm glow inside. She turns and walks away. There was almost a skip in her step. Catching herself before he had noticed.

‘Shit! ...’ Terry berates himself. *‘...I didn’t get her phone number.’* Or was that moving too fast? What was he thinking? *‘...Lorraine... Shit! ... As if I don’t have enough on my plate... What have I done? ... Shit!’* Looking back to catch Julie looking back at him.

He waves out and she waves back.

“What are thinking Terry? ...” He asked himself beneath his breath, signs heavily and smiles a big grin back to her. “... You silly bastard.”

‘Lorraine is going to kill me if she ever finds out.’

Chapter 14

“From the top... Again!” Archie calls out behind a large glass window of the control booth.

The sound engineer looks over to him with a suspicious glare as to say the band was not going to cut it. He could tweak much of the distortions, but there were some things even he would have trouble burying. Archie was at his wits end. Knowing Seth would be telling him, *‘I told you so’*.

He had so much faith in the boys and they were letting him down. Small town hicks. One hit wonders. A groan surfaces from the pit through speakers within the sound booth. Large spools rotate slowly. Columns of colored lights rise and fall in time with the whimpers protesting yet another take.

“How many more times do we have to do this?” A voice erupts through the control booth speakers.

“We stay until we get it right... From the top again...” Advises Archie killing the mic. Checking his watch, “... Can’t you do anything to smooth out his voice? ... It sounds like a strangle duck.”

The sound engineer shakes his head. This was one piece of wizardry that was beyond him. It would be like turning lead to gold. And this group would remain solid lead.

“Flick ‘em... The song is brilliant, but the vocals are *shite*.” The engineer offers his qualified opinion.

“Not yet... I faith in these guys... Move over Cam’. Let me have a crack.” Archie slides his chair behind the control panel of flashing lights.

Masterly equalizing and balancing vocals. Could he turn the ugly duckling into a gold goose? For a brief moment he thought he had it. Maybe post studio mastering could transform the death cry from the lead voice. So long as the band never performed live he was fine. The contract had the band stitched up for the next five years. Hoping the lead singer’s balls would drop sometime before then. They sounded so good at the bars.

Archie presses cans against his ears, rocking in time with the beat. He had heard the song a million times. And he would hear it a million more if it meant getting rid of the gremlin singer.

‘The Gremlin.’ The epiphany struck him between the eyes, *‘Of course... You idiot!’* Pulling all the sliders back to the bottom, sits back and enjoys the moment. It was brilliant. Pure evil. Seth would be proud of him for it.

Taking the Cameron by surprise. Large tape reels continue to rotate like the London Eye. Archie leans back in his chair and picks out the members of the band he would keep, and those he would throw away. Appealing to their sense of greed. The same greed they used when they first signed their souls over to the Devil. Him. The band looks up from their sound boxes and smile back at Archie thing they had done well this time.

“That’s a wrap boys! Well done... We’ll talk later... Get yourselves outta here.” Archie waves to the band members wearily leaving the studio.

“What you thinking Archie? ... You have that cunning look in your eye.” Cameron asked curiously.

“The lead singer can’t sing for shit.” Advised Archie pressing fingers together to make a steeple.

“So why you so happy?”

“We replace him for one that can.”

“Can you do that?”

“I’m the Devil Cam’... I can do anything I like...” Chuckles Archie, “... It’s in their contract, had they bothered to read the fine print.”

“Shit you’re good Archie.”

“Thank you Cam’... I do try.” Archie a breath of satisfaction.

Checking his watch again. It was getting late.

“You got some place you have to be?” Asked Cameron.

“Yeah, there’s a band playing at the *Shakespeare* over the ditch... *The Ravens*... heard of them?”

“Can’t say I have... Haven’t you been tortured enough today already?”

“Money never sleeps, and neither do I... They should have started by now.” Rechecking his watch as though the time had changed since the last time he checked it a minute earlier.

“You’re one for punishment Archie... But you do have a mitis touch to finding talent.” Stroking Archie’s ego.

“You’re too kind... But it’s true... I’ve always said that.” Archie strokes himself. Checking the time again, the second hand had moved ever slightly since the last time, “... Hmm... Where does the time go Cam’?”

“Well I know where I’m going... Home... See you Monday. Let me know how it all goes with the... *Ravens*? ... Why does that sound familiar?”

“Probably ‘course it’s a butt ugly bird.” Remarked Archie.

“Yeah, that must be it... I’m outta here... You can lock up.” Cameron pushes away from the massive console to leave Archie alone in the booth.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Responds Archie kindly.

Archie flicks a switch to kill the tape machines. A complete waste of studio time. He imagined the Ravens standing where other band was just standing. Gareth behind the microphone. He could almost recall their new song, *Tears*. That had promise. If they could pitch a couple more like that they could earn themselves a contract. Written by the Devil himself.

To Terry’s surprise the twins returned.

And had regained what little senses they had between them. No sign of Lorraine who had obviously used the road trip as a means to go clubbing. In some way a good sign if Julie should turn up. Julie. He looks over the faces about the room. Expecting the doors opens and see her to walk in at any moment.

Gareth went about tuning his guitars. Every now again turning to look up, as though he too was expecting someone to be there.

Sal had taken to the bar and supped quietly on a dark bitter. Blending into the crowd, unaware that he was a band’s drummer. Engaging in conversation with a young blond lass that had taken a seat beside him. Giggles followed then laughter. Perhaps tonight he would get lucky.

The twins had their eyes on to several young women who had caught their attention. Flirtatious intentions were exchanged without saying a word. Terry checks he had the keys to the van were in his pocket.

“Not tonight boys!” He chuckles.

The Tavern was filling by the hour anticipating the band’s new songs they had heard so much about. Lights flashed with the juke box of preselected songs. Mobiles glowed in the dark. Socializing with cyber space friends, rather than with those about them.

Duncan poured pint after pint. Looking up to the clock, 8:45PM. And signals the band should start getting ready to play. Terry gives the thumb up and begins to flick switches on the console.

LED lights come to life and flash in time with the static back ground noise. His worse fears abated to the dark corners of his mind. Annulled by Julie who had now taken center stage. Nothing could go wrong this evening.

‘Where is he? He said he’d be here.’ He thinks to himself anxiously. Looking up expecting Archie to be sitting at the bar.

“Get the troops, we’re good to go here.” Terry tells Gareth.

Disappearing into the crowd to the bar, pulling the twins away before they

took their intentions to the rest rooms. Giving Sal a nod, busily scrawling a number on a napkin and pushes it towards a girl.

“I’ll be back.” He tells her. She smiles and watches him head to the stage.

“Okay you guys... Listen up... Don’t touch the knobs on your instruments... I’ve laid everything down on the console... Okay?”

“Yeah... Okay... Got it.” Answered back unconvincing neutered voices.

The juke box fades and silence falls over the tavern. Something special was about to happen and revelers waited for the needle to drop. Faint static filled the hushed hall.

“Ladies and Gentleman... *Boys and girls...*” Begins Gareth, causing some laughter among the revelers, “... We’re *The Ravens* and we hope you enjoy the show... We have something *special* for those of you who stick around until the end.” Gareth teases the people raising mobiles over their heads to record the moment.

“*Tears.*” A voice call out from the back.

“Patience my *darlings...* Patience...” Gareth raises his hand to hold back their enthusiasm, “From the top... Two-three-four!”

The band launches directly into *Tears* to Terry’s surprise, looking up to Gareth smiling as though he had just gotten one over on him. The crowd roar their approval. The faithful had spread the word there was a new sensation was in town.

Lights throbbed in time with the intermittent beat.

Terry watches eagerly as needles ping back and forth across dials. Fearful of a threatening red LED to appear at any moment, but never came. The song ended. Gareth had given the crowd what they had come to hear and now settled into bread and butter cover songs. Dancers jiggled like teabags on strings.

Terry eases back from the console and sees Julie had arrived. Raises a hand hoping she would see him. She waves back and tries to make her way through the twitching zombies hoping not to be devoured on the way.

“Hey! You made it... What do you think?” Asked Terry grinning from ear to ear.

“You weren’t kidding... They’re good.”

“You just missed *Tears...* They’ll play it again later... Glad you came.”

“Me too.” Julie smiles.

Taking his beer from the console begins to sip on it as if it was her own.

“It’s not my beer.” He lies.

Julie pulls a horrible face and looks about the owner of the beer. Only to see

Terry grinning at her.

“You bugger!” Taking another sip, leaving a white moustache on her upper lips.

There was something cute about it. He wanted to kiss it away. His mind juggling the console, the noises blaring through the headset. And Julie. She points towards the dance floor and he gives the thumbs up.

Song after song the band played on.

Until the break struck at eleven. Peeling themselves away from instruments the band head to the bar to resume their flirtatious liaisons. No sign yet of Lorraine. It was as though she had left him for another man. Gareth looks about the faces in search of someone. Seeing them at the bar drinking a cocktail engaged in conversation with a man. He rushes over to rescue them before it was too late.

“The band is everything they said you were...” Remarked Duncan, unable to pour pints quick enough, “... Keep this up and there’ll be a little bonus in it for you at the end.”

“Thanks Mister Duncan.”

“Alistair please.”

“*Alistair.*” Corrects Terry.

“You expecting someone?” Asked Julie, seeing Terry keep looking around the room suspiciously.

“Ah... Ah... Archie... The record company guy... Thought he’d be here by now.” Terry lies. Wondering how he would explain Lorraine to Julie, or Julie to Lorraine.

“If he said he would be here, he would be here... Now relax.” She tells him.

“Yeah, your right.” Dismissing Archie’s absence.

Julie pushes a folded napkin towards Terry. Picking it up, reads the numbers written inside. Together with a small heart and a ‘J’ beneath.

He goes to write his number down, but she holds his hand back.

“Call me... Then I’ll have your number.” She looks into his eyes.

“Okay... I promise.”

“Only if you want to.”

“Oh I want to... I really do... I could call you right now if you like.” He grins.

“Tomorrow will be soon enough.” Said Julie tucking the napkin into his shirt pocket and kisses him.

Taking him by surprise. Sal looks over in time to see and grins.
'If only Lorraine was here to see this.' He thinks.

On the other side of the bar, out of sight from prying eyes, Gareth was in conversation with his telephone connection.

"I thought you'd never come." Said Gareth.

"I always come Gareth when I am with you."

"Don't be naughty here... People might see us." Gareth looks about like a shy school boy.

"Give me a kiss... You know you want to." His lover teases him.

"Not here... Not now... Later."

"Don't you love me?"

"You know I do... This isn't the place... I wrote a song about you." Gareth confesses at a moment of weakness.

"You wrote a song about me? What's it called?"

"Love Me Not."

"Oh... Interesting title... You know I love you don't you?"

"I wonder sometimes... Any way... Listen to the lyrics... They for you... For us..." Gareth stands to leave. Leans down and momentarily contemplates kissing his lover. Unseen by watching eyes caught up with their own liaisons, "... I see you after the show... Don't go away."

"I'll be right here." The man replied.

Chapter 15

“Time gentleman.” Terry calls out for the crew to get back on stage.

“Before we do, get these down you.” Sal appeared with a tray of tequila shots.

“No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no.” Stutters Terry knowing the effect it would have on him.

“Don’t be a pussy, get in here have one Terry! ...” Challenges Gareth, “...All for one and one for all!”

Each member took a shot glass filled to the rim. There seemed to be one too many glasses and Terry looks to Sal as to why. Tilting his head to indicate it was meant for Julie.

“To the top! ...” Toasts Sal, “... Let give it our best shot eh?”

“To the top!” The others toast back. Tossing the kerosene tasting contents to the back of their throats. Everyone regretted the decision moment they swallowed.

Resuming their positions back on stage, Gareth opens with *Show me the Way*. Party revelers go wild again as mobiles light up the dance floor like a star spangled sky. They would not be kept waiting. Terry grins his approval and raises a thumb at him. Happier than his earlier moody self. Whatever it was that had turned him around it was working. He could only assume it was buxom blonde on her stool. Beside her stood a man in a business suit. Well-groomed and looking out of place with the bar.

Terry returns his attention to a panel of needles flickering to and fro. The cover songs came and went. Time passed unnoticed. The shots had had loosen up the players. Taylor and Ness goofed around, dueling with each other, with Gareth watching on. Sal was in his zone. Long hair swooshed about, blinding him from the twin’s tomfoolery.

Archie had arrived taking a place at the bar. Impressed by the Tavern’s sound system. But had yet to hear anything original. Terry spies him and raises a thumb to acknowledge his presence. Archie raises a wine glass and acknowledges him with a grin. The buxom woman had left, leaving only the businessman in the pin stripe suit smiling back at the band. Terry traces the smile back to Gareth’s smiles and back again to the pin stripe suit’s smile and back to Gareth. No matter how he joined the dots. The picture did not make sense. That only left...

“Oh-My-God.” Exclaimed Terry realizing what was happening.

“What was that?” Asked Julie standing beside him.

“Nothing... Nothing at all.” The more he looked the more convinced him it was so. How could he not have known?

The rock anthem pumped carrying revelers along with it like a giant wave.

Without thinking Gareth automatically turned his volume knobs on his guitar to maximum. The twins saw this and followed suit, so as not to left behind. Suddenly the console’s lights up with red LED warning lights. Needles go to maximum and refuse to budge. Music becomes painfully louder and ravens squealed their approval.

“Shit! Not now!” Panics Terry. Frantically turning knobs and pulling down sliders hoping to compensate the unwanted volumes coursing through the console. The beast had been awoken.

Sparks begin to flash from beneath the console. Fingers try to touch the short circuited console, only to be bitten. Terry stands back and watches on helpless as fumes erupted from beneath it. The motherboard fried. One by one the instruments went dead and the speakers fell silent. Someone noticed the smoke and screamed. Then another. Panic ensued and people rushed for the door to escape the room now filling with rancid smoke. A wailing fire alarm sounded. Archie had not come to listen to an alarm and left without looking back.

Outside on the sidewalk.

Terry distances himself from the band on the other side of the road. They were so close. Why did they have to mess it up? His mind racing of what could have been and what was. The only stable element he felt was by his side holding onto his arm, trying to comfort him. Julie.

Fire engines appear on the scene screaming sirens and red flashing lights. But all for naught and quickly cleared out the offending console. Charred and grotesque. Terry looks at it in disgust. Then to the twins looking guilty and unable to make eye contact. Gareth comes over to talk to him.

“Sorry man... It was my fault... I got lost in the moment man... We can fix this... Can’t we?” Trying to pull Terry from dark thoughts. His world shattered.

Unable to find the words he wanted to say. Terry remains silent. There was no funny side to this. Just a complete and gutter train wreck. Knowing their wages would be forfeited to cover the smoke damage.

“Let me talk to him...” Said Julie pulling Terry to aside.

“Hey... Remember me?” Julie asked sheepishly.

“Hell.” Terry peers out from his shell.

“Nothing you can do okay... Not your fault.”

“If only... We could have... If it wasn't for...” He looks to the twins.

“Hey... *Shit happens...* Let it go...” She tells him, “... You're bigger than *this*... I know you are... I heard it... In *there*.” She tells him.

“It's over Julie... The dream is over.”

“It is if you want it to be... You want it be?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then sleep on it... Tomorrow's another day... Trust me, everything is going to be okay.” Consoling him, “...Come here.” Pulling him close.

The others watch on surprised by Terry's new girlfriend. And she kisses him as though they were lovers.

“Lorraine's going to be pissed when she finds out.” Said Ness looking on.

“Find out what?” Asked Lorraine appearing on the scene at the wrong end of the conversation.

“Shit.” Grimaces Sal feeling uncomfortable with the developing situation and steps behind the van from view.

“What the...? Who's that with *my* Terry?” Exclaimed Lorraine, her eyes set on the hussy who had her tongue down Terry's throat.

“A friend of his apparently... *Julie*.” Advised Gareth.

“Looks more than a friend if you ask me.” Watching him continue to kiss the young woman.

“I reckon.” Adds Taylor.

“What happen? What's with the fire engines?” She asked looking about seeing smoke and flashing fire engines.

“Terry cooked the console... Nearly burnt down the joint.” Ness embellished the lie.

“He did not... It was my fault.” Gareth corrects him.

“Tell Terry I'm taking the train home... And not to bother knocking on my door anymore... Two timing bastard he is.” Said Lorraine walking away, adjusting her panties beneath the short skirt.

“Yeah, I'll make sure he gets the message...” Lies Gareth, and waits for Lorraine to be out of ear shot, “...*Bitch*.”

The twins laugh thinking it was funny.

“As for you two...” Gareth begins.

“We just followed your lead.” The twins' responded.

Terry and Julie finish kissing and looking into each other's eyes. Unaware of Lorraine's arrival, ultimatum and departure.

“Get yourself home... I’ll give you call tomorrow okay?” Said Terry

“I’d like that... You going to be okay?” She asked.

“Can’t get much worse I’m guessing. Need to sort things out with the manager... Not looking forward to that talk.” Seeing Duncan standing in the door way talking to firemen looking Terry’s way.

“I have to go... Don’t want to miss your bus.” Said Terry.

“Yeah, yeah, you go... Talk soon.”

Their hands slipping from the others’. Both reluctant to let go of each other.

“Bye... Call me... Promise?” Asked Julie.

“Promise.” Watching her walk away into the darkness.

Feeling alone again. Looks over the band members standing by the van keen to get going.

“Give me a minute with the manager.” He calls out to them. Though he doubted it would be a minute. A minute would have been merciful.

Half an hour later Terry reappears, out of pocket. Thankful he was not up for the cost of the smoke damage covered by the bar’s insurance.

“Good news, we’ve been banned from ever stepping foot inside the place again.” Advised Terry relieved.

“Where our wages?” Asked Ness.

“That’s the bad news... Someone talk to him... I’m not in the mood” Said Terry

“What?” Asked Ness credulously.

“Everyone inside the van... Where’s Lorraine?” Asked terry looking about for her.

“She said she’s taking the train back.” Informed Gareth.

“She was here? When?”

“About the time you had your tongue down Julie’s throat.”

“She didn’t see that?”

“Oh_ yeah, we all_ saw it man... Nice action.” Declares Ness.

“Shit!”

“Don’t worry about it Terry... If you only knew...” Sal began, deciding not to complete the infidelity.

“Knew what?” He asked curiously.

“Nothing man... Let her go... Nothing but trouble... You’re better off with Julie. Nice girl.”

Confused and tired and in no mood for riddles he left it there.

“Get in the van. I want to go home.”

“You coming Gareth?”

“Nah... I’m going sleep over at a friend’s place.” Said Gareth looking up the street.

Terry looks about for the man from the bar and sees him looking in his direction. Then looks to Gareth. A mind grappling with how he never knew his best friend was gay. Not that it worried him. His songs now taking on another dimension. It made sense now why he never had a girlfriend.

“Have fun Gareth... Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.” Said Terry, regretting his choice of words

“I very much doubt that.” Said Gareth smiling.

“See you tomorrow.” Watching him walk away.

Terry pushes the key into ignition and turns the key.

Groan-moan-cough-splutter-groan-groan-splutter-cough. The van coughs and splutters as though it had a fur ball stuck in its throat.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” Curses Terry trying again.

Click-click-cough-splutter... Click-click-cough-splutter...Click-click-click-click-click.

“Battery’s flat!” Points out Taylor from the back.

“Really?” Asked Terry.

“I reckon... Sounds like it.” Confirms Taylor.

“Shit... Gareth left the lights on... Man can this day get any crazier? ...” Asked Terry, looking for an immediate remedy, “... Okay, you guys take the train back. I’ll stay with the van and get jump started tomorrow morning.”

“You going to be okay?” Asked Sal seeing him emotionally exhausted.

“Yeah, it will give me a chance to think... I should have known the console wouldn’t handle all those amps... We should have stayed with our own gear... Go home... I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

“Okay man... If you say so... Sal get these two to the tube station and home.”

“Can’t we just leave them here?”

“For as much as I would like to, it wouldn’t be fair on London.” Remarked Terry.

Sitting behind the wheel Terry tries the key one more time. But to no avail.

The battery was dead. He was stuck there for the night. Leaning back in the seat looks out the windscreen and contemplates what to do.

02:12AM too wired to sleep, he pulls himself from the van and locks it. A

gust of cold air strikes him as though to nudge him to get moving. Unsure which way to head, the sound of distant the music draws him along familiar streets and found himself standing before a familiar entrance. A large neon sign buzzed and blinked above the door way.

THE VAULT

Chapter 16

A black light coughing intermittently. Animating fluorescent graffiti to life.

People stand about smoking. And look at Terry as though he were lost. Rowdy music and colored lights flickered from the door way. As if it were trying to escape the place. Hesitantly he steps inside the pulsating cavity. It had become alive with weird and the zany.

Costumed creatures wandered about, compounding the eccentricity and the strange world he now found himself. Tunnels transformed into magical night clubs. Colored beams strobed in time with a throbbing heartbeat of the music. Sleepwalkers of every description looked at him suspiciously.

“What’s he doing here?” He thought he heard one say.

Losing his way, moves through the stagnant life forms in search of an exit. An eerie feeling comes over him, and that he should had stayed with in van.

“Excuse me... Coming through... Sorry... Excuse me please.” He said, holding out an arm to make a path through the walking dead drinking strange cocktails that changed color with the lights. Masks with long beaks and hooked noses. Small black holes stare at him as he passes. Deafening music made it impossible to think. Intermittent darkness made it impossible to see where he was going. He could well have been walking in a circle.

In the distance, he thinks he sees a red flickering exit sign.

Strangely a pathway clears for him and he takes advantage of it. Strangely the pathway closes behind him as he passes. Standing beneath the flickering red neon sign discovers it was no exit. But what appeared to be an entrance to a bar of some kind. With an ominous name.

PURGATORY

Sparking violently as flying insects came into contact with it.

Thinking nothing of the name, he peers into the entrance. Stairs lead to an upper floor. A single wall lamp dimly lights the stairway. Polished brass rods that hold down a blood red carpet. On entering, the sound from outside is muffled. Looking back to twitching bodies and erratic flashing lights. A strange haze cloaks the doorway. Reaching fingers into it. He feels a tingle sensation. Unsure what to make of it of the doorway.

“That’s weird?” He said to himself. But everything about the Vault was

weird.

Thankful for the silence, feels a comforting presence about the place. Caressing his soul. An inner voice calls his name from the upper balcony beckoning him inside further.

“One can’t hurt.” He convinces himself taking the first step. And takes another. Then another.

Behind him sounds fade into a far distance. Making out silhouetted bodies in the faltering light. A person appears at the door way and tries to warn him to turn back. Hearing only garbled words Terry raises a hand to the stranger and continues on. Stepping upward, the stranger fades. Seeing only the immediate stairs in front of him. Now unsure if he was heading up or down.

Hesitating, he holds onto the hand rail to steady himself.

About to take another step only to find there was not one. He was standing on the balcony. A wall light flickers. Illuminating the empty surroundings and a door. Light and voices seep from a beneath the door. Reaching for the handle. He turns it. Squeaking from eons of disuse. Hesitantly he pushes the door open, unsure what he would find on the other side. Hinges protest their awakening.

From a far table, faces look up through a haze of cigarette smoke. Curious to the new arrival. And see Terry standing in the doorway. A bartender stands behind a long wooden bar. Grinning. Polishing a glass. As though he were expecting him.

Terry takes in the old west saloon and the faces staring back at him. Imagining gun swingers about to draw. And grins at the thought. The barman grins with him. A card player chuckles. Pulling out an empty wooden chair, as though it was meant for him.

“Leave him alone...” Another card player warns, “... You in or not?”

“I’m out.” Responds the player.

“You’d be so lucky.” Another player remarks, causing the others to chuckle.

“Don’t listen them son... You coming in or not?” The barman asked angelically.

“Yeah... Of course... I was just passing.” Said Terry uncertainly.

“Aren’t we all ...Take a load off your feet stranger...” Indicating an empty stool, “...What will it be?”

“What have you got to make a shit day go away?” Asked Terry looking up at the dust covered shelves.

“You’ve come to the right place. Here... Start with this... On the house...”

Pushing a tequila shot in front of him, "... What your name son?"

"Terry... Thanks."

"No worries Terry, that's what I'm here for... What is a bar but a confessional to bare our *sins*?" Hissing the final word.

The Dealer looks up from the card table and glares at the barman. He was there to deal the cards. Ensuing that everybody, living and dead, abided by the *rules*. Chuckles sound again around the table only to subside when the barman glares at them.

"You got that right..." Remarked Terry, grimacing as he swallowed the tainted lighter fluid, "...Woah! That's wicked!"

"Yeah_ you could say that... Have another on me... A woman right? ... It's always about a woman." The bar man lies.

"I wish it was..." Terry begins to say.

"Be careful what you wish for son... There'll be time for that soon enough." Warns the barman.

"Eh?" Asked Terry confused.

"Get that down you... And tell uncle Luc' here about your day."

"You don't want to know." Wondering where to begin.

"Oh I don't know... I'm a good listener. Try me..." He entices him, "... Start at the beginning." As though he could read his mind.

Terry swallows the next shot whole.

Going down smoother than the first. And takes in the dimly lit room. Old bottles lined the shelves. Untouched in decades. Something moved behind one of the bottles. A creature magnified by the glass. He follows the shadow as it slivered along the shield. A small black head appears. A forked tongue tastes the air sensing the new arrival. Hisses quietly and slivers into the darkness again.

"There's a snake... Up there!" Terry exclaims.

"Really? ... Hmm." The Jinn dismisses his concerns and pours him another shot, "... Not to worry, they're harmless... Here have another."

Without thinking throws the shot to the back without tasting it. Slumps on the stool and feels his troubles leave him.

"That feels better doesn't it?" Strokes the Jinn.

"Yeah thanks... What's your name?" Asked Terry curiously.

"Oh_ I have so_ many names Terry..." The Jinn momentarily pauses, wheezing at the thought, "...But let's not dwell on *nomina* for now... You're with friends can't you see." Looking over to the table of tormented souls.

Terry turns and sees a four gentleman playing cards. A haze of smoke hangs about them.

“Aren’t there smoking regulations?” He asked squinting through the haze of smoke.

“I won’t tell if you don’t... Ah, but where are my manners? Let me introduce these fine gentlemen... The one in the cap is Brian... How long you been here?”

“Too fucken long... Wyatt, you playing?” Stringing out a Brooklyn draw.

“Fold.” Declares Wyatt tossing cards to the center table.

“That’s Wyatt... Hmm...” Said the Jinn as though irritated, “... Beside him is Kiran... And beside him his Gary... A woman wasn’t it?” He asked.

“Something that...” Throwing his cards to the center, scratching the tattoo on the side of his neck.

“Women, you’ve got to love them... You got a woman Terry?”

“Not sure... Sort of between them at the moment.”

“Ah_ yes, Julie.” Remarked the Jinn.

“How did you know her name?” He asked looking to the barman peculiarly.

“You said earlier, before the ...” The Jinn lies, looking at the three empty shot glasses on the bar.

“I did? ... I can’t remember.”

“Here... Have another, it will help you forget.” Pouring the vessel to the rim and pushing it towards him.

“I don’t know... Maybe I should be leaving? ...” He looks about for the door that had now disappeared or become part of the wall, “...Where’s the door?”

Ignoring Terry’s concern, the barman presses him to tell him his woeful tale of despair.

“Maybe I could make it all go away... You’d like that wouldn’t you?” Strokes the Jinn.

“You can do that?” Asked Terry looking up, eyes wanting to turn back time.

“I can do anything Terry... Trust me.” Enticed the Jinn.

“I very much doubt that.” Staring blankly at the shot glass.

“Save that one for the end of your story.” The Jinn suggests.

Terry rubs a finger under his nose and sniffs.

And begins to unload the events of day and all the events that led to the disaster at the Tavern. Exhausted, lifts the glass as though about to make a vow. Lucifer could smell Terry’s mortal soul sweating from his body.

“I wish I could do it all over again differently!” And skulls the foul tasting spirit. It burnt like hell to the pit of his stomach.

“Ahh!” The Jinn savors the cherished words he had been longing to hear.

Bang! Slamming the shot glass onto the bar. Sending a loud sharp echoing about the bar.

Card players turn up from their game to the unfortunate soul about to fall. They all had at some time in the far distant past. Wyatt watches on, recalling his first wish. Only to stumble and fall to the dust. There would always someone quicker on the draw.

“I’m out.” Throwing his cards to the table. Blank cards never won a hand.

The venom coursing through his veins and Terry gasps for breath.

Eyes roll in their sockets. Black snakes sliver behind darkened bottles eager to watch the pitiful human and hissed their pleasure. The room begins to rotate. Swirling and twirling and turning and spinning about him. Feeling dizzy, rests his head on his arms on the bar. And tries to focus on the shot glass but inches from his face. One becomes two. Becomes four. Becomes a kaleidoscope of sparkling shot glasses moving about.

Dong_! Dong_! Dong_! A wall clock insidiously strikes three.

“Sweet dreams Terry... Be seeing you.” Said the Jinn beginning to laugh, and laugh and laugh.

The laughter fades into the distance as though it were leaving him.

Or he was leaving it. Terry feels himself slipping down a long dark rabbit hole. Visions flash through his mind. Like a rewinding tape... *Flash* Julie’s kiss, *flash* console fuming, *flash* carrot cake, *flash* the Vault, *flash* a red beret, *flash* the road trip, *flash* Hackneys and double decker buses, *flash* the twins sleeping, *flash* endless rehearsals, *flash* Gareth playing Tears, *flash* Archie, *flash* gigs at Clissold Arms, *flash* pizzeria, *flash* Lorraine... Faster and faster memories rushed through his mind.

A fanatical kettle screams as Gareth’s guitar riff wails from the basement only to add to the assailing noises. Visions of the poster spinning closer and closer and closer.

‘*We’re the King of the Teds of Muswell Hill Terry!*’ The fab four laugh at him.

Soon everything is engulfed by bellowing steam. The kettle, the riff, the poster, the laughter. Suddenly eyes open to blinding morning light streaming through his bedroom window.

And the sound of his mother's voice.

Chapter 17

“Morning Terry... I made you a nice cup of tea. I’ll put it over here for you... Where’s your laundry?” She said picking up clothes from the floor, “... You really should get to bed earlier, these late nights are not good you... You need you’re rest... You’re not getting any younger you know... Why don’t you settle down with your Lorraine? ... Like your brother.”

“Ah_!” Terry groans. It hurt to groan.

Reacting to both his mother and a hangover from hell. A mouth tasting like a sewer and his head pounding like a kick drum. Reluctant to move he pulls a sheet over his face to deny the misery and his mother’s presence.

‘How did I get back here? Did I black out? The tequila shots... Never again...’ Trying to re-piece the previous evening. Memory of the Tavern, of the Vault, the bar. *‘...What was the name? Card players... A Saloon bar, old west... Ahh_.’* It hurt to think, *‘... Julie, a kiss... Lorraine.’*

Unsure which he feared most, the hangover, or what Lorraine would say. Visions of Julie return. Of her playing a guitar and singing in the underground. Wondering if it had all been a bad dream. Straining to lever himself upright, sits on the side of the bed. Reaches to a pocket and pulls the napkin from his pocket with her number on it.

“Oh_ thank God for that.” He tells himself.

Taking a sip of the tea. Groans with the satisfaction, feeling taste buds coming back to life.

“Thank God for what Terry?” Asked his mother appearing again unexpectedly.

“Julie.”

“Who’s Julie?”

“Just a girl I met last night.”

“What’s wrong with Lorraine? She’s the only one that can do my hair the way I like it.”

“Don’t know... There’s something about Julie that different.”

“What does she do?”

“*Sing.*” He said the word as if it made her an angel.

“Oh_ Terry I wish you’d give this music thing away and get a real job and get married, settle down and have some children...” She began to say.

“Like my brother and wait to die...” Finished Terry, “... Yeah, yeah I

know.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” His mother asked gathering clothes from the floor and leaving the room before Terry could get the last word in.

“She’s not Julie! ...” Terry calls out to the doorway wishing he had not. His head hurt with the sound of his own voice, “... Never again.” He vows without commitment.

Squinting through blood shot eyes at the poster on the wall. A corner had fallen down during the night. Faces that looked like those of the card players. Gradually the faces transform to that of the band. And he wonders what to make of it. Four blank faces stare back at him. Taunting him. He was a failure. The dream was over.

‘We’re the King of the Teds of Muswell Hills... Not you Terry.’ He could hear them saying.

Losing focus on the poster, replaced by visions of snakes behind bottles come to mind.

‘Purgatory. Who was the barman? How did he get back home?’ Too many questions not enough answers.

“Shit! ... The van? ...” He suddenly realizes, worrying where it could be. Hopefully still parked outside the Tavern, no doubt clamped by now. Another expense he could ill afford. Their gear was in it. “... We’re screwed.”

Peering out the window in hope the van would be there. But why would it be? There was no way he could have driven back. Maybe he caught the train. But could not recall the train ride, no matter how hard he tried. Surely he would remember some of it. Nothing.

Standing gingerly, scratches his crutch and stretches the stiffness from tequila tarnished joints.

“Never again.” Vowing reluctantly again. And takes himself to the shower in the hope of resurrecting his flat footed soul.

Having washed away the sleep.

Reboots the laptop to read the reviews of their disastrous performance. The computer came to life quicker than he had and waited forever for band’s web page to load. Blood shot eyes shift to the number of *likes*. They had fallen to but a few dozen.

“Jesus? ... I didn’t know they could go *backwards*... We must have been bad... *Shit*.” Unable to comprehend the disaster of the train wreck.

Spies an email from what looked like Alistair Duncan from the Tavern.

“Shit.” Terry shakes his head in disbelief.

“Fuck’n damages...” Closing the laptop before he could read the citation of costs, “...As if yesterday wasn’t a complete cluster fuck... Could my life get any worse? Fuck!” Feeling his life spirally away, sighs heavily.

Outside he could hear a vehicle approaching. It sounded like the van, but how could it be? The van was in London. Then hears the familiar squeaking brakes.

“What the...? It can’t be? ...” Pulling himself from the chair and clambers to the window to see Gareth parking the van and the twins peeling out the side, “... What are they doing here?”

Checks his watch, and sees it was just after ten. His mother appears standing at the door way.

“Come on... The band is here... I have to get going to the shops.”

“What day is it?” He asked curiously.

“Sunday Terry... Sunday... Band practice remember?”

“Eh? ... We can’t... The console burnt out last night.”

“It did? ... That’s nice, I’ll be off now... Don’t make too much noise, think of the neighbors.” She said not listening, leaving him confused.

“They’re keen.” Terry watches the others unload the van as though nothing was amiss.

Dragging feet down the stairs in no rush to face them. Opens the door to see Gareth bright eyed and ready practice.

“Hey man... You look like shit... Where’d you go after we left?”

“Found a bar... I think... Tequila shots... Ah_ my head hurts.” Shielding the sun from blood shot eyes.

“Should have said, I would have joined you...” Suggested Gareth, “...What a night eh? ... We bitched it man!”

“Yeah, we bitched it alright... What are you doing here?” Terry squints at Gareth, fighting off the bright background light.

“What do you mean? ... Practice man, we always practice on a Sunday... Man you look like shit.”

“Yeah, I feel like it... We can’t practice man.” Remarks Terry.

“What do you mean we can’t?” Asked Gareth anxiously.

“The console is burnt out... Remember? It’s toast... You turned the settings up.”

“Eh? When did this happen?” Gareth looks back to the van watching Sal carrying the console.

“Last night at the gig... Don’t you remember?”

“Man_ you must have had a session on the sauce.” Said Gareth seeing a squeamish looking Terry holding onto the door frame to stay upright.

“It was a train wreck man... The record guy left... Before you could play your songs... Fuck! We were so close man.” Terry said dejectedly.

“What the fuck are you talking about man? I don’t know what acid you took last night but I can tell you we rocked man!”

“Don’t mess with me Gareth, I’m not in the mood.” Exclaimed Terry holding the side of his head suppressing whatever demon was trying crawl its way out.

Sal appears at the door with the console under one arm and an amp in the other.

“Take those to the basement man... I need to fix Terry some coffee.”

“You look like shit Terry.” Said Sal passing, soon followed by the twins giggling.

Terry sees the console without a sign of damage to it. Eyes strain to comprehend the anomaly.

‘It can’t be? I saw it with my eyes... I packed it in the van... It was charred black.’ He thought, scrambling for a reason.

“You didn’t clean it up?” Terry asked.

“Nah, you know the rules man... If it belongs to you, it’s your *responsibility*.” Said Gareth.

“I don’t understand Gareth... I’m going crazy.”

“Yeah that *Tequila bitch* will do that to you... Come on, let’s get some coffee into you.”

“Yeah...” Becoming more confused than ever.

“What’s that about... *before we could play my songs?*” Gareth asked curiously.

“I’m not sure anymore Gareth... I need a coffee... A lot of coffee... I’ve had a shit of dream.”

“All been there Terry... What you need is a hair of the dog... Your old man got any spirits?”

“No-no-no-no-no, no way man... I’m on the wagon until further notice.” Heading to the kitchen.

The kettle whistled and screamed, catching Terry’s attention.

Reminding him who was in charge. He stared at it as though it was whistling at him and him alone. Expecting a guitar riff to wail up from the basement stairs.

“So we never went to London yesterday?” Inquired Terry curiously.

“What the heck are you talking about Terry? ... Christ you are in a bad way... Get this down you man.” Pushing a mug of black coffee towards him. Adding three sugars to sweeten it.

“What day is it Gareth?”

“Sunday... Ha.”

“What month?”

“You serious? You bump your head last night, or something?” Gareth looks for abrasions on Terry’s hands and face.

“Just amuse me will you... What month is it?” Terry asked again.

“June... Has been for the past couple of weeks... Maybe you should see a doctor Terry... You don’t sound right.”

“Can’t be... It’s July... Isn’t it?”

“You want me to amuse you, or tell you the truth?”

“The truth... Straight up, man to man.”

“June... Straight up man... I wouldn’t mess with you.” Informed Gareth looking him in the eye.

“It can’t be... We were in London last night... Doing a gig... Somewhere... Ah_...” Terry holds his head partly with pain, partly in frustration, “... *The Vault*... I remember the Vault... The bar... What was the name? ... Red lights ...”

“Any naked women there?” Asked Gareth jokily.

“Julie... I remember... Julie... I have her number... She’ll tell you.”

“Nice, you meet a girl... Does *Lorraine* know about this *Julie*?”

“I think so... She was there when I was kissing her.”

“O_kay... Things are getting a little kinky now... What you guys get up to afterhours is your own affair... Each their own if you know what I mean.”

Terry looks at Gareth as through him he knew a closeted secret.

“I think I do.” Said Terry, not wanting the other’s to hear.

Gareth reads between the inferred lines.

It was starting to come back to him as the coffee sank into his bones.

The bar. The tequila. The card players. The wish. The wish that he could ‘*do it all again differently*’.

“No-no-no-no-no-no-no... Not possible... This can’t be happening...” Terry stutters his refusal to accept the realization about him, “... What did he say?”

“Who?” Asked Gareth growing confused by Terry’s ramblings.

‘He could make it all go away... That he could do anything...’ The words of the Devil rang in his ears.

“You okay man? We can practice another day if you want?”

Terry fell silent. Events turning over and over becoming clearer in his mind. Not possible. Yet. Then he spoke to confirm his worse fear.

“Tears... Tears like Rain.”

“How do you know about that? ... I only wrote that the other day... There’s no way you could know about that.”

“A lucky guess... I guess.” Said Terry

“What is that supposed to mean? You’re starting to freak me out Terry.”
Worried for him.

“It means we’re going to need a bigger console.” Remarked Terry.

Chapter 18

Killing the tape machine Terry calls time in the woolshed.

His head still throbbing with every kick of the drum. Tortured by Gareth's shrieking guitar riffs. Sun glasses covered blood shot sensitive eyes. Glad it was over. Again.

"That sounds better than the first time I heard it." Talking in riddles to the others.

"Is he okay? ... He's been acting strangely." Asked Taylor looking in a peculiar way.

"Tequila." Answered Gareth packing away.

"Ah_. That *bitch* will do it to you... Poor bastard... You got to stay off the sauce Terry." Relays Taylor.

"As for you two." Terry bites back.

"Man_ we ain't done nothing and he's already jumping us..." Ness protests, looking at Taylor as though they had.

"It's what you're going to do I'm worried about..." Leaving it there, "... Okay that's it for today... Well done guys... But you're going to do better... Get out of here."

"Don't worry about him... Pack the gear back to the van, see you Saturday..." Gareth informs the twins, "...You too Sal."

"I think I'll walk." Informs Sal.

Terry caresses the console with disbelieving finger tips and watches as the others pack away their instruments.

"You going to be okay Terry?" Gareth call out before leaving.

"Yeah, yeah... Sorry about before... Must have blacked out last night after the gig."

"The gig here, or in *London*?" Gareth asked suspiciously.

"Here of course..." Terry lied, "... Never again." Vowing never to court Mexican señorita ever again.

"Never say never Terry... Hey, how'd you know about *Tears*?"

"Had a weird dream last night." Hoping that would belay Gareth's suspicions.

"Freaky man... You had me worried for a moment... Do I have any others I need to know about?"

"Maybe... I haven't had the dream yet." He lied.

“Let me know when you do.”

“You’ll be the first to know... I promise.”

“You coming down to the Arms later? Get a hair of the dog into you?”

“Yeah_ why not... Just need to sort some stuff out here first... Maybe later if you’re about.”

“Cool man... It’s good to have you back man... You had me going there for a moment... What month is it? Good one man! ...” Gareth joked, “...Catch you later man.”

“Adiós amego!” Said Gareth climbing the stairs from view.

Hearing the front door close behind him.

Waiting to hear the van splutter to life and its rattling exhaust sound into the distance. Taking in the dreamlike surroundings of the basement. Was he really back in June? Was it all just a long bad dream? None of it made sense. The reality around him told him otherwise. The console. Unscathed. He had carried its charred corpse to the van that evening. How could it be?

Feeling for the napkin in his pocket. Pulls it out and examine Julie’s hand writing of numbers and a ‘J’. Recalling her kiss. Her lips. Her perfume. Nostril inhale as if to capture it again. If that was a dream, then why is he holding her napkin in his hand?

Dust floats in the air and is captured upon a beam of sunlight. Transforming the basement to the smoke stained bar. Visions of the card players staring back at him. Laughing at him. Who were they? It was as though they could never leave. Who was the bar man? The barman with many names.

What price would he pay for his heart’s desire? And why was there an empty chair at the table? In his mind he hears their laughter growing louder as though to enforce his troubled thoughts. The sudden realization brings him back to the room. Sunlight pierces the basement from a window. Creating a shaft of light glowing in the floating dust. As though a finger of God was searching for him. What had he done?

Stepping back to distance himself from vexing finger. Walks around it and heads up the stairs to his bed room. Opens the laptop, waits impatiently for it to start. Icons and script flash across the screen.

Buzz-buzz-whir-whir. A hard drive initiates subroutines and operating commands. The dilapidated laptop groaned back at him protesting its reboot within three hours.

“Don’t die on me now.” Suddenly the desktop appears and he spies the date

and time stamp in the bottom right hand corner of the screen. Confirming his worse fears.

Gareth was right.

Clicking frantically on an icon opens the band's profile page. Scanning the page, numbers were what they had been at that time. The train wreck had yet to happen. Clicking on a familiar message to re-read an invitation to play at the Shakespeare.

"Yes!" Terry punches the air. And replies to the message...

*Mister Duncan,
It would be an honor to play your
fine establishment on the date stated.
I understand from a reliable source
you have your own speakers and
amps. Please advise specifications to
ensure a compatibility with our
sound system.
I look forward to hearing from you.
Regards
Terry Davies
The Ravens*

"That sorted... Now all I need is bigger sound board..." Scratches his head to think, "...A visit to the music store is in order." Making the mental note pinning it to the back of his mind.

Nothing would move until Gareth they performed *Tears* live on Saturday at the Arms. Terry updates the profile page with a teaser comment about the band's upcoming new song.

'*Spread the word.*' He types the message for all to read.

But how would he pay for the new console? Extra hours at the pizzeria. A loan from his father. Without it the performance would be another train wreck. One had been enough. He did not want another.

'*Archie. Archie Sykes.*' Terry reaches for his wallet and pulls out the card.

"Ha! ..." He laughs momentarily. Then an eerie feeling came over him as though he had stepped on his own grave. "...Not possible... How can I have it if I have yet to meet him? Or perhaps I have... In another time." The concept of

time travel was doing his head in.

'If Archie exists... Then so does Julie.' he rationalized.

Caught up in the excitement, he reaches for his mobile dials Julie's number. Listening to the dial tone of the other end. After some time it is answered by a familiar female voice.

"Julie speaking." The voice answers cautiously.

"Hey Julie, told you I'd call." He blurts out without thinking.

"Who is this?"

"Terry... Remember... From the band, *The Ravens*... Last night."

"I don't know anyone called Terry."

"We had coffee, carrot cake, we kissed... The evening was a complete disaster... Not us, the band."

"I hate carrot cake! ... Must be some other girl you're stalking... I don't know who you are, or what game you're playing... But if you call again, I'll pass your number onto the police."

"But Julie! It's me! Terry! ... " Desperately trying to convince her.

"I'm hanging up creep, don't call again!" She warns him, then the sound of a click.

"Julie? ... You still there? *Julie*?" The phone went dead.

"Of course we haven't met... Yet... You idiot... Think Terry, think." He thought he had heard voices around her, as if she was at the train station.

Perhaps he could *bump* into her again. Closing the laptop grabs a jacket and heads out the door just as his mother and father arrived back home.

"Just popping into town." He calls out to his parents watching him pass in a hurry.

"You couldn't pick 'us up some ginger cake could you love?" His mother asks.

"London ma, London."

"What's in London?"

"Julie... I need to catch her before she goes home... Gotta fly. Got to catch the next train."

"Who's Julie? What happen to Lorraine?" His father asked.

"He's your son, can't you have a *talk* with him?" His mother tells him.

"I'll have a word later..." He lied. No man ever understood women, less so Terry's father, "... Good luck son!"

Chapter 19

Terry stared out the window of the train as the green English countryside and red brick terraced homes basking in the midday summer sun rolled past.

In the distance the rising buildings of London proper. Buildings became gray and dirty. Crowded. Replacing the tranquil serenity of the countryside with the trampled calamity of commerce.

Descending into a tunnel, day becomes night. Lights flash past intermittently to suggest the train was still moving. Rocking him on the bench seat. Scanning the carriage to discover he was the only one on board. Was this all part of the dream? Reality had left him when he had awoken this morning. Would he wake up in his bed again with a kettle whistling in his ears? And his mother's voice wanting his laundry?

The train jerks to a stop beside a platform busy with Sunday commuters. Waking Terry from the macabre day dream and back to the carriage and his purpose for being there. A sign outside on the tiled wall. A large red circle and blue banner at its center...

WATERLOO

He had arrived. Doors open and passengers vie to get onto the train. Tussling his way through oncoming wave of people. Exiting in time just before the doors closed on him. Leaving him alone on the platform. Eyes stare back at him from within. Watchful his uninvited presence. The train slipped into a dark tunnel from view. Voices trickled from openings as more commuters began to saturate the platform.

"Excuse me... Coming through... Sorry... Excuse me." Terry maneuvered his way around the people.

Faces turn and see what the urgency was to have them move out of the way. He smiles and shuffles about stagnated bodies. In the distance makes out the faint sound of singing. Someone busking.

"Julie!" Eyes light up with anticipation.

Standing on a bench to get a better view, spies a red beret at the far end of the tube platform.

"Excuse me... Coming through... Excuse me... Sorry." Causing a disturbance.

