

THE ENEMY OF MINE
ENEMY

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CHAPTER ONE

There had been irrefutable evidence that it was the Icelandic terrorists, they started it. It wasn't the Russians, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he'd condemned us all. What else could you expect from an American president? The man was an out and out warmonger, nothing more, like all those trigger happy Americans.

Feeling helpless, she watched in dismay. First, the most brilliant flash of light, followed by a deep rumbling bass. The vibrations shook the whole house right down to its very foundations. An ashtray vibrated in sympathy on the coffee table. Fear caused her to raise both hands to her face. In that moment she held her breath, the blast, inevitable. A blast to tear the skin and flesh from bones as the bodies tried to flee in vain. The signature mushroom cloud towered over the distant city of New York. Then it came! Whoosh!

Helen Goldstone hated that film, she turned off the player with the remote but the power light remained green. Whenever she felt lonely, she'd put it on, the film, for company. Her husband used to like that movie. It was his favourite.

"Can you turn that pigging bass down!" she always used to shout at him.

Nowadays, Helen turned the volume up herself. She loved the feeling as the entire room vibrated. The atmosphere reminded her of the man she'd lost. Watching the film actually used to make her cry, but over time the tears ran out. You cannot cry forever. Twenty years ago she'd said and done the wrong things, immature stupid things.

Driven to insane acts by her hormones; then consumed by her own guilt, she'd adopted the role of judge and jury, and sentenced herself to punishment, by leaving him.

He'd taken comfort in the arms of another woman, and subsequently, fathered a child. Helen grew a deep hatred for that woman, her sworn enemy.

The widowed Helen Goldstone believed, six months after moving out, her husband had been shot dead, murdered by a corrupt police officer. She'd been denied her opportunity to reach him, apologise, and plea for a reconciliation and parole from her self-imposed sentence.

None of this was the truth.

Strauss David Goldstone died at the hands of gangsters, four-thousand miles away in Oakland, on the other side of the Atlantic. That other woman had joined with members her husband's family to inflict furious vengeance on Strauss Goldstone's murderers. In pursuit of justice, Natalie was not Helen's enemy, Natalie was her friend.

Helen, a part-time beautician, buttoned her coat and left for work. At the front door she stooped to pick up the newspaper. 'UK JUDGE CALLS FOR LEGAL DRUGS,' read the headline. She tucked the paper under her arm, checked the time on her watch, and continued on her way.

The film, Nuclear Deterrent II, was left in the player the day he'd walked out the door, and Helen had played it a hundred times since; more than a hundred. When