A CCTV camera follows the jostling individual pushing his way through the people.

Arriving just as Julie had finished a song. He stands back grinning, staring at her. She catches his mistaken grin and dismisses him. Picking the gold coins and notes from the guitar case. One eye wary on the creep staring at her. People move about her, but the stranger remained staring at her. Then he spoke.

“Julie?”

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Terry, from the phone... You don’t know me, yet... But you will...” An anxious Terry began.

“Keep away from me creep.” Reaching into her hand bag.

Terry steps forward. Without warning Julie raises an arm and pepper sprays his face. Blinding him in pain. Adding to the pangs of the hangover.

“Julie, you don’t understand...” He tries to explain through blood shot eyes.

The CCTV camera capturing the illicit love affair.

“(Click)... Situation platform one... Copy... (Click)” A voice speaks into radio telephone.

“(Squawk)...Copy... Officer’s on their way... Over... (Squawk)” An officer responds.

Passersby gather around Julie as though to protect her from the jilted lover. Rubbing his eyes only made it worse, now whelming with tears.

“Hey mister, you keep away from her or you’ll be dealing with me.” Said a larger man clenching a fist. Followed by another man beside him. Then another.

Terry sits on a bench to regain his vision. His face stinging and red. A handkerchief wiping away the tears and spray. A woman brings him a bottle of water out of kindness.

“You should get help you know?” Handing Terry a card of an organization.

“You don’t understand... We know each other... Once.” Pleads Terry of their relationship.

“Let it go son... Whatever you had is over... Let her get on her life.” The woman advises.

Looking up with blood shot eyes to discover Julie had disappeared into the crowd.

“Shit! ... Ah_!” Resting his red stained face in his hands

Could he have just lost the love of his life to a silly wish?

“The Vault!” He exclaims, catching people’s attention around him.

Red faced and eyes stinging he makes his way through the crowd of

passengers. Catching guarded looks of those around him. Wary of the stranger pushing his way through in a hurry. Officer's arriving on the scene just as he disappeared up the escalators.

“(Squawk)... Suspect is not here... Respond... Copy... (Squawk)”

“(Click)... Suspect leaving the building... He can be Metro's problem... Over... (Click)

“(Squawk) ... Copy that Control... Over... (Squawk).”

The escalator could not move fast enough.

Looking unlike those about him. Grinning at people who looked too long. Wary that he had some disease they should distance themselves from. Hurriedly exits the station. Surveillance cameras trace his every move. Others would take over once on the street.

Re-tracing now familiar steps makes his way to the street at the back of the station. Coming to the entrance of The Vault. Silence leaked from the open doors. Appearing less formidable during the day. The fluorescent graffiti dull and lifeless. Inanimate. He had reserved fears of what laid within. Eyes peer into the darkened interior.

Cameras peer down at him. Watchful of the belligerent young man. Cagily he steps inside. The nocturnal aliens that had previously stalked the passage ways had receded to the crevices and shadows. Warily he steps deeper into the tunnels.

'This could be Heaven, or this could be Hell.' He thought to himself.

Closing blood shot eyes, senses for the direction he should be heading and steps blindly towards a side tunnel. Then he sees it. A narrow alley way. Barely wide enough to squeeze between. It felt right. This was it. But where was the doorway?

“What you looking for son?” A janitor asks, mopping up a pool of dried vomit.

“A bar... *Purgatory*, or something like that... Thought this was the place.” Looking down the darkened alley.

“Nothing down there son but junkie needles and urine stained walls... Wouldn't go down there if I was you. Can't guarantee you'd come out again.” The janitor slops the mop about. Smearing the puke from one side to the other. And back again.

A gust of wind rushes from the dead end alley and along with it the foul smell of Sulphur.

“Yeah, I know what you mean....” Turning about to see the janitor had

vanished without trace. Leaving only a wet patch across the cobbled surface, "... Hey, where'd you go?"

What was he thinking? Did he really expect the Devil to release him from his wish? He had skulled the shot cementing the covenant he had entered into with him. And he had not read the fine print. An empty chair awaited him should he fail. Peering into the darkness. Sensing someone was watching him. Looking up to a nose camera sniffing directly at him. Raising a hand to suggest he was leaving.

His face red and feeling sorry for himself, he descends into the bowels of station and climbs aboard a train back to Muswell Hills.

Returning to his room before his parents saw his face. Appearing in time for dinner takes his place at the dinner table. Hoping the swelling had subsided by then.

"What happened to your face?" Asked his mother pryingly.

"Sunburn ma, sunburn." Offering a plausible explanation.

"Did you catch up with *Julie* was it?" His father asked, piecing together the sudden solar flare to his son's face.

"Yeah I did actually... Didn't work out as I had hoped... We've decided to see other people."

"Sorry to hear that son... It hard finding the right woman." He offers his advice, patting his wife's hand.

"Thanks dad... No chance I could squeeze a small loan from you... Promise to pay it back of course." Seeing chance to ask his father while his mother was in the kitchen.

"What for?"

"Going to need a new console."

"What wrong with the old one?"

"Too small... Won't handle the amps and speakers at the *Shakespeare Tavern*... She'll blow I'm certain of it."

"Shakespeare?"

"London dad, London... Got a gig lined up in four weeks' time... I'll put in some overtime, but we really need a bigger console, something with a bit of grunt, if you know what I mean."

His mother appears at the table holding two hot plates.

"There's even going to be a record producer there... Archie Sykes." Had he said too much? Had he jinxed himself?

The last part caught his father's attention. This could be the break the band needed.

"Record producer eh? I suppose we could squeeze something out of the savings account." His mind ticking over with sums and calculations.

His mother remained silent. But gave his father a stare that said they would speak later.

"Thanks dad, you won't regret it... This time I know we can do it."

"This time?"

Caught out, he desperately tries to think of a way to untangle the knot.

"Yeah... This time we'll have a decent panel... Gareth has a few songs that are wild.... You're going to love them."

"That so?" Causing his father's eye brows to rise.

"Yeah... *Tears like Rain* is awesome, why don't you come down to the Arms this Saturday and have a listen?"

"Might just do that, see where my hard earned money is going... What you say love, want to hear Terry's band play?"

"Coro is going to be on..." Becoming disinterested in their conversation, turns away to watch the television.

"As you wish love... Catchy title... You might have something there Terry."

"I know we do dad, I know we do... I'll pop in at the music store tomorrow and see what they have."

"Really?" Becoming intrigued, visions of his day coming to mind.

"That's just the beginning Dad, Gareth's got two more in the pipeline. They're going to be hits, we just have to get them in front of the Archie." Pulling his card from his wallet pushing it over to his father sitting opposite.

"Hmm... Archie Sykes eh? Fancy card." Intrigued by it, "...Let me know how much you need Terry and I'll sort it out... But it's coming out of your wages okay?"

"Thanks dad, you won't regret it!" Beamed Terry.

His mother shook her head. Not going unnoticed by the two muso men. Grinning at each other.

"To the top Terry!" Toasts his father raising a fork laden with bangers and mash and peas, before shoving it the fork loaded with tatter's and gravy into his mouth. Savoring the taste and grinning contently.

"All the way dad!" Responds Terry likewise raising his fork.

Chapter 20

“That one?” Terry points to a control panel that had caught his attention.

“Well spotted Terry... Can’t go past a *Wharfedale*.” Attests Johnno the sales assistant.

Looking portable and roughed. But he wonder if it could handle the Tavern’s amps. Taking a folded piece of paper from a pocket examines the speciation’s Duncan had given him.

Johnno regurgitates the console’s capabilities in short sound bites. As if prerecorded in his memory.

“Portable, light, roughed... Good for on the road... Quick easy set up... This one unit can balance and combine all your instrument and microphone source inputs... Tape in sockets ... Digital delay, repeat rate, volume delays... High-low frequencies... Six LED output levels meters... Dual DSP chip for reverb and delay on the same mic channel...,” Taking a breath contemplates what he had forgotten, “...Oh yeah, also has an extra input channel, making seven in total... Plus a band graphic equalizers for feedback control.”

Johnno was speaking another language but Terry understood every word. There was something sexy about the console. Or perhaps it was the bright red knobs that reminded him of Julie’s red beret. He tries to shake her vision from his pepper sprayed memory.

“You okay Terry?” Johnno asked seeing him faze out.

“Yeah, yeah... Sorry just thinking about someone... How much?”

“Usually these retail for eighteen hundred, but for you and *The Ravens*, I could knock it down to say_ fourteen... *Cash*.”

“Oh, that’s a bit more than I had budgeted... I’ll need to speak to my old man. But I’ll take it... Can you put it aside for a day?”

“No worries, it’s a great buy for the money... You playing this weekend?”

“Yeah, Gareth has a new song... *Tears like Rain*... Spread the word.”

“No worries man.”

“Thanks Johnno, you’re a champ... I’ll be back tomorrow with the money.”

“You’re all good Terry, I’ll put it out back with you name on it.”

“See you soon.”

With several hundred pounds saved plus his wages for the week he wondered if his father would extend the balance.

Somehow he had to make it happen. He had wished to do it differently. This was his chance to right the wrong of that dreadful evening. Anxiously pulling out his mobile, dials his father's number and waits for it to be answered.

"Dad? ... Yeah... Just at the store... Yeah... Think I've found the one that can handle what we need... Yeah, ah_ ..."

Reluctant to speak the formidable price, "... Fourteen... Hundred..." And was greeted with silence from his father, "... I can front up with four from my savings and this week's wages..." Trying to lessen the burden, "... You can? ... Thanks dad, you're a life saver... I promise not to tell mom... Yeah, ha... I've got Johnno to put it aside for us until tomorrow... It's a beauty dad, you're going to love it... Okay... I'll see you tonight... Bye."

Pocketing the mobile sighs with relief as though he had ticked a giant box.

"Okay that out of the way... No train wreck this time around!"

Noticing he was cutting it fine to get to the pizzeria in time for work.

Running like the wind and puffing like a steam train.

Appearing at the entrance of the pizzeria just as Mario was putting the sandwich board sign to say he was open.

"Sorry I'm late Mario!" Gasping and wheezing for breath, leaning on the door frame.

"Momma Di Mia! You okay-a Terry? Maybe you-a take-a the day-a off-a, Si? ...Freddie can-a come-a in-a?"

"I'm fine Mario... (*Gasp-gasp*)... Just ran from the music store... (*Gasp*)"

"Why-a you not-a catch-a the bus-a?"

"No time (*Gasp-gasp*)..." Slowly Terry regains his composure, "...Needed to buy a new audio console, for the band... The other one... *Blew up*... Or it's going to... Ha." Chuckling at hearing himself talking in riddles.

"Sometimes I don't-a understand you-a Terry... Time-a to open uppa! Momma Di-Mia!" Exclaims Mario returning inside.

Another day of making pizzas.

Another day of remembering what customers wanted on them before they did. It had become a game to him. Making suggestions for them, only to find they preferred some other topping. The clocked ticked over the hours. His mind drifts to Archie.

Nothing would eventuate until Archie showed in two weeks' time. Should he give him a call to be there? Then remembered what had happened with Julie. Backing quickly away from the idea, as though the Devil himself had tempted

him to do it. Looks about the pizzeria and out into the mall. Looking for a suspicious individuals. Seeing nothing untoward, but a man sits reading a newspaper who looks up momentarily at Terry as though he was being watched. Gives the newspaper a flick with annoyance and resumes reading it.

“Hey Mario?” Terry see a lull in customers and a chance to ask Mario for more hours.

“What’s uppa Terry? ... You want-a to go-a home? Si?”

“No-no-no-no-no-no... Nothing like that. Quite the opposite actually, I was wondering if I could do more hours... To help pay for the new sound system.” He asked hopefully.

“You-a sure?”

“Yeah, nights and weekends... I’ll do anything. Just keep Saturday evening free.”

“Okay-a, I’ll have-a look-a at-a da rosters.”

“Thanks Mario, you’re a champion.”

“Momma Di Mia!” Mario sings out like a broken record.

Just then Lorraine strolls in the pizzeria and leans across the counter and gives Terry a kiss.

“Momma Di Mia!” Mario sings out with surprise.

“Hey you.” She grins at him as if she knew a dirty secret.

“Hey you... You want to come around tonight and listen to Gareth’s new song?”

“New song? Wow... What time you finishing here?”

“Seven... You?”

“Six... I’ll stop by after I finish at the saloon.”

“See you then.” Terry leans over the counter towards her.

Lorraine looks about the pizzeria for people watching and gives him a kiss that may have lasted longer than Mario cared for.

“Momma Di Mia!” He calls out.

“Tonight.” She said winking at him

“Someone’s going to be-a lucky boy tonight-a.” Said Mario.

“I reckon.” Recalling the last time.

“Momma Di Mia... You band people have *groupie* women after you... No?”

“Perhaps the twins... They seem to have no trouble pulling women... Or themselves for that matter...” Terry catches himself parroting himself, “... (*Ha!*) ... Somethings never change.”

“Oh... Mamma Di Mia!” Mario’s imagination goes into over drive.

Operating on auto pilot.

Mario sang out boisterously in Italian to the amusement of the patrons. Five became six and finally the hour hand blinked to become seven. Freddie appeared as a sudden flock of customers came into the store and whistles out for Terry his shift was over. Throwing a duffle into a corner pulls on an apron. Just as he had done before. Terry could not get over events replaying themselves. Goosebumps run over his skins like a cold chill.

“Freddie!” Calls out Terry.

“Busy?”

“Steady... Just picked up now... I’m outta here.”

“Heard you guys have a new song?”

“How’d you know?”

“Saw it on line man... When you playing it?”

“The Arms this weekend if we can get it down in time... Then London in four weeks.”

“Big time now eh? ... Get out-a here!” Sheiks Freddie keen to get started.

“See you tomorrow Mario!” Said Terry throwing a hair net and blue rubber gloves into the rubbish bin, wrestles with the apron before discarding that to a laundry basket.

“You too-a Terry... Good-a luck-a with Lorraine-a you stud!”

“Pictures at ten!” Warns Terry.

“Momma Di-Mia!” Mario sings out in deight.

“Terry! ... You have a visitor.” His mother calls out from the living room hearing him coming through the front door.

“Lorraine... You’re early? ... Of course you are.” He catches himself.

“I can leave if you want?” She said pulling a pout on her face.

“No, no of course not... Give me a moment change... I’ll be right back.” Dashing up the stairs and hurriedly changes.

Splashing cologne over his face in the hope of burying the smell of the pizzeria. And dashes back down the stairs to appear at the door of the living room.

“Hey! There you are.”

“That was quick.” Said Lorraine grinning.

“Just going to play Lorraine the new song Ma.” He calls out hearing his mother rattling pots and plates in the kitchen.

“Don’t be too long... Dinner’s almost ready...” Asked his mother, “...Would you like to stay for dinner Lorraine, you’re most welcome.”

“She’s already eaten.” Replied Terry for her.

“I have?” Wondering what was in the boiling pots.

“Trust me you have.” Informs Terry pulling her by the hand to the basement away from his mother.

Terry’s father looks over the top of his newspaper, reading glasses half way down his nose and grins at Terry before he disappears from the room. Catching a hint of anticipation on his face.

“Such a lovely girl... Why can’t Terry settle down with Lorraine?” His mother asks.

“Let the boy be... He’ll settle when he’s ready.” Shaking the paper to fold it.

Throwing the switch, the basement bulb ignites to lighten the darkened basement.

Just as he had remembered it. Boxes stacked against a wall and a sturdy workbench against another. Fumbling with the tape machine hoping the song would still be there.

“Give it a moment to rewind it.” He said.

“It looks pretty old?”

“It still works... Just bought a new console today... It’s a beauty!”

“Oh... That’s nice. Why_? ...What’s wrong with the old one?”

“The old one is dead... Well it’s going to be... Anyways, we’re going to need something with more juice to handle the amps at the London gig.” He tells her.

“London? When?”

“Next month... You coming?”

“Always.” She grins pulling him close.

“You’re the first to hear it outside the band.” Terry presses the play button.

“Really?” She said with surprise.

“Yeah.”

Terry waits for the tape to play. Demonic sounds screech through speakers before the song finally came to life. Wrapping itself around the two lovers. Lorraine pressed her body against him. Her body rocking against his in time with the melody.

“Gareth write this?” She asked curiously.

“Yeah... Amazing eh?”

There was no answer, just a kiss. Terry nudges her towards the workbench. His hands reaching for a breast.

“What about your parents?” She asked.

“They won’t be down...” He remarked taking the lead.

“Oh... Who’s being the bad boy?” Knelling before him.

Terry looks over to the stair well, knowing his mother would not appear and kill the moment. Fumbling for the volume knob to ward off parental demons. Lorraine fumbles with another if only ward off her own sexual demons.

“Oh ... Oh ... Oh.” Terry cries out.

Lorraine looks up at him. As though she had done it a thousand times before. The song filled the room and drifted up the stairwell. Belaying any intrusion. Bending her over the bench, she lifts her skirt to reveal a lace thong and ripe firm buttocks. Turning the volume up again hoping to stifle Lorraine’s moans. He holds her hips rocks rhythmically in time with the music. Breaths quicken. Fingers grope and fumble beneath a blouse. Arousing him to the point of no return. This time without regret.

“Shit!” Curses Lorraine.

“What the matter?” He asked anxiously.

“You should have used a condom.” She tells him.

“I thought you were on the pill?” He said.

“Must be one of your other girlfriends Terry.” Adjusting her panties and skirt as though nothing had just happened. Brushing away dust from the bench. Straightening her skirt and blouse. The song finished. And the lovers sit back panting.

“It’s good...” She told him on hearing the song, “...Does he have any more?”

“A couple... He just doesn’t know it yet.” Terry chuckles.

“What is it with you Terry? ... You’re different?” She notices.

“Nothing, just have to dig the songs out of him. He’s... *Shy*... If you know what I mean.”

“Play it again.” She asked.

“Okay but I have to get upstairs soon... Mother will come looking for us.”

“She’ll know where to find us...” Beginning to dance, pulling Terry towards her. Twirling him around. Smiling and giggling, intoxicated by the new sound, “... Brilliant Terry. Tell Gareth I said that okay.”

“Yeah I will... Spread the word.”

“Okay...” Lorraine checks her watch, “... Shit, I have to be at the salon, I’m covering for Marilyn tonight.”

“You are? ... You sure it’s not another salon?”

“Don’t be silly Terry, you know I only work for Marilyn... What is wrong with you tonight? I must fly, I’ll be late.”

Lorraine appears at the living room in time to see Terry’s mother setting the table.

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner Lorraine?” His mother offers again.

“I’m fine Misers Davies...Terry was right after all, I have eaten... Maybe next time.” Lorraine grins looking at Terry.

“Maybe next time then, you’re always welcome at our table Lorraine...” Terry’s mother responds, “...Say hello to your mother for me.”

“Will do Misers Davies... Bye... You too Mister Davies.”

Terry’s father looks up over his paper and raises heavy eye brows to acknowledge her departure. There was a spring in her step. Noticing Terry was like a guilty school boy. As though he had had his hand in a preverbal carnal candy jar. And grins proudly at his son.

“Got the money for you Terry.” His father said unwittingly.

“Thanks dad.”

“What money?” His mother asked suspiciously.

Chapter 21

“Won’t be long... Just popping into the Arms to catch up with Gareth.” Terry calls out closing the front door behind him. Leaving his mother speaking to his father about the *money*.

Standing at the gate he looks up and down the Denmark Terrace. The summer breeze from four weeks earlier blew over him and the sun from four weeks earlier hung on the horizon reluctant to move as if it were frozen in time.

“I know the feeling...” Consoles Terry.

Wondering if he should visit the saloon on route, only to discover Lorraine not there.

“Nah_ Why bother... She’ll be at the Arms later anyway.” He told himself.

Heading in the direction of the Arms, he crosses the road at a gap in the traffic. Striding out steps as though Lorraine had rekindled his spirit. Ahead sees the two story brick building flourishing with the mural of tall colorful trees. The van is parked in the corner and as though it was hiding from view. Its chassis gently squeaking on its suspension.

“Those bloody twins are at it again! ... I’ll teach them.” Warns Terry.

Without knocking first, Terry opens the rear doors to find Ness and Taylor slapping into the as end of some unknown *Judy*. Only her bare ass and red heels exposed.

“Terry!” Calls out Taylor surprised to see him.

Stopping their rocking motions, the girl almost chokes on hearing his name. Taylor’s hand covers the girl face from view. Ness clenches his pale white buttocks hoping to distract Terry’s attention.

“Won’t be long! ... You’re welcome to join us.” Taylor offers.

The girls groans her exposed annoyance. And begins to buck like a rodeo horse. If only the twins could stay on for eight seconds.

“You’re unbelievable... Both of you!” Exclaims Terry turning away from their debauched act.

“You sure you don’t want some?” Asked Taylor giggling to himself.

The girl moans louder, sounding her continual displeasure. Ness recommences his rocking action. Giving the girl’ as a spank with a hand.

Slap! Followed by a loud protesting groan.

“Come on Terry, don’t be shy.” Teases Ness.

Terry closes the door in disgust. And hears the twins giggling with glee. And

heads into the Arms. Pulling open the old grey doors. Locals look up to see who the new arrival.

“It’s only Terry.” A regular said and returns to the cross word puzzle in the paper.

“Nice to feel welcomed.” Said Terry looking about for Gareth.

Seeing him sitting at the bar talking to Sian who was giggling and smiling at him. Thoughts of him being gay could not have been further from his mind. A jukebox played in the back ground.

“Hey Gareth.” Pulling up a stool beside him.

“Terry... We’re just taking about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... The London gig.”

“That’s nothing, you should hear Gareth’s new song.” Responded Terry deflecting the gig.

“You got a new song?” Echoed Sian excitedly.

“Yeah seems Gareth here is a song writer... Maybe we’ll play here this weekend... What do you reckon Gareth?”

“Yeah, why not.”

“I can’t wait.” Sian eyes sparkles at the prospect.

“Tell your friends... Spread the word.”

“I will!” She responds, she sees a customer needing serving.

“Spread the word? ... You sound like a preacher Terry.”

“It’s called Networking Gareth... We’ve had a lot of hits on the website since I told everyone about the new song.”

“Really? ... But it’s only been a couple of days?”

“Word travels around here Gareth... You got any more up your sleeve you’re not telling us about?”

“Don’t know, you tell me... You’re the one having the weird dreams *future boy*.”

“I think you do ...We can use them when the record company comes knocking.”

“A record company?”

“Yeah... I think I know someone, who knows someone... If you know what I mean?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Trust me... We have to strike while the iron is hot.” Said Terry.

“Yeah I suppose.” Responds Gareth unsure what it all meant.

“Leave the promotional stuff to me and you get on with writing great songs okay? That’s why you pay me the big bucks.”

“But we don’t pay you... You pay yourself.” Gareth laughs.

“Speaking of which... Just bought a new console today... Cost a pretty penny.”

“We can’t afford that... What was wrong with the old one?”

“It would have blown at the Tavern... Trust me.”

“We could have tuned it.”

“We could have... But all it would take is two fools to tamper with their knobs... Don’t worry... It’s coming out of my pocket. That plus a loan from dad.”

“Thanks Terry... Now all we need is a decent van.” Gareth laughs.

“Which reminds me... I think the radiator is going to need fixing.

“Nothing wrong with it Terry... Is there?”

“Not yet there isn’t.” Terry begins to talk in riddles again leaving Gareth more confused than ever.

“You think it will make it to London?” Asked Gareth.

“It will make... Just make sure you turn the lights off when you get there if you want to get back.”

“You’re funny Terry.” Gareth laughs.

“And the twins don’t break the suspension... They’ve been at it again in the car park.”

“No way?”

“Yes way... Some poor *Judy* got tagged... Imagine that.” Advises Terry.

“I’d rather not thanks...” Reluctant to take a sip of beer., “... Where’s Lorraine?”

“She’ll be down later.” Said Terry knowingly, “... Apparently she’s working at a friend’s salon.”

“Is that Mary McKinnon talking to the twins?” Asked Terry, “... She’s laid more pipe than BP!”

“And she’s about to lay two more.” Said Gareth sipping gently on a Guinness, leaving a white frothy mustache on his upper lip. Watching her lead the twins from the bar without much convincing.

“Where’s Sal... Thought he might be down tonight.” Asked Terry looking about the bar for him.

“He’s out somewhere getting his leg over some girl last I heard.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Said Terry, the evening coming back to him.

“Hey, there’s Leigh... Who’s the girl?” Asked Gareth watching on unsure what to make of the odd couple.

“Oh shit, I forgot about them... That’s Jane.” Informs Terry.

“Crazy Jane?”

“Yeap! One and the same...I’d look away if I were you.” Advises Terry turning about.

Gareth watches the strange mating ritual. Once had been enough. And he tried not to think about what was happening behind him. Bar staff groaned in disgust.

“Get room you two.” Gareth mutters beneath his breath.

Kneeling down, she begins to crawl between Leigh’s legs.

“Are they gone yet?” Asked Terry quietly.

“Weren’t you watching?”

“I’d rather not man... Somethings a grown man shouldn’t see before he dies... That was one of them.”

“Isn’t he going out with Laura?”

“Not for much longer it seems.”

“You wouldn’t read about it would you? ...” Said Gareth, “...Seems you and me are the only two not getting any.” Swirling the dregs of Guinness at the bottom of his glass.

“Yeah.” Terry lied.

“Another? Asked Gareth.

“Yeah, why not, Lorraine should be here any moment... Thursday practice right? Polish the song off... Let’s get it down before London.”

“You seem to know it better than I do.” Said Gareth.

“Maybe I do.” Terry raises his glass.

Just then Lorraine enters the bar brushing grass from her skirt.

Silhouetted in the doorway. Dressed in a cotton top, a short shirt and red heels. Terry recognizes them from the van. Julie steps forward to kiss him and he offers a cheek. Taking her by surprise.

“Oh we’re doing French now are we? *Kinky*.” Said Lorraine.

“Hey you!” Said Terry surprised.

“Hey what are you doing here?” She asked knowingly.

“Wanted to catch up with Gareth... More like, what are you doing here? I thought you were working?” He asked suspiciously.

“Just finished... Thought I’d stop in for a quick one.”

“Marilyn said you weren’t working this evening.” He lied.

“Oh yeah_,” Desperately trying to think of a convenient alibi, “Friend of mine... Samantha at the other salon? Just finished... I’m knackered.”

“Not Sally?” Questioned Terry, piecing together her infidelity.

“Who’s Sally?” She asked confused by the unfamiliar name.

“No one... One of my other girlfriends I suppose.”

“Okay playboy... You can buy me a drink before you leave.” Pulling him close and pressing her superheated body against his.

“You missed a great show... Leigh had some floosy all over him... I couldn’t watch. Gareth will have to give you the gross details.” Remarked Terry.

“Leigh? The chef?” She asked.

“Yeah... They were at it like rabbits...” Advised Gareth. “...I thought Phil was going to ask them to take it outside at one stage.”

“Uh_ Yuck! How gross!” Lorraine looks about the bar as though they were still there. “... Where are they now?”

“Outside I think.” Said Gareth sipping on a fresh Guinness. He chews a bit, then swallows. Leaving a frothy white moustache on his upper lip.

Outside, as the day was surrendering to night.

A parked car rocked with Leigh’s sporadic thrusting. Naked legs protruded from the far side. Trousers wrapped around ankles. Groans and grunts and moans and squeaks sounded from inside the metallic bed posts. Two sweaty lovers collapsed with sexual exhaustion. Jane pushes the suffocating mass away. Her irritable itch scratched. His primal urge relieved. They had become *strangers*. Again.

Chapter 22

“How come he gets new equipment and we don’t?” Complains Ness lugging heavy amps in both arms down basement stairs.

“Because I paid for it out of my own pocket... *For the band.*” Terry corrects him.

“It’s not fair.” Ness continues to complain.

“Someone slap him will they?” Calls out Gareth appearing on the basement stairs.

Sal reaches over the drum set and pokes his sticks towards Ness. Causing him to have him back away.

“Besides, we’re going to need it for the London gig... Got back the specs on their gear and the old console would have fried... You wouldn’t want that would you? ... Would you?”

“No_.” Whimpered Ness going quiet.

“There’s going to be a big shot record producer there... I want to sound our best okay.”

“Who?”

“Just someone, so don’t fuck up like last time.”

“Last time? What’s he going on about?” Asked Ness looking to Gareth for the answer.

“*Tequila.*” Gareth provides the code word.

“Ohh_” Ness and Taylor respond knowingly.

“She’s a real bitch man... I’d stay off that sauce if I were you... She’ll fry your brains.” Warned Gareth. Not that the twins would ever listen to the advice.

“Righto, give me a sound check... It won’t sound much better than before as we’re still using the old speakers.” Terry pushes and pulls on jacks and plugs and fires up the new board.

LED lights jump to attention.

“Woah! Easy baby... Easy...” Terry coaxed the new board to behave, “... *So beautiful.*”

The band look at him as if he was being unfaithful to Lorraine in front of them.

“If you want to be alone, we can always leave....” Suggested Gareth seeing Terry getting becoming intimate with the console.

“Later... Righto Ness... You first.” Calls out Terry.

Fingering the bass, working through a scale before cutting to a cover song. Feeling the groove, slipped into a mojo. Wrapping the sequence up suddenly.

“How was that?” Ness called back.

“Beau_tiful... Oh man should have had one of these years again.”

“Get a room Terry.” Jokes Gareth.

“I wish I could... I’m sleeping with this baby tonight.” Proclaims Terry.

“Can’t be much worse than Mary McKinnon.”

“What’s wrong with Mary McKinnon?” Ness asked looking as though she was a vessel virgin.

“Someone slap him!” Calls out Sal restless at the back.

“Okay Taylor... Show us what you have.” Calls out Terry, cupping cans against ears.

Fingers petted keys, his timing intuitive. As though the keys were an extension of his body. Terry gives him the thumbs up.

“Okay Gareth you’re up... Sal follow in over the top and you two come in at the bridge.”

Without thinking *Tears* stumbles from his mind through fingers, through amps, through the console and sounded live through speakers. Filling the basement with a collaboration of sound. Sal taped in with orange drum sticks, feeling for the beat. Ness layered in with an improv as Taylor filled the void with elongated chords.

The console responded without breaking a sweat. Needles hula danced back and forth.

“Again!” Terry calls out.

“Again? ...” Moans Taylor, “... We’ve already played it five times.”

“You got someplace else you have to be?” Terry asks eyeing him into submission.

“Maybe...”

“You want to make a record or not?”

Ness hesitated before hearing Sal cough and looking at him sternly.

“I suppose... Then can we take a break?”

“Okay... One more time and we break... Then back to it. I want it pitch perfect for the Agent.”

“Don’t take it too seriously Terry... We’re only here to have fun remember.” Advises Gareth.

The men stare at each other. Reading the other’s mind. Each knowing the

other would not step down.

“Sorry guys... Guess I’m a little excited about London.” Terry stepped down.

“Okay you lot, follow my lead and Taylor try to keep up... Sal... More kick drum, I want to feel it coming through the floor boards... ‘Kay?”

“You got it!” Sal twirls the drum sticks and nods the instructions.

“From the top, two-three-four!” Gareth leads in with the intro bars of the song.

With each repetition the song became more instinctive. More, automatic. Knowing its mood and temperament. As though Gareth had written for a lover. It’s meaning becoming clearer in Terry’s mind.

“Fantastic! ...” Calls out Terry, “... You’ve done it. Wrap it up and I’ll go make a cuppa tea and sandwiches.

“Got any cucumber?” Asked Taylor.

“I’ll see what Ma has in the pantry.” Terry heads up the basement stairs.

The kettle whistles.

And Terry whistles along with it. Slicing dicing, buttering and making white bread cucumber sandwiches.

“You’re in a good mood... Maybe you should stay off the snake bites.” Said Gareth appearing in the kitchen.

“Yeah... I can feel it in my bones Gareth. We can’t foul up this time. We’re going to the top.”

“There was never a first time Terry...You still on that whole premonition dream trip?”

“Yeah... Suppose I am.” Conceded Terry.

“You couldn’t dream about Lotto numbers... Or getting laid?”

“Never... As for getting laid I’m off Lorraine for life.”

“You know about that do you?”

“You knew?”

“Everyone knew Terry... We were just trying to protect you.”

“Oh Christ man... Who hasn’t she slept with?” Terry looks at Gareth.

“Everyone but me.” Responds Gareth.

“I reckon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I *know*.”

“Know what?”

Terry did not have to say anything. The suggestive look in his eyes gave the

truth away.

“How’d you know? ... No one knows... Not the bloody dream?”

“Hm-m.”

“Jesus... Must have been one heck of a dream man, that’s all I can say... And you say we stuffed up in London?”

“A complete cluster fuck Gareth... Don’t worry man, mom’s the word... I love you too much man.” Terry steps forward and wraps his arms around Gareth. Taking him by surprise. Gareth responds with his own heart felt hug.

“Oh get a room you two.” The twins cry out appearing in the kitchen.

“You’d be so lucky...” Said Terry laughing, “... Tuck in guys, you deserve it.” Pouring out four steaming mugs of tea.

“Woah! ... Look at the time...” Exclaims Gareth looking to kitchen clock, “... Got to get home.”

“What’s the hurry? ... Not like you’re working today.”

“Some of us have a life Terry.” He grins.

“Yeah I suppose... We set for Saturday?”

“Yeah.” Tired voices sing back in four part harmony.

“Okay, see you then... Let’s knock them over guys!”

“Yeah, whatever... We’re outta here.” Said the twins eager to leave and escape another set.

“Think I’ll walk.” Said Sal sliding the orange pointed daggers into a satchel.

Gareth waits for the other’s to leave. And hears the front door close behind them.

“So... How do we do this Saturday? With *Tears*?”

“They love it Gareth... The song goes *viral* man... It gets us noticed by a record producer.”

“You’re kidding me? ... I thought you said you already had one?”

“Yeah_ well I will... After Saturday.”

“And we really do stuff up at the Shakespeare?”

“Oh yeah... But that can’t happen *this time* ‘round.”

“You’re putting a lot of faith in a dream Terry... It might just turn out to me a nightmare if you’re not careful.”

“Not going to happen. Got it covered... The new console is amazing.”

“Hey man, I’m glad you *know* man... It’s a load off my mind.” Dwelling on the sequestered secret.

“Your secret is safe with man.”

“Love you man.”

“Love you too man. I’m here is you want talk... You know that?”

“Yeah, thanks man... I’m good.”

“Okay I’m outta here.” Embracing him and patting his back, “... Catch you Saturday.”

“Keep the songs coming, you have two more before the Shakespeare.”

“Woah! No pressure man.”

“Don’t worry, I know them by heart if you get stuck... I’ll write them down and give them to you Saturday... You just have to add the chords and riffs.”

“If you say so... But I’ll believe when I see it... Okay, I’m outta here.”

Terry watches him leave and hears the sound of the latch catching on the door.

Pulling out his wallet checks for Archie’s card sitting snug in a sleeve. This much was true. Sitting back enjoyed the last of the cucumber sandwiches and poured himself another cup of tea. Thoughts drift to Julie. Imaging her standing beneath the Waterloo Station central clock. Waiting for him. But there was nothing he could say that would convince her otherwise. Ironically jilted by one woman, only to discover his girlfriend was the village slut.

The kettle whistled as though to suggest he should wake up from the day dream.

“Piss off!” Warned Terry without looking back to it.

4:20PM and Gareth collapses on his bed having lit up a loosely rolled joint.

A haze of smoke lingered in the air. Plucking at a guitar, piecing together a song formulating in his mind. Indifferent to writing it down. Mellowing in the moment. Trails of time flowed around him creating disturbed eddies in their wake. Time had been disturbed. Like broken sleep it fidgeted from one side to side. Incapable of deciding whether it should be a tick or a tock.

Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz...

Feeling his mobile vibrate, he tries to ignore it. The ring tune suggested it was a message. Curiosity, the message gets the better of him. And he reaches for it from the side table. Flicking the tired mobile open to find a notification from someone he did not know.

“Hmm_...” Grinning to himself eyeing an image of the messenger, “...Cute.” He reads it carefully, picking out the subtle suggestive insinuations.

Without much thought messages back with his own cryptic shorthand.

(Send).

And waits. It might amount to nothing. It generally did. Naughty thoughts fill

his mind. Taking a hit on the doobie, holding it in hoping to relieve the aroused anxiety. The reply came longer than he would have liked. As though to tease him. It had read his mind, and he grinned at the playful words.

'Call me.' The simple message read.

Gareth contemplates the solicitation. Should he?

It would not be the first time. Taking another hit, exhales purposely. Filling the air with smoke about him. Re-inhaling the second hand smoke through flared nostrils. Excited by flirtatious thoughts, coursing through his imagination. Dampening his inhibitions, rousing his desires.

'Why not.' Cyber space afforded some anonymity.

The messenger made him curious. And he dials the number and listens to it ring. It rang and rang and rang. Was it a prank? And he begins to rethink his judgement. Then suddenly it answered catching him by surprise.

"Hey..." Gareth replies, "... Thanks, saw yours too, cute... Can I say that? ..." Gareth lays back on the bed and listens to the voice and matches it to the image of the man burnt in his mind, "... Ha ha ha... What do I do? ... Not much, you know, muso, play gigs, mostly bars... You? ... Oh_ really, a muso too..." Grinning that they had something in common, "...Where are you? ... London? Muswell Hills... Yeah I know, tell me about it... Yeah-nah... You're welcome to stop by and hear us play this Saturday... You would? Really? ... Clissold Arms, *The Ravens*... Yeah... Tweed jacket... I'll find you... Yeah... Bye." The phone goes dead.

Gareth fantasizes about man with the seductive voice, perhaps older. Mature. Names were not important at this stage, it was as if by not knowing, added to the titillation. Laying back on the bed plucks at the strings of the acoustic. His heart beating a million beats a minute, the tempo was feverous.

Words spilled like wine over the page. Impatient to get it down before it drifted back from whence it had originated. It had been giveth by song writing Gods. And so it could be taketh.

"He loves me, he loves me lots... Nothing can take him away from me..." He sings softly to the softly strummed strings. Flirting with lyrics and rhyme. Scribbling almost illegible words onto a napkin. A guilt comes over came him and corrects a lyric to hide his forbidden love.

"She loves me, she loves me lots... Nothing can take her away from me...." Satisfied the truth had been buried beneath a lie.

Completed, he lays back as the late afternoon sun shines through the attic

window, blanketing him in a warm radiance.

Trying to make sense of Terry's dream, unsure what to make of it. And his awareness of the future. Hoping Terry was right. But in his heart, it was just a silly dream. He had gotten lucky. Overly passionate for the band's success, his imagination had obviously gotten the better of him. No one knows the future. Otherwise you would buy a lotto ticket and put your feet up.

"Ha! ..." Laughing off the ridiculous premonitions, "... You nearly had me going there Terry, ha!"

Picking up the guitar again, and begins to play the new creation.

"She loves me, she loves me lots... Nothing can take her away from me..."

Chapter 23

Old wooden window frames rattled to the pulsating beat.

Word had spread far and wide among the faithful, of the band's new song. Rebels called out for it to be played. But the band played on ignoring their request. Terry relished the new console. Dials flickering like lashes of a Yorkshire tart. Looking up now and again ever hopeful Archie would appear at any moment. But knowing it would be another week before he would.

"Patience man, patience." Telling himself to chill.

Someone had caught Gareth's attention at the bar. A dandy of a man. Sharply dressed, a smart tweed jacket. Looking distinctly out of place the locals about him. Grinning back at Gareth. Subtly nodding his head in time with the music.

The night was drawing to a close, and Loraine nowhere to be seen. Thankfully.

Terry checks his watch and twirls a finger in the air to wind it up with the finale. The mush pit falls limp. Exhausted from relentless gyrations.

"Tears like Rain!" Someone calls out from the back of the crowd.

Gareth raises a hand to quell their excitement. Turning to instruct the others to follow in after him, as they had practiced. And nods to the man at the bar as though he were dedicating it to him.

"Two-three-four!" Gareth calls out, taking the ravens by surprise. Intrigued by the new sound pounding through the speakers. Terry watches needles dance back and forth and LEDs bounce up and down like yo-yos.

Gareth's acquaintance at the bar nodding his head and grinning. In the middle of the performance takes out a mobile as though he were taking a call.

'Hey what are you doing man?' Gareth projected the question towards the man.

The man smiles and waves back gesturing a thumbs up back at him.

'What the fuck? ...' Gareth desperately trying to focus on the song, *'...Fuck you man!'* Then turned his back on him.

Ripping into the lead guitar riff more aggressively. Only to excite the ravens more. Mobiles light up and sway in the dark.

"Yes." Said Terry, just as he had remembered it.

The song comes to an end and Terry floods the stage with darkness then sudden brilliant light. Whooping cheers cry out, punctuated with loud whistling. The man at the bar chaps and acknowledges his liking. Gareth now having

forgiven him for his wayward indiscretion.

“More! ... Again! ... Encore!” Voices call out wanting more.

Gareth raises his hand to quieten the faithful and looks over to Terry if he was ready.

“One more time.” Calls out Terry giving the thumbs up, he dims the lighting again. Twirling a finger in the air to begin.

The band performs an extended version. Rewarding the faithful for their loyalty. Sweating and panting, Gareth winds the song down and Sal closes with a crashing drum roll. Lights flood the room again and party revelers continue to cry out wanting more. Only to be silenced by Gareth raising his hand.

“That’s all for now *Ravens*. Be seeing you all again next week... You take care out there. Love you!” Gareth cries out looking over the crowd towards to bar to the man at the bar sipping on a blue colored cocktail.

“That was fantastic guys! ...Pack up here and get yourself a beer.” Informed Terry.

But the twins had other ideas.

“Hey! You two... Pack up your gear.” Terry warns them.

“Later.” Calls back Ness eager not to lose sight of a red head he had that was giving him flirtatious looks.

“Later.” Echoes Taylor following his brother.

“Unbelievable, how their cocks haven’t fallen off amazes me.” Said Terry.

“How was that man?” Asked Gareth now appearing at the console.

“Brilliant man... The board barely flickered and the song was better than at practice... You had energy in it man.”

“Yeah, sorry about that... I’m just going to see someone... I’ll be back shortly.”

“No rush Gareth, I’ll grab your stuff.” Offers Terry.

“Thanks man.”

Sal followed the twins to the bar, leaving Terry by himself. It was going just as before. Minus Julie. Minus the old burnt out console.

‘Touch wood.’ The song would go viral that evening and hopefully catch Archie’s attention.

Looking over to see Gareth approaching the dandy bar at the bar. Began chatting and sip through straws on blue cocktails.

“Hey.” Begins Gareth stepping forward grinning, stroking his trimmed beard.

“Hey... That was amazing... You write that?” The man asked.

“Yeah... Just something I’ve been working on.” Dismissing the song.

“I wish I’d known earlier you were that good... I would have brought my partner.” The man blurts out without thinking.

“Partner? I thought...” Catching Gareth by surprise.

“Ha-ha-ha.” The man laughs.

“What so funny?” Asked Gareth becoming angry at being mistaken for a fool.

“No-no-no... Not like that... My *business* partner... Archie, he would have really enjoyed it.”

“Sorry ... I just thought...” Apologized Gareth, almost blushing.

“Perfectly understandable... I called him to tell him about you guys.”

“That was him on the phone?” Pulling a shameful look.

“Who did you think it was? ... Oh_” The penny dropped, “... Here, have my card.” Handing him a fancy looking business card.

Gareth examines the embossed lettering of the gilded card and reads it to himself.

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“Seth?” Asked Gareth putting the name to the face.

“That’s right... Good to meet you? ...” Extending his hand.

“Ah... Gareth.” Returning the handshake feeling a gentleness in the other’s grip. The hold lingered longer than it should have. Neither wishing to let go.

“Perhaps we could find some place more private to talk...” Asked Seth suggestively, “... My hotel perhaps... I’d like to hear more about the band... About *you*.” Baiting him.

“Sure... Give me twenty minutes... Just let me get packed up here first.”

“No rush... We have *all evening*.”

“Hm...” Grinning at the flirtatious comment, “... Don’t go away.”

“You know where to find me.” Seth sips on the strong cocktail, letting the venom course through his veins to take effect. His mind fantasizing their liaison. He rarely sleep with someone on the first date. But there was always exceptions to the rule. Especially when the man is a gifted musician.

“Hey man... I’m going to pack up here and *head out*... If you know what I mean.” Advised Gareth.

“No worries man... catch up tomorrow.” Responded Terry.

“Got another song in the wings.” Gareth confessed.

“Told you so... You can play it tomorrow at practice.” Terry informs him.

“See you man.”

“Have fun... Don’t anything I wouldn’t do.” Advised Terry cheekily.

“Yeah right, like that’s going to happen, ha.”

“Get out of here!”

Terry watches him leave just as Lorraine enters the bar. Wearing red heels. And he can only imagine where she had been, or who she had been with.

“Hey Terry!” Waving to get his attention.

“Lorraine... What are you doing here?” He asked faking a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you’d be out with your girlfriends in London clubbing.”

“And leave you all alone with all these single women?” She told him.

“You missed a great show... Gareth played *Tears*... They loved it.”

“Saw it online.”

“Already? ...” Looking to his watch as though it were not possible, “...Wow that was quick.”

“You going to buy me a drink?” She asked.

“You didn’t say the magic word.”

“*Abracadabra!*” Her eyes light up.

“Close enough... *Please* would have worked.”

“What’s wrong with you Terry? You’ve been acting strangely lately.”

“Well if you must know... I’m seeing another woman.” He lied.

“Who?” Asked Julie jealously.

“Julie.”

“Who’s Julie?”

“The girl of my dreams...” He gazes into space before him, visualizing her red beret, and a tongue licking carrot cake icing about succulent lips. He could almost taste them. His tongue dances with hers, “... She pepper sprayed me... Do you believe that?” Screwing up his face with pain.

Lorraine watches him and realizes he must be joking.

“You’re_ funny Terry! ...” Pulling on his arm and him from his fantasy girl, “... I would never pepper spray you stud.”

“Usual for Lorraine thanks Sian.” She was going to be more difficult to shake than he thought.

Perhaps he should just accept they should have an open relationship. Not too

unlike his socks.

There is nothing more debilitating than not suffering a hangover on a weekend morning.

It was unnatural. It was horrible. It was wrong. He felt... Disoriented. He felt... *Sober*.

The thought mortified Terry as he stood and scratched his crutch. Stretching buckling arms as though a he was trying to tear an open an invisible paper bag that had him trapped. Feeling out of his comfort zone, takes himself to the shower. No weird dreams. Just minnows that sporadically came and feed and left without reason.

“No one should be out of bed before eight on a Sunday.” Berating himself for not having the tequila shots.

“Oh you’re up early love... You coming to church with us today?” His mother enters his room at an awkward moment he was getting dressed.

“Oh_ Ma... I’m getting dressed!” He protests the intrusion of privacy and his semi nakedness.

“I’ve seen it *all* before Terry... Now hurry up, you’re going to be late if you’re coming.” She informs him.

“I think I stay here and work on the web site before the band gets here.”

“It won’t hurt if you came to church and make your peace with the Lord.”

“You know Church’s scare the *hell* out of me.” Wishing he had not said it. Words that invoked memories of Purgatory, snakes and card players. Of a Devil serving him shots as though they were water. Seducing him to enter into a wishful covenant.

“As you please... Where’s your laundry... Can’t you put it in the basket?” Picking his underwear off the floor.

“Ma... You’re going to be late... Say a prayer for me...” Ushering his mother from the room holding a towel around his waist, “... Finally.”

Dropping the towel examines himself proudly in a full length mirror. Flexing pec muscles and tightening abs hoping to see at least one or two appear. But conceded a keg was better than a six pack. Without rhyme or reason thoughts of Julie aroused him. And he turns sideways to admire the growing affection. Just then his mother re-enters the room.

“Oh!” She gasps not looking away.

“Mother! ...” Terry exclaims turning away quickly gathering anything that would conceal would was too late to conceal, “...Knock first... Some privacy!”

“I’ve seen it *all* before Terry... Nothing to be ashamed of you know.”

“Mother! ... You mind?!” Terry protests facing the wall mirror.

“Why don’t you marry Lorraine and have kids... You’re obviously... Capable.”

“Mother! Please!... Lorraine and I have broken up... I think... Now if you mind, I’d like to get dressed... In private.”

Terry closes the door behind her, wishing it had a lock. And leaned back on the door. Listening carefully for the sound of his parents leaving. The front door closes and then the front gate. Alone at last.

“Finally.” Sighing his relief.

Throwing on random clothing, collapses into the chair before a laptop covered with large colorful stickers. Levering open the screen. Presses the power button and waits for it to come to life.

‘What the hell he was doing up at this ungodly hour of the morning?’ He questioned himself.

“Never again...” He promises faithfully, “... It’s not natural.” Squinting at the screen, seeing it flash and spit icons at him.

‘Click-click.’ The mouse squeaks and scurries to the band’s profile page.

“Fuck me!” Looking to the door hoping his mother wouldn’t appear. Looks again at the numbers. This was ten-fold more than last time. “... Not possible? ...” What had changed? Nothing, or so he thought, “...If that didn’t catch Archie’s attention, nothing would.”

Looking again to re-confirm the number of likes. Ticking over faster than a second hand on a clock.

“No way!” Something was wrong.

This was the opposite of a train-wreck. This was locomotive barreling down the tracks gaining speed. Messages overflowed the inbox. There was no way he could answer them all.

“Shit! What have I done? ...” Closing the laptop in denial. Ponders the significance and the events that would follow, “... No-no-no-no-no-no-no.” Wishing now he had had the shots.

Looking out the window in search of an answer.

The street was silent. Only the sound that of an occasional vehicle passing. Probably on their way to church. Sanctuary from the alternate reality around him. Accepting there was little he could do about it.

What’s the worse that would happen? The band would crash, bring him back

to the present. The best, that the band was successful. But what did that actually mean? Had he really thought about? Success? Fame? Fortune? Such words may as well have been in mandarin.

“Bu Hao...” He mutters to himself, “... Not good... Not good at all.”

Chapter 24

The kettle shrieks at Terry, getting his attention.

Killing the gas, relieves the kettle of its misery. A teapot, contaminated by blackened clippings, stands ready to take on the cargo of boiled water. Steam bellows from the opening of the teapot before being shut in by a tight fitting lid. Turning the pot three times to the left, then three times to the right, as though he were a Sharman performing some ancient pagan ritual. He waits as the mystical potion settles. Then pours himself a cup of English tea.

“Ahh_ that’s good.” Savoring the scared remedy. Thoughts of his mother, viral *Likes*, and Julie dissipate to the universal ether.

His mind blank, for a moment, he was lost in time. For a brief moment he had found bliss. Slowly as the effects wore off, the vacuum sucking in a chaos of bewildering chatter. Taking another swallow. The effects less so than the first. Bites of a piece of buttered toast. Crisp and crunchy. Burnt. Crumbs falling over the front of his shirt. Brushing these away to the floor.

Hearing a knock at the front door, followed by familiar voices. It was time.

“Everyone ready? ... Sound check... Ness you first.” Terry fine tunes the sound board checking plugs and jacks were secure. LEDs bounce up and down. Working his way through the band, saves the best to last.

“Okay Gareth... Let’s hear the new song.”

“New song... Not another?” Complains Taylor.

“Someone slap him.” Asked Sal stuck in the corner unable to reach. Stabbing a drum stick at him.

“What did I do?” Flinching away from Sal’s gabs.

“We’re going to need new songs if you we want to impress the record producer.” Advises Terry.

“Suppose.” Groans Taylor.

“Okay bad boy... Let’s see what you have... Give it to me... *Show me the Way.*”

A confused look comes over Gareth’s face.

“What are you talking about?” Asked Gareth curiously.

“The new song *Show me the Way.*”

“Never heard of it... You hum it, I’ll sing it.” He jokes.

“You okay Terry? You back on the sauce again?” Asked Ness.

“Yeah... Nah... Okay... What have you got then?” Taken back by the change of events. Suddenly he could not see past the now. The future had ceased to exist. He was no longer in control of the horizontal.

“*Loves Me Lot.*” Admits Gareth fingering the strings familiarizing himself with his love child.

“What happened to *Loves Me Nots*?” Terry asked more confused than before.

“Terry... You work the board, leave the song writing to me... You seriously need to get laid man.” Suggest Gareth puzzled as to what had come over him.

The twins chuckle at the thought.

“As for you two, stop sticking your cocks into other band member’s girlfriends!”

With their sordid escapades exposed, suddenly it was not funny anymore.

“He *knows* okay.” Gareth announces.

“*Sorry* Terry.” The pair apologizes as though saying sorry made it alright.

Terry is stunned by the sudden promulgation and stares defiantly back at the others. Betrayed. They had all known and said nothing. To protect him? To hurt him? Growing dark thoughts broken by Gareth’s voice beckoning his attention through the headset.

“Unbelievable...” Gareth shakes his head, “... Okay... Follow my lead, rhythm and blue... Try to keep up.”

Strangely the song was similar in all aspects to *Loves Me Not*. Just the words had changed. Sensing an emotional mood change in the lyrics. From doubtful regret, to lustful hope. Something in Gareth had spurred him to life. The man with the pink carnation perhaps. Terry grins at the thought.

“Amazing Gareth... That’s a keeper... We need just one more before London.”

“Thanks man... I’ve got others... Can’t scribble them down fast enough... I’ve found this energy man.” Gareth found it difficult to describe.

“That’s good. Keep them coming we’re going to need them... Okay, we have the covers down pat... Time is precious, work on the new songs for now... Okay Gareth take it away.”

“Man that was amazing...” Terry informs the others packing away instruments, “... I’ll put the kettle on.”

“Sandwiches?” Asked Ness looking to Taylor then to Terry.

“I’ll see what Ma has in the panty... Doesn’t *your* mother ever feed you?” He asked rhetorically. Only to be greeted with childish giggling laughter.

“Great job Sal!” Calls out Terry to him not going unnoticed.

“Thanks man.”

“You staying for a cuppa?” Terry asks Sal looking to leave.

“Nah_ think I’ll chill. Go for walk, clear the head... If you know what I mean.” Patting a pocket as though it contained something illicit he could not show.

“Yeah sure man, whatever gets you in the zone.”

“Seeing ya’ Thursday guys.” Said Sal leaving.

“You too bro.” Calls out Gareth.

The twins demolish half a loaf of bread and were now scoured the pantry for more.

“Ou! Outta there you two... Go find Mary MacKinnon or someone.”

The thought appealed to them and they looked each other as though it was their own. There was only one thing they loved more than eating, and sleeping, and that was Mary MacKinnon.

“Gotta go!” Calls out Taylor, soon followed by his older sibling. Ness was always one to get to the vagina ahead of his brother.

“What’s wrong with those two?” Asked Terry watching the impish pair leaving.

“Nothing that neutering wouldn’t solve.” Suggests Gareth watching them leave. Hearing the front door closes behind them.

“So_ ... How’d you get on last night with your mystery man? He looked a right dapper.” Asked Terry hoping for some gossip that did not involve him.

“You noticed?”

“Pretty hard to miss man...” Then thinks how he missed Lorraine’s promiscuity,”... But not when it comes to women it seems... Maybe I’m gay?” He contemplates the awkward possibility.

“Probably, but let’s just stay inside the closet until we know for sure okay.” Suggests Gareth.

“You changed the lyrics to *Love Me Not*?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about man.”

“The song was almost identical to before except...”

“Except what?”

“I swear it was *Love Me Not*. It was as though you had broken up with someone. .. *He loves me not...*” Terry catches himself slip not going undetected by Gareth.

“That’s the funny thing about songwriting man, it’s a mood thing... I can’t explain it.”

“*Tears* went viral over night with more *Likes* than the last time.”

“You’re still convinced about that *dream* aren’t you?”

“Gareth it was no dream... It was *real* as I’m sitting here, I’m telling you.”

“Maybe it was... You say there is going to be an agent at the London gig right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well_ I have a card.” Taking it from his wallet and pushing it across the table towards Terry.

‘*Can’t be...*’ Examining a familiar looking card, “... How’d you...?”

Wrestling with the conundrum compounding in his mind. Should he jeopardize exposing Archie and risk everything?

“*Seth* was the man at the bar... Told him we’d be playing Shakespeare in a couple of weeks... We’re still on aren’t we?”

“Yeah think so... Heard nothing to the contrary.”

“Good... He said he’d be there...” Informed Gareth proud as punch. Just then as if by chance, or coincidence, his mobile rings. Vibrating deep inside a pocket. Fidgeting and fumbling at it to get to it in time. “... It’s *him...*” Gareth mouths to Terry about to answer it, “... Hey_!”

Terry tries not to listen in. Piecing together parts of the conversation that relayed the band’s performance. Dismantling those that relayed Gareth’s.

“I’ll just be over here...” Terry Excuses himself to collect dishes and ease himself from overhearing a conversation that was becoming more personal by the moment, “... Get a room.”

“See you soon... Bye.” Gareth hangs up, “... Right I best be off... See you Thursday then Terry.

“Yeah right-o... I have afternoon shift at Mario’s... Got to pay for the new console.”

“It’s a ripper Terry... Hope it can handle the Shakespeare.”

“She’s handle it okay... You make sure you have the songs ready... Here...” Pulling a folded piece of paper from a pocket.

“What’s this?” Gareth asked unfolding it.

“The lyrics to *Show me the Way.*”

“Mate, you’re kidding me? I wrote this?”

“Technically I did... Theoretically... Yeah_ you wrote it.”

“Crazy man.” Remarks Gareth trying to fathom the song.

“I think I have most of the chord changes... Anyways... See what you can make of it.” Terry remarks.

“Thanks man... Gotta go... Seth is picking me up in an hour.”

“Get outta here stud.” Watching him leave.

He just needed to get back to the Tavern.

Play the gig. After that would be uncharted waters. Free of the Devil and the card players. Visions of the dimly lit bar came to mind. He could almost smell of smoke in the air.

“Terry! ...” His mother calls out from nowhere, pulling him from the day dream, “... The toast!”

“Ah! Sorry ma...” Skillfully flicking the latch with one hand to ejaculate the charred soul into the air to be caught with the other, “... Owe! Oh! Oh! Hot! Hot!” Blowing on his fingers.

Chapter 25

Monday morning and Archie scrolls through on line music reviews.

Bored with reading about wannabe bands peddling what only amounted as plagiarized noise. Feedback would sound better. Taking a drag on a cigarette and sipping a lukewarm latte now having lost its kick. Leans back in an expensive leather chair. Framed gold and platinum discs line the walls like eyes staring back at him.

'What was the name of the band Seth had called him about the other evening...?' Struggling to remember, reciting what he thought he heard, *'The Birds?... The Sparrows, The Robins, The Eagles... Nah_... The Crowes... Like Crowes... The Ravens... Gotcha!'* He grins pleased with himself.

Doing a search, stumbles on a crude but simple profile page of a small hick town band.

'Written by an amateur.' Thought Archie, just the way he liked his prey. Naïve.

Just what exactly had Seth gotten himself involved with?

"Hmm... Let's have a look shall we..." Talking to himself, noting the likes ticking over faster than a Geiger-counter, "... Well bugger me!"

"We've had this conversation Archie..." Melissa warns him entering the office, "... Never going to happen."

"Never is such a long to wait." Responds Archie teasing her.

"You see Seth yet? Got some contracts for him to look over." Dismissing Archie's desires.

"Shouldn't be too long. Drop them on his desk." Archie stares at the screen disinterested in her.

"What you looking at? ..." Peering over his shoulder... Not surfing porn again are you? You know last time you did, you brought down the server with that virus you downloaded."

"Not while I have you Ms Helliwell... Heard of *The Ravens*?"

"No... Should I have?"

"Not yet... Not yet." Scribbling down the phone number of the Clissold Arms.

Leaning over Archie's desk and he cops an eyeful of her deep heaving cleavage.

"Do you mind?!" Catching his perverted glare.

“Too late.” Joked Archie.

“Bastard!”

“You’re welcome.”

“Never going to happen! Tell Seth to look over the contract... I’ve reduced the fine print to a smaller font.”

“Nice_!” Remarked Archie suggestively.

“Never going to happen Archie!”

“Not you! The font... You’re a wizard.”

“I think you mean Witch.”

“Yeah, you’re right there!”

“Bastard!”

“You’re welcome.” Following her tight ass and long legs walking out of the office.

Momentarily distracted, eyes shift back to the screen to the *likes* ticking over.

There was something that attracted Archie to the band. More so than what attracted Seth to the lead singer. Sometimes thinking with Seth’s dick was bad for business as had been the case on multiple occasions involving Seth’s. It would not hurt to get a second opinion of the ailment that had inflicted his partner’s professional judgement.

And he dials the Clissold Arms.

Listening to the dial tone. Tapping his fingers to the tune from the mobile crude video clip. Waits for what seemed like an eternity before it was answered by a young female voice.

“Clissold Arms... How can I help you?” Asked cheerful young female voice.

“Is the manager there?” Asked Archie scrolling the images of the old pub.

“Dad! It’s for you!” Sian calls out, screaming through the ear piece. Causing Archie to pull the handset away from his ear. Moments later a gravelly male voice speaks into the phone.

“Phil McCracken speaking.”

“Mister McCracken... Archie Sykes, of Sykes and Mayer Records... I was wondering if you had a moment to speak about a band you had play at your fine establishment recently.” Regurgitating that standard complementary citation.

“The Ravens?”

“That’s them.”

“How can I help?” McCracken began...

“Not a word to Terry, I’d like to surprise him with a visit...”

“Mom’s the word Mister Sykes.”

“*Archie* please... They playing this coming Saturday you say?”

“That’s right.” Archie cuddles McCracken.

Archie hangs up just as Seth enters the office. He had a spring in his step.

‘That can’t be good.’ Archie thought. He had been laid. His brain had been deprived of vital oxygen.

“How was your weekend? ... Contracts on your desk for review... Might need a magnify glass for the fine print... Melissa’s been at it again... Speaking of at it... How’d you get on with...? Who was it? *Crowes... Magpies?*”

“Very funny... I can see your screen from here... You not thinking of pinching them from me are you?”

“Would I do something like that?” Lied Archie.

“In less than a heartbeat.” Attested Seth.

“You know me so well... Just covering our asses... Excuse the pun.”

“More so yours than mine I hope.”

“Touché my good friend... Touché... They really that good? If you discount the lead singer.”

“Well_ technically *he* is the band... He’s carrying them... We could ditch the drummer... The keyboard could go but for the fact he’s the twin brother of the bass guy who is actually pretty good... For now.”

“Always the drummer eh?”

“Gotta go... Hopeless.” Iterates Seth with his professional opinion.

“And Terry?”

“You’ve done your research I see.”

“Made a call... Professional curtesy of course.”

“Of course... Terry, hmm... He’s pretty tight with Gareth, the lead... But nothing that money can’t buy.”

“You’re pure evil Seth.” Notices Archie grinning, cut form the same cloth.

“I’ve always said that... It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there... They’re playing here in three weeks. Why don’t we pay them a visit? ... I think you’ll like them. It can be a *joint venture* if you like.” Advised Seth flicking open a newspaper. His eyes too tired to read Melissa’s fine print.

“We’re partners Seth... Professionally speaking of course.”

“Of course... You watch my ass and I’ll watch yours.”

“I’d prefer if you watch my back.” Archie suggested.

“Touché my friend... Touché.” Responds Seth grinning.

Chapter 26

Terry tossed and turned that evening.

Unable to sleep. The thought that by tomorrow he would have come full circle. Would it be another train wreck, or a success? Vying for his attention, uncertainties became tangled and knotted. Having had to relive the past four weeks he had reached the point of no return.

“Got you...” Content he had gotten the better of the Devil he drifts to sleep. His mind now a blank canvas. No dreams would be painted that evening.

“What she doing here?” Terry asked seeing Lorraine in the van.

“She wanted to come... Come on man, she’s part of the gang... Besides she’s your *girlfriend*.”

“Groupie more like it.” Terry suggests trying to avoid eye contact with her.

“You ready?” Gareth asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Closing the door behind him.

“Can’t seem to find the twins, they weren’t at home after Mary MacKinnon kicked them out.

“I know where they are... You drive, I’ll point the way.” Informs Terry recollecting the location.

“All good Sal, Terry knows where they are.” Gareth calls out to Sal on his mobile.

“This is cozy.” Responds Lorraine being squeezed between Gareth and Terry.

Unable to accept her promiscuous transgressions with practically everyone in Muswell. He had however been to deflect her intimate advances with plausible excuses of having somewhere else to be. Preferably a place where she was not.

“Down that road... Keep going... Almost there... Okay pullover here. I’ll go and get them.”

“You sure they’re here?” Asked Gareth looking at the unfamiliar building.

“No... But it is where they were last time we had to pick them up.” Too tired to think of another reason.

“You’re funny Terry.” Lorraine laughs.

“Sal, go get them if you please.” Terry asked over his shoulder.

“Be my pleasure.” Sal leaps from the back of the van.

Thump!-Thump!-Thump! Sal bangs on the door with a clenched fist. And waits for the door to be opened. Nothing.

“Keeping knocking, they’re there... And God knows who else.” Terry stares up at the terrace home. Hoping time had not shifted on him and relocated the twins else where.

Thump!-Thump!-Thump! Thumping on the door harder. Shaking it at its hinges.

Faint voices surfaced from within. Sure he could detect the twins’ voices followed by female giggling. Now he was sure it was them.

“Hurry up you two... We haven’t got all day.” He calls out through the mail slot.

More giggling and hysterical laughter sounded through the slot. Getting closer. That was good sign. A lock sounds it release and the door opens slowly to reveal Ness dressing himself.

“*Unbelievable you two...* Come on... We don’t have all day... Where’s your brother?”

Raucous giggling followed by a loud squealing erupted from one of the bed rooms. Followed by Taylor pulling up trousers and carrying shoes as he escapes the clutches of a naked arm reaching from the doorway.

“*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*” Taylor laughs as though he was high on something.

The twins walk pass Sal indifferent to his stern looks and clamber into the back of the van as if it was their second home. Collapsing exhausted from their nocturnal feasting. Sal looks down a passage way to sees a naked woman staring back at him. Encouraging him inside. The temptress smiled at him, her finger coaxing him to enter. He steps forward and reaches for the door handle and closes it behind him. Shutting himself out.

“We’re going to be early?” Said Gareth wondering.

“I know, I know... I don’t want to leave anything to chance.”

Inserting a USB stick into the radio plays the bands new songs.

“Hey man, that’s us! Cool_ man!” Exclaims Gareth rocking his head to the songs.

“Thought you’d like that, help get it into your heads... We get this right and we could be on our way to the top!”

“To the top!” Cry out the Ravens excitedly.

Escaping the A1, the fragrant green English countryside gave way to the smelly grime of the city.

Brick and mortar buildings towered over the meager van. Meandering its way through the rambling cockeyed cobble streets. Stained with history. Stained with a past all too familiar to Terry. Narrow darkened alleyways pass by. An eerie feeling of déjà vu came over him, as if he was being watched. Thinking he could hear laughter coming from one. Expecting to see faces over a card table.

“You okay man.” Asked Gareth seeing him looking troubled.

“Yeah. Yeah... Just thinking about this evening.” He lied pulling himself from the shadowed alleyways. Now strangely lightened with the midday sun, “... Take the next road on the left. Stay in the outside lane, else we’ll miss the turn off.”

“You been there before?” Asked Lorraine curiously.

“Once or twice.” Hoping it would be his last.

“Oh... Didn’t know you knew your way around London.” Said Gareth.

“I don’t really.” As he watched the city rush pass his window.

In some way reluctant to re-visit the scene of the crime. Knowing with every rotation of the wheels he was getting closer to the Devil. Sandwiched between double deck buses the van was trapped. Having to go around again.

“Hm.” Terry muses to himself.

The replay was not over yet. Looking to his watch to confirm the time. Then to the van’s dashboard. The new water hose was holding. Fuel was topped up. Plenty to get home.

“Don’t forget to turn the light off after we get there Gareth. Don’t want the battery going flat on us.” He remembers.

“Good thinking Terry.” Pulling heavily on the steering wheel to make it to avoid hitting an on-coming car.

“Get him *next* time.” Jokes Terry.

Crossing over the bridge, over the dirty old river that rolled into the night. Turning ever so inconspicuously the London Eye watched them pass.

“A quarter mile on your left... Then the first right.”

“Got it!” Gareth changes down and eases the van slowly along unfamiliar streets. Pulling to the curb. On the opposite side of the street, a pub with an overhanging sign...

SHAKESPEARE TRAVERN

“This is it alright.” Said Terry, “... Kill it... And the lights.” He reminds him again.

“What is it with you and the lights?” Wondering why he had become so picky.

“You never know... You know.” Jokes Terry peering up at the weathered brick building. Visions of the interior still clear in his mind as he was there just yesterday.

“Christ Terry, what if we get towed?”

“They won’t tow us with those two in the back.” Looking back at the sleeping... Someone better stay with them... Lorraine? Would you mind keeping an eye on these two?” Suggested Terry to keep her occupied.

“My pleasure.” She volunteers looking back at the sleeping nymphs.

“Come on Gareth, Sal... Let’s find Mister Duncan and get set up.” Said Terry leading the way.

“What the_...?” Exclaimed Gareth pulling open the doors to discover an entry bar.

“You sure this is the place Terry?” Asked Sal looking about the interior.

“We’re early... Over there.” Terry points the direction of the stage.

“You been here before man?”

“Something like that.”

“Can I help you boys?” A rasping voice speaks as a head peers out from an office door. Hearing the bar doors squeak on their hinges.

“We’re the band... The Ravens.”

“You’re early. We don’t open for few hours.”

“Mister Duncan?” Asked Terry playing along. Just as he remembered him. Chewing like a cow and covered in crumbs.

“Alistair please... You must be Terry...” Extending his hand.

“The early bird gets the worm.” Jokes Terry.

“Well you are the *Ravens*, excuse the pun... *Ha-ha*.”

“Good one... Ha.”

“Where’d you park?” Asked Duncan.

“Across the road in the loading zone.”

“You’ll be fine there but just in case I’ll get you some letterhead you can put on the dash in case a ticket warden comes sniffing.”

“Thanks... We’ll set up over there right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. You been here before?”

“Passed through once... Another gig another time.” Responded Terry.

“Hmm... Thought you looked familiar...” Mistaking Terry for another muso,

they all looked the same to him, "...Oh well, I'll leave you boys to it then. Call out if you have any problems. Think you'll find everything you need. Speakers. Amps... What-nots." A hand flutters in the direction of the stage leaving it to the band to figure it out. It was all beyond him.

"Thanks... Kick off at nine right?"

"That's right... Keep the beers flowing and there might be something extra at the end if you know what I mean... Pints on the house, collect your wages afterwards okay?" Directs Duncan extending his hand again to cement the agreement.

"Sounds good to us Mister Duncan... *Alistair*." Watching him disappear back inside the office.

Sal and Gareth follow behind Terry taking in the size of the place.

It was like a Tardis, appearing larger on the inside than the outside.

"You sure the new console can handle these Terry?" Asked Gareth seeing the size of the speakers.

"Oh yeah_..." Proclaiming proudly, "... And then some."

"I can see what you mean when about *cooking* the old board... Wow, I'm in heaven!" Declares Gareth, "... Look at these Marshals." Stroking them with his hand.

"Steady down big boy... You're in a relationship remember?" Terry reminds him, "... Power points, there, there and there."

Gareth paces out steps and measures the amount of space they had.

"Shit man... It's massive... Three times the size of the Arms." Looking to the dance floor.

"Let's get the gear inside and set up. I want a sound check on the new board... Someone wake up those two slave in the van."

From the window he could see the van rocking on its suspension. And decides otherwise.

"You know what... Let them sleep... Wouldn't want to disturb them. They need their rest for tonight." Unwilling to catch Lorraine and twins at it in the back of the van.

"You're not going soft on them are you Terry?" Asked Sal keen to wake them.

"Yeah-nah... Give me a hand with these cables will you." Distracting Sal's attention from the rocking van.

Endless black cables cluttered the floor like spaghetti.

Before climbing upwards like vines to speakers and amps. Tracing and separating one after the other. Terry looks out the window again.

“Okay, go get them Sal.” Sensing he rocking had ceased.

Appearing on the street opposite Sal finds Ness smoking a joint. Beside him Taylor and Lorraine giggling about something.

“Come on you two... Terry wants a sound check.”

“Ohh_” Complains Ness passing the joint to his brother before handing it onto Lorraine brushing and adjusting her tight fitting short skirt.

Terry watches the needles dance about with more aggressively than with the band’s amps.

“Okay Gareth, give me some vocals.”

“Two-Two-Twenty-two... Doe_ Ray_ Me_ Far_ Sew_ La_.” Gareth sings out over the microphone.

“Steady girl... Steady.” He coaxes the console watching needles twitch excitably.

“We all good Terry?”

“Beau_ti_ful! ...” He exclaims with delight, “... She’s loving it.” Needles danced erotically as Gareth laid down a riff. LEDs giggled up and down in sequence. “...Give me some more volume your end.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, she can handle it.” Calls back Terry keen to see what the new console could handle.

Turning knobs on their instruments, the members dialed up the volume. The board barely broke a sweat. Not once did the red LED flash.

“I’m in love.” Called back Terry.

“Get a room man!” Calls back Ness.

“Okay we’re all good here... Leave your stuff here and take break and back hear by eight, no later okay? ... Sal, can you babysit the twins? Make sure they’re back here in time?”

“My pleasure... Come on you two... Git!” Sal ushers the brothers from the room. His sticks at hand should they begin to fun around.

“Ohh_” Complains Ness.

“Gareth you be okay?” Asked Terry seeing him forlorn.

“Yeah man. Think I’ll stick around here, keep an eye on the gear and the van... Need to make a call. If you know what I mean?”

“Think I do... Thanks man.”

“What about me?” Asked Lorraine feeling left out.

“Don’t you want to check out the clubs?” Asked Terry expectantly.

“Not really... You trying to get rid of me?” Taking him by aback.

“No of course not...” He lied, “... You fancy a coffee? I know just the place.”

Chapter 27

“What is this place?” Lorraine asked taking in the strange entrance looking like a vandalized warehouse.

“You mean you haven’t been here before?” Thinking she may have visited while clubbing.

“You obviously have.” Pryingly.

“Once or twice... Come on... I know a coffee shop... Serves great carrot cake.”

“Since when did you ever eat carrot cake Terry?”

“I’m a closeted *vegan* if you must know.” Pulling by the hand inside the darkened doorway.

Looking somewhat different than before. Lead her to the café and took the same table he had shared with Julie. Lorraine sits where Julie had. And he tries to imagine the previous visit. But somehow it was not the same. Lorraine could never be Julie. The two women complete opposites of the other.

Coffees arrive and Lorraine picks at the cake.

“Don’t you like it?”

“It’s okay?”

“What’s wrong?”

“This place gives me the creeps... So... So... *Dark*.” She looks to the shadows.

“It’s supposed to be... You should come here at night... It comes alive with people walking around with masks and customs ... If you think *this* spooks you... *Ooohhh!*” Hands gestures a haunting ghost.

“You seem to know a lot about the place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gareth told me about the Tequila bender you went on... Something about a weird dream.”

“Yeah that... ” He wondered how much he should tell her. But decided not to. Somethings defied explanation. Then changed the topic three sixty on her, “... My mother thinks we should get married and have kids and settle down.”

“Kids? Settle down... Married? Ekh! Never!” Spitting out the revolting thought, and carrot cake crumbs along with it. Taking a sip on her coffee to remove the taste.

That settled that notion. He knew exactly where he stood with her.

“Yeah, and then you wait to die...” Terry completes the martial vows, “... You want see something different.”

“Yeah, anything to get out of here.” She suggested unable to leave quick enough.

A wild thought had crossed his mind while sitting with Lorraine. A thought he should not have had. One that was perhaps not his own. Yet he chose it as his own and was becoming more comfortable by the moment. With Lorraine by his side as his girlfriend, Julie would surely see he meant her no harm.

He had to see her one last time.

Marble sculptures, perched like gargoyles above the Victory Arch.

Eyes like CCTV cameras followed their every move. Daylight streamed through the opaque glass of the immense overhead crisscrossed roof. Illuminating people swarming like flies across the station’s marble floor. Lorraine followed obediently, intrigued by the mystery tour.

A large four faced clock ticked off the remainder of man’s time on this earth. A romantic lotion that Julie would be waiting for him beneath it crossed his mind. Only to see the same woman rocking the same pram to sooth the same crying baby. Still waiting for the same absent father.

Standing perfectly still he listens. Holding his breath so as not to drown out the subtle detection.

“What is it?” Lorraine asked curiously.

“Can you hear that?” He asked pricking his ears to the subtle echoes reverberating off the polished tiled walls.

“Hear what?”

“Listen... She’s here.”

“Who’s here?”

“This way!” Racing off towards the tantalizing sound.

Ears sniffed for direction. Descending into the bowels of the station. Falling escalators carry them deeper and deeper.

“Where we going?” Asked Lorraine becoming more and more confused. Stuck on an escalator descending deeper into the ground. She looks back for a way to escape.

“*Shh!*” The voice had stopped. Silence. He waits. Standing like a stick stuck in mud as the tide of bodies ebb and flow about him. Bumped here and nudged there.

“Terry, I don’t like it here... I want to go back up.” Lorraine tries to pull him

back to the escalators.

“No wait, she’s here.” Terry tells her.

“Who is?” Lorraine asked. The request going unanswered.

The singing begins again. Standing on a nearby bench spies Julie busking against the wall some distance away. Dressed in a simple cotton dress and a red beret. The sight of her took his breath away. CCTV cameras follow him.

A message scrolls onto a monitor detailing Terry’s last catastrophic appearance. An annoying red alert flag yelps incessantly for its master to notice it.

“He’s back.” A voice announces to another at the central control.

“Who’s the woman with him?” Another voice asked, watching the high definition black and white and grey images on a panel screens.

“Don’t know... Watch him anyway... Have people ready just in case.”

“(Click)...Copy that... (Click).” Confirms an roaming officer.

A guitar case littered with gold coins and paper notes.

The angelic voice sang out. Wary to keep his distance, Terry steps forward and throws a coin into the case. Julie catches and him and immediately stops playing. Causing people to stop and turn to look at her.

“What are you doing here *creep*? ... I thought I told you last time to keep away from me.” Reaching for her hand bag.

“Who’s this Terry?” Lorraine asked curiously eyeing Julie over.

“Julie... Wait...” Seeing her begin to panic.

The name registers with Lorraine who is quickly piecing together their love affair.

“Keep your hands off my boyfriend *bitch!*” Warns Lorraine unashamedly her in front watching on.

Lorraine had heard and seen enough.

“As for you?! Ah!” She berates him. Kicking him heavily on the shin, buckling him over. Before pushing her way through the crowd. Leaving Terry in her wake.

“You don’t understand.” He calls back to Lorraine.

“He came onto me! ...” Julie begins to excuse herself from the triage, “... Keep your crazy boyfriend away from me *bitch!*” Julie calls out to Lorraine now disappearing into the crowd that was gathering to watch the domestic.

“Cheating bastard!” A woman calls out over the heads to Terry hobbled over.

Other CCTV cameras turn to monitor the developing events.

“(Click!)...Situation on platform four! Situation platform four! ... (Click!)” Announces a voice within the control center over a radio telephone.

“(Click!) ...Officers on their way! ... (Click!)” An officer responds.

“(Click!) ...Copy that... Have visual... (Click!)” Control center confirms.

Reaching inside her hand bag, rises an arm and pepper sprays Terry directly in the face.

“Aaahhh_! *Not again!*” He cries out.

With eyes burning and whelming with tears. Visibility blurring by the moment. Arms flail about wildly. Fending away the woman from striking again. Brushing against two police officers in the process, now standing directly before him.

That was all he could remember before what felt like one point two one gigawatts surged through his body and turned him into a convulsing human pretzel on the platform.

“Nice!” Said the other officer complementing the other.

“Always wanted to do that.” The officer grinned waiting for Terry to stop fidgeting.

“Hello-hello-hello... What have we got here then?” An officer asked Terry coming around.

Stunned, confused, and bruised by the fall. Lorraine and Julie long since fled the scene. Leaving just him alone with two brawly officers casting ominous shadows over him. And a curious tourists taking photographs of the apprehended terrorist.

“I can explain everything.” Pleaded Terry.

“I very much doubt that... Why don't you come quietly down to the station and we can have a little chat.”

“I haven't done anything! I know that girl... Julie.”

“Of course you do...The woman laid a complaint about you last time you were here... You need help son.”

“You don't understand... I have to be somewhere tonight... If I'm not there, they can't play. If they can't play... I have to relive all this over again... Please_ you have to believe me!”

“Maybe you should have thought about before you stalked that innocent young woman... Stand up now... Don't make me have to Taser you again.”

“Taser him!” A bystander challenges the officer for amusement.

“Cuff him and get him down to the station... He can sleep it off in the cells

overnight.”

“Copy that Cecil... Come on you.” Pulling Terry to his feet.

Chapter 28

“Where is he? ... He’s not answering his phone... ” Asked Gareth expecting Terry appear through the doors of Tavern at any moment. Looks to his watch to confirm the time, “... Damn he’s cutting it fine. It’s not like him.”

Just then the doors open and a Lorraine stands in the doorway. In a most unlady like way. But then Lorraine was no lady. Exhausted from walking from the underground.

“Lorraine... Where’s Terry?” Asked Gareth seeing her.

“Don’t know, don’t care where that creep is... Probably with his beloved *Julie*... The *bitch!*”

“Who’s Julie?” Asked Sal unaware of Terry’s love affair.

“Fucked if I know... He’s been *cheating* on me! The *bastard!*”

“And you haven’t?” Retorted Gareth.

“That’s different.” Defends Lorraine pouting.

“*Unbelievable.*” Replied Sal.

“Where did you last see him?”

“Don’t know, don’t care... The Underground somewhere!” Flailing a hand in the air, pointing blindly towards the window.

“You’re of no use... Fuck Lorraine!”

“Talk to the hand, explain to the finger! ...” Raising her hand and flips a birdie for good measure. “...If you are going to cheat, at do it properly and don’t go telling the whole damn world about it.” And heads to the bar for a drink.

“Eh?” Responded Gareth becoming more confused.

“We can’t go on without him... Can we?” Asked Sal looking to the others.

“Only Terry knows how to operate... *That thing...*” Gareth stares at the console, fearing to thread too close to it, “... I have an idea.” Pulling out a mobile phone and begins to dial a well-worn number.

“From the top... Again!” Seth calls out from the control booth shaking his head in frustration.

Large spools rotate slowly. Cameron looks over to him to say the band was not going to cut it. Tweaking as much of the imperfections as he could. He knew what Archie be telling him, ‘*I told you so... Thinking with your cock again.*’ He had so much faith in the young men and they were letting him down. Especially the lead singer. He had an *enormous* potential.

Grumbled groans resonate through speakers as columns of colored lights rise and fall in time with the whimpers protesting another endless take.

“Not again.” A voice protests.

“Stop your bitching... Now from the top...” Seth instructs his page boy before killing the mic. “... Can’t you do anything with his voice?”

“Flick ‘em.” Suggests Cameron, shaking his head, the wizardry that was beyond him.

“Move over.” Seth slides his chair behind the control panel of flashing lights.

Turning large knobs, presses cans against his ears. And for a brief moment he thought he had it. Post editing could savage some. He sounded so much better in bed. It would be so sad to lose one of his lovers over a breaking voice. That was trouble with boy bands. Nonetheless he had them by their gonads for the next five years under contract. And he intended to squeeze them as hard as he could. Hoping the lead singer’s would not drop before them.

Pulling sliders to the bottom, leans back and surrenders to the band’s failure. Large tape reels rotate like the London Eye. The band looks up from the studio floor and smile back at him hoping that was it for the day.

“Perfect! That’s a wrap boys! We’ll talk later.” Seth lies.

“Really?” Asked Cameron suspecting he had a cunning plan.

“Shelve them a few years... Crush their spirits and their Will to live and we’ll ditch them.”

“Can you do that?”

“I’m the Devil Cam’... I can do anything I like...” Seth sniggers, “... It’s in their contract, had they bothered to read the fine print.”

“Shit you’re good.” Complements Cameron.

“I’ve always said that.” Sighing a breath of contentment. Checking his watch again.

“You got some place you have to be?” Asked Cameron.

“Yeah, there’s a band playing at the Shakespeare over the river... *The Ravens*... heard of them?”

“The names sound familiar... Haven’t you been punished enough today already?”

“Money never sleeps Cam’ and neither do I.” Rechecking his watch as though the time had changed since the last time he checked it, “...Hmm... Where does the time go Cam’?”

Killing tape machines, giant spools grind to halt. Exhausted from their perpetual motion. Another wasted studio session. Wondering if *The Ravens* were

as good as they sounded in the studio as they did on stage. Imaging Gareth singing *unplugged*.

“Hmm_.” The word aroused him.

And as if by wishful thinking his mobile vibrates. The caller ID suggested he should answer it.

“Hey... Just talking of you.” Replies Seth still grinning.

“I know this is a big ask, but we’re in a bit of pickle...” Began Gareth.

“What’s happened my love?”

“Terry.”

“Terry? What about him?”

“He’s gone AWOL... Nobody knows where he is... Maybe he’s with Julie.”

“Who’s Julie?”

“Long story... But we’re desperate for a sound engineer to operate the sound console.” Gareth stares at the Pandora’s Box. Fearful of approaching the black beast. The bright red knobs only spelled danger in his mind.

“I might know someone... But it’s going to cost you.” Eyes shift to Cameron who catches the manipulative glare.

“Why you looking at me for? ... Oh no you don’t you bastard! ...” Cameron begins shaking his head and backing away as though about to leave.

Seth gestures a hand for him to sit back down,

“I have just the man for the job... Cameron here has just volunteered his services for free.”

“Hey wait on there!” Cameron objects to being pimped.

“You’re a life saver Seth... We’re on in forty five minutes.”

“He’ll be there in twenty minutes... See you soon.” Seth hangs up and grins at Cameron.

“You bastard... You owe me big time.” Protests Cameron.

“You can operate a sound box can’t you? ...” Pulling a fifty pound note from his wallet, then several more, sliding them across to Cameron staring at the cash, “... Buy yourself something *pretty*.”

“Christ? A *sound box*... You have to be kidding me? Why can’t you go?”

“Me? I have to have a shower, get dressed. Powder my nose... Look my best. If you know what I mean... Beside, how would it look if the head of a studio was seen behind a *sound box*?”

“Yeah... I can only imagine the *embarrassment*.” Grimaces Cameron at the thought.

“Don’t be a cry baby... Get your lovely ass over to the *Shakespeare Tavern*

across the river... Off you go! ...” Flicking his fingers like shoeing away a fly, “... I’ll be there later to check in on the band... So you better be there!”

“You can lock up...” Pushing himself away from the broad console that he had been attached to for the past eight hours. Only to be sold into slavery for another, “...Bastard!”

“You’re welcome! ... Shoe-shoe!” Flicking his hand again with amusement watching him leave.

A bright red light comes to life above the door only to die again as it closed.

Leaving Seth alone in the sound booth grinning at the torment Cameron was about to endure. What did not kill him would only make him stronger. If *The Ravens* new songs were as good as *Tears* the cash investment would repay itself beyond his wildest dreams. Gareth would sign without reading a word.

Terry? He may prove more difficult. Strange how he had suddenly abandoned the band at their moment of need.

Chapter 29

Awakening within a concrete cell.

Eyes open to pale green walls. High above a bulb buzzes like a fire fly. Unsure why it ached, disoriented as to where he was. Barbed memories begin to catch on his mind. Lorraine, Julie, pepper spray, policemen... Then what? ... *Zap!* Sparking grimacing thoughts of the violent electrical assault. Muscles cringe as if still in spasms. Terry waits for the debilitating feeling to pass. Disoriented, the realization of his incarceration becoming more apparent by the moment.

"The band! ..." He exclaims suddenly sitting upright in a panic, "...Shit! I need to call Gareth... What's the time? ...Hey, where's my watch? Where's my wallet? ... My shoes? ...What the ...? I've been robbed!"

Frantically looking about the cell for his possessions. Patting himself down as though he would find them. Voices and noise sound beneath the heavy cell door suggesting life existed on the other side.

Bang! Bang! Bang! ... Bang! Bang! Bang! Terry slams a tender fist on the solid door. Trying to attract attention of someone on the other side. A small metal window on the door latched closed.

"Hello!? ... Anyone there? Hello!?" He cries out, hoping his voice was penetrating the thick iron door.

Voices go quiet and then begin again. Followed by the sound of heavy steps towards the door.

Slide-Clank! A small metal window opens and a head with large grey eyes inspects the cell and the buckled individual looking distraught.

"Stand band from the door!" Shouting with menacing intent a deep authoritative voice bellows at him. Seeing the inmate step timidly backwards.

Slide-Clank! A small metal window slams shut. Leaving the Terry wondering where the other person had gone.

Clacker-Clacker-Clacker, sound of keys rattling and banging against a lock.

Bang-Bang-Clacker-Clunk-Clunk! A heavy iron door opens inwards slowly. Terry steps back further unsure what to expect.

"What do you want?" A hefty looking officer asked looking down his nose at him.

"I've got to get out of here!" Terry pleads his freedom.

"Really? ..." Laughter came from outside the cell as his words were

overheard by another officer, "... You aren't going no-where son... Not 'til the Judge has a chance to look you over Monday morning."

"Monday morning? ..." Echoing the officer.

"That's right."

"Why am I here?"

"Can't go having *your sort* on the streets can we?"

"What do you mean *my sort*? ... I ain't done nothing!"

"Tell that to the Judge, Monday... Stalking young women like that."

"Monday? ... I didn't... I was with my girlfriend..." Then remembers, "... Don't I get one phone call?"

"Hmm! ..." The officer grumbles reluctantly, there was always one who knew their rights, "... This way... One step out of line and..." Tapping the Taser on his belt.

Leading him to an ugly metallic call phone attached to a wall.

"Can't I use my mobile? It has my numbers on it... *Please*... What's the point of making a call if I don't know the number?" He pleads to the officer's goodwill. Hoping he had one beneath the heavy black vest.

The officer catches the eye of another and instructs him to get the inmate his mobile. Returning moments later with the cracked screen device.

"Hey_... How did it get cracked?" Terry eyes the officer suspiciously.

"Must have broken it when you fell... You going to make the call or not?" The officer presses him keen to get back to his desk.

Terry contemplates who to call.

'My parents? ... No. His mother would have kittens if she ever found out... A lawyer? ... What for? I haven't done anything and even then I couldn't afford one... Shit-shit-shit.'

"Hurry up son... I don't have all day." The officer yaps at Terry's heels to get a hurry on.

'Gareth... Yes Gareth.' Quickly swiping the device dials his numbers and listens to a never ending dial tone sound again and again and again and again and again.

(Beep!). The yelp of the voice mail kicked in, hoping it was Gareth answering.

"Shit! ..." Cussing beneath his breath.

Eyes shift to the officer listening intently on,

"Gareth! It's me... Terry... I've been arrested for something... Don't know for sure..." Terry looks to the officer for an answer, "... Where am I?"

“Metropolitan.” The officer said after taking forever to respond.

“Metropolitan man... Come and get me okay? Not a word to my parents... Sorry about the gig... I fucked up again man...” (*Beep!*) The voice mail yelps at him again to tell him he had finished.

Terry stares at the mobile as though it too had given up on him,

“Oh fuck man... Can this evening ever get any worse?”

“Language son.” The officer reminds him.

“Sorry.” Replies despondently.

Handing the mobile back to the officer, walks the green mile back to his cell. Head slumped and shoulders drooped. Socks of the condemned man, sliding on the painted concrete floor.

Slam! Closes the door behind him.

Clacker-Clunk-Clunk! A heavy lock latches to incarcerate him inside again.

Noticing the time on the mobile was 10:37PM.

The band would have been performing had he been there. No doubt now that they had headed home annoyed. Thinking he had abandoned them. How could he face them ever again?

Laying back on the hard crib bed and stares up at the pale green ceiling. The bright bulb suddenly blinks and darkness overwhelms the cell. From a small upper window, faint light from the street outside filters in. The groans of the city unable to penetrate the thick walls, as much as Terry is unable to escape his captivity.

‘What would his parents think? Dad would kill me... Ma would... Die... Why did Lorraine have to go and open her mouth? Was it a mistake taking her there? Of course it was you idiot! Fuck!’ He was beginning to regret ever taking Lorraine there.

A noise sounds at the door, perhaps someone had come to set him free. It had all been a misunderstanding. He looks hopefully to the door. Light leaked from a gap beneath the door. Two shadowed feet stand outside. His father perhaps come to get him?

Slide-Clank! A small metal door slams open. Examines the benign horizontal individual on the bed staring back at him.

“Sweet dreams *Jeffrey*.” The officer chuckles.

Slide-Clunk! Slamming the portal shut.

“Jeffrey? ... Who’s Jeffrey? You have the wrong guy! Wait up!” Terry call out fruitlessly.

Surrendering to his incarceration, made himself comfortable the best he could.

The grey course woolen blanket irritating his skin. The pillow smelt stale and he could only imagine what heads had laid on it in the past. Then tried not to. Monday morning was thirty six hours away. How would he be able to explain his way out of to the judge?

“Well you see your Honor... I made a wish with the Devil... Yes the Devil... And I looped back in time with the woman’s number from the future, who told me to call her... How did I get back in time? ... Really? You don’t believe me? ... Thank you your Honor... I would love to spend three years at a puzzle farm.” Playing out the court scene in his head.

No Julie, no Lorraine, no band, no twins, no Devil. Just him and a million pieces of puzzle. Strung out on hallucinogenic drugs. The momentarily thought appealed to him. Laughter and voices whisper from a grate at the base of the wall. Recognizing them from the card table. As though they could hear his every thought. Thinking he could detect a faint whiff of cigarette. The odor irritates his nostrils.

And somewhere in the impeached darkness he drifts to sleep. Leaving the ghostly voices to fade into the distance.

“I’m out.” Recites Wyatt.

“Ah_... Don’t you ever play?” Rebukes Brian.

The evening was coming to an end.

The music dies and spot lights blaze upon the band taking a bow. The crowd went wild, whistling and whooping for yet another encore. But three had been more than enough.

“Thank you *Ravens*...” Pausing to catch his breath, beneath the spot lights beginning to raise a sweat, “... Thank you... But its time go... We’ll see you all next time!” Calls out Gareth over the heads of the faithful.

Seth applauds and even Cameron was impressed nodding his approval to him. Archie’s mind was already mapping out the bands next move. But first he would need to sign them before another agent could sink their malevolent claws into them.

“Good job Seth... See you Monday... We need to talk about *them*... I’ll get a contract sorted with Melissa.”

“Thanks Archie... You weave your magic, I’ll weave mine.” Responded Seth pleased with what he had seen firsthand.

Exhausted and sweaty, Sal, Ness and Taylor head to the bar for a drink.

Lorraine had disappeared hours before, attached to a feral looking individual that had plied her with cocktails. Loosing whatever inhibitions she had left in Muswell. Or the van with the twins.

“Where’s Terry?” Duncan asked looking about for him holding a thick brown envelope.

“Dunno...” Replied Gareth expecting him to appear at many moment, “... It’s unlike him.”

“This belongs to you guys... A little extra as promised... Man you were good. Best takings in months... Tell Terry you’re welcome back anytime... Give me a call and I’ll slot you in.” Said Duncan handing Gareth an envelope.

“Will do Mister Duncan... Thanks!” Holding up the envelope.

“There’ll be more of that Gareth if you sign with us.” Seth lied.

“You mean that? A record contract?” Gareth was lost for words.

“You were phenomenal! ... I haven’t heard a sound like that in years... You’re going places Gareth!”

“I don’t know what to say... It was Terry’s idea... Hope he’s okay?” Eyes scan the hall.

“I’m sure he is... Probably out on the town, somewhere... He’ll be fine. He’s a big boy.” Dismissing his absence.

“Yeah you’re right I suppose.” Accepts Gareth.

“Why don’t you think it over and how about you and ah_ Terry, stop by the office say... Wednesday? We can sign some papers then if you’re still interested.” The Devil dangle the bait and waited for Gareth to bite.

“Wow... I don’t know what to say?”

“Say yes and I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Okay... Yes! Wednesday!” Stammered Gareth caught up with in the offer.

“Go celebrate my love...I’ll see you Wednesday... Here...” Peeling several fifty pound notes from his wallet and handing them to Gareth, “...Think of it as an *advance*.”

“Thanks Seth.”

“Just keep writing those *silly little love songs!*!” Giving him a light embrace and walking away before the others could see.

Gareth approaches the others at the bar.

His face betraying the truth. Looking dejected. Drags himself upon a stool. Folding arms onto the bar he rests his head into them. Trying not to smile or laugh. The others read their failure from his behavior.

“We fucked up didn’t we? ... Just as Terry said we would.” Sal speculates.

“Gotcha! ...” Gareth sits upright laughing having gotten the better of them. And begins to peel off the fifty pound notes to each of the band. “... Tonight we celebrate!”

“Celebrate... Why?” Asked Ness confused.

“We got ourselves a recording contract... We’re going to make a record!” Exclaims Gareth smiling ear to ear.

“True?” Asked Sal trying read Gareth’s face.

“True as! ... I only wish Terry was here to enjoy it... I wonder where he got to. If it wasn’t for him.”

“Shots!” Calls out Ness to the bar maid.

“Not for me... I’m driving.” Warns Gareth restraining the urge, then reconsiders, “... One never hurt anyone?”

02:00AM and three inebriated band members crawled into the back of the van.

Falling asleep over each other. Leaving Gareth alone in the front seat. Before turning the key, checks his mobile and sees he has had a missed call. From Terry. Frantically he fumbles to play it.

“Shit! ... Arrested? Metropolitan? ...Shit!” Listening intently to his voice.

Looking back to the intoxicated nymphs in the back sleeping. Checking the time. It was late. And he was in no position to front up to a police station with tequila on his breath.

“Why now Terry? ... What have you done? ... Tomorrow...Yeah tomorrow... I’ll call him tomorrow...” Banging hands onto the steering wheel in frustration.

Moving slowly down the lane leaving the Tavern in his rear mirror. Bleeding the van into the nocturnal veins lit with red lights that flowed into arterials that flowed back to the A1. Wishing Terry was there to help navigate the maze of dyslexic streets and chaotic circuses. Back to Muswell Hills. For all he knew, he the van could well be heading to Brighton. Questions and doubts raged in his mind. The contract that had been so close, was now slipping from the band’s grasp.

Jerking the van to a halt outside each of the nymph’s homes to wake them.

Sleep walking ravens staggered to the front doors and disappear inside. There was nothing he could do until the next morning, if he could do anything at all. Reluctant to present himself voluntarily at the police station due to a past run-in regarding possession of a certain *recreational* substance.

Perhaps he would phone first.

Chapter 30

“Metropolitan... Sergeant Morrison speaking!” An official voice barks into the phone.

“Hi... I have a friend you have locked up there.” Gareth began timidly.

“What’s his name_?” The sergeant barks again.

“Terry ah, Terry Davies... He tried to call last night... Left a message.”

A prolonged silence ensues. Hearing pages turn over. A voice muttering a surname.

“Davies... Davies... Davies... Ah! *Terry Davies?*” The Sergeant asks for confirmation.

“Yeah that’s right.... Can I ask what’s he’s done?”

“Sorry, we can’t disclose that over to phone to anyone that calls... You could be the media for all I know.”

“Of course not, I understand, sorry.” Gareth backs away from the authoritarian voice on the other end of the phone.

“He’s due in court Monday morning when the Judge can decide what to do with him.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“Course you can...” The Officer strings Gareth along, “... Visiting hours are from two to four.”

“Oh... Okay thanks.”

“That all?” The voice asks, wanting to get back to his breakfast.

“Thank you officer...” Gareth hangs up the call, “... Christ Terry, what have you done?”

Unable to picture Terry harming a fly.

His mobile rings before he could finish the thought. It was Terry’s parent’s number.

“Shit! ...” What to say? He answers the incoming call, “... Hey, Gareth here! ...” Trying to sound chirpy, “... Hey Misses Davies... Terry? ... Didn’t come home? ... Of course you are... Not to fret Misses Davies, Terry ah_, Terry decided to stay in town with ah_ ... Some friends of his... Yeah... They’re going to put him up for a couple of days... His mobile broke... I was just about to call you... Yeah, yeah... Said to tell you he’ll be home tomorrow afternoon... Yeah, that’s Terry for you eh? (*Ha*) ... Right-o Misses Davies... I’ll get him to call

you... Just popping into town this afternoon to see him... Yeah... I'll do that Misses Davies... Bye... Bye." Breaking out in a cold sweat as he closes his mobile shut.

What if he doesn't come home tomorrow? The truth is going to come out sometime. But until it does, his lips were sealed. Checking his watch. He could catch a train on the half hour. Lays back on the bed as thought of Terry locked in a cell clouded the thought of the recording contract.

His head surprisingly clear considering the amount of sleep he had had. Minus the tequila shots he never had. Having little sympathy for the others that had spent their wages over the bar. Whatever Duncan had paid them was poured down their gullets and back into his register.

And he grins at the thought of the hungover urchins were now suffering.

Reaching for a guitar plays with a tune that had been brewing in the back of his mind. His mood somehow dampened by Terry's incarceration. Forsaken words came rushing forth, pushing their way past others that fought for his attention. Reaching for a pen, begins to scribble down the outlines of a ballad. Each word finding their place among others. As if they always belonged. Picturing Terry laying in a prison cell. And Julie, whoever she was. Waiting for him. And Lorraine, who had cheated and abandoned him.

"Women!" Gareth speculates the root of all men's troubles.

Gareth stands frozen before the foreboding station casting a heavy cold shadow over him.

Hesitant to take another step. Trying to imagine Terry somewhere inside. Rotting in a cell. Incapable to fighting his way out of a wet paper bag he was probably someone's bitch by now biting into a pillow.

'Poor bastard.' Visualizes Gareth.

Perched CCTV camera's peer down upon him. Watchful of the human's presence. Metallic heads and glass eyes follow him. Feeling he was being watched. He makes his way up the shallow concrete steps, enters through large dark blue doors. Only to be over whelmed by a sudden urge to leave. Turns about to find the doors now blocked by officers standing around chatting. Faces turn to observe him looking at them. An officer places a hand on a Taser as though he were about to challenge him to a draw.

Gareth looks away. And walks towards a perplex window punctured by a ring of small holes about its center.

"Can I help you?" An officer asked through a microphone squawking a trace

of feedback.

“Ah yeah... Here to visit Terry Davies... I called earlier.”

“And you are?” The officer asked.

Reluctant to disclose his name, knew he was not going to get anywhere if he did not.

“Ah... Ah... Gareth Jones.”

“Jones?”

“Yeah... It’s Welsh.”

“Really?” Responds the officer busily tapping a clunky keys. Eyes focused on a computer screen.

“Of Muswell Hills?”

“Yeah that’s right.”

“Hmmm...” The officer looks suspiciously at Gareth comparing him to the image on the screen.

“There a problem officer?” Gareth asked hesitantly.

The question goes unanswered. Picking up a phone speaks inaudibly into it. Then hangs up. Eyes locked on Gareth standing nervously, now breaking out in a cold sweat. Steps could be heard approaching him from behind.

“Mister Jones?” A uniform officer enquires.

“That’s right.” Said Gareth anxiously, unsure if they had come for him personally.

“This way if you please.” The officer informs him.

Walking down a series of hallways.

Footsteps echoing off polished floors and walls. Doors buzzed and opened, only to slam shut behind him and the sound magnetic locking. Arriving at a larger room with tables. Visitors sat on one side talking quietly with detainees.

“Sit here!” Instructs the officer indicating a specific table and chair.

The officer walks away disappearing through the door they had just come through. Gareth sits on the simple wooden chair and takes in the room. An officer stood guard at a door. Arms folded. Watching over those within. A belt littered with an arsenal of weapons. Spray, Tasers and baton. Shining metal cuffs dangled from a hip.

The place gave Gareth the creeps. God knows what Terry must be feeling. Hearing the door open sees Terry shuffling in. Looking frayed and wearing the same clothes as the day before.

“Terry!” Gareth calls out getting his attention.

“Gareth!” He calls back raising an arm.

“Man it’s good to see you Gee.” Said Terry pulling out a chair.

“You too man... But what the heck you doing in here?” Asked Gareth quietly.

The officer at the door stares at him to say he was watching them.

“Long story... I think.” Wondering just how far back he should go.

“Try me, we have a while.” Looking to the wall clock.

“There was this girl.”

“Julie?”

“Yeah that’s right... How’d you know?”

“Lorraine told me... Something about your *beloved Julie*? But that’s all she said.” Gareth pulls a confused face.

“Don’t know about the *beloved* bit, but yeah... Julie.”

“How’d you end up in here for? ... You didn’t...” Gareth raises his eyes brows not wanting mention the word in case it was true.

“Eh? ...” Then the penny drops, “...No_ of course not... Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What did you do to her then?”

“I didn’t do anything... It’s all just a miss understanding.”

“Try me.”

“You know that dream I had?” Said Terry, hoping no one had heard the word.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“I met her there... In the dream... Sort of.”

“What do you mean *met* her there... *Sort of*?”

“Well it wasn’t exactly a *dream*.”

“You losing me Terry...” Gareth leans back, wondering what rabbit hole had fallen down.

“Let’s just say, that when I woke from the *dream*... I had her number on a napkin she had written down.”

“Not possible... Is it?” Asked Gareth taken back by the impossibility.

“No... So, it you can see my problem.”

“Yeah... Nah... I don’t know what to think Terry... You might need *help*... If you know what I mean... What happened to get you locked up?”

“I went to see her... With Lorraine... Threw a coin in her case, she busks in the Underground... Then things got out of control... Lorraine warns her to keep away from me... Julie thinks I’m stalking her.”

“Why would she think that?”

“From the first time...” Then realized what he had said, “...Shit.”

The officer at the door coughs to catch their attention.

“Sorry.” Mouths Terry.

“The first time? What made you go back?”

“I thought having Lorraine there might be different.”

“How did that work out for you?”

“Besides being kicked in the shin, pepper sprayed and Tasered within the space of twenty seconds... Just dandy thanks for asking.”

“You know the judge will *Section* you if you tell them that story.”

“I know... What am I going to do Gareth? ... I can't tell my parents... It's all a misunderstanding... It's all Lorraine's fault for opening her mouth.”

“Mate, it's not Lorraine's fault... It's *yours* for going back there... You're thinking with your dick man, start thinking with *this*.” Gareth taps his head with a finger.

“Yeah... Hey... Sorry about the gig... I blew that as well. I really messed up man... Next time eh... If I ever get out of here.”

“Yeah, about that... The show went on without you.” Confessed Gareth with a grin.

“What do you mean? Who operated the box?” Asked Terry with a worried look.

“Seth sent a studio guy over... It was magic man! We brought down the house!”

Terry sits back and takes in the revelation.

“And the agent? Was he there?”

“Yeah, both of them, his partner Archie.”

“Yeah... I know Archie.”

“How could you know him, you weren't...” Gareth hesitates and begins to join the dots, “...The *dream*?”

“Hmm... The dream... But it wasn't a dream.”

“I don't understand... How?”

There was no easy way to explain the unexplainable. So he just said it.

“The Devil.”

“Eh?” Responded Gareth sitting back to distance himself from the answer.

Chapter 31

Terry regurgitated to Gareth what had happened after the disastrous first gig.

Of how everyone went home leaving him to watch over the van. Only to find the battery flat and he was left to wander the streets of London. Of his visit to the Vault and the bar. Purgatory. Of how he had made a wish and woke up in his bed. Four weeks earlier.

“You get like three wishes?” Asked Gareth curiously.

“Dunno... I suppose.” Terry shrugs his shoulders.

“If you go back... All this just disappears?”

“I suppose so.”

“Heavy shit man... You’re laying a lot on me to believe.”

“I don’t even believe it... But how do I explain having Julie’s number... and Archie’s business card in my wallet... I know the songs before you write them.”

“Yeah... Nah.” Unsure what to say.

“You a religious man Gareth?” Asked Terry looking him in the eye.

“I suppose... Not really.” Being evasive.

“You believe in God?” Terry presses the argument further.

“I suppose... Maybe.” Becoming noncommittal.

“Then why not the Devil?”

“Hm.” Wanting to deny the Jinn’s existence. Terry had a point.

“Not a word to my folk’s man. If they find out I’m dead to them.” Warns Terry.

“Yeah, no worries... Your mother called this morning worried about you... I said you were staying in town, you’d be home tomorrow.”

“Thanks man... Not sure how long I can keep it a secret... You can’t tell anyone, especially Lorraine... One word to her and it’ll be on the salon grapevine all over Muswell before you know it.” The thought disheartened him.

Squeezed between the Devil and the bitch from hell. Unsure which he feared most.

“Mom’s the word Terry.” Said Gareth.

“Thanks man... If I can’t clear my name I’m fucked...” Whispering, looking to the guard at the door.

“They want to sign the band!” Gareth stated the fact, startling Terry.

“Eh? Sign? Who does?”

“The Record Company... Seth.”

“That’s great news!”

“Yeah, thanks to you... We have to meet with them on Wednesday to talk and sign a contract.”

“This Wednesday?”

“Yeah, that a problem?”

“I’m in court tomorrow... Hope they release me by then.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Dunno.” Shrugging the burdening thought from his shoulders.

“What about a lawyer?” Gareth asked inquisitively.

“They appoint one if you can’t afford one... And I certainly can’t afford one.”

“Get your *ass* out of here man... The band needs you. I need you man... Lie if you have to... Cop a plea. Anything... Just don’t tell them the truth.” Eyes shift to the guard watching on, wondering if he had heard the perjury.

“It’s all a misunderstanding Gareth... The Judge is sure to throw it out. It’s all on CCTV footage.”

“That’s good... You going to be okay in... Here?”

“Don’t really have a choice do I? ... Stay by the phone.”

“Okay man... I’d be there in court with you tomorrow, but I have to work.”

“Don’t worry Gareth... I’ll see you at the Arms for a beer afterwards... Now get home.”

“Love you man... Take it easy in here.” Gareth reaches out for Terry’s hand.

Gareth nods to the officer at the door as he stands. Terry remains seated and waits for an escort to return him to his cell. It was not much, but it was home. Hoping he would be a free man after the court hearing that would show it as all a misunderstanding of events. Knowing he could shake Lorraine and Julie. The Devil maybe a little more difficult.

The Jinn polishes a crystal shot glass.

Raising it to see a light emanating from it. Refracting, reflecting and sparkling. Rekindling a fond memory of his master. Catching himself, frowns hoping the others did not notice. The Dealer grins without looking up.

Drinks that never emptied. Cigarettes that never burnt themselves down. The Dealer shuffles the cards. Eyeing the players around the table. Each fumbling with their eternal stacks of worn colored chips. Kiran watching on anxiously as cards are sliced and diced and spit before skillfully spread and gathered in a single motion.

“He’ll be back...” Brian remarks, looking over to the empty bar stool, “... They always do.”

“Like you Brian?” Asked the Jinn.

“Yeah... Like me.” Accepts Brian.

“You going to deal or not?” Grumbles Kiran eager to play.

“You got some place you have to be?” Asked Gary. A young lady on his lap. Dressed in nothing but a frilly petticoat. Exposing her ample bosoms. A cigarette between petite fingers, takes a hit and presses it to Gary’s lips.

“Just deal.” Said Brian.

Cards slide across the red velvet table like machine gun bullets. Face down. Two cards each. Fingers fumble at corners, fraying and bending them upward. A hand shields from prying cheating eyes.

“What you looking at? ...” Brian threatens Kiran, “You show me yours I’ll show you mind... Yeah, didn’t think so.”

“I’m out.” Relents Wyatt without looking at his cards.

Others grumble their perpetual displeasure.

“Christ! Do you ever play?” Questions Kiran. Only to have the Dealer and Jinn look sternly at him.

“Language Gentleman, remember where you are...” Warns the Jinn, “... And how you got here.”

The woman on Gary’s lap giggles as he whispers in her ear.

“Excuse me *gentleman*, I’m out.” Gary throws his cards to the center.

Standing to leave, the woman takes him by the hand and leads him to an adjacent room. Followed by further giggles and squeals. Moments later to reappear with another woman leading him by the hand back to the table.

“That was quick?” Asked Wyatt seeing him reappear.

“Women eh?” Admits Gary taking his chair again.

“I wouldn’t know...” Said Kiran, “... The only woman for me is the Queen of Hearts.”

“Her and the ones between the pages of a magazine...*ha-ha-ha*.” Chuckles Brian.

“Fuck you man.” Retorts Kiran.

“Put your money where your mouth is.” Retorts Brian pushes two black chips towards the Dealer who stacks them one upon the other. And looks to Kiran to follow suit.

Thumbing the corner of his cards. Pursing lips considers his next move. Not to be left unchallenged, pushes two black chips forward. Brian taps a finger on

his cards to pass. Eyes burnt into Kiran. Tormenting him.

“You got a problem?” Kiran questions Brian’s glares at him. An eye twitched.

Reaches for the short glass of bourbon and swallows the contents whole. Places it down only to find it replenished. Ice rattles against the sides of the tumbler. Kiran taps his cards to pass. Nerves frayed. A sweat blistering on his forehead.

“Is it getting hot in hear.” Remarks Brian pushing Kiran’s buttons.

Wyatt had taken himself to the bar and sits beside the empty stool.

A place he had sat once. Many, many, many, years ago. Though it seemed like only yesterday. Recalling Terry, an unfortunate soul that had wondered from the path. Driven by a passion for success. Willing to do anything to achieve it. Fragile and weak. Some would say he had stumbled upon the bar. Some could say he was lead.

Wyatt looks to the Jinn wishing he would set the boy free.

“Just say the words Wyatt... You know the rules.” Said the Jinn polishing a glass.

A snake hisses from a shelf. Speaking in tongues. Its body magnified by the curvature of the bottle. It moves in the shadows, spitting out a forked tongue tasting the air.

“We’ll see...” Wyatt strings the Devil along, “...Don’t play every hand.” Then looks back at the trouble developing at the card table.

Three flop cards litter the center table. King. Nine and a blank. Useless. Finger tips anxiously taps cards. Weighing what the other player held. Or was not holding. Poker faces stared back at each other. Only the Jinn and Dealer could read their minds. He grins.

Brian raises again.

“You’re bluffing!” Exclaims Kiran beginning to sweat. Maybe he was not.

“Money talks my friend.” Informs Brian.

Kiran pushes a small stack to the center. Countered immediately by Brain.

Tilted, Kiran matches the call. Tossing chips onto the stack.

“You’re short.” Said the Dealer keeping the game fair.

“Christ... It’s just a game.”

The blasphemy goes unanswered. The Dealer tap a finger on the table. Sending an ominous vibration to Kiran. There were worse things than being stuck in Purgatory. And he flips the deficient chip onto the pile.

The standoff begins again.

Corners frayed by continual peeping. In a place void of time, it took an eternity for the Turn card to be dealt. When it was, it was like a bone had been thrown to a staving dog. Stirring Brian to finger shuffle chips more rapidly. Not going unnoticed by Kiran. He had something. Something he did not. Kiran's fingers twitch with anxiety, not going unnoticed by Brian. Lifting an edge, the Queen of hearts smiled back at Kiran. The King of spades laid beneath her.

Wyatt returned to the table to find the game still in process. Resumes his chair. Beside him an empty chair awaits Terry. Pouring himself beer from a bottle watches it froth. As two adversaries lock horns. Lying and bluffing their way through the game, as they had in life. Gary content to have yet another woman on his lap. A flirtatious red head. Giggling childishly as he wrestled her girdled waist.

Brian pushes another stack of chips towards the dealer without breaking a sweat. Sniffing, his nose irritated by Wyatt's cigarette. Seeing this as a *tell*, Kiran takes one last look at a worn out queen. Sore from being thumbed and fingered.

"You going to fuck her or not?" Asked Brian sensing there was only one card that would hold his affections.

"Leave her out of this." Warns Kiran becoming testy.

"I suppose the old man is home as well?" Probes Brain.

He watches Kiran's reaction. Stiff, awkward, frustrated at being read so easily.

"All in!" Calls Brian without thinking. What is the worst that could happen? Another stack would only appear again at the start of the next game.

Assessing the value of the call, Kiran pushes half his chips towards the center. Brian flips his two aces face up. Kiran flips the royal lovers on their backs. Naked and exposed or all the world to see. Wyatt strikes a course match to light a cowboy killer to breaks the silence. Or remind them of the flames of hell. No more calls. No more raises. No more bluffing. The Dealer flips the Turn card. Queen of diamonds.

"Gotta love those bitches." Kiran laughs, now seeing he had two pairs. Kings and Queens.

A dirty blonde giggles at the remark. Gary shakes his head for her to be quiet. And pushes her from his lap to the floor. Wyatt lends forward anticipating the River card. The Dealer waits for the tension to build. Brain taps the table needing an Ace. Three of a kind would seal him the win. A pale angelic hand reaches forward. Sliding beneath it, a nonthreatening card. Patterned with

Cupids and Angels.

Removing his hand leaves the card face down. With a subtle movement of a finger the card turns over to reveal... Another King. Kiran takes a moment to comprehend what he was looking at.

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Kiran laughs, knowing how close he had come to losing.

“Bastard...” Curses Brian, “... You got lucky!”

“Lucky my ass!” Dragging the huge pile of chips towards him grinning from ear to ear.

Brain pulls a tired Dodgers cap over his eyes. Pouting about the loss. Stands and leaves the table and moves to the bar.

“What will it be?” Asked the Jinn.

“The Green Fairy.” Insists Brain.

“A fine choice my friend.” Pouring a shot glass with the green embalming fluid.

In the back ground, cards are shuffled and dealt. Soon followed by familiar words.

“I’m out.” Wyatt tosses the unread cards back.

“Don’t you ever play?” Protests Brian.

“When I’m ready.” Responded Wyatt. Catching the Jinn looking at him as though they had unfinished business. Those around the table neither alive, nor dead. Suspended in time. Suspended in Purgatory.

Chapter 32

“All stand!” A bailiff calls out to the court room.

An elderly gentleman enters from a side door beside a bench that towered over the tables below. Taking his seat, raises a gavel and slams it onto block of wood three times.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The judge brings the court to order.

A number people and reporters that had gathered that morning sat down. Scribbling notes into small note pads. Fishing for a story. Of a small town boy, of a sexual predator. Embellish it here. Fake it there. Tragedy sells. Sex sells. Real or imagined.

Terry sits anxiously beside his appointed lawyer. Having never been in court before, his only knowledge of their workings gleaned from television shows. Mostly sit-coms. Which seemed appropriate considering the comedy of events that had led him to where he now found himself sitting. And tries not to grin at the irony.

The Judge shuffles papers before him. Re-familiarizing himself with the charges brought against the unkempt young man. As if he had slept in his clothes. A face in need of a razor. A pitiful sight. Obviously guilty by his appearance. Checks his watch. He had a more important lunch appointment to attend. The sooner he convicted the young man the sooner the better. Salmon perhaps, a stomach grumbled.

Julie sits quietly in the back corner of the gallery. Not wishing to be seen. It was the Police that had brought the charges, not her. Somehow she felt responsible for the man’s predicament. She only did what any other woman would have done.

Spray first, ask questions later.

Terry looks about the gallery of faces. Wondering who had made the effort to attend his trial. Hoping his parents would not be there. Thinking he saw Julie, but is interrupted by a voice barking at him from the bench.

“Mister Davies!?” The judge barks again at him.

Bang! Slamming the gavel down to send a sharp loud explosion of noise around the courtroom.

Terry wonders if he had been shot.

“Sorry.” Squeaks Terry standing to his feet beside his lawyer.

“Are we ready to begin?” Asked the judge.

“Yes your Honor.” His lawyer responded.

“Hm! ...” Grumbles the Judge, “... The purpose of this preliminary hearing to decide if we should proceed to the Magistrate’s Court.”

“Yes your honor.” Both Counsels responded like trained seals.

“Mister Davies you have been charged with *Criminal Harassment*... The unwanted pursuit of another person... How do you plead?”

‘*Criminal? That’s a bit harsh.*’ Thought Terry surprised by the word.

“Mister Davies... In your own time if you will.” Remarks the Judge.

“Not guilty.” Squeaking like a mouse.

“Hm...” The Judge was not so sure. Scribbling his thoughts onto the document before him, “... Very well. Counsels may proceed.”

The prosecution Counsel stands and begins to reciting chapter and verse Terry’s repeated encounters with the young woman.

“Is the woman in court today to be able to confirm these *encounters* Counsellor?” The judge looks over thick glasses perched halfway down an elongated whisky nose.

“No your Honor, we thought it prudent under the circumstances... She is quite distressed.” He lied, “... There is CCTV footage which shows the *encounters* Your Honor.”

“Hmm...” Grumbled the Judge as though he had passed wind and liked it, “... Very well... Counsel...” Looking to Terry’s lawyer, “... Have you anything add before we view the footage?”

“My client is innocent... A young man without priors. This has been a complete misunderstanding as the footage will show your Honor.” Reciting standard script, indifferent to Terry’s plight. A fee was a fee. Guilty or otherwise.

Terry’s eyes dart between the Judge and his counsel. Trying to read some surety in his imminent emancipation. Thoughts of having to wear an ankle bracket as bleak as a ball and chain. A projection screen is lowered as the lights dim. Shrouding the court room in near darkness. From an overhead projector a beam of black and white light sends tell-tale images to silver screen. In a corner a clock frantically ticks over the digital time. Prosecution Counsel narrates the tragic storyline. Of a jilted lover.

“Some four weeks ago Mister Davies is seen here approaching the young woman in the Waterloo Underground... As can be seen clearly...Mister Davies approaches and is repelled by the young woman just in time.”

“Objection your Honor... Cause for *Speculation*... There is no knowing of what Mister Davies was about to do... Other than throw another coin in the

case.” Defense Counsel interjects.

“Sustained... Counsellor is reminder to keep his thoughts to himself... And save the theatrics for the Play House and not my courtroom.”

“Yes Your Honor... Sorry Your Honor.” Prosecution Counsel lowers himself.

“Proceed.” Orders the Judge checking his watch as if he was running late for something.

Another clip is projected on to the screen rekindling Terry’s recent memories of the events. This time from outside the Station. Lorraine on his arm.

“Who’s the young lady?” Asked the Judge confused to see another woman involved. Looking down at Terry as though he were a serial offender.

“A *girlfriend* your Honor.”

“Hmm.” The Judge eyes Terry suspiciously weighing the predator before him to the predator on the screen.

“CCTV cameras detected his presence earlier Your Honor... He was put on a watch list after the *first* offense...”

“Objection your Honor! ... My client is innocent until proven guilty... Your Honor.”

“Sustained! ... Counsel has been warned.”

“Yes your Honor, sorry Your Honor.” Counsel bows respectfully to the judicial deity.

“Proceed!” Barks the Judge to continue.

“Here *again* the defendant can be seen in the Underground... There seemed to be some kind of quarrel between him and his girlfriend, who then kicks Mister Davies and walks away... Leaving him *alone* with the young lady...”

“He could hardly be *alone* as you put it Counsellor... If I am not mistaken there must be over a hundred people on the platform? ...” Interjects the Judge.

“Mister Davies approaches the woman in question and *again* is repelled as can be seen clearly... Mister Davies then strikes out at police officers and is Tasered to subdue him... Your Honor.”

“*Oh dear.*” Qualifies the Judge.

He could almost pardon the original sin. But to strike a police officer was reprehensible. Indefensible almost. Terry looks to Judge through the ghostly light. His face growing graver by the moment.

Bang! Slamming down the gavel to say the side show was over.

Startling those not paying attention. Lights flicker back to life. The screen retracts slowly as pencils scribble the illicit facts. Turning Terry into a monster.

‘*Terror Terry... No...*’ A reporter plays with a headline, ‘... *Tyrant Terror.*’

“Have you anything to say to the defense of your client Counsellor?”

“It’s a case of mistaken identity your Honor... Mister Davies is an innocent young man... Your Honor.”

“It’s says he is thirty two years old... I would hardly call that *young*.”
Qualifies the Judge.

“He lives at home with his parents Your Honor.” Submits his Defense Counsel, as though that would rouse sympathy in the Judge.

Terry slumps down in the chair. His pathetic life hung out like dirty laundry for all to see.

‘Please... Tell them about my mother why don’t you.’ Thinks Terry becoming ashamed by the moment.

“The man is a danger to society... Mister Davies has *struck* an officer of the law! ... There can be no excuse for such disregard of the law!” Belches the Judge eager to get back to his chambers.

Bang! Slamming down the gavel to cement his authority.

“The defendant is remanded in custody subject to a thousand pound bond and a one hundred meter restriction of the said woman if released before his court date of...” The Judge fingers a schedule of Court appearances before him, “... Hmm... I could fit you in Friday at... 10:00AM.”

Staring down at Terry over glasses now perched on the tip of a bulbous nose as if he were scheduling a dental appointment. Then makes a notation to the diary of their pending rendezvous.

“Where we will address this violent unprovoked on an officer of the law.” Expressing his unbiased opinion.

‘Violent? Attack?’ Thought Terry taken back by the sudden turn of developments.

“I didn't do anything!” Terry calls out.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bullets fly from the gavel, pushing him back in the execution chair.

“Silence in the court! ... Save your defense for Friday where you will be tried, convicted and sentenced to the letter of the law... So keep you God!” Orders the Judge preparing to leave.

“Sentenced? ...” Gulpes Terry taking in the sudden judicial process, *‘...So help me God?’*

Bang! Another bullet ricochets over his head. Signaling an end to the proceedings.

“All stand!” The Bailiff cries out.

Gathering stacked papers from before him.

The Judge ceremoniously leaves in no obvious hurry. They had come to see him, not the defendant. A door closes behind him. The room erupts with chatter. A mobile camera flashes, capturing Terry looking confused as to what had just happened.

“No pictures in here!” The bailiff orders.

“When do I get released?” Terry asked his Lawyer.

“Released? ... Asked his Counselor, “... They’re locking you up and throwing away the key... Unless you know someone who has a thousand pounds... Good luck with that son.” His Counsellor dismisses the court appointed meal ticket.

“A thousand pounds?” Gulped Terry sitting back in his chair. He barely had a hundred pounds to his name, let alone a thousand.

“See you Friday... Don’t be late.” The Counselor joked.

A heavy hand falls on Terry’s shoulder. Turning to see a thick set guard standing over him wanting him to stand and take him back to the station holding cell.

“I need to make a call.” Asked Terry fretting.

“When you get back to the station... Come along son, don’t make me have to carry you.” Taping the Taser on his belt.

Terry looks up to the gallery and sees Julie standing there.

“*Sorry.*” She mouths to him being hauled away.

A memory of familiarity rouses in Julies mind. As though it were a dream. There was something about him. And for no reason a vision of carrot cake appears in her mind. And a kiss. A kiss that was like no other. A first kiss. Eyes follow the strange young man that somehow knew her. Now disappearing hand cuffed through a side door.

“How’d it go?” Asked Gareth receiving Terry’s call.

“Not good man... There might be something in the paper.”

“Shit man... When you getting out?”

“I have to appear in court Friday for another a hearing.”

“Friday? ... Another hearing? What for?”

“Striking a police officer.” Confesses Terry.

“You couldn’t hurt a fly Terry... Why did you strike an officer?”

“I didn’t... It’s all a misunderstanding... Honest.”

“Christ man... And you wished for this?”

“It’s all gotten out of hand Gareth... It was never meant to be this way... I need to find a thousand pounds bond to get out of here.”

“Oh yeah, I’ll just exchange some deutsche marks for some US dollars and get those converted to British pounds... I’ll speak to my broker this afternoon.” Jokes Gareth, wondering where he would find a thousand pounds at such short notice.

“I know...” Seeing the funny side, “... Can’t ask my father, I’m already in debt with for the new console... Maybe Seth could give us an advance on the contract.”

“You think he’d do that?” Asked Gareth, unsure how far their *relationship* extended.

“He could if you asked him nicely... If you know what I mean?”

“You pimping me Terry?”

“Of course not, just saying if he wants the band it comes at a price.”

“I’ll ask... But no promises.” Said Gareth reluctantly.

“Just want to be out of here and make this all right again.”

“You’re not thinking of going back to that place again are you?”

“Of course not...” Terry lied, “... I’m *never* going back there.”

“Okay I’ll ask Seth... But you need help Terry. Therapy of some kind. Whatever you’re going through will pass.”

“I promise...” He lied again, “... Keep me posted. Okay? Bye.”

“Bye man.” Gareth kills the call.

His mind playing with how to ask Seth who had become distant in their brief liaison. The heat now evaporated and the waters feeling lukewarm. Perhaps it had been a fling. Perhaps he had just used him to get the band to sign.

Out of reach from mischievous inquisitive little fingers.

Julie takes an old biscuit tin from an upper shelf. And counts out the paper notes on her bed. The smell of money had its own distinctive aroma. It had a sweet smell. Soiled by filth and sweat. She had been savings towards a new guitar she had her eye on. Eight hundred and fifty nine pounds. She looks at the dull paper notes. Neatly stacking the notes to their denomination. Her mind toying with a bizarre thought. A thought that was not her own. A thought that went against everything she believed up until now.

Hearing footsteps in the hallway outside. The jingling of keys. Quickly swooping the notes from the quilt shoving them haphazardly back into the tin. Closing the lid as she heard the key rattle in the lock. Places the benign tin can

atop a shelf again. Out of reach of curious little fingers.

“Julie? You home?” Her sister calls out.

“Yeah. Just in here...” Calling from a bedroom room, “... How was your day?”

“Monday over... What you doing?” Appearing at the door.

“Just checking my lotto numbers.” A newspaper before her.

“Don’t know why you bother... No one ever wins those things!” Her sister tells her.

“Gotta to be in to win... Besides, it’s only a couple of lines, what’s fifty pence to win a few million... I have a feeling.”

“You and you’re feelings Julie... How’d the court case go?” Changing the subject.

“He appears again on Friday.”

“Again?”

“Yeah, well, he *kind of* assaulted a policeman.”

“You didn’t tell about that.” Her sister asked curious by the new facts.

“It only really showed up on the CCTV tapes... I wasn’t there when it happened.”

“Sounds like a hardened criminal if you ask me.”

“Yeah.” Julie’s voice did not convey her conviction.

“What’s wrong?” Hearing the doubt in Julie’s voice.

“Maybe he’s not” Having growing doubts.

“Don’t go Florence Nightingale on him Julie... He tried to attract you... Didn’t he?”

“Well... Not really... I may have over re-acted.”

“What about striking the police officer?”

“I don’t think he could see much... The officers walked into him.”

“Christ Julie! ... Have you told anyone this?”

“No... I didn’t press the charges, *they* did.” Trying to defend herself from her sister’s truth.

“You’re going to have to go to court and speak up for him.” She told her.

“It’s too late... Isn’t it?” She looks to her sister for the answer she wanted to hear.

“It’s never too late to right a wrong Julie.” Leaving her think about it.

Scanning the tired newspaper, searches for the lotto results.

Writing the winning numbers at the top and circling her favorite numbers.

Certainty becomes enthusiasm, becomes hope, becomes maybe, and finally becomes despair. Not a single number. She was sure it was a winner. She could feel it in her bones.

“Bugger...” Sighing heavily. Returning the losing ticket to her bag, “... Next time.”

Feeling her luck was changing. Or maybe karma had caught up with her. Perhaps she would need to right the wrong.

“Auntie Julie!” Screech two small children excitably running towards her.

Leaping onto her like playful lion cubs. Mischievous little fingers try to tickle her. Only to be tickled back.

“Ekh_!” Screams Julie giggling falling back onto the bed.

Chapter 33

Wednesday afternoon and Terry stares at the four pale green ceiling.

The solitary confinement playing on his nerves. Outside the door, life was carrying on without him. Wondering what his parents must be thinking. Ever hopeful they had not heard a word. The local rags having missed the scandalous news and shifted their attention to the annual Preservation Society's Garden Show. Oh how wished he was there. Rousing visions of strawberry jam and all the different varieties. Of custard pies and rattling china cups of English tea.

He could almost forget his was locked up in a police cell. The day dream dies as the sounds of a whistling kettle outside the cell door remind him of the band.

'The band's meeting with Seth and Archie today... Gareth can get the money... I skip the court... Hold out somewhere... Somewhere? Where? ... Worry about that then... Wait till Saturday evening and make a run for the bar... Make another wish.' It all sounded so easy in his mind.

Thoughts of Julie standing in the gallery came to mind. The love of his life had become the vain of his life. It was as if destiny had planned to keep them apart.

A polished black Hackney pulls up to a curb.

Four weary musos peel themselves from the interior. Watching it drive away to be drowned by traffic. Orange drum sticks protrude from Sal's satchel. The twins look up at the glassy edifice with reflective amber windows.

"This the place?" Asked Ness.

"Apparently." Remarks Gareth.

"Posh looking if you ask me."

"Where's Terry?" Asked Sal.

"He's ah... He's been *detained*... He'll be along *later*..." Gareth lied, "... Don't worry about Terry, let me do the talking okay."

"If you say so." Accepts Sal happy just to be there.

"Okay, we better get inside... They'll be expecting us."

The minstrels wandered inside the marble foyer and inspected the directory of Company names.

"Sykes and Meyers Record Producers... Level Twelve" Reads out Gareth running his finger under the large print.

A security guard stands in front of the lift doors and watches the trespassing

troupe approaching.

“Where do you think you are going?” Taking a stance to suggest they would not be going any further.

“Sykes and Meyers, twelfth floor... They’re expecting us. *The Ravens*.” Informs Gareth stepping forward.

“One moment.” The guard talks into a radio-telephone on his shoulder.

The RT squawks back at him. Spitting sharp jagged words back at him.

“Very well then...” Pressing the up button, and waits for the doors to open. Entering, swipes a card over a sensor and presses twelve, “... Off you go then.” Indicating they should enter before the doors closed them out.

“Thanks man.” Said Gareth, only to have the guard ignore him. Another squawk had gotten his attention.

The lift raises smoothly. Higher than anything in Muswell before coming to a seamless halt. Doors open to a glass walled reception.

“Can I help you?” Asked Melissa eyeing the lanky lads leaking from the lift.

“We’re *The Ravens*... Here to see Seth... Or Archie.” Responds Gareth.

“Take a seat. Mister Meyers will be out shortly.” Gesturing towards a large leather settee.

Prestigious gold records lined the walls. Gareth reads the inscriptions taken back by the names of the bands.

“They’ve handled some big band guys... We better behave ourselves!” He warns the twins.

“Where would be the fun in that? ...” Asked Seth appearing from no-where, “... You came... Good to see you boys again... Ah, where’s Terry?” Looking about the foyer expecting to see him.

“He’s been *detained* so to speak.” Advises Gareth cryptically.

“*Oh...*” Detects Seth, “... No worry. It’s you guys we need to talk to. We can deal with Terry *later*... Come this way to my office. You’ve meet Ms Helliwell...” Seth smiles politely seeing her holding large white envelopes. “... They them?”

“I’ll bring them through, just get Archie to sniff them over for typos.” She lied.

“Very good them... This way boys. What a wonderful day.” Charming the lambs being led to the slaughter.

Double doors open to a spacious board room.

A polished large wooden table takes central position. Floor to ceiling

windows. One eighty degree view of the city below. The dirty old river rolled beneath the Waterloo Bridge. Capturing the twin's attention.

"Hey, that's where we played the other night." Points out Taylor. His finger smudges the glass.

"Sorry." Using a sleeve to wipe it away.

"Don't worry about that." Seth lied.

Bling was everywhere. Turning the enchanted kingdom into a wonderland bewitching the children trapped within.

"Drink perhaps?" Offered Seth.

"Wouldn't say no." Responds Ness looking to Taylor if he was in. Eyes light up as large as saucers, free booze was always welcomed.

"Take a seat while you wait for Ms Helliwell to return with the contracts... All rather dull and boring... We keep the fine print to a minimum." Perjuring himself.

"Only wish Terry was here to read it... He knows about these things." Remarks Gareth.

"Does he now? And where is he exactly did you say?" Seth pressured Gareth for answer.

Unsure if he wanted to answer, more so with the others in the room. So he just said it and let the others make up their own mind.

"Locked up in a cell... Over... There." Pointing to the Metropolitan.

"Oh dear..." Hesitates Seth, "... Why?"

"She's been stalking a woman... And striking a police officer."

"How come you never told us?" Asked Sal feeling left out.

"He wanted no one to know. Especially his parents. Especially Lorraine. If she knows, then everyone would know."

Seth is taken back by the sudden turn of events.

"He due in court again Friday." Informs Gareth.

"*Again?*" Questioned Seth.

"The first was just a primary hearing... They decided to press charges. Unless we come up with a thousand pounds bond for his bail he's stuck in *there*... He could be facing jail time."

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." Sings Seth, playing out scenarios in his head.

"Is that going to be a *problem?*" Asked Gareth anxiously.

"For you no... For him... Yes." Responds Seth with a worried look on his face.

"How?" Asked Gareth tentatively, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“Well... We can't have a band manager guilty of being a sexual predator can we? ... That sort of thing can *ruin* a band. As for assaulting an officer of the law. ... I don't know.”

Melissa appears at the door, weighted down with contracts. Laying them on the table.

“Why don't you look these over while I have a word with Archie, Mister Sykes, about Terry's *situation* ... I'm sure we can work something out...” He lied, pushing the thick documents towards the four unlettered men grinning, “... If you excuse me.”

Sal opens his copy and is hit by a barrage of words.

It was a language he had never seen before.

“What does *Joint and Several Liability* mean?” Asked Taylor thinking it had something to do with drugs.

“*Rati-fic-cat-ion*... That sounds dirty.” Remarks Ness.

“Cav-eat Emp-tor? ... I've heard of that... That can't be good, can it?” Asked Sal screwing his face.

“These sentences are so long I have to take a breath just to through them... You sure these are in English?”

“I wish Terry was here... We can't sign these unless Terry reads them over.” Remarked Gareth feeling the weight of his.

Then there was the *fine print*. The font that required a magnify glass to read. Gareth sniffed his copy as if it did not smell right. Taylor sees him and sniffs his contract as well.

“Smells okay to me.” Said Ness.

“*Unbelievable*.” Remarks Sal about to reach over and jab him with a stick, only to be mired by Seth entering the room again.

“Boys... How were they?” He asked rhetorically, “... Just spoke with Archie and he's happy to wait for Terry to sign his copy when he gets out.” Seth lied.

“That's great, thanks Seth. But...”

“But?” Seth leans forward concerned with the tone of the *'But'*.

“We can't understand these...,” Holding out his copy, “...You sure they're *kosher*?”

“On my mother's grave... Trust me, these are industry standard... Take them to any lawyer and they will tell you.” Knowing they would not call his bluff, bands never did.

They could not afford fancy contract lawyers. Then sweetens the deal,

omitting the impinging covenants.

“You get fifty percent of all sales, less overheads and administration costs and our commissions of course... You could be in the studio as early as next week and on the shelves within months after that... How does that sound?” Takes a satisfying sigh having delivered the sales pitch.

Knowing Archie would be outside listening. His feet throwing a shadow beneath the door.

“Really? Fifty percent?” Said Gareth.

“Less our small commission, I have to maintain my *life style*.” Gesturing his office.

“Wow! We’re rich!” Exclaimed Taylor.

“Keep writing those *silly love songs* and all this could be yours.” Gesturing the board room that could never be.

“Where do we sign?” Asked Ness excitedly.

Knowing the others would not sign until Gareth had, pulls out a personal fountain pen he used for such occasions. Handing it to Gareth as a gesture of faith. Feeling like a nail from the holy cross itself. It certainly carried with it as many sins. Pulling the cap from the pen secures it firmly to the other end.

“Initial the bottom of each page and sign where it states your name on the last page.” Directs Seth watching his lover follow his instructions to the letter.

Watching over his shoulder, grinning as though the devil had acquired another fallen soul. Archie returned to his office. The Ravens’ web site had over a million *Likes* and continued to climb. Terry would be forgotten and another appointed. The company could not have a predator stain their reputation. Their reputation was bad enough without completion.

“I’ll get these originals copied... Ms Helliwell!” Seth calls out to the doorway, who suddenly appears, “...Be a dear and get these copied for the boys before they leave.”

“Certainly Mister Meyers, one moment please.” Grinning at Seth. He had weaved his deception.

“A drink to celebrate our new partnership... Whiskey oaky for you boys... You have ID’s” Seth jokes.

Ness pulls out his wallet and a driver’s license.

“*Unbelievable*.” Said Sal about to tap him on the head.

“Take the weight of your feet boys. The world is your oyster now... And you are my pearls.”

Gareth looks out the window to the city below.

Thinking of Terry rotting in a police cell awaiting trial. Maybe it was the best place for him. The last thing he needed was have him chasing a deluded dream. Allowing the thousand pounds slip from his mind as the whiskey soaked into him. Softening his inhibitions and releasing the hold Terry had on him. He had just signed a recording contract.

The *Fifty percent* stuck firmly in his mind, as it was meant. Planted like a seed by the Devil himself.

“You okay Gareth?” Asked Seth standing behind him, his hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah_ I’m good now.” Gareth sighed.

“And Terry?” Seth probed Gareth’s feelings for him.

“I think Terry will be fine where he is until after the trial.” He concedes looking over the dirty old river.

“I think so too... Let’s not rock Terry boat... One thing people shouldn’t interfere with, is other people’s lives.” Offers Seth philosophically.

“He’ll be out and back home again by Saturday.” Said Gareth reconciling the betrayal.

“Of course he will be...” Seth lied, “... We can start recording next week, get a single out... How you like that?”

“Really? As soon as that?” Distracting Gareth from his grey thoughts.

“Really my love.” Kissing the top of Gareth’s head.

Catching the other’s attention. Looking at each other as to what that had just happened.

“*Oh_ dear_ ...* They don’t know, do they?” Asked Seth looking back at them.

“They do now.” Confesses Gareth sinking lower in his chair.

“Know what?” Asked Ness.

“*Unbelievable.*” Remarked Sal reaching for a drum stick.

“You signed, that’s great! ... Wow, fifty percent? You read the contract right? ... What do you mean you couldn’t? ... Shit, they could be screwing you over man... Sorry... You know what I mean... Yeah... What about the thousand quid?”

There was an awkward silence before Gareth’s replied.

“Eh? ... Don’t worry about it!? ... Shit man I’m stuck in here man, I have to get out...” Trying to keep his voice down on the monitored call, “...To go

home.” Terry lied, “... Oh man_ I was hoping like hell you’d get the money... Let’s just hope the case gets thrown out on Friday... Tell my folks I’ll be back on Saturday okay? ... Congrats man, you did it... Bye.”

Terry hangs up the handset. Well-worn over the decades. Solid, robust and defiant as the prisoners that had used it. The wall etched with numbers and abusive graffiti and symbols of defiance.

Wandering back to his cell. An officer shadows his steps. The door slams behind him. Plans of escape now evaporating before his eyes. The pale green cell would be his home a while yet. Curling into a fetal position, as though to withdraw to his mother’s womb. Another cell he had done a nine month sentence.

In solitary confinement.

Chapter 34

‘Slide-clang-clunk.’ The small iron window opens.

Terry ignores the officer inspecting him.

“Davies! ...” A voice growls at him, “... Davies! Wake up. You have a visitor! ... Or should I tell her to go away?”

‘Her? A woman? Please don’t let it be my mother... Lorraine, of course... She might have the money.’ His mind excited into overdrive with possibilities.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” Suddenly sitting upright, running fingers through his hair. Composing himself and flattening out wrinkled clothes.

“Tell that to your girlfriend... Now hurry up. I don’t have all day Romeo!” The guard barks with frustration.

“It’s not my mother.” Terry rationalizes. Sighing some relief.

On entering the visitor’s room he was surprised to see the woman quietly awaiting his arrival.

“What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here... Are you?” Looking about the visitor’s room if the guards were in on it.

“Shhh!” Warns Julie, smiling back to the officer to say all is fine. Her eyes suggesting Terry should take a seat and keep his mouth shut.

“S’up.” Asked Terry pretending everything was cool to the guard.

“Sit down Terry we don’t have much time.” She warns him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know myself... It doesn’t make sense... It’s like a *weird dream*.”

“Tell me about it... Sorry.”

“There are things I can’t explain.” She begins.

“You remember?” His eyes light up with hope.

“Bits and pieces... Flashes... Am I going crazy?” She asked him looking into his eyes.

“If you are, then so am I... I need to get out of here to make it right again... I screwed up.”

“How?”

“I should never have called you... Visited you... You weren’t ready.”

“How did we meet? ... The first time?”

“I followed your voice... And there you were... Singing and looking so *beautiful*... Your red beret... We chatted about the band and you took me...”

“Where?” She asked anxiously.

“The Vault.” Terry fears to speak the word.

“Yeah... Yeah.” Visualizing the moment, “...I had carrot cake... I hate carrot cake... But I ate it because you liked it.”

“You did that for me?”

“Yeah.” Embarrassed eyes look down.

Silence falls between the two. Trying to rationalize the unexplainable.

“You gave me your number on a napkin... It’s in my wallet. They have it.”

“How did you... You know, go back?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Try me.”

“I don’t think you would understand.” Said Terry, really not wanting to say how.

She looks at him and reaches for his hand. Indifferent to the guard watching on. Her look suggested she would not leave until he had.

“The Devil.” He spat out.

“The Vault right?”

“That’s right... How’d you know?”

“I’ve heard stories... The place is haunted. That’s what I like about it.”
Revealing a darker side.

“After everyone went back home after the gig, I couldn’t sleep... I headed back there to kill some time... It’s a different place at night than the day... People wandering about in costumes and weird peculiar masks... It gave me the creeps... There was this sign... A red sign over an entrance... An alleyway during the day... A doorway in the early hours of the morning.

Intrigued, she leans forward to confirm what she had heard,

“Upstairs there was a bar... Like an old cowboy saloon... A bunch of guys playing cards at the back... The barman pours me a few shots and before you know it I make a wish.”

“A wish... What kind of wish?”

“That I could do it all differently... Zap... The room spins and I wake up four weeks earlier before it all begun... You pepper spray me... Here I am... That’s pretty much about it.”

“I believe you.” How else could she explain why she was sitting in front of a stranger?

“You do?” He did not believe himself, how could she?

“Yeah... I do.” Taking a leap of faith.

“But how do I get out of here... You heard the Judge he wants to throw the book at me.”

“I could have a word on your behalf... Say it was all a misunderstanding.”

“The police pressed the assault charges not you. They would dismiss the harassment, but not striking an officer... My lawyer said I could be doing time.”

“So what do we do?” She asked.

“*We?* ... I can't involve you Julie.”

“You love me?” She asked him.

“The moment I saw you...” Confesses Terry, “... I need to get out of here.”

Eyes shift to the voice speaking of escape. Suggesting they should to keep it down.

“Leave that to me...” She stands to leave, leans over and kisses him, “... Just as I remembered.”

Terry sits stunned, reluctant to go back to his cell.

“What are you going to do?”

“You'll find out tomorrow... I've got to go to work.” She said about to leave.

Playing fingers to the bone.

Her voice course and strained from busking for twelve hours continuous. Sometimes only to a few lost souls that had sort shelter in the underground. Lamenting Terry locked in prison as she played. Benevolent strangers throw money to her case. A CCTV camera stands guard over the lass singing her soul out.

Eyeing the takings, she had the balance she needed.

Standing on Waterloo Bridge with guitar case in hand, she watched the sunrise. There was a familiar feeling about it. As if someone was missing. She hails a cab back to her flat. Retrieving the cake tin. Sometimes we cannot explain why we do things. We just do. As though by an unseen guiding hand that nudges us one way or the other. The choice is not always ours.

“Hey? ...” Her sister calls out seeing her enter, “... Where you been? I've been worried about you. You didn't come home last night. You okay? You look shattered.”

“Yeah sorry, I should have called... Been busking.”

“All night?”

“Yeah... I needed the money.”

“You could have asked me.” Her sister offers.

“Thanks, but some things I have to do on my own... I have to ask a favor

though... A *big* favor.”

“How big? ... What have you done?” Her sister looks at her suspiciously.

“Nothing honest.” She lied.

“What’s the favor?”

“Can a friend of mine stay a couple to nights?”

“A boy friend? You know what I think about you bringing back guys with the girls here.”

“I know I know, but he has no place to stay before he... *Leaves.*”

“I don’t know Julie.”

“If you don’t like him he’ll go to a hostel or something.”

“Okay...” Her sister accepts reluctantly.

“Deal.” Hurrying to her room.

“What’s the rush? ... Sit down and have some breakfast... Five minutes off her feet would not hurt you.” Insists her sister.

“Yea_!” Two young girls squeal, faces smeared with marmite and crumbs.

Julie sips on a fresh cup of tea and takes a moment to relax. Hyped from lack of sleep. Eye lids struggle to stay open.

“You need to sleep.” Her sister tells her.

“I know... Just need to do something first.” She could sleep when she came back.

The sun raised higher. Poking a finger at her through the window. Unsure why she was doing what she was doing. Only that it felt the right thing to do, as though she had a destiny to fulfil.

Pulling a lotto ticket from her handbag, hoping it would add something to the kitty. Opens the newspaper and searches for the previous evening’s results. Writing the winning numbers at the top of the ticket, and compares them to her lucky numbers.

“Nothing... You expect one, wouldn’t you?” Julie tells her nieces wondering what the magic numbers were all about.

“I don’t know why you waste you money on those things.” Advises her sister.

“You have to be in to win... One day, you’ll see!” Responds Julie dejected and putting the ticket back into her bag.

Spilling the contents of the biscuit tin over the counter.

Pushing it towards the officer to count.

“What’s this for?” Asked the officer behind the punctured perplex screen.

“Terry Davies.” She tells the officer wearily.

“You know you’re not buying him?” Enquired the officer just in case the tired looking woman had different intentions.

“I know... I just want to borrow him?” She joked. The joke not going down well.

Tapping computer keys searches for Terry’s file.

“Ah... Here it is... One thousand pounds... You a relation?”

“*Girlfriend.*” The words felt natural.

“Oh... Very well then. One moment please.” Beginning to count out the notes and change into stacks. After some time, “...Nine hundred and ninety nine... One thousand...” Almost out of breath. “... An electronic transfer would be easier you know?”

“Sorry.” Offering a sweet smile to soften the Officers annoyance.

Pushing back the balance of five pounds to her. Seeing a police donation box slides the note into it.

“Sign here... Here and there. And he’s all yours Ms... Julie Sutherland.” He reads out her name.

She makes her mark, and adds an old address. Pushing the forms back through the opening beneath the window. Picking up a phone the officer dials a call.

“Yeah... Davies... That right.” Then hangs up and taps confirmation of the bond into the system.

“Wait there.” Indicating for her to take a seat.

Unsure if she was half awake or half asleep. The past twenty four hours had been surreal. Slumping onto a hard wooden bench. Inviting her to lay down. She resisted the devil’s temptation. Focusing on the wall opposite and the green door at its center. That could open at any moment.

‘Slide-clang-clunk!’ The small iron window opens on the cell door.

Terry ignores the guard inspecting him. Fidgeting to get himself comfortable on the itchy blanket.

“Davies! ...” A voice growls at him, “... Davies! Wake up. You’re free to go! ... Your girlfriend has bailed you out.” The guard barks annoyed seeing his prey about to walk.

“*Girlfriend?!’*”

‘Lorraine? What’s she doing here?’ Immediate thoughts enter his head.

Abruptly, eyes open widely with the sudden rush of adrenalin now surging

through his veins. Jumping off the bed as though it was on fire.

“Steady down Romeo! Stand back from the door!” The guard barks again.

Terry stands back obediently. Anxiously biting at the bit to leave. Like a thoroughbred in the starter gates about to spring open.

“This way!” The guard orders taking him to a counter where a box sits. Inside his sole possessions of belt, shoes, wallet and precious but broken cell phone. The battery now long since flat. Feeling its familiar contours and weight. It was like being naked without it.

“Sign here... Here and there.” Instructs the officer.

Making his marks, shuffles feet into shoes and secure his belt. Checking his wallet, still as empty as when he arrived.

“This way Romeo.” Directs the guard.

Terry followed without looking back.

Pushing open a green door that opened to the reception foyer. To find Julie leaning on a bench seat opposite as though she was about to keel over.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” He asked surprised.

“You expecting someone else?”

“No... I just wasn't expecting to see you so soon.”

“Hey Romeo!?” An officer call out to catch his attention.

Terry looks back at the officer filling the doorway.

“Don't forget you're due in court tomorrow! Don't be late, or you're back in here. And your girlfriend forfeits the bond money...Understand?!” Lectures the officer coldly.

“Yes Officer.” Responds Terry lying.

“Off you go ... Be a good boy now.” Instructs the officer wishing to see the back of him.

“You okay? You look like you haven't slept all night? Aren't those the same clothes as yesterday?”

“You're one to talk.” She yawns in capable of disagreeing.

“Where we going? I can't go... My parents will be all over me.” His mind searching for a place to hide out.

“My sister's place.”

“You're sister's place?” Echoing her response.

“Yeah... Come on.” Taking him by the hand.

CCTV cameras watched the odd couple leave. She looked familiar, as if they had seen her before somewhere. Eyes all over the city followed them until the

suspicious behaving public stretched their abilities to be in several places at once. One by one, the two frayed individuals blended themselves back into the streets of London. And became part of the whole again.

After a bus ride and sometime walking, they turn onto a side street.

Between a two convenient stores Julie inserts a key into a lock and pushes open the door. A narrow flight of stairs led to an upper floor of flats. Then another key and another lock. Warily she pushes it open relieved to be home. Closing the door behind him Terry takes in the homely flat. Toys scattered about the floor suggested children of a young age. The place had a warmth and smell that made it feel like a *home*.

He felt safe.

“Kitchen, bathroom, lounge... *Bedroom...*” She said the word as if it were gold, “... Make yourself at home... (*Yawn*)... I’m going to bed... We can talk later.” She waves back at him entering a bedroom.

Terry follows moments later only to discover Julie had collapsed face first onto a bed. Asleep. Taking a blanket he throws it over her and draws the curtains from the mid-morning light. Sitting on the edge of the bed he takes in the angel that had saved him.

Knowing he had to go back to make things right. Knowing he would be convicted of criminal assault and face jail time. Knowing that it would spell the end of his dream as the band’s manager. Knowing the record company would not have a bar of him. Knowing the band had signed and he had not. Knowing he was damned if he stuck around.

Then there was the girl on the bed.

The girl that had somehow entered his life four weeks ago. The same girl that had managed to inadvertently get him locked up. He had to find a way to make it right again. For him. For the band. For Julie. Looking down at her sleeping. Leaned down and kissed her forehead. Feeling the warmth of her skin on his lips.

‘Let her sleep.’ He told himself. Creeping quietly from the room, closing the door partly behind him. *‘...A hot shower and a cup of tea! ... Charge the mobile.’* Prioritizing his thoughts. Now looking about the wall sockets for a charger.

Locating the small bathroom. Yellow rubber ducks and squeaky toys littered the shower tub lined with a floral nylon curtain.

After five days in a police holding cell. This would be luxury.

Chapter 35

There must have been fifty missed calls from his parents.

But nothing could encourage him to call her. He just was not ready to face his mother. And decides to ring the next best surrogate. Gareth.

“Gareth... It’s me Terry... I’m out.”

“Terry, where are you man? Everyone is worried about you.”

“Can’t say man... With a friend. They bailed me out, for now.”

“I thought we were friends?”

“We are man... I just need some time to myself man... I can’t go home... Not yet.”

“You have to... I’ve been trying to get hold of you”

“My mobile’s been dead, just charged it now.”

“It’s your mother Terry.” Unsure how to tell him.

“Why what’s happened?”

“She’s in hospital man.”

“Hospital? Eh? ... How?”

“Apparently Lorraine opened her mouth at the salon... Thought your mother knew about... You know... You being in locked up... Giving her all the sordid details about how you stalked some girl and struck a police officer.”

“But I didn’t... What happened?”

“She had a heart attack from the shock man... Right in the chair!”

“Shit man! Who told Lorraine?”

“Mary McKinnon... Who heard it from, you know who.”

“Those bloody twins! ... So help me God I’ll swing for those two.” Vows Terry.

“Not if I see them first... They’ve been shooting their mouths off about not just you man.”

It took a moment for Terry to register.

“Oh no man... I’m so_ sorry... What have I done?”

“Nah_ Its okay man... It was going to come out one sooner than later ... Can’t go on living in a closet all my life. Actually... I relieved.”

“Good on you man. I’m proud of you.” Said Terry.

“Thanks man it means a lot.”

“How’s my dad handling all this?”

“Not well, but I think he’s expecting a call from you to explain yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah... I’ll do that after this call.” Said Terry hesitantly.

Terry hears the down stairs door closing below outside. Thinking someone was about to enter the flat. Maybe her sister.

“Hey man... I have to go... Catch you soon.” And tries to hang up before Gareth stopped him.

“Wait up!” Pleads Gareth catching Terry before he could hang up.

“What?” Hearing ascending steps getting closer. Voices. Children’s voices.

“Seth wants to drop you as our manager... Sorry man.” Informed Gareth reluctantly.

The demoralizing news was served cold. Terry swallowed it whole without chewing.

“I expected that... Don’t worry man... I’ll fix it... Got to go man, bye.” Hanging up on him.

And waits anxiously for whoever would appear through the door at any moment.

Children’s voices squealed and giggled mischievously. Keys jiggle in the lock and the door opened followed by two squealing urchins rushing into the room. Halting in their tracks upon seeing a strange man confronting them.

“*Mommy?*” A child responded eyeing Terry over.

“It’s okay sweetie... You must be Julie’s friend?” Asked the child’s mother.

Two small faces look at the curious kind face. Waiting for the strange man to speak.

“Hey, yeah. That’s right... I’m Terry” Extending his hand, “... Sorry.”

“Ellen. Don’t need to apologize... Where’s Julie?” Ellen looks about for her in the kitchen.

“She’s asleep...” Tilting his head towards the bed room, “... She been out most of the day... Don’t think she slept last night.”

“Busking for some absurd reason... That’s Julie for you.”

“Yeah.” Realizing what she had done for him.

Two hyperactive children rushed to the darkened room, leaping onto the bed to wake their sleeping aunt. Giggling playfully. Jumping up and down on her bed either side of her. Wrestling her from a bizarre dream.

“Hey... Let her be!” But it was too late.

“I’m awake... I’m awake.” A sleepy voice ruptures from the doorway. Followed by squeals and giggles.

“How you two know each other?” Ellen asked curiously.

“Musos... I manage a band... Well I use to.”

“Oh I’m sorry...” Making the connection, “...Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Let me...” Offered Terry taking her back, “... I think I know where everything is. You go save Julie.”

“Thanks...Terry was it?” She smile charmed.

“That’s right.” Reciprocating her smile.

Julie appeared looking worse than she had before she had slept.

Dragging the unspent sleep in her wake. Arms shackled by two infant weights.

“Hey, I have an idea... Why don’t you play with *Uncle* Terry while I have a shower? ...” Leading them closer to him on the couch, “...Make sure he doesn’t eat you. He loves little children... Hmm... This one is ripe Terry.” Feeling her niece’s arm.

Terry feels the small arm tenderly.

“Hmm... You’re right... Maybe for dinner.” Eyeing the child and licking his lips, “... Hmmm. Yummy.” He grins at the appealing morsel.

“Eeeeekkkkhhh!” The child squeals and runs to hide behind their mother.

“He won’t eat... If you behave yourself.” She warns them.

“I can’t eat well behaved children... Only the naughty ones... Which are you? ...“... (*Sniff-sniff-sniff*).” Sniffing the air.

Tentatively the children approach the couch to sit either side of him. Carefully examining the strange man.

“Shouldn’t you guys be at school?” He lied.

“Nooooooo!” The four and three old sang back at him.

“Oh... What’s your name?”

“Eve.”

“And you?” Looking down upon the smiling face looking back at him.

“Isabel.”

“What *beautiful* names... How’d you like me to read you a story?”

“Yeeaaaaa!” Two voices cry out running away and returning with armfuls of picture books.

“Oh... This one’s my favorite...” Remarks Terry examining the cover.

Snuggling either side of Terry, feeling safe. The children listened intently to the soft voice reading aloud and making animal sounds. Julie grinned and looked to her sister giving her a wink.

Standing outside on the street.

Away from prying ears Terry phoned home. Unable to get a response, tries

his father's mobile. And waits an eternity for it to be answered. Unsure what he would say or how he would be able to explain his predicament that was blossoming out of control by the moment.

"Dad! ... It's me, Terry."

"Terry! Where are you?" Asked his father exasperated on hearing his son's voice.

"I'm at a friend's for now... How's mom?"

"She's in hospital... Its touch and go son... What have you done?"

"I've done nothing Dad... Lorraine opened her mouth... Next thing I know I'm being kicked and sprayed and Tasered by the police."

"Tasered? Christ son. Come home... Whatever you have done, we can sort this out." Pleads his father.

"Soon... Not yet... I've got to do something first."

"Haven't you done enough already Terry." He beseeches him

"I started it dad, I'm going to finish it... I promise... I've got to go dad."

"Terry! Terry! Don't hang up on me!" His father warns him frantically.

"Tell mom I love her... I love you too... Bye." Hanging up before his father could say otherwise.

'That went well...' He thought. '...Not.'

His mind hatching a plan that would return to normal after he goes back. Jump bail. Skip the court case. Make a run for the bar. Julie would lose her money. Or would she? Trying to unravel the pretzel of twisted time.

"Hey you." Julie appears from no-where with a mug of tea in her hand for him.

"Thanks... How'd you sleep?"

"Unbelievable... Until those two came along."

"Great kids though... Yours?"

"I'd be so lucky... My sister's... You seem a natural."

"My brother has kids. Not quite like those angels."

"Angels? You caught them on a good day.... Penny for your thoughts?" She prompts him.

"Don't think you want to know them."

"I know you can't go to court tomorrow." She tells him.

"Eh?" Taking him by surprise.

"Well not if you're thinking of going *back* and changing all *this*."

"What about the bond? I don't know what exactly is going happen."

“Terry, where ever you are, I am... Do this for me... Do this for Julie.”

“How do I get to the Vault without being seen? There’ll be cameras everywhere looking out for me... Facial recognition all that.” Frets Terry looking about, but not above him.

“Let me worry about that... I have an idea.” She grins.

“What idea?”

“Come inside, dinners almost ready... Bangers and mash. Hope you like them.”

“Does your sister know my mother?” He asked laughing.

There was an awkwardness around the dinner table.

Ellen probed Terry with questions about where he was from and where he was going.

“Muswell Hills? That just up the road?” Said Ellen wondering why he needed to stay the night.

“I’m actually heading up to Liverpool and I wanted to avoid seeing the folks... If you know what I mean.” Thinking on his feet.

“Yeah... When you heading off?”

“Saturday evening... Late.”

“Oh... Okay then... Why don’t you make yourself comfortable on the couch? I’ll fetch you a blanket and pillow later.”

“That’ll be great, thanks I really appreciate you putting me up at short notice.”

“That’s okay... The kids seem to have taken a shine to you.”

“Yeah, so it seems.”

“Why don’t you go make yourself comfortable, while I’ll put the kettle on?” Said Ellen clearing away the plates.

“I could do that.”

“You’ve done enough today... Go you two.” Ellen tells the pair.

“I think she like’s you.” Said Julie.

“What about you?” He asked cheekily.

“I don’t like you.”

“Eh? You don’t?”

“No... I *love* you.” And she kisses him on the lips only to be kissed right back.

“Get a room!” Ellen calls out from the kitchen.

Street lamps leaked through thin curtains, illuminating the lounge with an eerie

light.

Bleaching the color from the room. Turning it into a surreal world of grey objects. Strange noises surrounded Terry as he lay on the fold out couch bed. A comfort after the hard crib in the holding cell. Unable to sleep. Looking at his watch. Waiting impatiently for midnight to tick over. Friday. The day he would become a wanted man. A fugitive on the run.

Somewhere in the early hours he surrendered to the encroaching sleep. Caught between worlds. Time surged through his veins. Visions of demons and creepy crawly creatures from the underworld appear like a dream. Squealing smothering bodies with life like claws clutch at him. Flashes of bright light blind him. Hideous screams and laughter ring in his ears. Struggling to free himself, hyperventilating, gasps for breath and sits upright. It all felt so real. Only to startle the assailing rascals.

“Leave him alone girls!” Their mother calls out.

“Oh... You two? ... I should have known... *(Sniff-sniff)* ... I feel hungry... *Roar_!*” He growls, causing the girls to run away squealing hysterically to hide.

Terry smiles at two faces peering from behind their mother.

“Maybe I’ll have some toast and a nice cup of tea instead.”

“How’d you sleep?” Ellen asked.

“Wonderful... Grateful for a bed. Thanks again. Where’s Jules?”

“She’s a heavy sleepy... Why don’t you take her this?” Handing him a cup of tea.

Entering the darkened room, vacant of mutant monsters.

Terry accidently steps on a squeaky toy and halts in his tracks. Julie stirs momentarily, nestling her head into the pillow reluctant to shake the dream that had taken hold.

Placing the cup on a side table, Terry kisses her forehead and watches her stir as eye lids flicker and struggle to stay open.

“Hey... Mm.” A sleepy voice murmurs. Making out Terry sitting beside her.

“Hey you... Cuppa for you.”

He kisses her and she responds in kind. Hands reach and pull at him to join her in bed.

“Your sister... *Later.*” Kissing her again frees himself from her burning desires.

“I have to take these two to daycare. Then to work... You two going to be okay?”

“You could leave them with us.” Offered Terry.

“Yea_!” Two girls scream out hopefully of a day with their *uncle* Terry.

“I wouldn’t wish these two on the Devil.” Warned Ellen,

Two Jinn’s grinning either side of their mother. Innocent blue eyes betray their mischievous intentions.

“Tonight okay?” Said Terry.

“Yea_!” The girls jump up and down.

“Make sure she gets some rest... No busking.”

“I’ll make sure she stays put... You have a fantastic day Ellen.” Responds Terry.

“You two Terry... Don’t do anything I haven’t done already... Come on you two!”

“Bye_!” He calls out watching them leave and closing the door behind them.

A lock latches sounding his incarceration again.

But this was a captivity he did not mind. Alone at last. Well almost alone. In another room, Julie lay sleeping.

Chapter 36

08:07AM.

Two hours until his scheduled court appearance. An appearance he would never make. Deciding he would wash the impending sin away with a shower. Water runs over his body. Refreshing and tingling. The rushing water drowns out the sound of the curtain opening and closing behind him. Hands run down his back and he feels a gentleness in their touch. A sensual caress. Reaching around him. A head rests against his back and feels the warm softness of a Julie's naked body.

Turning cautiously around. The shower was not big enough for them both. But somehow they made it worked. Water splashes over Julie's face and hair. They kiss and hands roam. Touching in a way that lovers touch. Gentle and sensual. Leading him from the shower to her bedroom. To make love as if they were soul mates re-united after eons of separation. Hungering to be feed, he filled her with his love. A divine ecstasy overcomes her. Collapsing on the bed beside each other. Foreheads touched. Patting breaths exchanged.

The Jinn curses beneath his breath. His mind ablaze with the vision of the lovers.

"You can't interfere... You of all... Should know the meaning of love." The Dealer reminds him.

Disgruntled, the Jinn polishes a shot glass. Sparkling with a divine light shining from it.

"He'll be back." The Jinn stakes his claim to the soul.

"I know... Until then... Let him chose his own path... The seed has been planted."

Two bodies lay exhausted on the bed staring at the ceiling.

Unable to speak. Panting. Satisfied. Julie feels a warm glow in her womb. It was too late for precautions. Somehow it felt right. It felt natural. Rolling over, cuddles him. Eyes examine the profile of the man lying beside her. By tomorrow evening, he would gone from her life. Again.

"What time's the court hearing?"

"Ten... I'm not going."

"I know... I don't want you to."

"What time is it now?"

“Nine-thirty.”

“Where’s your mobile?” She asked curiously.

“In the lounge... Why?”

“Stay here.” She stands and walks calmly from the room.

Terry watches her naked silhouetted body in the doorway.

“You had a missed called... *Dad?*” She reads the caller ID.

“I’ll call him back later.” Dismissing the call. Not wanting to engage his father again.

“Not on this phone you won’t.” Pulling away the back cover away.

“Hey? ... What are you doing?” Seeing her remove the SIM card and slipped it into the change pocket of his wallet,

“Hey, I need that!”

“No you don’t... *They* can track you.” Looking at the window to big brother peering in.

“Oh, right.” Reality catching up with him.

“You can use when you get *back*.” She tells him.

Pulling a piece of paper from her hand bag, scribbles a message on the back to herself.

“Drop this in my case and *don’t* speak to me... Only *I* will know what it means... Then walk away. Okay?”

“I don’t understand?”

“Just walk away... And don’t bring Lorraine *this time!* ...” She warns him. Securing the note into the wallet, “... Don’t *read* it. And don’t *lose* it! ... The less you know the better.”

“Okay... I promise...” Overwhelmed by the instructions.

Content just to lay there and left the day past by outside, he pulls her close.

“What did you do before *this?*” He asked curiously, wondering how she got into busking.

“I wanted to be a singer, my parents wanted me to stay at Law School.”

“You dropped out of law school?” He questioned her decision.

“I couldn’t do it... My parents pushed me into it... It wasn’t me. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah I think I do.” Responds Terry looking to the ceiling, his own life choices no better.

“You?”

“I’ve always wanted to be a muso, like my dad I suppose... It’s in my DNA I

guess.”

“Your father is into music?”

“Was... Once... Before my mother fell pregnant with my brother... I’m carrying on where he left off...” Thinking about his father, “... He’s the only one that understands me.”

“I understand you...” She kisses him, “... You have to be passionate about what you do... You know... Otherwise you’re just working for the man...”

“... Waiting to die...” Said Terry in unison with hers as though he could read her mind.

“Yeah...” Kissing him again to reward him, “... What do you want to do today?”

“You.” He said smiling from ear to ear.

11:13AM.

“I’m officially a wanted man.” Terry said to himself, eyes squint to his watch on the side table in the shaded room.

Outside time passed perturbed. Rippled. As though someone had thrown a stone upon a calm pond. The stone rolled over and wrapped his arm over Julie. Wondering what was going through her mind as she laid sleeping. Kissing her gently so as not to wake her.

“Mm_.” She murmurs. The corner of her mouth twitches only to be fought back by sleep.

“I could stay here for the rest of my life like this.” He whispers in sleepy voice. Reluctant to leave her again.

“Mm_.” She murmurs again beginning to stir.

Rolling over, foreheads touch. Breaths shared. Pulling a sheet over their heads to hide from the world outside. Suspending himself in the moment. Wishing the moment would never pass. As disturbed ripples of time passed over outside the sheet.

‘Damn that wish.’ He thought.

What should have been so simple, had become malignant. Why had he ever gone in there? Beneath the sheet, he begins to hear voices. As if they were in the room. Card players. Calling bets and cussing each other. Fearful of lifting the sheet, like a little boy hiding from a monster beneath the bed.

‘Monsters aren’t under the bed Terry, they’re within you.’ Terry hears a voice inside his head.

“Leave the boy alone.” Another voice warns the Jinn.

Voices fade and the room falls silent. Looking to Julie unaware of the ethereal visitors. His heart racing. Tries to calm himself with the warm body beside him. Her stillness to become his. Matching her breathing. Fingers guide softly of over her womanly contours. Fingers rousing sensitive regions. Moans surface to register their presence. Surrendering willfully to his intrusion.

Time stutters to the beat of the street outside the window. Shop owners call out bargains to passersby. Lorries and buses and taxis and mopeds sing in chaotic harmony. Morning turned to noon and noon to the afternoon.

But within the dimly lit room, time had stood still.

An arm reaches out only to feel a coldness on the sheet where a warm body had once been.

Eyes open and Terry awakes to find himself alone in the room. Hearing the sound of a shower leaking down the hallway. Squints at his watch. 4:27PM.

'Oh my God? Where did day go?' He thinks dazed and confused.

Reluctant to move. His body paralyzed by sleep. Pulls Julie's pillow and cuddles it. Smelling her residual scent.

"Hey! That's my pillow!" Julie enters the room seeing him being unfaithful.

"Finders keepers." Terry moans resisting the need to wake.

Abruptly Julie pulls open the curtain and the room floods with brilliant sunlight tainted with time. The latter disturbing Terry more than the former. Pulling a sheet over his head. Only to have it wrenched down by Julie.

"Ellen will be home soon... Come on bones." She warns him.

"Come here." Words betraying their intentions.

Sitting on the edge of the bed. A towel wrapped about her body. Terry sits up and smells the fragrance of the soap and shampoo.

"You smell nice." Leaning forward about to kiss her. Only to capture her and pull her onto the bed.

Wrestling with him. Desperately trying to resist his carnal advances. Playfully she succumbs to his advances and pins him down on the bed. Straddling his loins. The towel falls open.

"Oops! ... Wardrobe malfunction." She giggles.

"We're home!" Ellen calls out closing the door behind her.

Two excited imps rush past Julie as though she was invisible, in search of their *uncle* Terry. Squeals erupt from the bedroom as they capture their prey and drag him by the hand to the lounge.

"How was your day?" Ellen asked seeing nothing unchanged from the

morning.

“Quiet.” Responding sheepishly.

“Oh really... That’s unlike you.” She grinned. The smell of sex hung heavily in the air.

“I’ll put the kettle on.” Rebuffed Julie.

“Girls... Be gentle with *Uncle Terry* now.” Watching them climb over him like a jungle gym.

“Who shall I eat first?” Asked Terry eyes darting between the two girls.

“Me!” Squeals Eve with eyes as big as saucers.

“No, me!” Squeals Isabel not to be left out.

“Hmm...” Groans Terry feeling their forearms, “... You’re not ripe. You have been eating your vegetables haven’t you?”

Two small faces look at each other unsure what to make of their child eating uncle. Eve runs off squealing, soon followed by her younger sister to hide behind their mother’s legs.

“Peace at last.” Reaching for his mobile only to discover no signal, no provider. Julie shakes her head to what he was thinking.

“Use mine.” She tells him.

“Who’s this?” Asked Gareth answering the unknown number.

“Gareth, it’s me Terry.” Standing outside on the street looking back to flat above the small convenient store. Seeing Julie standing at the window he waves back masking the conversation with a smile.

“Terry? Where are you? The police are looking for you. You didn’t appear in court today. What’s happening man?”

“Yeah-nah, sorry about that man. I couldn’t go through with it. I have to go back and make things right.”

“Stop with this nonsense Terry! You can’t go back anywhere. It’s just a stupid dream. Have you lost your mind man?”

“Maybe...” He begins.

Wondering if he had. Julie standing at the window told him otherwise.

“Been trying to get hold of you all day... Something terrible has happened. I don’t know how to tell you... It’s your mother...”

“What about my mother?” He asked hesitantly. Hoping the best, thinking the worse.

“She’s dead... Sorry man.”

“What? ...When?” Terry’s mind goes numb.

“Early this morning... Your dad tried to call but couldn’t get reach you... Called me hoping I knew where you were.”

Silence befell Terry. The shock that his mother had died because of him registered on his face. Events now spiraling out of control.

“Terry? Terry? You still there?” Asked Gareth.

Gareth’s voice muted by his own deafening thoughts.

“Yeah. Yeah... I think.” Short of breath as though the altered time had tightened its grip on him.

“Where are you man? I’ll come and get you. It will be okay... We can would this out. I can get the money to get you a good lawyer this time.”

But Terry was not listening. His mind abuzz with his next move. Twenty four hours until he could set it all straight again.

“Nowhere man... Somewhere, not sure myself.” Looking about the strange street that was unlike any other, “... Portugal.” Terry lies.

“Portugal? Don’t be ridiculous. You have to hand yourself in Terry... Before you make it worse for yourself.”

“Give me twenty four hours, that all I’m asking... I’ll see you Sunday morning... I promise on my mother’s grave.”

“Christ you better man, or I will personally hunt you down myself... ... I love you man.”

“I love you too Gareth... Tell dad I can’t call... He’ll understand. Tell him Sunday, I promise okay.”

“Sunday... Sorry about your mom man.”

“Me too. Bye man.” Terry hangs up, shocked, disoriented. His mother dead.

Terry looks back up to the window above the store. Julie no longer there. Sits on a bench, enjoys the early evening. With the day dimming. The Egyptian sun God hung on the horizon, about to descend into the primal darkness of the earthly corpus.

Julie appears holding a cap and sunglasses.

“You might need these.”

“What for?”

“Too many eyes around here.” She looks up to the CCTV camera directly above his head. The fugitive sitting in a blind spot.

“Oh yeah thanks.” Quietly donning the camouflage.

“Who was that?” She asked curiously.

“Gareth.”

“You guys are close aren’t you?”

“Yeah... Family...” Difficult to describe their bond. The thought prompted another to be spoken, “... My mother died.”

“Oh Terry I’m so sorry.”

“Me too...” Trying to reconcile the grief, “... Or is she?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I go back, she’s alive... Like she never died.” The conundrum of her death and her resurrection confusing him.

“What about me?”

“You’re different... Somehow, we’re connected. I don’t know how. ... The dream... Connects us... I don’t know how. Or why. But it’s like we’re supposed to be together.” Terry tries to connect the intangible dots.

“I’ll be waiting for you Terry.” Taking him by the hand they walked.

Cyclists and joggers passed around them. Eyes stared at the couple suspiciously. As if annoyed by Terry’s interference.

“What’s he doing here?” He thinks he heard a passing voice ask.

“What’s the matter?” She asked looking back to see what had agitated him.

“Nothing... Thought I heard a voice. Must have imagined it.”

“Sit down here.” Taking an old wooden bench within a Hyde Park.

Terry puts an arm over her shoulders and holds her close.

Safe in his arms. A police siren wails in the distance. Unsure if it was coming for him. Dismisses its beckoning. The day could not get any worse. Now a wanted man. And his mother dead. All that faded with Julie by his side. Resting her head on his shoulder. Watching the sun setting, listening to the hum of the city in the distance.

“I love you.” He whispers, kissing the top of her head.

“I know. Love you too.” Squeezing his hand to return the kiss.

Chapter 37

Saturday 10:01PM.

“Righto... I better be off. Thanks for putting me up at such short notice.”
Said Terry

“You’re always welcome Terry. It was nice having you. You take care now.”
Ellen responds cheerfully.

“You too... As for you two...” Terry spies the two small heads bobbing out from a bedroom door.”

Isabel and Eve squeal and giggle. Running out to grab his legs from leaving.

“You heard *Uncle* Terry... Go back to bed.” Their mother warns them.

“Ohh_” The children grumble in unison.

“I’ll be back to check on you... Eat your vegetables. I want you nice and plump... (*Sniff-sniff*)... Roar_!” He roars raising his hands to causing them to rush back to their bedroom, pulling blankets over their heads.

Terry extends his hand to Ellen. Only to have her pull him close and give him a hug.

“I don’t know who you are Terry, but I know you’re the best thing that has ever happened to Julie. Don’t you go breaking her heart okay?” Ellen looks into his eyes.

“I won’t. Promise.” Pulling her close to embrace her warmly.

“Hey, get a room you two!” Julie appears from the bedroom in time before they took it to the next level.

“She found out about us. Bugger... We had a good run...” Ellen jokes. “... What’s with the bag?”

“Just some knickknacks.” Julie swerved further questioning.

“Okay then, you take care Terry, I’ll be seeing you. Don’t be a stranger.”
Ellen disappears into the children’s bedroom.

“Come on. You’ll be late for your *train*.” Said Julie pulling him from the hand.

“What’s in the bag?” Terry asked pulling on a baseball cap and sunglasses. Making the evening a little darker.

“*Something* for later.” She teased him.

“Oh okay, if you say so.” Being left further in the dark.

The walkways were busy with Saturday night revelers. Out on the town.

Night clubs pumped synthetic music through door openings. Scantly clad young women congregated in groups for safety. Men shirts short skirts. Legs to their arm pits. Boob tubes and high heels. What could easily could have been swimwear, left little to the imagination.

“Hey!” Julie warns him from staring at them.

They were nearing the Vault. CCTV cameras perched like vultures on tall poles. Looking down upon the innocent. Their nervous system a complex network of wires. Their abdomens gigantic servers ready to digest the digital feast. Glass eyes scan faces. Recognition algorithms filtered wanted suspects from the unwanted at the speed of light. Retching the toxic results to the humans in the nest. The Control Center.

With police officers in their bellies, vested and armed. Unmarked wagons circled the city, waiting to response to their master’s voice. Itching for action. For someone to step over that thin blue line. For some punk to make their day.

Julie turns into a narrow side streets void of cameras. Opens the bag to reveal capes and masks.

“What are these for?” He asks curiously.

“Put this on.” Handing him a black feathered cape and bird mask.

“Ha... A Raven... How appropriate.” Pulling it over his face by its elongated mandible. Throwing the cape over his shoulders, ties it about his neck.

Julie pulls on her mask. Looking like a porcelain doll. Her cape glittering with colors. Reappearing onto the main walkway, looking like night club revelers. CCTV cameras followed the suspicious pair. More out of curiosity.

“What do you make of those two?” An officer asked another scanning a wall of monitors.

“Don’t take drugs, that’s all I can say.” The other responds.

“Yeah, you got that right.”

“(Click)... Situation at Paddington... Officers respond... (Click)” Diverted the officer’s attention away from the costumed fugitives.

11:03PM the evening was black.

Not a cloud in the sky to trap the city lights. Stars lost in the haze of pollution. Street lamps and passing traffic offered little illumination. Engines rumbling and groaning. As if the city were bellowing an ache. The ache of human occupation.

Crawling from taverns eliciting liquor, drugs and sex. Nocturnal creatures staggered the streets. A Hackney spews young women onto the street. Holding

each other upright. Stumbling on heels into a night club that welcomed them. To await pliable young men to ply them with cocktails in exchange for a Boris Johnson in a restroom later.

People mull about the entrance to the Vault smoking what could have been cigarettes. Vapor smokers bellowed large plumes of white smoke. People turn and observe the birdman and doll face that had arrived. Dismissing them as easily as they had noticed them. Indifferent to new arrivals. *They* were one of *them*.

“We’re early.” He informs Julie checking his watch anxiously.

“Well we may as well enjoy ourselves.” Pulling him inside.

Inside, the music pulsed against graffiti ceiling and walls.

Lights flashed sporadically with the music, creating a crazed surreal world. Bizarre costumed creatures stalked the dance floor. Materializing and vanishing with the effervescent lighting.

Taken by the stuttering beat. Julie began to dance. Swaying and turning about. Arms raise in the air and Terry follows suit. If only to release the tension of the past week. Tomorrow he would wake up in his bed. And all *this*... had yet to happen. The thought was too tripping for him. Doubts crisscrossed his mind.

Did he really have to go back? To leave *this*? To leave Julie?

The music slows and finds himself pulling Julie close. As if taking her in a waltz. Unseen beneath her mask, tears fall. A smile can hide the pain. A mask can hide so much more. Another song ends and Terry needed a drink and leads his doll faced lover to the bar.

“Coming through... Excuse me.” Trying to be overheard over the noise of what could have been music. Or a Mayan sacrificial drum beat, “...Sorry... Excuse me... Coming through.”

“Two beers please.” Lifting his mask to speak.

Two plastic cups are pushed towards him and the ten pounds taken without change. Taken back by the price, and hands Julie a cup. Lifting her mask to take a sip. With masks suspended on foreheads, bright lights illuminate the mush pit of drinkers. CCTV cameras scan for new faces. Poking digital pins into the flesh. Suddenly a red led light yelps its excitement hoping to catch its human master’s attention.

“What do we have here then? ...” An officer draws his focus to the central screen displaying Terry’s face. Digital triangulated dotted lines join the digital pins. On another screen a police report scrolls Terry’s arrest warrant,

“Who’s been a naughty boy then? ...” Picking up a radio telephone.

“(Click)... Officers respond, the Vault. Follow my directions. Respond... Over... (Click)”

“(Squawk!) ...Copy that Central... E.T.A. five minutes... Over... (Squawk!)”
A hovering blue vulture screeches back their imminent arrival.

In the distance a red sign begins to flicker above what was once an alleyway. Unnoticed by everyone, but Terry. Checking for the time. 12:01AM. He looks again to the glowing ominous sign. Calling him. To others it was simply part of the décor. To Terry it was a way out of this time and into another.

Julie catches his anxiety and sees the red sign.

“Is that it?” She asked hesitantly. A chill of goosebumps erupt over her body.

“Yeah.” He responds reluctant to leave her.

“This is it then.” She said stepping forward.

Taking her in his arms. Feeling her fragile body. Rekindling the past two days of love making and promises spoken beneath the bed sheet. Hiding from the world. Smelling her fragrance one last time. Her eyes welming with tears.

“It will be alright... I’ll see you again. I promise.” Kissing away the salty tears.

“Do it for me... Do it for Julie.” She tells him pressing their foreheads together.

Some distant away, a commotion was stirring among the creatures on the dance floor. An uninvited visitor had trespassed upon their territory.

“Fuck off pigs!” Calls and insults threw at the unwelcomed costumed intruder.

“There he is!” Calls out an officer spotting Terry at the well-lit bar.

“It’s the police! You have to go now Terry! ... Go!” Julie pushes him towards the red sign.

Predator and prey struggle to push their way through the packed party goers.

“Get out of my way! ...” Barks an officer, only to be pushed back by a man in a threatening looking costume, “... I’ll be back for you!” Warns the officer on a mission.

“Excuse me... Coming through... Sorry.” Asked Terry apologetically.

Julie being pulled by the hand close behind. Looking back to see the police getting ever closer.

“Go! Go! I’ll stall them. Go!” Suddenly she lets go of his hand.

“I love you!” He calls back.

“I love you too... Go!” Looking up to the flickering red sign.

Forcefully Terry crashes his way through the crowd of people. No time to apologize.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going.” Someone calls out at him.

Terry was but yards away from what appeared as an alleyway to those around him. But to him he saw a door way. A soft red glow shone from within. His heart’s desire. He looks back to Julie who was now impeding the path of an officer. He grins seeing her putting up a fight for him. The officer push her to the ground and Terry wants to go back to help her.

“Go! Go!” She calls out for him to keep going.

“For you.” He whispered to her.

And as though she could hear his words, she smiled back.

Walking into the opening. The chaotic sound of the dance hall fell away to a muffled murmur behind him. Looking back to see heavily vested police officers standing before the opening with torches looking about for him.

“Where’s he go? ...” One asked another. Shining a torch into an empty darkened misty alleyway.

A beam of torch light penetrates the strange hovering mist. Making out the back wall. Suddenly red eyes appear. Startling the officer momentarily as he made out the beast. Sitting on its haunches, a large brown rat stares indifferently back at the penetrating beam before scurrying to hole in the wall. Shining the torch directly at Terry. Blinding him. Unable to see him before them.

“Nothing down here.” The officer reports to another who had appeared on the scene.

A radio telephone dispatches instructions the suspect was seen going down the alleyway.

“(Squawk)...Copy that Central ... No sign of him... (Squawk)... Come and look yourself... (Squawk)... I’m telling you there’s nothing down there but a filthy rat, and it can stay there... (Squawk)... It’s a festering shit hole... Over... (Squawk).” The officer stands back from the offending odor of urine and dead animals.

Officers walk away. Leaving Terry watching on in disbelief. Julie appears at the darkened entrance into which Terry had run. Standing back from the entrance as though not to get too close.

“Julie! ...” Terry calls out, “...Julie, I’m here!” Waving his arms about frantically.

She sees nothing but a cold dark damp smelly alleyway. The red sign above

had mysteriously disappeared as had Terry. Her mind tries to comprehend what her eyes had just seen. Her heart telling her a truth she wanted to believe.

“I love you Terry Davies!” She calls out and blows him a kiss. Where-ever he was.

The muffled words could not be heard, but her blown kiss could not betray the message she was speaking.

“Love you Julie Sutherland.” And he watches her turn and walk away.

Caught in a twilight zone Terry looks up at the stairs he has to climb.

Takes the first step. Heavier than the first time he was there. The familiarity of the place coming back to him. Everything was the same. But different. Stairs climbed for eternity. Up became down. Stopping for a moment to orient himself. Looks back at the entrance that appeared no further away than it was since he last looked.

A wall light flickers to draw his attention to it. Illuminating the door. A cold brass handle waited for him to turn it. Unlike before, he knocked.

‘*Knock knock-knock.*’ As though he knew the owner was home. Or perhaps, to announce his return.

Turning the handle, hinges squealed to sound their awakening. Faces turn to greet him.

“Told you he’d be back.” Laughs Brain.

Chapter 38

Faces stared at the trouble soul standing in the doorway.

They had all stood there at one time. Or another. Familiar smells entered his nostrils. He could never get use to the pungent fumes. And as though the Jinn could read Terry's mind, the scent clears. And the discomfort passes.

A ceiling fan rotates slowly above the table. Stirring smoke and causing it to dance in the air. Strange dark shapes move behind bottles on the shelves. Inquisitive of the arrival. Hissing their pleasure. Their appetite for the mortal that had entered their sanctum. Eager to feast upon falling soul.

"Don't listen to them Terry..." Looking to the shelves, "... Come in, it's been a *while*." The Jinn lied.

A chuckle rouses from the table. Terry had only just left, only to return but moments later. Pulling himself onto the stool he had sat the first time. A shot glass is pushed in front of him. Without thinking Terry swallows and allows it to burn to his stomach. Daring not to utter a wishful word. Wondering how it all worked. Did he get three wishes or was this it.

"You get three." The Jinn clarifies Terry's thoughts.

"Eh?"

"You get three wishes... Then..." The Jinn grins a devilish grin.

"Then what?"

The Jinn looks to the card players. The empty chair that waited him.

"Let's not worry about specifics for now... You were so close... No one ever gets it right the *first* time..." Trying to comfort Terry's troubling thoughts, "... Why don't you tell us what happened." Pushing another shot in front of him beside the empty vessel.

Hesitantly he lifts the glass and examines the urine stained contents. And throws the tincture to the back of his throat gasped for breath.

"Lorraine..." He curses her name, "... If it wasn't for her opening her mouth... My mother...My mother?" He looks to the Jinn for a sign.

"Your mother is fine Terry... You've done the right thing coming back." Disinterested in his mother's saved soul.

The Dealer grins.

“It was all a misunderstanding... One thing lead to another... Julie.” Random thoughts spew from his mouth, leaving those listening to fill in the blanks.

Wyatt listens intently on. Hopeful the lad would avoid the Devil’s snare. No one ever did. But there was always hope. The Dealer catches Wyatt’s desire. Dealing cards like flying bullets.

“I’m out.” Call’s Wyatt without looking at his cards. Intent to listen to Terry’s misfortune.

“Ah_ don’t you ever play_.” Complains Brian.

“When I’m ready” Warns Wyatt ignoring the game.

“Don’t mind *them*... Go on... Julie you say?” The Jinn leads Terry on. Enticing him further down the thermal rabbit hole.

“Yeah. She saved me.” Sighs Terry, his mind drifting her under the bed sheet.

“*Saved* you? She put you in jail Terry... How can you say she *saved* you?” The Jinn questioned Terry’s readiness to forgive.

“I know. But... It wasn’t her fault. It was never her fault... It was *mine*.” Admits Terry accepting responsibility.

“Don’t so hard on yourself Terry... The band got signed, that’s what you wanted wasn’t it?”

“How did you know about that?”

“Terry, Terry, Terry... I’m the Devil, I know all...” The Jinn lied. Though the future was beyond his grasp, the past however was another matter, “...Drink up.” Pushing a third shot glass filled to the brim.

“I thought it was about the band, then Julie came along...” Confused by the conflicting thoughts, “... I want both I guess... I don’t know anymore.” Examines the green colored liquid, sniffs the appealing vapors. Turning to look at the card table and the empty chair that awaited him if he got it wrong. Faces watch. Ears listen for the hallow words to be spoken.

“You know you could just wish for a million pounds, or a hundred million... They all do.” The Jinn grins at their failings.

“You can do that?”

“I can do anything Terry... Just say the word.”

The idea was tempting, but somehow the thought of being a self-made man appealed more. Catching the Jinn by surprise. The force was strong in this one. The Dealer grins at Terry’s personal desire.

“Again!” Proclaimed Terry determinedly.

“Again what?” The proclamation taking the Jinn by surprise.

“I wish to go back and do it again... I know I can do this.” Vowed Terry

stubbornly.

“As you wish.” Shaking his head in disbelief. It was irrelevant how he acquired the soul. In a place where time had no meaning, sooner was the same as later. The Jinn gestures for him to drink up.

Closing eyes Terry swallows the green fairy slamming the glass onto to bar.

Bang! Slams the shot glass onto the bar.

“Woah!” Terry feels giddy and takes hold of the bar top to stop himself from falling.

Faces of the card players laughing revolve about him.

All but one. Wyatt remained silent. Unsure what to make of the peculiar young man making stubborn wishes. If it were him, he would have taken the money and gambled it until it was all gone. Then come back for more to do it all over again.

Eyes roll in sockets as the venom coursed through veins. Snakes slivered and hissed their pleasure behind bottles. Excited by the pitiful human succumbing to temptation. Wooziness overcomes him. His head sways, trying to stay upright. Eyes try to focus on the shot glass. One becomes two. Becomes four. Becomes a kaleidoscope of sparkling colors dancing light.

Dong_! Dong_! Dong_! A wall clock insidiously strikes three.

“Sweet dream Terry...” The Jinn lies, “... Be seeing you.”

The Jinn began to laugh, and laugh and laugh.

The laughter fades into the distance as though it were falling down a long dark hole. Visions of the past weeks replayed in his mind. As though unwinding backwards. Faster and faster memories rushed past. Engulfed by steam. A kettle whistles wailing guitar riff. The wall poster spinning, getting closer and closer and closer.

Suddenly, as if someone had pressed a stop button, eyes open to blinding morning light piercing his bedroom window. And the sound of his mother’s voice.

“Morning Terry... I made you a nice cup of tea. I’ll put it over here for you.”

“Mother! You’re, you’re... Alive!”

“I’d like to think so... Now where’s your laundry I’ve got washing to do.”

Picking up clothes from the floor.

Taking a moment to register his revived mother. And a mouth that was tasting like a sewer and a head that throbbed like Sal’s kick drum. The poster on

the wall had fallen down during the night.

Pulling a sheet up over his head, to hide. Shadowing the blinding sunlight streaming through the window. It hurt to think, but he tried. Julie. The band.

'Where had it gone wrong? ... Bloody Lorraine.' He cursed loudly in his mind.

"Ahh!" He moans beneath the bed sheet. Even thinking hurt.

"What was that Terry? ... You okay? You don't sound too good... You really should get to bed earlier, these late nights are not good you... You're not getting any younger you know... Why don't you settle down with your Lorraine? ... Like your brother..."

"Julie." He cut his mother off mid scream of her marital sales pitch.

"Who's Julie?"

"She's the one I'm going to marry."

"What's wrong with Lorraine? She's a lovely girl... She the only one that can do my hair the way I like it."

"Don't know... There's something about Julie that's *different*."

"What does she do?"

"Sing."

"Oh_ Terry I wish you'd give this music thing away and get a real job, settle down and have some children..." She began to say.

"Like my brother and wait to die..." Finished Terry, "... Yeah I know."

"And what's wrong with that?" Asked his mother gathering clothes from the floor and leaving the room before Terry could get the last word in.

It was the same argument. Just a different day. Somethings never change.

"She's not Julie! ..." Terry calls out to the doorway wishing he had not, "... Never again." He vows.

Reaching for his wallet, opens it to discover a small piece of yellow paper. Fingers fumble for it then pull away. Recalling her words not to read it.

"Hmm." Frustrated searches for the SIM card in the change pouch.

Pulling away the back of the mobile inserts it and switches the mobile on. Hoping it still worked. Icons flashed and buzzed.

"Thank God for that." Seeing the mobile come to life again.

Pulling himself upright, sits on the side of the bed and takes a sip of the tea.

"Oh_ that's good..." He groans with satisfaction, just as he remembered it.

And takes himself to the bathroom. Squinting through blood shot eyes at the face staring back at him in the mirror.

"What have you done Terry you silly bastard?" He asked himself. The

reflection refused to answer.

The reflection proceeded to the shower. Leaving Terry staring at a fogged stained mirror. Drawing a heart with a finger with an arrow through it. And a 'J' at its center. Then went to join his reflection in the shower.

Coming out rejuvenated. And a spring in his step. Booted the laptop to life and saw what he expected he would see. A profile page that said nothing had changed.

"Perfect." He said to himself. Looking to the bottom corner of the screen confirms the date. Sunday.

'The band will be here soon. Just let them be them. Don't interfere this time. As for Julie, she can wait. I know where to find her. Don't fuck it up this time.' He tells himself.

Replying to messages, confirms the band's appearance at the Shakespeare in four weeks.

*Mister Duncan,
It would be an honor to play your
fine establishment on the date
stated. We will arrive mid-
afternoon to set up and do sound
checks. We look forward to seeing
you.
Regards
Terry Davies
The Ravens*

One message caught his eye. One that he had not responded to the last time.

"Tomlinson, hmm?" Wondering how he should play it.

With Archie and Seth about to appear on the horizon, it would not hurt to seek second opinion. And types a reply to Tomlinson's enquires.

(Click). And presses Send.

Staring at the screen. Had he missed anything? It had been weeks since he had last sat where he found himself. Eight, Nine weeks? It seemed like only yesterday he had been in the police cell. The pale green room closed in on him. Closing the laptop shut, killing the incarceration and connection along with it. Outside he hears the sound of the old van coughing and squeaking to the curb.

“Hey! It’s great to see you guys again!” Said Terry opening the door to discover Gareth laden down with amps and speakers.

“You sound like you haven’t seen us in a week!”

“Yeah well maybe I haven’t! Come on in.” Said Terry keen to get them inside.

“What you been smoking man? ...” Asked Ness, “... We want some!”

“Nothing honest.”

“You sound like a box of birds Terry. You get lucky last night with Lorraine or something?”

“Who hasn’t got lucky with Lorraine right?”

“Yeah right... So you know about that?” Said Gareth surprised by Terry appearing apparently okay with it.

“For a while now. It’s all good man... We have an *open* relationship.”

“Like my socks!” Remarked Gareth lifting trouser legs.

“Eh?” Exclaimed Terry on seeing the different colored socks.

“I don’t know where they go.” Answered Gareth wondering how his socks disappeared on him.

“Hey whatever works, right man? ...” Responded Terry, “...Get that lot downstairs and I’ll help the others with the gear...Great gig last night man.”

“Yeah thanks man.” Gareth lumbers down the stairs confused by Terry’s chirpy behavior.

“Come on you two... Sal.” Calls out Terry.

“S’up.” Responds Sal.

“Let me give you a hand with that.” He offers.

“I’m fine, you take the sound board.” Instructed Sal drawing Terry’s attention to the old console.

Unwilling to touch it as though it were possessed. Hesitantly lifts it from the van. Smelling its familiar odors. It would have to go. And he knew exactly what to replace it with.

“Com’on Terry we don’t have all day.” Calls out Sal seeing him standing frozen at the back of the van.

“I’m coming!” Calls back Terry.

The twins giggle on hearing the comment.

“Unbelievable you two.” Responds Sal shaking his head, reaching for his drum sticks.

“Ouch! Ouch! ...” Sal taps a couple of heads, “...We ain’t don’t nothing.”

The twins cry out in pain.

In the basement the band went about tuning instruments.

Taylor tapped keys of the organ. Ness plucked thick steel strings on the bass. Sal slashed out at skins to a metal tune in his head. Gareth worked scales. Terry plugged cables into the old console. Pulls on a head set and checks the feeds.

“Ness?” Asked Terry for a sound bite.

Ness plucked out a riff. Terry gives him the thumbs up.

“Taylor?”

Taylor taps out a few bars.

“We’re good... Gareth?”

Everyone but Terry expected to hear his usual practice piece. But what they heard was different and struggled to place chords to any tune they knew.

“What the hell was that?” Asked Taylor taken back by the titillation.

“Just something I’ve been working on.” Gareth admits somewhat embarrassed.

“What’s it called?” Asked Terry knowingly.

“*Tears like Rain.*”

“I like it already... Why don’t you play it again? And the others can join in their own time.” Instructs Terry.

“You’re the boss... You heard the man... Okay, watch my changes... And try to keep up... Two-three-four!” Calls out Gareth carrying on where he left off.

Sal taps sticks lightly as he picks up the beat.

Taylor feels the rhythm and plays a series of soft chords. Becoming harder and louder with every repetition. Not to be left out Ness plucked in time Sal’s drumming. Terry flicked the record switch, it was all too familiar to him. Playing as though he were possessed, Gareth fingers tap danced up and down the neck of a Fender. Counting down the final bars as the others laid off leaving Sal to wrap the song up.

“Woah! Brilliant Gareth! I love it.” Said Ness from behind him.

“I didn’t know you could write.” Exclaimed Sal excited by it.

“You really like it? ... I still think there’s something missing from it. I can’t put my finger on it... It’s like it’s supposed to be a... *Duet*... But I can’t place the voice.” Asked Gareth taken back, then looked to Terry for his opinion, “... What you think?”

“It was brilliant man, don’t worry about it... You’re a perfectionist, let it go... I got it down on tape, have a listen.” Pressing the replay button.

“Really?” Said Gareth surprised by everyone’s reaction.

Speakers sang back to the band, as heads bobbed up and down in time with the tune.

“Wow... It sounds better on tape than in my head.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d say that... Why don’t you guys have another take? ... I’ll go put the kettle on... Tea anyone?”

“Love one.” Said Gareth.

“I’ll see if ma has any biscuits.” Said Terry.

“Choice!” Calls out Taylor.

The band kick off again.

Old wooden steps squeaked as they should have. Everything was going as before. He just had to keep his mouth shut. Steam bellowed from the spout as Gareth’s signature riff harmonized with the whistle of the kettle.

The two had become one. Again.

Chapter 39

Asking a parent for money is never easy.

Especially if you are thirty two years old and still living at home. With his mother in the kitchen, he sensed it was the right time to ask his father at the dinner table. Coughing to clear his throat to get his attention.

“Got that gig coming up in London ... But I’m not sure now.” Terry plays his father along.

“Thought you were looking forward to it. What’s happened?” Ask his father curiously looking up with concern.

“It’s the old console... I don’t think it will handle the spec’s they’re throwing at us. She’ll blow the moment the twins fiddle with their knobs... Think we should cancel.” He said coldly. Pulling a disheartened face, as if to accept the fate.

“Cancel? You can’t be serious?!” His father stops eating and looks at him with a worried look.

“We were so close what with a record producer going to be there to.” He baits his father.

“Really? A record producer eh? ...” Clogs turn over in his mind, “... Not so fast Terry. Maybe I could squeeze something out of the savings account if we keep your mothing from knowing.”

“You sure dad? It would help a lot... I don’t mind cancelling.” He lied.

“Don’t you dare! ... This could be the opportunity you’ve been looking for... An opportunity like this comes along, you grab it with both hands.” His father grabs the air in front of him, “... How much you reckon you be needing?”

“Don’t know...” He lies, “... I have a few hundred plus my wages. I reckon *we* could knock Johnno down... Say a *thousand?*” Terry hesitates wondering if time had shifted since last time.

“A thousand... I don’t know... Must be a good console. Hmm...” His father hesitates momentarily before committing himself, “... Okay. Do it.”

“Thanks dad... You don’t have to.”

“I want to son... You have a chance I didn’t...” His thoughts drift to another time.

“I’ll see Johnno tomorrow... I’ll give you a call.”

“Why would you call him? ... He’s right there.” Said his mother entering the conversation at the wrong end.

“Mother?”

“What is it Terry?”

“I love you.” Said Terry, glad she was alive and well and being her old self again.

“That’s nice sweetie. Now finish your dinner before it gets cold... Coro is going to be on soon.”

Monday 9:35AM and Terry walks confidently into the music store.

Strolls over to a wall display of audio consoles and stands before a black ominous looking box. Johnno attends to a sale and rings it up. Watching another satisfied customer leave the store. Looks around and sees Terry standing frozen staring at the wall. And wonders what had gotten his attention.

“Terry... It’s been a while.” Breaking the silence.

“This one.” Terry points to the box.

“Can’t go past a *Wharfedale* Terry... But don’t you want to look around first?

“Nah! That’s the baby for me.” Affirming his commitment to the console.

“Well, if you’re going to cheat on Lorraine it may as well be with this sweetheart. Good choice... Don’t you want to know the specs?” Johnno asked reaching for a colorful brochure.

“Nah. All good. I know exactly what it can do... How much?” Examining the sliders, LEDs and knobs. Running fingers over its curves and edges. As if he was petting it. Inserting a jack into to a port socket.

“Hey_... *Never* on the first date Terry... Steady down big boy.” Joked Johnno.

“Sorry.., Got a little excited to using it again.” He slipped.

“Again? You’ve used one before?”

“Yeah... Another band... Another time.” Responded Terry. His mind begins to drift.

“Oh. I thought you’d only ever been with the *Ravens*... Hm.”

“How much?” Asked Terry.

“For you eighteen hundred.” Replies Johnno checking the label.

“I know you can do better than that Johnno, call it fourteen. For The *Ravens* ... *Cash*.”

“*Cash?* ... Johnno hesitates, financial clogs turning over in his mind, one almost hear the pennies falling, “... *Sold!*” Extending his hand before Terry changed his mind.

“Can you put it aside for a day? And I’ll get you the money... Got to call my father to arrange the finances if you know what I mean.”

“No worries, you playing this weekend?”

“Yeah, Gareth has a new song... *Tears like Rain*... Spread the word.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks Johnno, you’re a life saver...” Then rethought his choice of words, “... I’ll be back tomorrow with the money.”

“You’re all good Terry, I’ll put it out back with you name on it.”

“Shit!” Terry exclaims, catching Johnno by surprise.

Then notices he would be cutting it fine to get to the pizzeria in time for work.

Running as fast as he could Terry arrives just as Mario was placing the display sign to say the store was open.

“Sorry I’m late Mario... (*Wheezing-gasping*).” Short of breath.

“You-a okay-a Terry?”

“I’m fine Mario... (*Gasp-gasp*)... Just ran from the music store... (*Gasp*).”

“Maybe Freddie can-a come in-a if you’re not-a well?”

“Needed to buy a new console ... (*Gasp-gasp*) ... Other one blew up, or it’s going to. (*Gasp-gasp*).” His mind exhausted trying to remember what to not say, from saying it.

“Momma Di-Mia!” Exclaims Mario returning inside.

Another day of making pizzas.

Another day of remembering what customers wanted on them before they did. Terry played the memory game. In the end he simply gave up and waited for the customer to change their minds by themselves.

Terry looks to the Mall outside the pizzeria for suspicious individual. The man sitting on the bench reading a newspaper looks up momentarily as though he was being watched. Flicks the paper with annoyance and resumes reading it again.

“Hey Mario?” Terry finds a lull in the patrons.

“What’s up Terry?” Mario sings back.

“I need to do more hours to help pay for the new console... I’ll do anything, days, nights, weekends... You name it. Except Saturday evening.”

“I’d hav-a check-a da rosters. Don’t-a know why-a not-a. Freddie is looking to cut back-a his hours.”

“He is? ...” Responded Terry confused, “... Thanks Mario.”

“Momma Di-Mia!” Mario sings out like a broken record.

Lorraine strolls in the pizzeria and leans across the counter and gives Terry a kiss. And he offers her a cheek.

“Oh? ...” Taken aback by the rejection, “... We doing French are we?”

“Yeah, something like that.” There was a tone in his voice that their relationship had changed.

“Momma Di-Mia! Lorraine!” Mario sings out with surprise.

“Hey Mario...” She grins at him as if they shared a dirty little secret.

Returning her affections to Terry organizing the trays of ingredients. Now somewhat disinterested in her.

“I was thinking about coming around tonight?” She informs him.

“Oh tonight? ... I’m heading to the Arms. Why don’t I catch you there? We need to *talk*.”

‘*That talk.*’ He thinks to himself.

“Talk? About what? Oh_ ... The new song? Yeah I know all about it... Ha-ha. Terry for a moment I thought you were breaking up with me... You’re *funny*... Okay I’ll see you tonight.”

“See you then.” Terry lies. Standing back from the counter to avoid an unsolicited kiss. Fidgeting with ingredients as though to say he as preoccupied.

“*Tonight.*” She said winking at him.

“Someone’s going to get-a lucky tonight-a!” Said Mario grinning.

“It won’t be me Mario...” He responded confidently, “... Been there done that... Who hasn’t?”

“Mamma Di-Mia!” Mario sings out.

The wall clock counts down the time to the end of his shift.

Mario sang out the same Italian song to the amusement of the patrons. Five became six and finally become seven. Freddie appeared on cue and whistles on cue to Terry that his shift was over.

Throwing the hair net and rubber gloves to the rubbish bin. Wrestles with the apron and discards it into the laundry basket.

“Heard you guys have a new song? ...” Asked Freddie, again, “.... Read it on line.”

“Playing it at the Arms... Spread the word... Then London four weeks.”

“Big time now eh? No more flipping pizzas for you Terry.” Sheiks Freddie keen to get started.

“See you tomorrow Mario!” Terry calls out.

“You too-a Terry! ... Momma Di-Mia!” Mario calls out from the back.

Terry walks through the front door and waits. Not expecting to hear his mother’s voice.

“Ter_ry? ...” She calls out, halting his pleasant thoughts, “... Is that you?”

“No mother, it’s the local burglar.” He calls back.

“You have a visitor!” She calls back to him.

“Eh? Who now?” He asked himself hesitantly walking into the living room to see Lorraine had made herself comfortable talking to his mother.

“Hey! There you are! ... I couldn’t find you at the bar so I came here.”

“Yeah, here I am... Let me freshen up and we can head off.”

“Don’t you want to play me the Gareth’s new song (*hint-hint*) ... Looking to the basement?”

“Oh that... Ah, well actually we taped over it with cover songs.” He lied.

“We could listen to those, I don’t mind.” Said Lorraine, keen to be alone with Terry the basement.

“Why don’t you play her your songs Terry? You’ve got plenty of time.” His mother encouraged the liaison to the basement. Grandchildren would not make themselves.

Cornered, he surrendered and dawdled to his room. Reluctant legs climbed as weary arms pulled a reluctant carcass up the stairs.

“Damn.” And he would be if she had her way down in the basement.

His thoughts turning to Julie.

‘Would he really be cheating on Julie? ...’ He asked himself, *‘... Dah_... Yes.’*

Descending the stairs slower as he had ascended, fearful of the lustful sexual predator that waited for him. Reappearing at the living room door. Then has an idea.

“Oh no! Gosh... Look at the time?” Pulling a surprised face.

“What is it?” Asked Lorraine curiously.

“Said I’d meet Gareth at the Arms five minutes ago... To go over the new song. *Crikey!* We better get going... He’s going to be so angry with *us*.”

“We do? ... He will?” Responded Lorraine confused by the sudden change of plans.

“Come around Thursday, after practice and I’ll play it to you then.” He lied.

“Oh I was so looking forward to... *It*.” Crossing her legs to relieve the growing irritation.

“So was I... Sorry Lorraine. I’ll make it up to you I promise.”

“Good seeing you Misses Davies, you too Mister Davies... Bye.”

“Bye Lorraine! ...” Terry’s mother calls out to her leaving, “...What a *lovely* girl.”

At the front gate Terry hesitates.

“You coming to the Arms?” He asked cautiously, ‘*Please say no.*’

“No_... Think I’ll pop over to Sally’s salon to see if she needs a *hand*.”

“Oh yeah_ *Sally*, okay_... That’s kind of you.” Leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

“We still doing French thing... Kinky Terry.”

‘*Wah!-Wah!*’ She returns the kisses on both cheeks.

“Oh bugger, I forgot my wallet (*ha*)... I’d forget my head if it wasn’t screwed on properly, *ha*.”

“I think you would Terry Davies... I’ll see you Thursday, no excuses this time. I’m feeling horny.”

“Maybe Sally has some cream you can put on it.” Joked Terry.

“You’re *funny* Terry.”

Not wanting to be her rubbing post, he deflected the imagery. And watched her walk away, to *Sally’s* salon. Whoever *he* was.

Heading back inside, collapses on the couch relieved to have avoided what would only have been a regrettable event.

“Thought you were heading to the Arms with Lorraine.”

“Nah_... She had to work at the last minute.” Said Terry.

“What about Gareth?” His mother asked.

“That’s Wednesday. I got the dates mixed up.”

“You’d forget your head if it wasn’t screwed on.” Informed his mother.

“I reckon I would mother.” Confirmed Terry.

His father looks up over his paper and raises an eye brow to acknowledge his son’s return. Chuckling a grin, then remembers.

“Oh, almost forgot... Got the money for you Terry.” His father said unwittingly.

“Thanks dad.”

“What money?” His mother asked suspiciously entering the room at the

wrong end of the conversation.

Chapter 40

The week passed as they had before.

Likes climbed exponentially. Going about what he thought he had the first time. Practice sessions less brutal than before. Content to let the days wash over him like waves.

The corner of Julie's note protruded from his wallet. Resisting the temptation to pull it out and read what it said. Memories of her. The warmth of her body. The scent of her hair lingered in his mind. Inhaling deeply as if only to recapture the essence her aura.

Pushing the note from sight. Closing the wallet.

The house was packed.

Intoxicated ravens jiggled to the infectious beat. Anticipating the band's new song. Voices chanted out the title hoping the band to begin playing. Gareth looks to Terry who shakes his head. They would save it for the finale as they had before. Everything as before.

"You okay Terry?" Calls out Gareth from the stage, breaking him from a day dream.

Terry gives a thumb's up. The new console ready to go. Broken in at practice sessions. Already familiar with it, he had mastered its controls. LED lights flashed brilliant greens and yellow. Needles swayed back and forth like hula dancers as strobe lighting flashed ecstatically.

Turning up the volumes, bass speakers shock the Arm's windows as Sal's kick drum shock the floor boards. Causing McCracken to look up with concern. Playing cover after cover, anthem after anthem, until Sal crushed out the final beat.

"Thank you Ravens... We're just going to take a short break and we'll be back real soon... Don't go away." Gareth shreds a few bars of *Tears* to leaves the fans calling out for more.

"How we sounding?" Asked Gareth watching the other head to the bar.

"Brilliant man... The new box is awesome... Save *Tears* for last."

"You think we're ready?"

"You're played it a hundred times... Sort of... You'll be fine." Said Terry

dismissing his concerns.

“If you say so Terry... Lorraine coming down?” Asked Gareth.

“I hope not.” Nervous eyes search the faces of the packed bar.

“You’re serious about breaking up with her aren’t you?” Asked Gareth concerned for his best friend.

“You beat... She’s laid more pipe than Mary McKinnon.”

“Good one Terry! Ha!” Laughs Gareth.

“Let’s sit over here.” Said Terry seeing Leigh at bar staring into a half empty beer glass. Pining a relationship that never was, and that was now rubbing herself up against a complete stranger.

“Get these down you boys.” Said McCracken arriving with pints at hand.

“Thanks’ Phil.” Happily accepting the frothing beers.

“Going to play your new song?” McCracken Asked.

“Yeah, at the end... Leave them wanting more.”

“Keep them drinking and there could be something extra in it for you.” Winks McCracken.

“Cheers man.” Said Gareth.

“String it out Gareth, we could use the extra dosh.” Said Terry.

Draining his glass Gareth headed to the restroom to relieve himself only to discover a pair of heels protruding from beneath the booth’s door. Accompanied by Taylor’s voice, soon followed Ness moaning. Zipping up he bangs on the door.

“Five minutes you two!” Gareth calls out.

“Almost done.” Calls out Taylor.

“Speak for yourself!” Complains Ness.

Midnight and Phil gave the signal to start winding it up.

Terry nods and gestures a thumb up to Gareth.

“Okay... Just as we practiced it, follow my lead okay.” Gareth instructs the band.

“No worries man, we’ve got your back.” Encourages Sal.

“Okay everyone... Thanks for coming along tonight, hope you enjoyed the show...” Gareth recites the closing liturgy into the microphone.

A wild roar goes up among the enthusiastic ravens. Clapping hands into the air. Hooting and whistling their appreciation. Gareth takes in the moment and raises a hand to quieten the walking dead.

“Know a lot of you may have heard something...” He falls silent and ravens

squawk their approval.

“*Tears like Rain.*” A raven yells out from the back.

Gareth grins hoping the song would live up to everyone’s expectations.

“Oh yeah... *That...* I suppose ya’ all be wanting to hear it?”

A roar erupts among the ravens. Inciting the band to play the song.

“Okay boys from the top, follow my lead, and try to keep up... Two, three four!” Gareth shredding the opening bars.

The faithful fell silence. Spellbound. Heads begin to sway. Ravens came to life. Animating their dance moves. Mobile phones streaming the internet before the song had finished. Playing an extended version Terry gives a nod to wind it up. Easing back the sliders, kills the sound and engulfs the stage with white light. The ravens squawk their approval. Band members grin among themselves.

“Again! ... Encore!” Cried out a raven from the back. Echoed by another, then another.

Gareth looks to the others who show the eagerness to go again. Terry gives the thumbs up.

“One more time and that’s it okay!” Teases Gareth.

Another re-boot, and after several minutes of playing the exhausted the band winds the song down as Terry killed the speakers again. Followed by cheers and whistles and hoots from the sea of faces.

“*Spread the word ravens...*” Gareth parrots Terry’s catch phrase, “... Ya’ all come back now, ya’ hear.”

The evening was just as he had remember it. People left, leaving groupies for the twins’ to pick over. McCracken pushes an envelope towards Terry. Feeling it a little thicker than before.

“A little something extra in there for you boys... I’ll be sad to see you guys go.”

“What do you mean? We’re good here aren’t we?” Asked Gareth.

“You guys are going places... Just saying.” Said McCracken dejectedly.

Causing band members laughed. The only one not laughing was Terry.

“You okay Terry?” Asked Gareth seeing him go quiet.

“Yeah... He’s right you know.”

“He is?”

“Yeah, trust me... Got anymore song inside you?” Terry probed old territory.

“Maybe, one or two. It’s not that easy Terry.”

“I know... In your own time.”

“*Tears* was a fluke, I was coming out of a relationship...” Gareth falls quiet,

the scars still bled for the man.

“Good... Capture that feeling. Bottle it. I’ll sell it.”

“It’s personal, you know...” Insists Gareth.

“I’m sorry man... Just be you okay... It all starts here Gareth...” Said Terry raising a shot glass, “... *The Ravens!*”

“*Slainte!*” Toasts McCracken in Irish.

“*Slainte!*” Everyone taps them lightly together and throws the Tequila to the back of their throats.

“Ahhh.” Cries Terry regretting the decision.

Lorraine appears at the bar’s door and looks about for Terry. Brushing grass off her skirt and adjusting her bra strap. Sees him at the bar waves out.

“Oh shit! ...” He said beneath his breath. “...Hey! ...You’re late. You missed a great performance.”

“Clubbing with Marilyn. Rattle Snakes... Half price cocktails.”

“So long as you had fun... You should heard the *Tears.*”

“I’ve heard it already... It’s all over the internet dummy... You going to buy me a drink?”

“G&T for Lorraine thanks Phil.” Terry pushes a fiver towards him, only to have it pushed back.

“On the house Terry.” Offers McCracken, they had had a record take.

“Thanks Phil.”

“Oh shit... Look at the time. I have to get pack up and ... Well you know... Band stuff. You going to be okay?” Excusing himself noticing Lorraine exchanging primal glances with a stranger at the bar.

“Yeah, you go... I’ll be fine.” Her eyes not willing to lose sight of the stranger.

The twins too had mysteriously disappeared.

Sal bangs on the back of the rocking van and tells the boys to hurry up with whoever, or whatever they had on the spit.

“I’m not packing up your shit! ...” Banging again louder on the door.

Waiting for the doors open to see Taylor and Ness pulling up pants as an unnamed feral female adjusted her skirt and smiled back at Sal as if he was next on the gravy train.

“I’ll pass thanks sweetie... Come on you two, inside... You’re are on *idiot check* tonight... Shouldn't be too hard for you seeing how you're qualified for it... *Unbelievable!*” Tapping them on the top of their heads with sticks.

“Ouch! ... We ain’t don’t nothing!” Exclaimed Ness.

“Exactly! ...” Exclaims Sal following closely in their footsteps, “...But that’s all about to change.”

Another Saturday rolled around and Terry found himself behind the console becoming bored.

A raven notices his disinterest and glares at him as though he was insulting the greatest band ever to come out of Muswell Hills.

“Fuck you.” The raven snarls at him.

“Fuck you.” Terry snarls back.

Days ticked over like second hand of a clock. There was only so many times one could press *replay* before one lost interest in the day. It was like a never ending dream that looped over and over and over again. Predicting people’s behavior before they knew it themselves. Sidestepping accidents. Avoiding Lorraine was challenging. Plausible excuses now running thin. Looking about the bar as though he was expecting someone to appear.

The stool remains vacant. Who would show? Archie or Seth?

With his mind in three places at once. A crash of cymbals brings the song to an end. Gareth looks up and wonders why Terry had not hit the lights.

“Don’t go away Ravens, we be right back after a short break.” Gareth informs the faithful.

“*Tears! ...Tears!*” A raven calls out from the crowd.

“Patience ravens! After the break.” Forestalling their wanton desire.

Cheers and whoops cried out in excitement at the promise. Pulling Terry from his boredom behind the console. Slides the light faders to the top. Brightening the stage.

“Ah_ there he is! Give it up for Terry, our manager and sound engineer!” Calls out Gareth.

Apathetic intoxicated cheers and whistles holler their non-appreciation for him. They had come to see the band not him.

Stepping from the stage Gareth works his way through crowded bodies to find Terry fiddling with knobs and plugs.

“You okay man?” Asked Gareth seeing him disinterested.

“Yeah, just *tired* man... Let’s get a drink.” Removing the headset.

The twins had cornered another set of twins at the bar. Barren minds running wild with indecent carnal acts. Had the met their match as the red headed fillies flirted with them. Terry could not recall them being at the bar before. Perhaps

they had and he had not noticed them.

The stool remained cold and empty.

“You expecting someone?” Asked Gareth seeing Terry focused on the stool.

“Not really.” He lied.

“You need a shot man... Phil! Two shots!”

“No-no-no-no-no!” Terry protests. But it was too late. Sian appears with three shots, not to go without.

“To the top!” Toasts Gareth.

“One won’t hurt...” He hoped, “...Ahhhh_!” Regretting the decision immediately after swallowing the kerosene cocktail. And takes a sip on the warm pint of beer to remove the tart taste from his mouth.

“Excuse me...” A voice speaks from behind him, “... You must me Terry.”

“Yeah...” Turning about to see a suited gentleman about his age extending his hand. Taken aback by the man, “... Can I help you?”

“David Tomlinson... Tomlinson Records, Merseyside... You wrote a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh yeah, Mister Tomlinson... Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you...” Terry stuttered becoming lost for words.

‘This never happened before... Shit.’

Looking to the door expecting Archie to appear at any moment. Then to Gareth as if Seth would.

“David please...I caught you at a bad time I know...” Reaches to his wallet and take out a business card, “... Was just passing through on my way back to Liverpool. Thought I’d pop in for a pint and check you guys out... Got anything ah... *Original?*” Handing the card to Terry who pockets it without looking too closely at it.

“If you wait around until after the break Gareth here can play his new song, *Tears.*”

“I appreciate that, cheers... We can talk later.” Tomlinson extended a hand. Returning to another stool to resume a conversation with a female companion.

“Terry! That’s the *Merseyside* producer you’ve been talking about... He’s *here!*”

“He’s *always* been here.” Said Terry coldly.

Realizing the interrupted opportunity that had passed the first time around.

“Eh?” Confusing Gareth with riddles, “... Sian! Shots! Terry having a bad day.”

“No-no-no-no-no!” Terry protested. But it was too late.

“Ahhhh_!” Flushing the kerosene tasting solution down. Contorted faces excised demons.

“Okay, back to work... Have Sal get the twins.” Instructed Terry.

Sal heads to the restrooms to discover two booths with doors closed.

Unsurprisingly two pairs of female heels protruded from beneath the doors. Rocking back and forth.

“Unbelievable!” He shakes his head. Wishing he had his drum sticks with him.

The rocking and groans stop at the sound of Sal’s voice.

“Ignore him, it’s *only* Sal.” Said Ness and the rocking begins.

Taylor giggles from the other booth.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Sal thumps the doors to get their attention.

“Ahh, ahh, ahh, ahh_” Cries out Ness, soon followed by Taylor.

“Hurry up you two, we’re back on stage in five!” Hollers Sal remaining at the doors ensuring they appear.

Doors slowly open and two red heads appear, licking their lips. Adjusting bra straps they smiled at Sal as though he was next on the menu.

Ness appeared zipping up just as Taylor appeared zipping up. Both giggling.

“You got their names I hope?” Asked Sal curiously.

“Why?” Asked Taylor. Not seeing the point.

“Unbelievable!” Declares Sal.

“From the top, try to keep up, two-three-four!” Gareth unleashes *Tears*.

Playing an extended version of the song.

Terry has one eye on the band and the other on Tomlinson at the bar. Tomlinson had one eye on the band and one on an attractive young lady sitting beside him. When it was over, ravens squawked their approval with feverish whistles and whoops.

Terry looks over to the bar to find Tomlinson had left. As had his attractive companion.

Where was Archie? Where was Seth? Had time taken a detour? Unsure if he was still on the same path he as before.

He was venturing into new territory.

Chapter 41

Within a darkened room. Thick with silence. The kind you can cut with a knife.

Contaminated with a pungent odor. Heavy curtains prohibiting the morning sun from entering. But for a blade that pierced through a tear. Sending a ray of divine light into the satanic enclave. Captured by floating dust. Onto a floor littered with magazines, and discarded soiled clothes.

Large posters of chosen apostles covered torn wallpaper walls. If there was a color darker than black it was in the hearts of the demonic brethren. Horned beasts. Bloody pointed teeth. Painted faces. Defiant stances. Studded leather jackets. Metallica. Black Sabbath. Motley Crew. Iron Maiden. Mortals of the fallen world.

Watching over them, God's favorite, Lucifer. The light bringer, the shining one. Like any relationship, words had been said that should not have been. Agreeing to disagree. They would see other people. Forever subservient to his master, the Jinn moved out.

A headset shut out the silence. Demonic voices shrieked inside an empty skull of the sleeping soul now feeling himself falling into a dark pit. Swallowing him. Down and down he fell. A point of light appears at the bottom. Growing larger and larger. Becoming closer and closer. Suddenly, he finds himself in a small basement with the band.

Seeing himself drumming heavily. Lost in the moment. Sweat dripping from his forehead beneath long hair, swooshing about to the rocking of his head. A foot presses at a paddle striking onto the side of a bass drum to the beat of the raging music. Gareth, looking beast-like, elongated fingers, claws, scratched at metal strings. A disfigured perverted soul excising itself from the mortal shell. The twins likewise transfigured deprived creatures. Faces festering with boils and dark sunken eyes. Fork-like tongues. Behind the sound board, Terry. Appearing normal. Out of place. Out of time. It was him. But not him.

Suddenly the room begins to shake and rotate. He had overstayed his welcome.

Terry looks up from the board of flickering dials. Thinking he saw something. Or someone. A shriek of feedback interjects the momentary visitation

and the sleeping soul finds himself back to his bedroom. An explosion of violent light burst through the opened curtains. A beast stands over him.

“Mother!” Sal protests the intrusion.

“Out of bed lazy bones.” His mother ordered him.

“What time is it?” He asked.

“Nearly nine... Where’s your laundry?”

“Christ! ... It’s the middle of the night mother!” Pulling a sheet over his bed, denying her presence. Denying the throbbing handover pounding inside his head. Removing the unplugged headset. Silence reined again.

Julie awakens from a bizarre dream in cold sweat. Panting.

Disorientated in time and space. It felt so real. A hand shifts to her lower belly. As if it felt, *different*. Reaching to the bed space beside her. Expecting *him* to be there. Only to feel it cold and vacant. Empty. Maybe, it was *just* a dream.

Suddenly a feeling of nauseous over whelms her. A stomach retches its unrest. Quickly throwing back the bed sheet she rushes to the bathroom. Puking prayers to the porcelain God. Her mind yet to conceive what her womb already had.

“That's weird.” Feeling woozy.

“You okay?” Ellen asked appearing at the bathroom door, seeing Julie hunched over.

“Don’t know... I must have eaten something that disagreed with me.” Julie spits into the bowl and flushes the bile from sight.

“You’re not pregnant are you?”

“Impossible... You have to have to have sex don’t you?”

“So they say... Unless your name is Mary?”

“Last time checked it wasn’t.”

“You better see a doctor if you keep that up. I don’t want the girls catching your *bug*.” Ellen warns her sister.

“We’ll see...” Cupping hands with water from the tap and splashing it over her face.

Staring at herself staring back in the mirror. The nauseated feeling had passed for now. Feeling wheezy, splashes more water over her face. Desperately trying to recall what she had eaten that could possibly had affected her system. Nothing out of the usual came to mind.

“I’m off, you be okay?” Ellen calls out from the door with two children pulling at her eager to get going.

“I’ll be fine. See you tonight.” She calls back from the bathroom.

Hearing the door close. Leaving her alone in the flat. Her mind muddled with strange thoughts. Of a strange dream that had lingered for the past few weeks. Refusing to shake itself from her psyche. As though she were dancing with a stranger and never wanted it to end. Cocooning her with an unexplainable warmth.

‘It was a dream wasn’t it?’ She asked herself reaching for her belly.
It felt so real.

“What have you done?” Asked the Jinn looking over to the Dealer dealing the river card.

Causing Brian to complain and Kiran to laugh at the card.

“Don’t look at me. You gave him the wish...” Said the Dealer washing his hands of the temptation. Shuffling cards. Deals them to the fallen souls before Him.

All but one.

Wyatt examines his cards and discards them without much interest. It was as if he was expecting someone to walk through the door at any moment. The clock on the wall struck three. Again. As it did every hour.

“You want to get that clock fixed.” Joked Wyatt.

“I’m ready when you are.” The Jinn responds to the challenge.

The two stared each other down like western gun slingers at high noon. Both familiar with the situation. Only one had ever walked away alive.

“No rush. I have eternity don’t I?” Wyatt looks to the Dealer to confirm the limitation of his stay.

“That’s entirely up to you Wyatt.” Advises the Dealer.

“Don’t you ever play?” Asked Brian.

“One day.”

“Day? ...” Laughs Brian hysterically, “...Christ! I can’t remember what that looks like.”

“Language gentleman! Remember where you are.” Warns the Jinn polishing a sparkling shot glass. Placing it delicately onto the wooden bar.

Brian bends the corner of his cards. Blanks. But the others did not know that. Raises the ante and pushes a stack towards the center of the table.

“Really?” Remarked the Dealer.

“All in.” Calls Kiran pushing his entire stack towards the center. Throwing two aces face up beside the chips.

Collapsing on the couch.

Sipping herbal tea. Julie nibbles on a slice of dry toast to settle her stomach. And contemplates the day. An unknown song surfaces in her mind from nowhere. As if she were was listening to it. Reaches for her guitar and frantically searches for the nearest piece of paper. One of her nieces' drawings. Turning it over, begins to scribble the sporadic words down coming at her in her head. Plucking at chords for the lyrics to ride upon. Finding the tempo, the words now flow like water over the page. Completing it within a few minutes she collapses back on the couch.

"Where did that come from? ..." She asked herself looking to the scribble lyrics,

"... *Tears like Rain.*" Etching the name at the top of the page.

Strumming strings heavier, gaining more confidence with each repetition. The nausea had passed. Singing it over and over again. Chords changes become automatic. Hope returned to her spirit. Life returned to her bones. Thoughts of heading to the underground prompted her to move from the couch. Any money was good money. Anything that would food on the table and a roof over her head in a flat she lived rent free.

With a spring in her step, packs the guitar in its case and heads out the door. Lingering thoughts of being pregnant surfaced.

"Not possible... Don't be silly." She told herself.

Terry crossed off the days on the calendar to the Shakespeare gig.

The anticipation was driving him crazy. On cue Gareth came up with the new songs. *Show me the Way... Love me Lots.* Unchanged from the first time Terry had heard them. Someone had stolen Gareth's heart. The twins were the twins. Sal remained dark and mysterious.

'*Drummers are a strange lot.*' Thought Terry watching Sal set up the drum kit in the corner of the basement.

Thoughts of Julie with her red beret playing the tube played on his mind. He could visualize her playing at that moment. The note now buried, but not forgotten. Hesitant to imagine their last encounter. Pepper spray and Tasers. A pale green police cell. Voices echoing in his head. Card players and a Jinn lingered in the dark fissures of his mind. And the empty chair that awaited him if he fouled up.

"Terry! Terry!" Calls out Gareth pulling Terry from the day dream.

"Hey... Sorry... Okay guys, let's do it again."

“Again?” Complains Ness.

“Again?” Complains Taylor echoing his older brother.

“Yes, again... This is our last chance before London. Sal you get the radiator hose replaced?”

“Done.” Replies Sal giving a drum roll, “...How’d you know?”

“Saw steam the other day.” He lied.

“That was lucky.”

“Yeah, okay then. One more time through and we’ll call it a day.” Said Terry offering a reprieve.

“You heard him Ravens... From the top, two-three-four!” Calls out Gareth wishing to end the session sooner than later.

Sore callused fingers fondled bruised instruments. They could have played the new songs blind folded. They were ready. Sal crashes the cymbals one final time and slumps with a heavy sweat.

“You okay Sal?” Asked Terry seeing him exhausted.

“Yeah...” He lies, “... Just tired I suppose.”

“Get a good rest before Saturday okay... As for you two.” Terry eyes the twins suspiciously.

“We ain’t done nothing... Have we?” Looking at Terry then at each other, as if one of them may have.

“Not yet you haven’t... At least I know where to find you.”

“Eh?” Confusing them further.

“I’ll put the kettle on.” Said Terry grinning.

“Biscuits?” Asked Taylor.

“Sandwich be nice.” Suggested Ness.

“I’ll see what ma has in the pantry.” Said Terry heading up squeaking stairs.

“You need a lift Sal.” Asked Gareth heading to the van.

“Yeah, why not.” Feeling tired.

“Hmm?” Terry taken back by the his acceptance.

“See you down the Arms later?” Asked Gareth.

“Yeah. See you there. I just a few things to do here first... Make sure those two get home.” Looking to the twins. As if they could go missing at any moment. Two faces giggle at the allegation.

“Right-o you heard Terry get in.” Gareth orders the two urchins. Followed by Sal on their tails. Two drums sticks at the ready.

Terry watches the van disappear down Denmark Terrace. Leaving a plume of

exhaust in its wake. And leaving him alone on the street. Timeless faces peer from windows. They had seen it all before. Another band. Another time. Content to see the back of the racket makers. Peace reined on Fortis Green. A cat meows loudly. A dog barks. A metal trash can crashes to the ground. Another meow, followed by a dog yelping in pain.

“(Ha)... Nothing changes.” He told himself.

Returning inside re-boots the laptop and waited as it groaned and whirred and buzzed itself to life. Resurrecting an operating system desperately in need of an upgrade. Inserting a USB stick from the tape machine, down loads the bands new songs to the laptop. Attaches them to an email. Types a brief message.

Enjoy.

Terry Davies

The Ravens

(Click). And presses Send.

He had done everything he could have.

That only left Julie. Reaching for his wallet opens it to check the note was still there. A curious mind entices fingers to pull it out and eyes to read it. But the temptation was broken as his mother entering the room. Thoughts of his mother having a heart attack and dying. Snapping the wallet close, quickly shoves it deep into his pocket.

“What you got there then? Something you don’t want you want your mother to see?” She teases him.

“Mother? If you must know, it’s Julie.”

“Who’s Julie?”

“The love of my life.”

“Oh... Does she do hair?”

“I’m pretty sure she doesn’t.”

“Oh, that’s a pity.”

“Can I help you mother?” Wanting her to leave him in peace.

“Just came to say Lorraine is down stairs... She does my hair lovely.”
Dismissing any thoughts of Julie.

“Lorraine, *shit*... Tell her I’m not here.”

“I’ve already said you are... Come on down now.”

Reluctantly he pulls himself from the chair and creeps down the squeaking stairs. Telegraphing his presence. Perhaps he could make a run for it. The front

door was in sight. Then without warning Lorraine appears at the bottom of the stairs as though to block his escape.

'Fuck, I'm trapped.'

"Hey_ Lorraine, what are you doing here?" Acting surprised.

"Who's *Julie*?" She asked taking a defiant stance glaring evil eyes back at him.

"How'd you know about Julie?"

"You mother just told me... Are you cheating on me Terrence Davies? ... Well? Are you!?"

"If you must know... Yes, I am... I've been meaning to tell you for weeks... I'm so sorry you had to find out this way Lorraine... It's not you, it's me."

"Weeks? ... Weeks? You *bastard* Terry Davies!" Bursting into crocodile tears. Faking a fake pout.

"Terry? How can you do this to poor Lorraine?" His mother puts her arm around Lorraine to comfort her.

"Poor Lorraine? She's practically slept with half of Muswell Hill mother!" Exclaims Terry looking like the villain.

"That's not true!" Declared Lorraine. A good third would have been a more realistic estimate.

"I'm sure it's a *phase* he's going through Lorraine, why don't you stay for a cup of tea... I'll just go put the kettle on."

The English cup of tea solved all problems.

"Mother!" But it was too late she had already disappeared into the kitchen, followed closely behind by Lorraine smirking back up at Terry.

Waiting for the sound of rattling cups and saucers Terry makes his run for the door. The sound of his mother's voice soothing Lorraine's troubled relationship.

"I'll have a word to him later, he *always* listens to his mother." She tells her.

Opening the door, quietly closes it behind him. Heads to the front gate. Squeaking on its hinges to give away his escape. Looking up and down the terrace. Unusually quiet. Traffic was non-existence.

Catching himself in time. A horn sounds a loud warning just as he was about to step onto the road. The distorted ripple in time races past him in the form of a heavy lorry truck. Steps back to the sidewalk. His heart pounding. Finds himself breaking out in a cold sweat.

'That was close.' Wondering what would happen if he ended up dead.

Standing on the sidewalk, heads towards town.

Distancing himself from Lorraine being consoled by his endearing mother and her beloved hair. Thoughts of another relationship getting closer. Leigh making a fool of himself. Crazy Jane crawling between his legs. Tongue lashing each other. Disappearing from the bar for five minutes, only to reappear to become strangers again.

'Lucky bastard.' Thought Terry, with a growing spring in his step.

Chapter 42

“What she doing here?” Asked Terry spying Lorraine sitting in the front seat of the van.

“She’s *forgiven* you.” Said Gareth looking back at her smiling and waving at Terry.

“Forgiven me?” He really did not want Lorraine along for the ride.

“Who’s Julie?” Gareth asked curiously.

“Long story, I’ll introduce you later.”

“Woah! ... So it’s true?” Exclaimed Gareth surprised by the news.

“Don’t know yet... Shit!” He still could not believe Lorraine was coming along for the ride.

“Can’t seem to find the twins. They not at home or Mary McKinnon’s place.”

“I know where they are. I’ll drive, we’ll get there quicker.”

Climbing into the driver’s seat an awkward silence awaits him. All eyes fixed on Terry.

“Terry.” Said Lorraine plainly.

“Lorraine.” Said Terry plainly.

Turns the key, then revving the engine to stifle any further discussion. Jerking the occupants in their seats.

“I can drive if you like?” Asked Gareth.

“I’m good, it’s been a while. I can use the practice.”

“Practice?” Asked Lorraine with uncertainty.

“If you want to get out and walk...” Terry never finished the sentence.

“Come on you two. Play nice and we might get to London in one piece... How you know where they Twins are?”

“They called me.” Terry lied. Swerving around a round-a-bout, tires squealing on the road.

“Steady down Terry, no rush. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Sorry... There’s a lot of weight in the back.”

Taking one street before turning down another.

Pulls the van to the curb. Abruptly stopping causing passenger to brace themselves to avoid being thrown forward.

“Why don’t you go get them Terry? ... I’ll check the tires.” Gareth lied.

“Stay here, I’ll be right back. Clear some space for two sleepy rascals back there Sal.”

“Right-o” Said Sal shifting an amp and speaker.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Terry thumps on the front door.

Voices and giggles could be heard from inside. Opening the mail slot Terry peers inside to see a naked nymph giggling and being chased by naked Ness.

“Oh sweet Jesus!” Terry exclaims at the sight of Ness.

Bang! Bang! Bang! He trumps again.

“Hurry up you two... We don’t have all day!” He calls into the slot.

The door opens and a blonde head protrudes from the side. Eyeing Terry over. A whiff of a sweet narcotic drifted under Terry’s nostrils. Desperately trying to inhale it if only to the growing anxiety of having Lorraine along for the ride. Quickly as the door opened, it closes again. Followed by giggles and laughter.

“No wait!” Terry pleads.

Moments later the door opens again to have Taylor appearing pulling up trousers. Followed by his brother beside him doing likewise. With innocent looks on their faces as if they did not know what day it was.

“S’up?” Asked Ness wondering why Terry was standing at the door.

“You do know we’re heading to London today?”

“Woah, is that today? Heavy man.” Said Ness stoned to the bone.

“Fuck me.” Exclaimed Terry.

“Shannon!” Calls out Taylor.

“No-no-no-no-no... I didn’t mean it like that.” Said Terry fending off the naked blond nymph appearing from a bed room.

“False alarm Shannon!” Calls back Taylor.

“Cock tease!” She calls out from down the hall way.

“Get in the van. Hurry up! *Unbelievable...*” Terry mutters and turns to walk back down the path and discovers Gareth behind the wheel, “... I thought I was driving.”

“I’ve seen you driving and *we’ve* decided I should drive... Get in.” Tilting his head to take the passenger seat beside Lorraine.

“This is cozy.” Said Lorraine, squeezed between the two men.

Terry bites his lip. Preferring to say nothing. His mind already at the Tavern and ways to distance himself from Lorraine.

The lush green vegetation of the English country side turned into gray concrete

city streets.

Fresh air replaced by monoxide and deasil fumes. High rise buildings loomed before them. In the back of the van, rocked gently in its cradle the twins slept obvious to time passing around them. Double decker buses over shadowed the van as it weaved through the London traffic. Horns tooted. High pitched mopeds gargled. Heavy engines belched thick diesel fumes. Madness on wheels.

“Take the next exit.” Terry calls out directions, again. Without referring to a map.

“Ghee Terry, I didn’t know you knew the streets this well. You done this before?”

“Yeah, once or twice.”

“Man, maybe you should be driving.” Said Gareth frantically checking for traffic about him.

“Nah, you’re good. We’ve got plenty of time.”

A dirty old river rolled pass the London Eye marking how close they were to their destination.

“Almost there... Take the next left.”

“Oh Christ Terry! I’m going to need more warning than that... I’m going to have to go around again.”

“I know.” Said Terry calmly.

Resting his forehead against the window. Watched as the city flashed by. Each building a moment in time. Tick tock tick tock. Somewhere out there was Julie. Eyes fix on Waterloo station. Visions of her playing unaware of his very existence. Lost in the thought, the van jerk violently to avoid a collision with an on-coming car.

“Sorry... I should have told you about that,” Said Terry before resuming his day dream.

“Eh?” Said Gareth pulling on the wheel regaining control.

“Over the bridge, quarter mile on your left, and then a right.”

“Got it!” Gareth changes down gears to ease the van down the familiar street. Pulling to an empty park to read a sign Terry never bothered to look up at...

SHAKESPEARE TRAVERN

“We’re here...” Said Terry casually, “...Here we go again... I’m getting to old for this...” He grumbles to himself.

The others peer up at the tired brick and tile building.

“What if we get towed?” Asked Sal seeing the no parking sign. Deliveries only.

“Not with those in the back... Let them sleep.”

“Someone needs to stay with them in case they wake and wander off again... Lorraine you mind?” Asked Terry grinning.

“My pleasure.” Looking back at the sleeping nymphs.

“Come on, let’s check the place out.” Said Terry leading the way.

Waterloo Station dwarfs the tavern. Sending its foreboding presence over the young men staring up at it. A chill went down Terry’s spine. How much had time been disrupted this time? He was about to find out. A ray of sunshine pierced between the buildings to capture the three young men standing on the street.

Pulling open the double green doors to discover an entry bar.

“We’re early.” Proclaimed Terry taking in the spacious room.

“You sure this is the place Terry? ...” Asked Sal looking about the darkened interior, this is huge man... Look at the Marshals!”

“Can I help you boys?” A rasping voice calls out from an office door on hearing the bar doors squeak on their hinges.

“We’re the band... *The Ravens*.” Said Terry, “...You must me Mister Duncan?”

A gentleman approaches wiping his hands against his trousers as though he had been eating his lunch.

“That’s right, call me Alistair, everyone does... You must be Terry... You’re a little early.” Shaking his hand.

“Yeah sorry... Thought it would give us time to set up, sound checks and all that.” Advised Terry.

“Oh well, you know what you’re doing.” Concedes Duncan keen to get back to his lunch.

“Great. This Gareth and Sal... Two more in van sleeping in the van, sleeping off a hard night... If you know what I mean.” Said Terry.

“Not really, but why don’t I show you the stage and you can get set up?”

“Thanks, what time we kicking off?” Asked Gareth.

“Nine... ‘Til late, is that okay with you?” Duncan replied.

“No worries... Anything that keeps the beers flowing right Mister Duncan?” Said Terry.

“I like you thinking Terry... This way. The stage is over here.”

“Those speakers? ... Lights?” Gareth asked curiously.

“They’re part of the establishment, feel free to plug into them if you like...”

The bands we get through here don't generally have sufficient speakers and amps... If you know what I mean?"

"Tell me about it, wow! ... Can your box handle these Terry?" Asked Gareth taking in the size of the speakers.

"And then some." Said Terry grinning.

"I'm in heaven!" Declares Gareth his mouth drops open in awe.

"Power points, there, there and there... You'll find them... I'll leave you to it... Pints on the house, collect your wages afterwards okay?" Parrots Duncan automatically disappearing back to the office to finish his lunch.

"Okay let's get the gear inside and set up... Sal do you mind waking the two slaves in the van."

"My pleasure." Said Sal heading to the door.

"Oh and Sal..." Called out Terry at the last minute.

"What's that?"

"Don't go a knocking if that van's a rocking... If you know what I mean?"

"Unbelievable..." Said Sal existing on to street to discover the van rocking on its suspension only to return inside, "... I think we better them a moment. How you know?"

"Who doesn't? Right? ... All good. I'm over her now." Replied Terry grinning. He should have broken up months before he ever started going out with her.

"Ghee you're taking it really well Terry?" Said Sal seeing how calm Terry was about Lorraine's infidelity.

"Julie." Said Gareth finding the answer to Sal's concern.

"Who's Julie?" Looking at the two faces.

"Long story I've been told, but I guess were going to find out." Informed Gareth.

"Oh." Becoming more confused.

"Give me a hand to sort these cables will you... Red with red, black with black." Instructs Terry reaching for the elongated wiry snakes ending in gold and silver forked tongues.

Sometime later, Lorraine appears silhouetted in the door way.

Adjusting her skirt. Soon followed by the twins, incredulously zipping their flies.

"*Unbelievable.*" Mutters Sal beneath his breath.

"Glad you can finally join us... Grab you gear and get set up." Calls out

Terry, "...Leave the amps and speakers in the van. We'll be using theirs'." Instructed Terry.

"Woah! Look at this place man." Exclaimed Ness coming off his high.

Lorraine sat at the bar expecting to be served.

She looks about for a barman. Frustrated she gets up and heads to the door.

"I'm heading into town. I'll see you later." She advises Terry.

"Oh really... Don't you want to stick around for the sound check?" Asked Terry knowing the answer.

"No, not really... Bye." She replies disinterested in Terry and the band.

"Okay then." Watching her disappear from his life.

"We won't see her again." Said Gareth knowing her true colors.

"Okay guys give me a sound check... Let's see what this baby can do... Don't be shy." Terry calls out.

Each went through their basic routine. Noodling and doodling with chords and octaves and scales. Warming up. Feeling the acoustics of the great hall. LEDs sprang to life, stuttering on and off. Needles danced on dials. Lights worked in synchronization with the beat. The black box stood up to everything the amps threw at it.

"That's was amazing man!" Exclaimed Gareth.

"Yeah... We have to play bigger joints man." Responded Sal.

"Hey, one gig at a time guys. Let's survive this one first okay? ..." Memories of the train wreck surface. The smell of a charred console still fresh in his nostrils as though it were yesterday.

"Is *he* coming in?" Terry asked Gareth quietly.

"Who?" Gareth whispers back.

"You know who... *Seth*." Said Terry quietly as though it was a secret.

"How do you know about Seth?" Gareth's eyes shift to the other members hoping they were not listening.

"I just do..." Keeping his voice down, "... I have *connections*." He lied.

"He said he'd pop in later to hear us." Remarked Gareth.

"That's great." Hoping to keep his options open.

"Hey not a word okay... You know... *About*..." Asked Gareth tilting his head to one side to suggest an unspoken secret.

"All good Gareth. Love you man." Giving Gareth a hug.

"Thanks man." Returning the embrace.

"Get a room you two!" Calls out Ness appearing from nowhere.

“As for you two? Sal... You mind baby-sitting those two... Don't let them leave your sight.” Asked Terry.

“My pleasure... Come on you two.” Mustering the mischievous lambs.

“You coming Gareth?” Asked Terry seeing him look forlorn and alone.

“Think I'll hang around here keep an eye on the gear... Make a phone call, if you know what I mean.”

“No worries... I have to see someone myself.” Said Terry.

“Julie?”

“Yeah. How you know?”

“I maybe gay, but I'm not stupid...” Confessed Gareth coming out, “... Go get her Terry.”

CCTV camera perched on high look down upon the human standing beneath them.

Unsure where they had seen him before. Algorithms whirred and whizzed only to end up crashing in a circular confusion.

“Something screwy with the program today...” An officer gives the fuzzy static monitor a tap on the side hoping bring it back to life, “... That's weird.”

“Have you tried turning it off and back on again?” Another officer asked.

Terry stares up at the cameras and waited. Not a siren or heavy footstep to be heard. Feeling for a wallet to confirm it was still there. Nervously he ponders the encounter that was about to take place. Stepping inside the grand station. Cameras let the unidentifiable human pass.

Entering another world. Fatigued travelers' wander the polished marble floor. Some coming. Some going. Some just standing still. Taking pictures on mobile phones. Beneath the iconic clock a woman waits rocking a pram. A baby cries within. Waiting for the father no doubt. The parental thought sends a chill of goosebumps over him.

“Oh_ that's weird.” Shaking himself free of the feeling.

Heading to the escalators descends into the abyss. Faceless people stare back at him. Waits for the escalator to reach the bottom. Keen ears listen out for an angelic voice.

Silence.

Perhaps the dim of the chatter was masking her voice. Bodies shuffle left and right. He heads to the Waterloo platform. The silence got louder. A train arrives to ejaculate bodies onto an already over populated platform only to swallow those waiting into its yellow colored intestines.

He stands on a bench. Looking over heads. In search of Julie. No-where to be seen.

“It was today? Wasn’t it?” He asked himself.

“Hey! You! ...” A policeman approaches him, reaching for his Taser, “... Get down off there!” The officer barks the order.”

“Sorry! Just looking for someone.” He offers an excuse and climbs down fearful of being stung by the law. Watching the officer move along on his beat.

Sits on the bench with his head in his hands. Wondering where she could be.

“The Vault... Of Course!” Excitedly rushes off.

Catching a CCTV camera’s attention. Fast moving prey was not a good sign.

“Got a visual... Run him through the database.” An officer directs another.

“Copy that.” A desk jockey responds.

Processors whirred and whizzed and spat out meaningless grabbed messages as though in a state of perpetual confusion. Fumes begin to rise from the back of the stack of computers some two hundred kilometers away.

“What the hell’s happening?” An officer in charge frantically yells out.

“Ukraine cyber-attack?” A geek offers his appraisal.

“Get MI-6 on the line!” Exclaims the officer panicking at the scale of the attack.

Chaos turned to panic as algorithms looped infinity at the speed of light. And then some. Incapable of calculating the status of the wanted-unwanted-wanted-unwanted fugitive. Both states co-existed at the same time. The duality was too much for the system to handle. Overloaded and overheated. Processing units sparked and fumed before erupting an electrical mushroom cloud into the air. Causing fire alarms to sound. The entire surveillance system burnt to a crisp.

“Shut it down! Shut it down!” The officer yells out over the floor of technicians.

But it was too late. A haze of smoke hung in the air. Noses and lungs irritated by a cocktail of burnt circuitry. All over London, perverted glass eyes drooped flaccidly to the ground. One by one. Big brother had been rendered impotent.

Terry rushes up the escalator and out onto the sidewalk.

Running down the street, and stands at the entrance to the Vault. Hideous in the light of day, its face scared with graffiti. Bystanders see Terry arrive panting and gasping for breath. Wondering what had been chasing him. Entering the darken cavern walks briskly to the café. Only to discover it empty of customers.

‘What were you thinking? Of course she’s not here. She brought you here.’

He thinks.

“Damn!” He curses. Looking about the walkway. Faces look at him as though he did not belong.

In the distance a red light flickers. Sparking as though a fly trap. Hesitantly approaching the dark alleyway. Unpleasant smells drifts from within. Causing him to stand back. A heavy hand grips on his shoulder.

“Wouldn’t go down there son...” An officer informs him, holding him back from entering.

Taking two looks at him as though he knew him from somewhere. Unable to place him, talks into a radio telephone for a confirmation.

“(Squawk)... What do you mean the system is down? Copy that... (Squawk)... Off you go son... Nothing to see here.” The officer watches Terry walk away.

Terry heads outside for fresh air.

Nostrils stained with the lingering smell of the alleyway. With no way of contacting her, the note that meant nothing to anyone but her. Wandering aimlessly. Dejected. He finds himself standing on Waterloo Bridge. The sun rays dipping on the horizon. Reluctant to let the day pass. Something was amiss.

“Damn.” He mutters to himself, watching the dirty Thames flow beneath the bridge. Taking with it any hope of finding her.

Hunching over a toilet bowl Julie retches. Spitting bile, and moaning with morning sickness.

“You okay Julie?” Asked Ellen.

“I’m fine... Just a stomach bug...” She lied.

The pregnancy test shows double lines. Dead rabbits. She was pregnant.

“Fuck.” She curses herself.

“Yeah that’s generally how it happens.” Declares Ellen seeing through her sister’s lie.

Chapter 43

One by one band members return to the Tavern.

Sal chaperones the twins and musters them to their positions on the stage. Gareth had made himself comfortable at the bar. An empty shot glass and half empty pint going some way to calming his anxiety before they went on. Two young women that had taken a fancy to him. There was something about him that appealed to them.

Terry had yet to return. Gareth looks to his watch. Forty minutes until they had to go on.

“Where is he?” Looking to the doors.

The two woman now losing interest in Gareth. Their charms having failed. The day outside was fading with the setting sun. Long shadows crept over the city. Nocturnal life crawled the streets in search of entertainment. People begin to enter the bar. Voices fill the great hall.

Twenty minutes to go and still no sign of him.

“You see Terry on your travels?” Asked Gareth stepping on stage.

“I thought he was with you...” Responded Sal.

“Nah, went out.”

“Maybe he’s with Lorraine?”

“I very much doubt that...” Seeing Lorraine being pined with cocktails by a stranger at the bar. Laughing and giggling unashamedly at his suggestive remarks. “... Probably with Julie.”

The black console stood ominously in the corner. Gareth wondered who would be capable of operating it.

“I have an idea.” Reaching for his mobile and begins to dial Seth’s private number and waits for it to ring. Just then, Terry walks into the bar and see’s Lorraine getting up close and personal with a strange man at the bar. Hoping she did not see him. Weaves a path towards the stage and the four faces staring back at him.

“What? ...” Terry asked seeing the surprised looks, checks his watch, “... Plenty of time. We all set?”

“Sorry false alarm... See you soon... Bye.” Gareth kills the phone call, “...

Where have you been, I was worried you would not show.”

“Out for a walk...” Terry dismisses Gareth’s concerns, “...Okay give me a sound check guys, nothing fancy, just some noodles will be fine.”

The evening raved. Ravens danced.

Jiggling and bobbing like tampons on a string to the music. Duncan’s cash registers sang fifth part harmony as beers poured from the taps. Takings were up. These boys were welcome back anytime. Terry caressed the console as if it were Julie’s naked body. LEDs flashed their excitement. Dials dance to and fro as if a choreographed hula dance.

“*Tears!*” A voice cries out from among the faces.

Gareth raises his hand and told the faithful to be patient.

“After the break... I promise.” He calls back. A roar of cheers go up like a Mexican waves.

“That was brilliant guys, go get yourself a beer, back in fifteen.” Terry tells the band.

The twins wonder off closely followed by Sal eager not to let them out of his sight.

“Come on Terry. You too man.” Pulling Terry away from the console.

Lorraine had disappeared strangely enough. As had the twins. Leaving Sal alone at the bar.

“Where the twins?” Asked Gareth.

“Rest rooms. Weak bladders I suspect.” Sal lies.

“Oh well, at least we know where to find them.”

“Great jobs boys...” Duncan interjects pushing large pint glasses their way, “... Keep it up and there’s a bonus in it for you.”

“Cheers Mister Duncan.” Terry raise his glass.

“Man, this place rocks Terry, nothing like the Arms. Those speakers are amazing. Beats the heck out of our boxes.”

“Yeah, lucky we have the new console, the old one would have burnt out for sure.”

“You did the right thing man getting that *thing*. We’ll pay you back for it.”

“Let’s get that contract first okay. By the way, where’s Seth, or... Archie? I thought they’d be here.”

“Who’s Archie?” Asked Gareth inquisitively.

“Seth’s partner.”

“Eh?” Catching Gareth by surprise.

“*Business partner.*” Terry realigns his thinking.

“Ohh_ How you know him?”

“I did my research.” Terry lied.

“Said he’s be down later.” Said Gareth looking about the intoxicated faces.

“Make them wait for Tears and the other songs. We still have couple of hours. Keep our powder dry okay.”

“Sal! ...” Gareth hollers out across the bar over the voices, “... Go get ‘em.”

Sal finishes his pint. Sliding off the stool heads to the rest rooms. Faces look towards the strange noises coming from one particular stall.

“Unbelievable.” Sal shakes his head.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Thumping a fist onto the heavy door. Only to hear banging against the door coming back as a body thumped against it.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Come on you two, we’re up in five. Get a hurry on!”

“Coming!” Calls out Taylor.

“Me too (*he-he-he-he-he*).” Followed by hysterical giggles from Ness.

A toilet flushes and Sal wonders what they exactly were doing in there. The door squeaks open and two pale sexually drained twins appear. Followed by a three young women dressed as school girls. Grinning to Sal as if he were next.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Declining their invitation to treat.

And he wonders how five bodies could possibly fit within the small cubical. His imagination prohibited him from visualizing the contortions required. Especially if it involved the twins.

“Come on you two, on stage.” He instructs them.

“What about our beer?” Asked Ness.

“You should have thought about that beforehand?”

“Ohh_” Moaned Ness heading to the play to order shots.

“Unbelievable.” Declared Sal heading back to the stage and taking his place behind the drums.

Fingers skillfully twirl orange drum sticks as a foot taps the kick drum.

Boom, Boom, Boom. Sending heavy vibrations through the floor boards. Drawing the crowd’s attention back to the band. The band was about to commence again.

“*Tears!*” A voice hollers out.

“*Love me Lots!*” And other voice cries out impatiently.

“You heard them boys... Just as we practiced. Follow by changes and try to

keep up... Two-three-four!” Gareth leaps into the opening bars and shreds a riff. Huge speakers accentuated the titillating licks. Volume filled the air.

Just then Seth enters the bar looking dapper. Tweed jacket and tie. Immaculately dressed, he set himself apart from the undomesticated individuals about him. And takes a stool at the bar. Tomlinson sits nearby disturbed by Seth’s sudden appearance.

“What are you doing here?” Tomlinson asked curiously.

“That’s none of your business.” Warned Seth becoming tetchy.

“Maybe I’ll make it my business.” Tomlinson taps a large brown envelope.

“What’s that?” Seth asked hesitantly.

“I think the phrase is *That’s none of your business?*” Advises Tomlinson, taking a swallow of whiskey.

“We’ll see about that.” Turning his back on Tomlinson.

Both men listen with keen interest to the performance.

Experienced ears culling imperfections. A crudeness. There always were with bands starting out. But with the right guidance. The right mentor. The rough could be made smooth. Amateurs made professional. And lead turned to gold.

As the band played on Tomlinson stands and walks over to Terry at the console. Seth watches on as Tomlinson engages Terry in conversation.

“Can’t stay, but here’s a copy of the contract you wanted... The Exec Team were very impressed with the demo tape... Call me if you’re still interested.” Handing him the envelope, shakes hands and walks quietly from the bar without looking back to Seth watching him leave.

Wondering what had been said. What promises had been made? Obviously they had not signed.

“*Scourer.*” Scoured Seth sucking on a small straw savoring a blue cocktail. A bright red cherry to one side. Eyes fixed on Gareth. The lynch pin of the band. The others could be dispensed or left on the shelf. The fine print would see to that.

After several encores the night finally wound down.

And the faithful left with *Tears* ringing in their ears.

“You’re welcome back anytime boys!” Duncan hands Terry an envelope thick with notes.

“Thanks Mister Duncan, we’ll let you know.” Terry waves the pay packet in the air as Duncan leaves.

“You must be Terry. The band’s *manager.* I’ve heard so much about you.”

Seth approaches him.

“Yeah, that’s right, you must be Seth... *Friend* of Gareth’s, right?” Asked Terry playing along.

“You could say that. I see Tomlinson had a word with you. I’m not one for interfering but... At least consider our offer before you sign anything... You haven’t signed have you?” Asked Seth probing.

“Not yet. Just keeping our options open... If you know what I mean.” Remarked Terry.

“You’d be silly not to...” Seth lied, “... Why don’t you stop by our office say, *Wednesday*? Here’s my card.” Holding out the familiar card.

“Yeah, sure... Thanks.” Said Terry, his eyes lighting up.

“We can talk then... But we’d certainly be interested in signing you.”

“Really?” The last word catching Terry’s attention.

“Really.” Said Seth extending a hand as commitment. Opening his wallet, pulls several fifty pound notes and hands them to him, “... Think of it as... An *inducement*... That’s all. And there’ll be plenty more where that came from.”

“Ghee thanks! ... You not staying?” Asked Terry seeing him about to leave.

“No rest for the witted Terry. The music industry waits for no one.” He lied again. He had a lover waiting for him.

“I understand. Thanks... For this.” Holding up the gold gilded business card. Before sliding it into his wallet beside Archie’s now tired looking card.

Seth disappears among the people on the floor then out the door unseen. Gareth appears at the console expecting to see Seth.

“Where’d he go?” He asked.

“Back to the office I think.”

“Oh... What’d he say?” Gareth asked anxiously.

“Sic man... Got a meeting with him on Wednesday.”

“Woah-Who! ...” Gareth punches the air, “... What’s with the envelope?”

“Oh just the Merseyside dude dropped it off... Thought I’d keep our options open if one or the other fell over... Seems I won’t be needing it after all. (*Ha*). What a relief... We did it!!”

“Shots!” Calls out Gareth.

“No-no-no-no-no-no!” Terry stuttered fearful of them.

“Com’on... One won’t hurt you. You have to celebrate.” Presses Gareth.

“One won’t hurt I suppose.” Relents Terry hesitantly.

Throwing an arm over Terry’s shoulder Gareth pulls him to the bar. Peeling off the fifties and hands them out to band. Soon to be swallowed by way of

shots. To be rewarded with nauseating hangovers the next day.

“To the top!” Toasts Gareth.

“To the top.” Parrots the twins and Sal.

“We did it lads... We’re going to get a recording contract!” Advises Terry looking at the fresh innocent naïve faces.

Lamenting thoughts of Julie come to mind. Visions of her in a red beret. Standing alone on the tube platform. Her voice echoing off white tiled walls. Where could she have gone? Or did she even exist? The small yellow note wedged tightly into a pocket of his wallet. Between two business cards.

“You okay man?” Asked Gareth seeing Terry distant in thought.

“Yeah. Just thinking of someone.”

“Lorraine, I know. What a bitch eh?”

“Yeah, Lorraine.” He lies.

“Speak of the devil... Look who just walked in.” Gareth exclaims seeing her enter, adjusting her skirt.

“Oh shit!” Frets Terry unwilling to face her.

“Why don’t you guys take the train back, I’ll take the van.” Advises Terry finding an excuse to leave.

“You don’t mind?” Said Gareth reluctant to drive at night. Finding his way around London in the day time was hard enough.

“Nah_ I’m good.” Heading past Lorraine watching him leave without speaking.

“What’s wrong with him?” Asked Lorraine taken back by the Terry’s dismissal of her.

“Pissed off he has to take the van back.” Gareth lied on his behalf.

“Hey! What about your shot?” Calls out Sal.

“Give it to Lorraine. She needs it more than I do... Besides I’m driving.” Wanting to distance himself from her.

01:47AM and Terry sits in the van laden with gear.

Alone. Relieved to have escaped Lorraine’s clutches and having gotten the better of her. Inserts the key into the ignition to make good his escape only to hear the sound of a drained battery.

Hee!-Hee!-Hee!-Hee!-Hee!-Cough!-Splutter! The engine laughs at him, refusing to turn over.

“Com’on baby! ... Not now!” Turning the key harder as though it would help.

Hee!-Hee!-Hee!-Cough!-Splutter!-Splutter!-Cough- Groan!-Groan!-Groan_.
A red LED on the dashboard told him the lights had been left on.

“Oh come on Gareth.” He told himself.

Click-Click-Click-Click-Click. The starter engine clicked its tongue at him.
Having the last laugh.

Thoughts of spending the night in the back horrified him. Thoughts of loitering the streets petrified him. Going back into the bar was not an option. Feeling for Duncan’s pay packet of cash. Pulls out his mobile and dials a reserved number for emergencies.

“AA? ... Yeah, I have a flat battery... Waterloo Station, Shakespeare... Yeah, you know it? ... Yeah... You take cash? ... That’s great. See you soon.”

Relieved Terry leans back in the driver’s seat and waits for the cavalry of the British highways to save him.

Chapter 44

Wyatt looks shyly at the empty stool at the bar.

There was something about the lad that was different to the others that had been drawn inside. Each with their own sad tales of misadventure. Each given three wishes. In exchange for their souls should they fail. Each stumbling. Succumbing to greed. Pliable in the Jinn's hands. Only to fall at the last hurdle.

They all did. Without exception.

Terry did not strike Wyatt as a greedy man. He could have wished for a million dollars. Success, fortune. And what does he wish for, *'to do it all over again'*.

"Stubborn bastard if you ask me." Said Wyatt aloud.

"He'll be back. They *always* come back." Laughs Brain.

A cigarette smoldering from the corner of his mouth. A trail of smoke drifting over his face. Irritated nostrils twitch.

"Maybe." Said Wyatt distantly.

"You still looking for an out?"

"Maybe."

"You in?" Asked Kiran growing impatient himself to get on with the eternal game.

Wyatt thumbs his two cards. Finger tips feel the contours. Sliding and shuffling them one upon the other without looking at them.

"I out." Pushing them to the center. And takes a heavy swallow of bourbon.

"You were never in." Complained Brian.

Gary had disappeared to a room with a long legged brunette. Only to return moments later with a dumpy blonde. Giggling as if she was still being tickled. The Jinn stood defiant behind the bar and stared ominously at the Dealer as though he had interfered.

"Don't look at me... It's up to the boy." Said the Dealer dealing the Flop cards.

Kiran's fingers taps his cards, pleased by what he saw. And tosses two black chips to the center.

"I call ya' and raise you five." Brain tosses five more black chips upon

Kiran's.

The Jinn paced the bar from one end of eternity to the other. Frustrated. Wondering what was taking the lad?

"I'm just popping out... Hold the bar." Then vanished into thin air.

"Who's the father?" Ellen asked concerned for her sister.

"I can't be pregnant. It's not possible." Declared Julie collapsing onto the couch after another session over the basin.

"Come on Julie. Don't give me that Immaculate Conception crap. That may have worked two thousand years ago before the pill and the internet, but not today... Was it that guy from bar?"

"Who? ... Ugh_! You got to be kidding me! Yuk! Think I could do better than *that*."

"It must be someone in the past couple of months? Surely?"

"I haven't had sex in the past six months! ..." She let out her secret, "... Unless..."

"Unless what?" Ellen asked curiously.

"You won't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"I had this really weird dream..." She began to say.

"Dream? ... I'm pretty sure you can't get pregnant from a dream."

"I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

"I'll see the doctor next week if it hasn't gone away."

"Make sure you do. I don't know how we'll cope..." Then relents her inquisition. Who was she to talk as an unmarried mother of two, "...Don't you worry okay? ..." Placing a supportive arm over her sister's shoulders and pressing her head against her sister's, "...It's probably one of the phantom pregnancies you read about in the magazine."

"Yeah." Julie lied.

A hand feeling her belly glowing with unusual warmth. There was nothing phantom about it.

"Fuck_ me." Cries out Archie entering the office.

"We've had that discussion Archie, you're not my type." Replied Seth gazing out his office window.

"Nah_ this. I'm talking about the press these guys are getting... Have you read this?" Handing him a section of a newspaper.

Seth runs his eyes over the review column. And purses his lips.

“And deservedly so... You should have been there.”

“I had a prior *engagement*.” Explained Archie.

“Did this prior engagement have legs to her arm pits?”

“That probably explain why it took so long to take her panties off.”

“Leave them on... It’s *much* more fun.” Seth offered his own advice, then remembered, “...Oh, bloody *Tomlinson* was there.”

“Was he now? ... And what he that thieving Scouser want?” Archie asked suspiciously.

“Not a lot. I think I scared him away... Besides I have Gareth by the balls. He won’t sign with anyone else.”

“You’re such a cock tease Seth.” Pleased with his business partner’s methods.

“I know... I’ve always said that.” Accepting the encomium.

“Nonetheless, I want a contract tighter than a snapper’s ass at thirty thousand feet, you hear?”

“Get Marisa onto it right away. They’ll be here Wednesday to sign. They won’t know what hit them until it’s too late... (*Chuckling*)...” Then pulls a stein face, “... The drummer will have to go... Better suited to a metal band. Bury it in the contract somewhere... I don’t want any blow back.” Informs Seth.

“I might know someone up north that would fit.” Said Archie, his mind ticking over with alternatives.

“Yeah? Who?” Seth asks anxiously.

“*Starkey... Pete Starkey. With The Twisters...* Shouldn’t be too hard to change teams... Excuse the pun.”

“*Touché* Archie... Sound him out will you?”

“Onto it already...” Said Archie reaching for a mobile, “... Shame, it’s always the drummer that has to go.”

“Don’t go soft on me Archie.”

“You’d be so lucky.” Joked Archie waiting for the call to be picked up.

Swiveling a chair about again to the windows Seth surveyed his domain.

Below, the streets of London scurried by unaware his watchful presence from above and the CCTV cameras. Their heads drooping, as though they were asleep. His nostrils twitched. Scenting the alluring aroma of money lingering in the air about him. Becoming stronger by the moment.

A black Hackney pulls up to a curb and five eager young men step from its belly.

Stepping onto the concrete sidewalk. Watching it drive away to become one with the swarming traffic. Bright orange drum sticks protrude from Sal’s satchel

providing some color to the ragged troupe. Standing before a towering brown glass edifice. Looking lost and bewildered. Looking outside their comfort zone.

Terry had conflicting thoughts. Elated to be standing on the brink of success. Annoyed at having misplaced Julie. The paradigms did not sit well together. The Jinn watches from a nearby bench peering over a paper. Flicking at it, as though he were agitated.

“I thought we agreed to let the boy be.” Warns the Dealer appearing beside him unseen.

“What? I can’t sit here and enjoy my Master’s creation?” The Jinn lied.

“Hmm... It is a lovely day isn’t it... I’ll think I stick around myself. If you don’t mind the company.” Said the Dealer materializing with paper at hand.

Outplayed, the Jinn vanished to think air, leaving the paper to fall to the ground. Soon followed by The Dealer to resume a card game at the exact moment he had left.

“You see that?” Asked Sal unsure what he had just seen.

“See what?” Asked Taylor joining him, wondering what he was looking at.

“Two men, over there... Just disappeared. *Like that.*” Sal gestures a magical *puff*.

Taylor only sees two newspapers blowing about and raising to the air.

“Nah man, must be the wind... You got to get off the weed man.” He tells Sal.

“I’m telling you, I know what I saw... They were just there!”

Sal stared transfixed at the bench sure he had seen what he had seen. Tilting his head to one side as if that would clarify the bewilderment. Papers lift into the air and swirl about, suspended before falling to the ground again,

‘Hmm... Maybe it had just been the wind.’ He dismisses the illusion. And rejoins the others staring up at the glass tower.

“This the place?” Asked Ness taken aback by the size.

“Apparently.” Remarks Gareth.

“*Fuck_* it’s big.” Qualified Ness.

“*Posh* looking if you ask me.” Offered Taylor.

“Okay we better get inside... They’ll be expecting us.” Said Terry checking his watch.

Leading the others through huge revolving glass doors and into the marble foyer. Eyes scan the directory of Company names. As twins played childishly within the revolving doors. A security guard watches on. A stern look on his face.

“Ah-ha!” The guard coughs. Loud enough for all to catch his presence and watchful eye.

“Hey, get in here!” Terry barks at the twins to stop fooling around.

Running a fingers under lines treading out companies’ names.

“Sykes. Sykes. Sykes... Sykes and Meyers. Here it is... Level Twelve.”

The Security guard blocks lift doors. Refusing to let them pass. Eyeing the twins suspiciously.

“Where do you think you are going?” In a growling voice.

“Sykes and Meyers, twelfth floor... They’re expecting us... We’re *The Ravens*.” Advises Terry stepping forward.

“One moment.” Orders the guard. And talks into a radio-telephone clipped to a shoulder.

The RT squawks back. Spitting sharp jagged noises that could have been words.

“Very well then...” Pressing the up button, the guard steps aside and waits for the doors to open. Swiping a card over a sensor presses twelve, “... Off you go then.” Ushering them into the lift before the doors closed them out.

“Thanks man.” Said Gareth only to have the guard ignoring him.

Feeling the lift rise before coming to a seamless halt. Doors open to a glass walled reception. Melissa inspects the individuals exiting the lift.

“Can I help you?” She asked politely. Fixing her eyes on the twins.

“We’re *The Ravens*... Here to see Seth... Or Archie.” Responds Terry looking about the extravagant reception.

“Take a seat. Mister Meyers will be with you shortly.” Gesturing a large leather.

Gold records peppered the walls. Gaining everyone’s attention. Reading engraved plaques of renowned bands that had signed over the years.

“Hey man... Look at this one.” Calls out Ness to his brother.

“Don’t touch anything!” Warns Sal watching the impish pair touching the frame.

“You came! ...Good to see you boys again.” Welcomes Seth entering extending a fake smile.

“Come this way to the board room. You’ve meet Ms Helliwell...” Smiling politely to her holding copies of documents.

“I’ll just get Archie to sniff it over for *typos*.” She lied.

“Very good then... This way boys. What a wonderful day!” Leading the sacrificial lambs.

Entering a palatial room. Extravagance with floor to ceiling windows. One eighty degree view of the city and a dirty old river. The London Eye displaced in symmetry and time. Incongruent to its surroundings. Ancient and old and circular and rectangular. Terry could empathize with the anomaly.

“Hey! That’s where we played the other night...” Excites Taylor, a finger smudging the glass, “...*Sorry.*” Using a sleeve to wipe it away. Only to make it worse.

“Don’t worry about that...” Seth lied, “... Have a chair.” Encouraging the twins away from the window.

Taking leather chairs about a large board table. Bling sparkled from polished surfaces. Bewitching the children seated before him.

“A drink perhaps?” Seth offered cheerfully.

“Wouldn’t say no.” Say Ness looking to Taylor, free booze was always welcomed.

Seth opens a hidden wall panel to reveal shelves of amber bottles sparkle their illicit contents. Pouring whiskey over large ice cubes rattling against the sides of crystal tumblers. Handing each of the young men their glass.

“Ah_, here is the young lady...” Seeing Melissa reappear at the doors, large white labelled envelopes, “... Why, thank you Ms Helliwell. Is *everything* in *order*?” Seth asked playfully.

“Of course Mister Sykes.” Placing them before Seth at the head of the table, sitting in a large leather chair.

Appearing as a monarch over his subjects. His serfs seated before him. Identifying each by their labels, slides them one by one towards each of the unlettered band members as though dealing cards. Before being halted by hands that eagerly awaited them.

“Gentlemen... Your contracts...” Advised Seth looking about the confused faces with eyes as big as saucers, “... Why don’t you take your time, read them over and I’ll be right back, I have to make an important call.” Trying to avoid eye contact with Sal.

“I’d like to take these away and have a *Lawyer* look over them if I can.” Speaks Terry, halting Seth in his tracks.

There was always one smarter than the others. One that resisted. Seth hesitates before speaking. His mind finding the right words to sooth the troublesome soul ruffling his delicate feathers. Turning about he faces down Terry’s squeaking voice, in need of grease. And the grease was money.

“You’d be silly not to... But I can assure you it’s a standard industry contract

with the *usual* upfront advance of... *Ten thousand pounds*. Double that if we get a *single* out within the next few weeks. But hey, it's your call." Promises Seth, dangling temptation of the contract.

The contract. The yellow brick road to fame and fortune.

Cementing his domination over the band. An un-shackled band was dangerous. Without it there would be bedlam. Chaos and disorder. And God forbid, Freewill. The thought mortified him and a chill ran over his body.

With proper nurturing, and a guiding hand, in the right places, he could squeeze every last drop from the pound of flesh. The erotic thought aroused him. Insubordination would be met with litigation and years living out the remainder of their contract in obscurity.

Seth stands and hesitates to leave. Waiting momentarily for the minnows to bite.

Chapter 45

“*Ten thousand pounds?! Wow, we’re rich!*” Taylor calls out taking the pitch, hook line and sinker. Excitedly opening his envelope and pulling out the contract.

The contract looked so... So harmless.

“Like I say, have a look, no rush... If you can excuse me.” Holding up a mobile. Closing the heavy double doors behind him and encapsulating the five young men inside.

“We need to have these read by a Lawyer guys.” Suggests Terry prying open his envelope and inspecting the thick document.

The bleached pages and weight alone suggested something sinister was buried within its pages.

“We can’t afford fancy *Lawyers* Terry. You heard him... Ten thousand pounds up front and ten more if we can get a single out... I could buy a descent guitar, pay off my credit card.” Relishes Gareth, opening the contract is immediately assaulted by a barrage of words he had never seen before.

“What does Joint and Sever-al Liability mean?” Asked Taylor curiously.

“Rati-fic-cat-ion... That sounds dirty.” Remarks Ness.

“Cav-eat Emptor? ... That can’t be good, can it?” Asked Sal looking confused.

But the one word they all recognized was *money*. Eyes searched frantically for the word money. Over and over again it was stated. As if Melissa had increased the font size to make it easier to detect. Distracting them from cleverly worded annulments. Strained eyes tried to read fine print. Gareth sniffed his copy as though the paper was fragranced. Only to have Taylor do likewise.

“Smells okay to me.” Said Taylor.

“*Unbelievable.*” Remarks Sal about to reach over and clip him with a drum stick.

Only to be halted as Seth appeared at the double doors.

“Well boys... How were they?” He asked rhetorically, “... Just spoke with Archie and he’s willing to wait. But it will mean *losing* the *bonus*... Sorry guys. I tried talking him down, but... We have a deadline. Release dates... You know

how it works.” Seth lied.

“I don’t know...” Said Terry hesitantly. Unwilling to forestall the release of the band’s first single, “... Okay, damn it. Let’s do it? You only live once right?”

“*Trust me*, these are industry standard... Take them to any Lawyer and they will tell you the same...” Embellishing the lie before sweetening it, “...You get *fifty percent* of all sales... Less overheads, administration costs and our commissions of course...” Then deflected the calculating minds elsewhere, “... We can get you in the *studio* as early as next week... How does that sound?”

Taking a satisfying breath. He could almost smell the greed seeping from the young men’s pores. Archie listened on outside the doors, grinning to himself. Hearing the maestro at his best.

“Really? Fifty percent?” Exclaimed Terry being unconsciously manipulated.

“Less our *small* commission of course... I have to maintain my life style.” Said Seth.

“Wow! We’re rich!” Exclaimed Taylor again.

“Keep writing those silly love songs... And *all this* could be yours.” Seth gestured with his hands about the regal room.

Grinning from ear to ear, imagining the wealth the band would bring him. Pulling a handsome gilded fountain pen from his jacket that he used for such occasions. Hands it to Terry as though it were scared, to sign first. Knowing the others would fall like dominos once he had. The pen had weight. An authority.

“Where do I sign?” Asked Terry naively.

“Initial the bottom of each page and sign where it states your name on the last page.” Directs Seth watching the sacrificial lambs sign their lives away.

Gathering them back, stacked them into a neat innocent pile before him. Pleased with himself sits back in his chair patting the stack with a hand as though to bless the pact the boys had just made with the devil. The Jinn sits in a chair next to him. Unseen. Pleased with his protégé.

“I get these copied... Ms Helliwell!” Seth calls out to the doorway. Suddenly appearing as though she had been waiting just outside the doors “...Be a dear and get these copied for the boys before they leave.”

“Certainly Mister Meyers... One moment Mister Meyers.” Beaming a fake smile at him and the five misguided individuals.

“A drink to celebrate our new partnership.” Seth raises his glass, “...The world is your oyster now, and you my darlings are my pearls.” Humoring himself, looking at Gareth grinning back.

Terry stares out the large window, invisible to the outside world. He had just

signed a recording contract. His wish had come true. He had done it. Visions of gold records, wealth and grandeur. Suddenly the thoughts are replaced by another. One of Julie. Sweet and innocent. Her voice rings in his ears.

The Jinn and Dealer vied for Terry's mind.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't interfere." Warned the Dealer.

"I lied." Chuckled the Jinn polishing a shot glass.

"You're forgiven." Offers the Dealer. Stifling the Jinn's sniggering.

"He'll be back."

"I know." Said the Dealer slicing and dicing shuffling cards back and forth.

"Again!" Barked Archie into a microphone from the control room.

Speakers magnified the otherwise quiet voice into headsets of the four tired band members.

"Again?" Complained Ness. Fingers tender and feeling as though they would wear to the bone.

"Again! And we'll keep doing it until you get it down."

"What was wrong with it?" Asked Ness becoming annoyed, voicing what the others were thinking but too afraid to say.

"Everything... Now. One more time and you can take a break okay... From the top." Archie kills the mic. Looking to Cameron wondering if Seth had made a mistake.

With Terry in the room it was difficult to speak freely. Sitting quietly to one side, watching Cameron operate a massive sound console. If there was a heaven, this was it. An array of innumerable needles bounced back and forth. Sporadically, LEDs lit up with a life of their own, signaling the vitals of the band.

"Hey Terry..." Cameron catches his attention, "... Listen to this will you..." Handing him a headset. "...You know most of these. Volume, tone, tweeters, isolators... Why don't you have a go? They might play better if they see you behind the panel." Cameron lied, turning up the volume. Deafening Terry from all other sounds and voices.

Archie watches on wondering what Cameron was up to. Terry gives a thumbs sign to the band to start when they were ready. Cameron slides his chair next to Archie's some distance away from Terry behind the panel of dials.

"You heard him..." Said Terry taking control, "Gareth led them in."

"Right guys, Terry's in the chair... Let's give it our best shot okay? Follow my lead... Two-three-four!" Gareth riffed into the opening bars, Ness stroked

bass strings with tender fingers. Sal timed in perfectly. Taylor layered elongated chords over the top.

Terry bobbed a head in time with the beat.

Dead to the world of any conversation going on beside him. Two voices speak quietly. Amused by the amateur playing God. Cameron was taken back by Terry's sudden ability to isolate each instrument in turn. Maybe his first impressions of him were mistaken. Archie pulls him from his thoughts.

"Hopeless." Archie remarks, glaring at Sal bashing orange drum sticks against skins.

"When the new guy get hear? ... Starkey?" Asked Cameron.

"Yeah. Tomorrow. Someone will have to break the news to the poor prick." Said Archie looking assuredly at Cameron.

"Why you looking at me for? I didn't sign him."

"Just messing with you..." Archie lied, "...I'll have a word with Terry. He's their manager. He can fire him." Said Archie coldly aware of such eventualities.

It had been written it specifically into each of their contracts. It was time to cut one loose. Eyes shift to the strange bobbing individual, a hand pressing a can against his head. Terry turns about and catches the pair looking at him. Fake grins smile back, giving him the thumbs up. Unaware of their hatched plan. Returning his attention to the rack of flashing lights and dancing needles. The song comes to a close.

"That was brilliant guys!" Calls out Terry unheard by those on the studio floor. The mic dead.

Cameron indicates the mic needed to be turned on.

(Click). Flicking the side switch on.

"Sorry... That was brilliant guys!" Looking over to Archie for his confirmation.

"Bloody brilliant!" He lied.

There would be time to iron out the creases once the new drummer was in place. But first a word to Terry. Archie slides over and takes control of the mic.

"Great job boys. Why don't you pack up and we'll see you tomorrow!" Directed Archie.

"Whoa-who!" Sings out Ness excited the day was over.

Members rush from the studio and the twins kill the light prematurely. Flooding the studio floor in darkness. Eyes now turned inward.

"Terry, wait up... We need to talk." Asked Archie quietly.

The tone of his voice suggesting he had a concern about the band,
“You can stay too Cameron.” Seeing him about to leave.

Archie needed support, hoping Cameron’s presence would give weight to the impending dismissal. From one sound engineer to another. The decision had been made before the ink had dried on the contract. Anxiously Terry swivels about on his chair to face the two men. Poker faces gave nothing away.

“Hey, what’s up? Is it the band? ...” Terry asked curiously.

“No, no... Not exactly...” Archie skirted the issue, “...Well maybe... Just one member.” There. He had said it.

“Eh? ... Who? ...” Asked Terry his eyes dancing between the two faces, “... Not Gareth?” Wanting to protect him.

“Of course not... The man is talented beyond his years... No. It’s ah_ *Sal*.”
Remarks Archie hesitantly.

“Sal? What about him?”

Archie sighed and looked to Cameron hoping for some support. Only to have him squirm in his seat.

‘Pussy.’ Thinks Archie being abandoned.

“He has to go.” Spitting out the distaste.

“Eh? You can’t just drop him. He’s one of the band. It’s all of us or none of us...” Terry protested back.

Overshadowed by two men giving him no room to maneuver. Feeling trapped in.

“There’s the contract!” Calling Archie’s bluff.

“Ah yes... About the *Contract*... It clearly states that *any* band member can be *replaced*... At *any time* for *any reason*... It’s all *there* in the Contract... I *assume* you read it before you *signed*?” Archie played with the novice manager.

“I don’t understand. You can’t just drop Sal... Who’s going to replace him?”
Becoming worried for Sal and the band.

“I’m sure we can find a *stand-in* until someone suitable comes along...” He lied, “... It’s all there in the contract.” Iterated Archie to hammer the nail home.

Crucifying Terry where he sat.

“What if the band refuses? You can’t make us spit up!” Challenged Terry.

“We own you Terry and your back street band... We have your souls for five years. You won’t be able to whistle dickie out your ass without being sued for everything you own.” Archie grins from ear to ear.

Confused. Feeling like a broken like a doll. It was all too good to be true. The dream unravelling before his eyes. To lose Sal was like losing a brother. How

would the others take the news? How would Sal?

“You could tell Sal... Or I could.” Archie deflected the bad news.

“I’ll do it...” Said Terry, “... Always the drummer isn’t it.”

“You’ll be doing him a favor... We could find him another band he could fill in for... Something more suitable to his... *Style* shall we say.” Archie lied.

“Yeah...” Terry replied reluctantly, seeing a silver lining to the gray news, “... He does love his Metal.”

“There, I knew it was the right decision... We have to do what’s best for the band right? The others are carrying him... It’s for the best Terry. You know that... Sometimes a manager has to make tough calls if you want to go places... You do want to go places?” Coerced the devil incarnate.

“Yeah, of course.” He admits. It was a bitter pill to swallow. More so for Sal.

“Thank you Terry. The decision will be the wisest you’ve ever made.” Said Archie leaning back in the chair.

“It doesn’t feel very wise?” Responds Terry feeling sick to the stomach.

“They never do at the time...”, then coldly added, “...Make sure you tell him tonight. *We* can’t have him back here tomorrow.” Archie warned.

“Tonight?”

“The sooner it’s done the better... Oh gracious me... Look at the time. I’m running late for meeting.” He lied excusing himself.

“You do?” Asked Cameron, catching Archie’s scorned look.

“I do...” Leaving it there, words would be had later. “...Terry... Good luck.” Sighing deeply, releasing the built up anxiety having washed his hands of the wretched eviction notice.

The two men exit the control room, leaving Terry alone. A mind clattering with conflicting loyalties. Pressing fingers together as though to make a steeple. Lips purse together. An alternate world spinning in his head. The pale yellow sound booth a pleasant alternative to the pale green cell he had found himself last time. *Last time?* Unsure what was real anymore? He pinches himself and feels the sharp pain. Bringing himself back to the room.

‘Managers make tough decisions... Grow some balls Terry.’ He reprimands himself taking a heavy sigh. Maybe Archie was right. Maybe Sal was not suited for the band.

“Just do it.” Terry tells himself.

Swiveling about he stares out to studio dimly illuminated from the bright lights of the control booth.

Sal steps out from a darkened corner. He had heard every treacherous word. The mic had been left on. Eyes burned at Terry. There was no words that need to be spoken that have not already.

Chapter 46

“Fuck you.” Mouths Sal through the veiled glass wall.

Stepping back into the darkness like a ghost.

A rear stage door opens, silhouetting him briefly in the door frame before closing behind him.

“No Sal! It’s not like that! ...” Terry pleads into the mic, back peddling the lies that could not be taken back, “...What have I done?” Resting his head on arms, wishing it was not so.

Terry catches the reflection of the Jinn momentarily on the glass, before vanishing from sight. Startling him to sit upright. He looks about the control booth. His heart thumping in his chest. Leaping from his chair, rushes outside hoping to catch Sal before he too disappeared. Only to discover him gone.

Frantically dialing his mobile number. Hearing it being rejected and die a spontaneous death. A continuous dial tone sounds the death knell. Their relationship dead.

“Sal! I’m sorry!” Terry cries loudly.

Passersby stepped around him, keeping their distance from agitated young man.

“Sal_!” Terry pleaded one last time.

Dejected. And emotionally drained. Terry stood on the sidewalk staring up at the tall brown glass edifice. This is what he had wished for.

Thoughts of Julie come to mind from nowhere, as though she was part of a perverted grand scene created to torment him. Burying hands into pockets begins to walk. Walking aimlessly taking a gravel path that followed the dirty old river to a bridge. A couple stands at its center. Embraced in each other’s arms. As though to stab another dagger through his aching heart. Suddenly he grimaces, feeling a sharp pain in his chest.

“What was that all about?” Bracing himself on a railing, clutching his chest. Was he having a heart attack?

If he could not contact Sal, then maybe Gareth could. Reaches for his mobile and dials a number, waits for it to answer. But hears it click into voice mail.

“(Beep) ... Gareth, it’s me... We need to talk... Something’s happen.

Something bad. I'll be at the Arms this evening... See you there."

Terry slumps at the bar.

Two empty shot glasses and half empty glass of whiskey before him. Sian looks at him unsure what to make of the individual that looked like Terry. But was not acting like him.

"You okay Terry?" She inquires quietly.

"Yeah... Just waiting for Gareth." He replies wearily.

"How's the recording going? It's all over Muswell you know." Sounding excited.

"Good... I think." Then falls silent, lost in thought.

"Call out if you need anything okay?" Sensing his mood, stepping away to rack empty glasses.

Lorraine appears at the doors and makes a bee line for him. Terry looks up to see her approaching. Could his day get any worse?

"Not now Lorraine." Trying to fend her off.

"Terry Davies! I've been looking for you... Have you been trying to avoid me? Well, have you?"

All eyes in the bar turn to the brewing confrontation. Terry slouched mournfully over the arm. Lorraine standing fiery and defiant. About to give him a piece of her mind.

"This should be interesting." One patron whispers to another.

"I've been busy. At the studio... And if you must know... Yeah, I have been trying to avoid you. It's over between us Lorraine. Not that we were really ever together." Terry uncustomary unleashes.

Releasing the emotional attachment she had on him. There he had done it. Two dismissals in one day. Relieved he had finally done what he should have done a month ago.

"How can you do this to me?" She begins faking a pout and tears.

"Quite easy actually... I'm sorry Lorraine. It's not going to work out between us. I'm sort of seeing something else."

Sian listens in from the side polishing a wine glass. That explained the heavy drinking.

"You've cheating on me behind my back? How could you? Who is she? Where's the bitch?" Lorraine looks about the bar. Sian steps back out of reach.

"No one you know... Julie... Now she's gone." Terry takes a mouthful of whiskey and swallows. Emptying the glass. Pushes it forward wanting a refill.

“She dumped you... Good job Terry Davies. You’re nothing but a loser and a cheat. You always have been.” Slapping his face and waking out of the bar.

“That went well...” Said Sian sliding a fresh glass towards him, “... On the house, never liked that bitch. She’s got a nerve... She’s been cheating on you for years Terry. Sorry.”

“Yeah, I know.” Accepting the truth.

Annoyed from losing Sal.

Confused from losing Julie. Takes a swallow of the amber spirit slowly numbing his extremities. Listening to the sound of his own breathing. He was at peace. He had reclaimed his manhood from Lorraine.

“Terry!” A voice cries out from the door.

He need not look up. It was a familiar voice. It was a friend.

“Same again...” Terry informs to Sian, “... And two shots... Nah... make it three if you want one.”

“Sure, why not.” Responded Sian happily.

Gareth pulls a stool along and sits beside him, watching Sian line up three shot glass and pouring tequila over the brims.

“What we celebrating?” Asked Gareth confused by Terry voice message.

“Commiserating more like it... To Sal.” Informed Terry.

“Sal? What about him?” Asked Gareth anxiously.

“He’s being dropped from the band.” Terry breaths a heavy sigh, raising the glass and throwing it the back of his throat. The others follow suit. They wanted to know more.

“He can’t be. He’s part of the band. *It’s all of us or none us.*” Gareth recites the band’s oath.

“Archie said he can... It’s all in the contract. Had we taken the time to *read* the damn thing ... Fuck it! I knew it was all too good to be true.”

“Does he know?” Asked Gareth hesitantly.

“Oh_ yeah. He knows.”

“Where is he? Have you spoken to him?”

“Can’t reach him. Mobile is dead... Not talking to me for *some reason*... Was hoping he might talk to you.” Asked Terry.

“I’ll give him a call... Who’s going to drum?” Asked Gareth.

“They have *someone* lined up.”

“What if we refuse to cooperate?”

Terry shakes his head and chuckles.

“It’s *all* in the contract... We have to or they put us on a shelf for five years. You won’t be able to pick your nose let alone a guitar riff without having your ass sued off you.”

“Maybe if I have a word with Seth?”

“We were played Gareth, shafted right up the ass... Sorry Sian.” Terry apologizes for his use of words in front of a lady.

“That’s okay Terry, I know how it feels.” Gathering the shot glasses.

“Eh?” Watching her walk away.

The young men stare into space before them.

Their expressions a mirror image of the other. Mimicking the other’s movements. Thoughts all but identical. Gareth pulls out his mobile. No messages. No missed calls. And dials Sal’s number. Briefly hearing the dial tone repeatedly sound before hearing a click and continuous death knell.

“Nothing... You’re right. He’s pissed off... What we going to do?” Asked Gareth.

Taking a deep sigh to accept the inevitable. There was nothing they could do.

“What would you do with your balls in a vice?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever been in that position.” Though takes a moment to contemplate the prospect.

“Gareth... Stay with me.” Terry pulls him from a trance.

“Sorry man... You say they have a replacement drummer?”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“What about Sal?”

“Maybe it’s for the best... You know... Sal’s drumming was *okay* but...”

“But what? I thought it was *okay*.” Counters Terry.

“We need *good* not okay... Maybe Archie is right. They’re in the business. You know.”

“I don’t like it Gareth. Sal had a sound that made us... *Us*... I don’t want to be a manufactured plastic band. We *had* a sound.”

“We still do... Let’s give this new drummer a chance okay... Watch him fall on his face okay? Then they’ll *have* to bring back Sal.” Gareth formulates a plan.

“I hope so...” Swallowing the drink, “... Sian! ...” Terry rattles the ice in the drained short glass, “...Two more.”

“Coming right up.”

“Hey what was with Lorraine? ... Saw her walking out. She looked pissed

off.”

“You missed her performance... I broke up with her. She didn’t take it too well. Told her about Julie.” A hand feeling the side of his face.

“Julie... Dream girl Julie?”

“Yeah, that’s one.”

“And where is this dream girl of yours?”

“Dunno... Somewhere out there.” Terry stares towards the Arm’s doors wanting her to walk in at any moment. Her red beret and guitar in hand, “... I’d give anything to have her back.”

“The band?”

“Yeah... The band.” He concedes without a moment’s hesitation.

“And Sal?” Gareth asked prying the extent of Terry’s loyalties.

Silence and hesitation answer’s Gareth’s question.

“I thought as much. Love will do that to you. You should write a song about it.” Gareth teases him.

Hours later Terry peels himself from the stool.

Feeling for his sea legs.

“You going to be okay Terry? I can call you a cab.” Asked Sian watching him steady himself against the bar like a new born giraffe.

“I’m good, the walk will do me good.” Setting his focus on the doors.

Making it home.

He stands on the path and looks to the star drenched evening sky. As though in search of the falling star that had begun it all. Tilting his head back, feeling woozy catches himself before he fell. And heads inside and climbs the stairs. Hands cling to a railing as arms pull an intoxicated body up squeaking stairs.

“Is that you Terry?” Calls out his mother.

“No mother, just the neighborhood burglar!” He calls back.

“That’s lovely... You want a cup of tea? Just got the kettle on.”

“I’m good, I’m going to bed... Tired.” Reluctant legs carry him the rest of the way. And he collapses face down on to the bed.

“Please let this be a dream.” And within moments he was asleep.

Chapter 47

“Morning Terry... Time to get up... Where you’re laundry?” His mother parrots the morning salutation.

Eye lids open and close. Reluctant to open again. Blinded by the bright morning light. His head throbbed. A mouth that tasted like a sewer.

‘Gareth? Sian? How did he get home? Why was he wearing clothes to bed?’ Struggling to recollect memories of the night before.

“Ahh_!” He groans trying to sit upright.

“You really should get to bed earlier Terry... You’re not getting any younger... Why don’t you settle down like you brother? Marry Lorraine... Such a lovely girl... She does my hair just the way I like it.”

“We broke up... I think?” Piecing together the slap on face. His face winches at the thought. A hand reaches to feel the cheek.

“What about my hair? I’m sure you didn’t mean it... I’ll have a word with her.” His mother annuls the separation.

“Julie.” He speaks one word that would put an end to the discussion.

“Who’s Julie?”

“My secret lover.”

“Does she do hair?”

“She’s sings mother.” Speaking as though the words were a breath of fresh air.

“Oh Terry I wish you would give this music nonsense away... Look at your father.”

Yeah look at him.

His will to live being sapped from him. Having to give up his dreams of threading the boards, stardom and fame. His mother pregnant with his brother. He dismisses his mother’s lecture.

“What day is it by the way?”

“Thursday... What else would it be? You’d forget you head if it wasn’t screwed on.” She tells him.

Squinting at his watch it was mid-morning. He was not due in the studio until that afternoon. Checking his mobile for missed calls. Nothing. Pulling himself

upright heads to the shower hoping something would revive his spirits from the gutter. Heavy feet trudge to the bathroom. The cold water startled him. Imagining Julie's arms around him. And for a moment he was back at her place.

"Her place! ..." He exclaimed, "... Of course!"

But where was her place? He had only a vague idea of its location. It was a start. Above a convenience store. How far was it from the station? What bus did they take?

"Shit... Think Terry." He told himself.

"You okay in there Terry?" His mother walks into the bathroom unbothered by her son standing naked in the shower.

"Mother! Do you mind?" He protests quickly facing the wall away from her.

"I've seen it all before you know... Where are your clothes? ... I'm doing the washing today... (*Hmm-hum-hmm-hum.*)" Humming an annoying tune while his gathering discarded clothes from the floor.

His mother's appearance dowsing any aroused thoughts of Julie quicker than the cold water.

"Who's he?" Asked Ness staring at the strange individual setting up behind a studio drum set.

"New drummer apparently." Advised Gareth keeping his distance.

"Eh? Where's Sal?"

"Don't know. He hasn't contacted you?"

"No, why should he?" Asked Ness.

"Terry will explain everything when he gets here."

"What's going on?" Asked Taylor looking the stranger among them.

"Gareth says Sal's been dumped." Distorts Ness.

"Dumped. Fuck. That's pretty rugged... Who's next?" Looking up to the sound booth. Alien faces look back at him.

Archie tap's the open mic. Sending a knocking sound over the studio floor to gain everyone's attention.

"Morning gentleman, welcome back... Before we begin let me introduce Pete... Pete Starkey. Former drummer of *The Twisters* was it Pete?" Asked Archie cocooned safely within the sound booth. Insulating him from rebellious tribesmen.

"That's right." Responds Pete.

"Where's Sal?" Asked Taylor.

"Sal won't be joining us... We're lining him up another band more..."

Suitable to his style of play. Pete here has volunteered at short notice to stand in case Sal decides to return.” Archie twisted and bended the lie until it could almost sound like the truth. Soothing any perceived wounds and ruffled misconceptions.

“You said he was dumped.” Taylor questioned Ness.

“Gareth told me he was dumped.” Ness questioned Gareth.

“Unbelievable.” Questioned Gareth.

“Okay lads... Let’s make Pete feel welcome and carry on the great work from yesterday... Brilliant bass Ness. Keep it up. You too Taylor...” Archie stroked the twins’ egos.

Knowing Sal would soon be forgotten and Pete cemented in his place. Unsure how Terry had told Sal, it was done. It was time to move on.

“Okay lads... From the top... Gareth, you can lead them in... Pete, you’ve heard the tapes, come in when you’re ready.” Instructed Archie sliding aside to let Cameron take control of the control panel.

“Okay, you heard Archie... From the top... Two-three-four!” Gareth begins to play, soon followed by Pete.

The other look over to him. He sounded, different. Not as harsh as Sal’s drumming. Soon the group had found a rhythm. Archie leans back in the large leather arm chair.

“Now that’s more like it.” Grinning from ear to ear.

Just then Seth enters the booth. A red light above the door flashes its warning to keep out. The warning goes unheeded. And he takes a seat beside Archie. The two producers had a knack for finding talent, at any cost.

“You’ve done it again Seth.” Archie commended his partner.

Seth remained silent. Preferring to take in the new sound. A foot tapping in time with the beat. He slides over to Cameron and joins him at the console. Pulls on a headset and begins pushing sliders up and down at will. Tweaking a fidgeting needle. Calming an agitated LED. Hands move over the console like a magician conjuring an illusion. When it was all done he sat back and watched his master piece at play. The song comes to an end.

Band members look to each other surprised as to what that had just happened.

“No rest for the wicked my darlings... Again!” Seth instructs the troupe.

Terry failed to show for the recording session.

Not that he was actually required to appear. Deferring the afternoon session

for something more urgent. Julie. The map of London was of no use. Amaze of color lines heading in every direction but the one he wanted. Discarding the map went for a gut feel. Retracing his steps from the station.

“Did we? ... Or was it?” He looks down a street too busy to be her narrow thoroughfare.

Tormented by streets that all looked the same. Some going for miles in one direction, only to end up in some outer suburb. The more he tried, the more lost he became. It was as if she was not meant to be found. The Jinn follows in the shadows watching him take one false turn after the other. Filling his mind with doubt and indecision.

The sun now hung tiredly on the horizon. And waited for Terry to give up and go home. Collapsing onto a bench exhausted. Feet sore from walking endless miles of nameless streets. Had he looked behind him he would have seen a convenience store and an overhead window of a small flat.

Content that Terry had failed in his quest, the sun slips beneath the horizon and a darkness sweeps over him. A chill in the air told him to head home. There was no point going to the studio. Tomorrow he told himself. Tomorrow was another day.

Pulling himself to his feet, feels the aches and pains in his limbs. And heads to the nearest underground. Appearing on the platform where Julie had played just moments before. The planets were not aligned for Terry. His moon was in a house he could not find. Catching the next connecting train back to Muswell. Lights of the city flash by, growing fewer and fewer as he got closer to home.

The grubby old platform of Muswell Hills arrived beside the train.

Reluctantly Terry steps to the platform. Leaving behind his failure on the seat. Tired weary steps take him from the station to the front gate of his home. Squeaking on its hinges. Sounding his arrival.

“Bed.” He told himself, shattered by the marathon effort.

There was a darkness about the street. As if there were no stars in the heavens that evening. The street light outside the home had mysteriously gone out. Hearing the gate squeak behind him a second time.

Startled, he turns about to see Sal coming up the path toward him.

Looking unkempt as though he had not been to bed since Terry had seen him last.

“Sal! Where you been... I’ve been trying to get hold of you... I can explain everything.” Terry began.

No words could express the rage building inside him. A mind not his own anymore. Eyes glazed over, as though on drugs. Screaming voices and satanic music raged through earplugs drowning out Terry's caring voice. Straggly hair covering his face. Eyes peer through gaps at his prey. Sweating beneath a tee and plaid shirt. Panting as though short of breath. Like an animal.

Fingers twitch and reach to a satchel. Dark shadows conceal the weapons.

'Do it! Kill him! Kill _him!' Demonic voices scream and hiss at him. Inciting him to act.

"You okay Sal? You don't look well. You want to come inside?" Asked Terry stepping closer.

Like a man possessed. His glare fixed on Terry. Without warning he lunges at him. And stabs violently at his neck with a drum stick. Severing arteries. Lacerating flesh. Blood spurted like fountains. Then a sudden sharp pain to his chest as Sal thrust the final blow.

Eyes look down to a chest to see an orange stick protruding from it. Blood spurted from the fatal wound. Choking and gagging on his own blood Terry collapses to his knees. Weakening by the moment. Incapable of calling out. Life draining from his body. He looks up to Sal standing before him. A bright light opens up. It was the street light coming back to life.

"Ha." Seeing the irony. Collapsing to the path to a pool of warm blood.

Eyes fixate on a Man in black standing at the gate watching him. Unperturbed by the violent events. Such was life. Such was death. Neither as pleasant as the other. Terry recognizes the man.

'Oh shit.' He realizes and gasps for a breath that never came.

Impulsively Sal runs off. Wailing and screaming with fear. Arms flailing frantically as though to ward off a pack of demons chasing him. Windows fill with light as curious heads peer into the darkness in search of the commotion.

"Terry? Is that you?" His mother appearing at the door her hair in curlers.

Discovering her son lying buckled on the ground inert. A bloody drum stick protruding from his neck. Overwhelmed with the sudden horrific scene, she screams hysterically. Gasps. And clutches her chest.

Collapsing upon the steps to join her son in eternal rest.

Chapter 48

“Ahh_!” Terry screams gasping for a breath that finally came.

Awakening suddenly at the bar. Flailing arms to fight off a non-existent Sal and his lethal stabs.

“Welcome back Terry... That was close. Fortunate you still had a wish at hand.” Said the Jinn calmly. Polishing a shot glass, readying it for use.

A chuckle rouses from the card table. They all been there. All bar one.

“Hssss!” Hisses the Jinn. Silencing the table.

Hands feel for bloodied wounds about his neck and chest. Nothing. Not a drop of blood. Looking about the familiar bar. The clock show 03:00AM. Sinister shapes hiss from behind bottles on shelves. The smell of cigarettes and sulphur irritates nostrils. He knew exactly where he was.

“It was all going so well... You almost had it...” The Jinn played with him.

“Leave the boy be.” Warns the Dealer eyes fixed on the cards.

“One wish left Terry... What’s it to be?” The Jinn pushes a shot glass before him.

“I dunno... No matter what I do, I end up here.” Throwing the drink to the back of his throat. It burnt like the fires of hell. Pushing the glass back to the Jinn for another.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable over there? ...” Looking to the empty chair at the table, “... Try it out for size...” Pushing the glass back to him, “... I’m right here when you’re ready.”

Looking over a shoulder to the dimly lit table blanketed in a haze of smoke. Only Wyatt stares back at him. Subtly nodding for him to join them.

“Time don’t mean nothing here son... You got some place you have to be?” Asked Wyatt with kind eyes.

Drawn like a moth to a flickering flame Terry slides off the stool and walks tentatively to the table. Faces etched with scars of sadness and despair. Of love and fortunes won and lost. Pulling back the wooden chair collapses into it exhausted. Taking a swallow of the whiskey from the glass. Only to have it refill before he placed it on the table.

Eyes interrogate the stranger among them. Stripping him naked. They got

under his skin.

“Got a green horn here. Easy money.” Said Kiran seeing Terry sweating with anxiety.

“Ignore him... Where ya’ from kid?” Wyatt asked.

“Muswell... Muswell Hills.” Saying it with some pride.

“Don’t reckon I’ve heard of that place out west.”

“North London.” Terry corrects him.

“London... Fancy city they tell me... Meaning to visit one’s these days.”

“Eh? ... Where you from?” Asked Terry confused by Wyatt’s answer.

“Tombstone... Tombstone Arizona son.”

“Oh... I’ve heard of the place.”

“You play’n or talk’n.” Complains Brain.

A stack of dull colored chips lay before Terry unsure of their denomination or meaning.

“I’ve seen this on Telly.”

“Telly?” Asked Wyatt curiously.

“Moving picture box.” Explains Gary. A playful blonde filly on his lap giggling.

“Yeah, something like that.” Terry scans the faces of the strangers about the table.

Faces from different times. Different places. Different wishes.

The Dealer goes about quietly shuffling cards. Terry catches his eyes. If they were eyes. More like windows to his soul. The more he looked the more he fell into them. His life passing before him. The Dealer blinked, startling Terry back to the table. And grins.

“No interfering.” Hisses the Jinn from the bar.

The warning goes unheeded as the Dealer deals cards about the table. Stopping before each of the men. Followed by an awkward silence as suspicious eyes glares at each other. Hands cover cards as thumbs prize and bend corners upwards. Looking beneath shadows. Seeing what they wanted to see.

Gary discards blanks and stands to leave the table. Led by the filly to an adjacent room. The door closes behind them. Only to open immediately afterwards with Gary tucking his shirt into trousers. Fidgeting to wedge a naked foot into a boot.

“Like I say... Time as no meaning here...” Said Wyatt tossing unread cards to the center of the table, “... I’m out.”

“Do you ever play?” Asked Terry curiously.

“I will when the right card comes along.” Said Wyatt cryptically.

Eyeing Terry as though he were that card.

“You’re gotta’ be in to win.” Stated Kiran proudly.

Terry contemplated the comment. Then it struck him like a Taser bolt.

“What you say?” Asked Terry having an epiphany.

“Gotta to be in to win.” Repeats Kiran.

“Of course... If you’re not in... You can’t play.” Said Terry coming to his senses.

“You’re a fast learner kid... So ya’ playing or not?” Whined Brian becoming frustrated with all the talking.

“*I’m out.*” Responds Terry throwing cards to the center to join Wyatt’s.

“Seems_ we got ourselves_ another Wyatt here_ boys_?” Declares Brain chuckling.

“What ya’ getting at son?” Asked Wyatt curiously sitting upright, holding up a hand to hush Brain from speaking further.

‘*Could it be that easy?*’ Thought Terry.

Reaching for the bottomless shot glass. Filled to the brim. Examines the piss colored contents. Presses it to his lips. And grins.

“It means... *I wish I’d never come in here.*” Sculling the potion before the devil had a chance to change his mind.

Slamming the heavy glass bottom to the table. Sending an annoying loud crack about the room. The Dealer grins. The Jinn stops polishing the shot glass in his hands. Serpents hiss their master’s festering mood.

“That’s it? No fireworks, no dizzy spells.” Terry asked looking to the Jinn.

Stunned, the Jinn remains silent. Fuming. Crushing the shot glass in his hand to powder. Only to have standoff broken by the Dealer.

“That’s it Terry. You’re free to leave.” Laying down His authority.

Terry looks to the Jinn. His face red with fury. Speechless.

Standing, Terry is about to head to the bar. When at the last moment, Wyatt calls out to get his attention.

“Hey, wait up son...” Wyatt scoops chips into a tired black hat. Approaches the bar and spills the chips onto the bar before the Jinn. “...I’ll be cashing out if you don’t mind none.”

“Is that right?” Asked the Jinn.

“And I’ll be having that final shot now if you don’t mind barman.” Looking the Jinn square in the eye.

Hesitant to obey, the Jinn attempts to stare Wyatt down. The Dealer coughs

from the table, making his presence known.

The Jinn blinks.

And places a shot glass on the bar. Popping a cork from a whiskey bottle pours a shot into it. Overflowing onto the bar. The spillage sending traces of white fumes into the air.

“Been nice knowing ya’ all.” Wyatt looks back at the table of poker faces.

Raises the glass. And winks to Terry.

“*I wish I never came in here.*” Repeating Terry’s wish, slamming the glass down, turning the chips turned to silver dollars.

Filling pockets with the coins. Takes his hat, shakes the dust from it and secures it. Feeling its sweaty contours. Turns and faces the Jinn one last time. A stand-off ensues. Like a high noon showdown. About to draw. Fingers twitch for a side iron.

“Hey, where’s my iron?” Now feeling naked without it.

The Jinn throws the heavy leather belt and gun onto the counter. A colt handle extrudes from the holster. Wyatt straps it about his waist.

“That feels better.” A hand rests on the wooden grip.

Suddenly in quick smooth action a hand draws the side arm from the holster, as though he were in a draw with an unseen opponent. Frozen, Wyatt holds the position and glare before resuming his unrushed composure.

Rolling the cylinder against a palm. Feeling its cold steel body. Hearing its heart beat... *Click-click-click-click-click-click*. Before coming to a stop.

A callus thumb presses down on a latch. The cylinder falls open and he examines the chambers. Five unfired bullets glare back at him. Dispensing the fatal cartridge to the floor. Sounding metal upon wood as it strikes the floor. Fingers fumble to pull another from the belt and slides it into the empty chamber. A flick of the wrist closes the cylinder again. Twirling the gun about his trigger finger. Gracefully slides it into the holster in one ready motion.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you again real soon?” The Jinn chuckles, as though gun would have something to do with it.

“Maybe you will...” Wyatt looks back to the Dealer and ponders who he really was, “... Maybe you won’t.”

“Gentleman... Gary.” Tipping his hat. Fingers run along the rim of the hat that had seen better years.

Gary scratches the tattoo on the side of his neck. Wyatt’s leaving irritated him. It was like he was losing a brother from a different mother. Though he was stuck in purgatory forever, there was always hope for Wyatt. His patience now

rewarded with the perfect wish to walk through the door.

“Hey Wyatt...” Gary calls out catching Wyatt before he left for good, “... Well played.”

“Watch the ladies now...” Returning the complement, “... Be seeing you boys. Ya’ll take care now ya’ hear.” Wyatt tips his hat at the players.

Heads nod their respect and regret to see him leave.

“There’s the door gentlemen...” Said the Jinn as a door materializes in the wall.

Players watch as the men leave. The door closes behind them and fades from to become part of the wall again. Interning the players within for eternity.

“I’m out.” Calls Kiran.

“Oh_ don’t you start.” Cusses Brian throwing his own cards to the center. Gary had disappeared again leaving Brian to play by himself.

“This way.” Said Terry keen to heads down the stairs.

Below in the distance, a strange light glows from a door way. Leaking distorted sounds of those outside. Blurred visions of people passing the alleyway. Stairs that seemed to go on forever but never getting anywhere. Looking back, the door and wall lamp fade into a darkness.

Wyatt sees a different view. A sundrenched dusty street. The smell of horses and dry dusty air fill his nostrils. He was almost home. Standing at the entrance but feet away. Wyatt extends a callus hand to the lad that he had waited a century and half for.

“Thanks son... I knew there was something different about you... You take care now, ya’ hear?” Wyatt grins.

“Yes sir.” Wondering what to make of the cowboy, and how he would fit into the modern world outside.

Adjusting his gun belt Wyatt steps into the brilliant sunlight of the Tombstone main street, from a darkened alleyway. Momentarily blinding Terry as he passed through the doorway. Terry reaches a hand towards the strange portal of translucent colors. Swirling mysteriously. Fingers tingle. Closing eyes, he steps through to the other side.

And finds himself in the Vault.

“Hey, where you go?” Terry asked expecting Wyatt to be standing there.

Passersby look at him strangely and the dark alley he had just appeared from. He looks back at the opening. An emptiness of foul smells. CCTV cameras focus their attention on the young man appearing from the alley. Algorithms churned

and whirred but to no avail. Nothing aroused their interest about the suspicious individual. Turning away to resume their unsolicited surveillance of the unsuspecting public.

Time had been returned to its preordained temporal flow.

Well almost. But for one final wrinkle. A card dealt by a Divine hand.

People went about their day unperturbed. No longer restless. No longer feeling they had forgotten something. The sun hung on the horizon tell-tailing the end of the day. Terry soaked in the sun's final rays. It was finally over. No more wishes. Willing to accept whatever life threw at him. And the consequences that came with it.

Making his way to an underground in the dying light. Tired and dejected, slumps onto a bench and waits for the next train back to Muswell Hills. Burying his head into hands. His mind ablaze with the events of the past four weeks that had looped over and over and over again. And wondered if he should give it all away. Was it worth the heartache and pain?

“Hey... You okay?” A soft caring voice of a passerby asked.

Lifting his head he sees the most beautiful sight he could ever wish for.

“Julie.” Had he said too much?

Chapter 49

“How do you know my name?” Sensing something about him that prompted her to ask, “...Have we meet before?”

“*Yeah...* Something like that.” Hesitant what to say in fear of being pepper sprayed. Then he remembered the note she had given him. Frantically he frisks himself for a wallet.

‘*Say nothing... Oh shit, where is it? ...*’ He reminds himself to stop talking. ‘*...Please let it be there.*’ Exasperated fingers fumbles frantically at contents of his wallet.

And then he finds it. Crumpled. Tired and grubby. Folded and buried deep.

Pulling it from its solitary internment. And holds out the small piece of paper to her as though it were a precious jewel,

“I’m supposed to give you this.” He saids nervously.

“What is it?” Examining the note, and instantly recognizing her own handwriting.

“I don’t know... She just said give it to you. Said only you would *know*.”

“Who did?”

“*You did...*” Then stands and walks away. As she had told him to, “... I’ll be over here.” Indicating a bench to distance himself.

The wait was nerve racking.

Burying his head into hands again. If it was meant to be, it was meant to be. A CCTV camera moves back and forth between the two. Struggling to unravel the peculiar situation. If it was harassment, the young man was going the wrong way about it.

Footsteps approach the bench and he looks up at her.

“You’re *Terry*... I don’t understand any of this... But I think I love you...” Her face showing a vagueness of a distant memory. “... I’ve been having these really weird dreams.”

“Yeah, me too... If it means anything... I love you too... What’s it say?”

“You haven’t read this?” Holding out the faded note paper.

“She told me not to.”

“You always listen to what I say?”

“Always.” Terry’s smiles.
Julie hands him the note...

*“This is Terry.
Allow your heart to believe,
What your mind cannot.
And never let him go.
J
PS: Good luck.”*

“That’s it? ... *Good luck?*” Expecting something more enlightening.

“Don’t you get it?” She said turning the note over to reveal the lotto ticket.

“So it’s a lotto ticket? So what?” Terry said clueless.

“Yeah... *My numbers...* My nieces’ birthdays... There is no way you would know these.”

“Isabel and Eve... Ellen your sister.” Spouted Terry automatically.

“That’s right... You know them?” Pieces of the puzzle coming together for her.

“Yeah, I stayed at your place... We...” Terry could not say what had been consummated.

“We slept together... I know...” Pausing momentarily before realizing what she was holding, “... Oh my God!” She shrieked.

A CCTV camera zooms in on the hysterical female now jumping up and down. Perhaps they would not go unrewarded with an arrest after all.

“What’s the matter?” Asked Terry looking about the platform for others watching her.

“This ticket is for *next* Wednesday... And those numbers at the top... Oh my God! ...” She could not contain herself, catching her breath excited by the sudden realization.

“So?” Asked Terry confused by what she was trying to say.

“I always write the winning numbers at the top... Oh my God! We’re rich!” She exclaimed excitedly.

Terry looks about the platform anticipating the Jinn to materialize at any moment.

“What do you mean? ... *Next* Wednesday... *What* day is it?” He asked cautiously.

“*Saturday* dummy, what day did you think it was?”

“I don’t know anymore...” Time was quickly catching up with him, checking his watch, 08:17PM, “... Shit, we’re going to be late.”

“Late for what?”

“We have a gig to get too... The band is on in forty minutes.”

“*The Ravens*... Of course. Com’on! ... You can’t be late!” Pulling him to his feet.

Terry clutches her guitar case, causing the CCTV camera to sit upright. Taking Julie by the hand, pulls her close. And kisses her. Just as he remembered. The camera turns away and scurries after a suspicious character loitering near the tracks.

“Jumper track ten! ... Jumper track ten!” An officer’s cries out into a radio telephone.

Waving down the first cab available, they fall into the back seat.

“*Shakespeare Tavern!*” The both cry out in unison looking at each other.

Watching the streets of London rush by outside. Julie rests her head against his shoulder and watches the world flash by outside her window.

The cab pulls up outside the Tavern.

“They’re here! ...” Spying the old van parked in the loading zone, “...Keep the change.”

“Thanks mister, have a nice evening now.” And drives off leaving them on the sidewalk among people entering the tavern.

Terry stares up at the now familiar Tavern. How many times had he crossed the threshold of its doors? Hoping this would be the last.

Pushing open the doors discovers the place crowded.

With one hand on the guitar case, the other in Julie’s. Terry make his way through huddled bodies to the stage to find Gareth setting up.

“Hey Gareth... Man_ it’s so great to see you.” Terry eyes the others over as they check their instruments. Then froze as they came to Sal, “... Hey Sal!”

“Hey man, thought you’d been murdered or something.” Happy to see Terry back among the living.

“Yeah... *Something* like that.” Responds Terry.

“Terry? Where you been? We’ve been worried about you.” Asked Gareth.

“No time to explain. This is Julie, this is everyone.”

“We’ve met.” Said Julie catching everyone by surprise.

“What’s Cameron doing here? Where’s the new console?” Asked Terry looking to the back seeing the old console set up.

“What new console man? ... You know we can't afford any new gear...” Gareth reminded him, “... Hey, how do you know about Cameron? I never told you.”

“I'll explain later, we don't have much time.”

“Time for what? ...” Gareth asked curiously, “... We're about to go on.”

“Trust me Gee, the console won't be able to cope... I have an idea, get the amps and speakers out of the van... Hurry!”

“They sounded awesome when we practiced.” Gareth reminds him.

“We can't risk it... Besides, all it'll take is two delinquents to play with their knobs... Know anyone?”

“We ain't don't nothing!” Pleaded the delinquents looking at each other. Had they?

“Well *start* now by getting the gear out of the van... Snap-snap bitches!” Orders Sal stabbing his sticks at the twins.

Cameron stood over the old console.

Fiddling with the knobs and dials trying to make sense of the primitive audio console.

“I'll take it from here Cameron.” Said Terry.

“Who are you?” Cameron asked eyeing him over.

“I'm Terry, the band's manager.” Looking to the console.

“It's all yours. But I'm warning you now, it won't handle *those*...” Looking to the speakers, “...It's all yours.” Heading to the bar for a drink.

“I know...” Checking his watch, “...Shit... We'll be cutting it fine.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Asked Julie feeling left out.

“Yeah, keep an eye on this lot, and I'll help get the gear in.” He kisses her quickly before rushing off making his way through the crowd.

“Sorry... Excuse me... Coming through... Sor_ry.” Pushing his way pass bodies.

“What about a sound check?” Asked Gareth.

“We'll *wing* it live... Come on! We're on in five!”

Seeing band members rush from the bar as if it were on fire, patrons piece together the situation. Whispers became chatters became helping hands. With a minute to spare. Duncan appears on the scene.

“Everything okay here?” He asked concerned about at the commotion and cluttered gear.

Cables littered the floor like a stampede of escaping snakes.

“Yeah, yeah... All good Mister Duncan... Change of plans, but we’re all good now.”

“You’re up! Keep them drinking!” He warns the band.

“Don’t hold back this time Gareth... Give it to them straight away.”

“What about the record producer?”

“He’s already here.” Said Terry.

“He is?” Looking about for Seth. Nowhere to be seen.

Terry gives the heads up to Tomlinson sitting at the bar, minus his attractive companion. The band would have his full attention this evening. Without introduction, Gareth turns to the other members.

“Okay boys... Just as he practiced it. Watch for my changes and... Try to keep up (*ha*)... Two-three-four!” Riffing the opening bars of *Tears*.

Ravens go berserk. Kaleidoscopic lights spontaneously burst to life raining over the faithful. Inadequate speakers boomed the new sensation. Pressing the head set to his ears, Terry weeds out the distortions.

“Hey! That’s my song!” Protests Julie on hearing it.

“Your song? What are you talking about?” Pulling aside a can from one ear.

“I wrote *that*... There’s no way you would know it.”

“We’ve been playing this for weeks... Gareth wrote it.”

“Well see about that.” She said shouldering her guitar to join him on stage.

Gareth looks over to Terry unsure as to what was going on. Terry shrugs his shoulders.

“Keep playing.” He mouths back rolling a hand in the air.

Julie joins in seamlessly adding a feminine harmony to Garth's masculine voice.

The missing piece to the puzzle now in place. The duet he wanted. Tomlinson sits upright. Intrigued by the acoustic accompaniment. Accepting the young woman’s appearance as though it were part of the act.

The room a lit with mobiles. Heads bobbed to the infectious melody. The song finally winds down after an extended play and the crowd cheer and whoop and whistle their delight. Gareth take Julie’s hand and raises it to the air, taking a bow with her to receive the acclamation.

“Welcome to the band.” Said Gareth giving her a hug.

Waving out to the people, she leaves the stage to join Terry behind the console.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding were you? You sounded amazing.”

From the stage Gareth catches the love birds and grins. It was as if written

Tears for them. Tomlinson sits quietly at the bar. A foot and a head continue to subtly nod in time with the beat. Fingers tap out invisible piano keys on the bar. And he gives Terry a nod of approval.

Seth enters the bar to discover Cameron seated at the bar.

Unsure why Terry was behind the console. Then latches his sights on Tomlinson. Eyes meet.

“What are you doing here?” Seth asked suspiciously.

“Enjoying a quiet beer. You?” Teases Tomlinson.

“You know very well. This is my band. I saw them first... Hands off.”

“Steady down Seth. We’re grown men here. I am sure the band can decide for themselves the better of the two evils.”

“Sykes and Meyers is the best!” Claims Seth proudly.

“I have no doubt that you are...,” Grinning, “...You’ve spoken with Terry... *Their manager?*” Tomlinson teased.

“Well_ no... Not yet.” Responded Seth hesitantly.

“*Oh_!*” Exclaims Tomlinson formulating Seth’s *relationship* to the band and their lead singer.

“*That’s* none of your business.” Seth looks about him for illicit ears.

Tomlinson’s fingers tap a large brown envelope on the bar.

“What’s that?”

“I think the phrase is... *That’s none of your business.*” Looking to Terry and winking at him.

Out played and out witted, Seth storms out. Giving Gareth an evil glare as though to say that their *relationship* was over as was any hope of a contract.

“*Bitch.*” Gareth mutters under his beneath seeing him leave.

The band played on into the night and wrapped up the session with another of Gareth’s creations.

Unplugged. Its words carried the joys and sorrows of everyone in the room. Lights burst onto the stage over the exhausted band members, relieved that it was finally over.

Tomlinson approaches the band, with Terry standing vanguard.

“Mister Tomlinson, you came?” Extending his hand to greet him.

“I said I would...” Accepting his hand to shake it.

“You must be Gareth, I’ve heard a lot about you. Love your sound... Ah the twins...” He took in the mischievous pair, “...And you must be Sal...” Extending his hand to him. Then turns to look at Julie, unsure how she fitted into

the group, "... And who might this *trobairitz* be?" Admiring her beauty.

"This is Julie... The *fifth Raven*." Gareth introduces her.

"Julie..." Responded Tomlinson.

There was a glow about her that he found alluring.

"The executives loved your demo tape you sent, and after what I've seen and heard tonight, here's a copy of a contract if you're still interested." Handing Terry a large brown envelope.

"I'll have my lawyer look over them..." Passing the envelope to Julie, and extending a hand, "... But I have one condition."

"Oh? ... And what's that?" Asked Tomlinson curiously.

"The band stands together... It's *all* of us. Or *none* of us." He informs Tomlinson, "... And that includes the *drummer*."

"Eh?" Sal looks up wondering why he had been singled out.

"Wouldn't want it any other way..." Said Tomlinson, "... It's a package deal."

"We'll be in touch soon... Thanks again Mister Tomlinson."

"*David* please... I look forward to it, if you have any concerns you have my details... Now if you excuse me gentlemen, Julie... I have an important appointment." Tomlinson excuses himself to rendezvous with a young lady at the bar.

"Shots!" Calls out Ness wanting celebrate.

"Yes_!" Calls out Taylor punching the air with excitement and heads to the bar.

"No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no_!" Terry stutters his reluctance ferociously.

"Oh_ come on Terry don't be a wuss... One shot won't hurt you." Julie encouraged him.

"What about you?" He asked seeing her reluctance to take a shot glass from the tray.

"Not for me." Raising her hand to fend off the toxic solution.

"Oh come on_! It's good enough for me, it's good enough for you!" He challenges her.

"I'm pregnant." She tells him, and waits for his reaction.

All eyes went from looking at Julie to looking at Terry. Then back to Julie. Then back Terry.

Then the realization of their time together dawned on him.

"Really?" He asked hoping it was true.

"Really." She smiles.

“We’re going to have a baby?” Terry embraces and kisses her. Staring into her eyes with disbelief.

“Jesus Terry... You’ve been busy while you were out.” Exclaimed Sal giving him a wink.

“So it seems...” Reconciling the time that had passed, “...So it seems.”

“Lorraine’s going to be pissed.” Remarked Ness.

“*Unbelievable!*” Exclaims Sal shaking his head.

Everyone laughed. None more so than Julie.

“To the top!” Toasts Terry.

“To the top!” *Ravens* cry out tapping their glasses together before throwing back the kerosene stained potion.

Faces contort and grinned with delight. They were on their way.

Outside, the dirty old river kept rolling. Rolling into the night.

About the Author

Born a long time ago in the small township of Foxton New Zealand, Bradley's first book was a Self-Help book E is for Effort. That led to his debut novel The Ring. And so unwittingly began the "End of Days" trilogy. The fuse had been lit and one book lead to another, and as they say the rest is history. His books reflects his keen interest in comparative religion, spirituality, adventure and romance. When not writing he enjoys innovating new products, hearty workouts and hanging out with his three amazingly intelligent and beautiful children Harry, Emily and Rebecca. Then again, he could be found at his local enjoying a craft beer with good friends.

Other books by this author

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Alfie

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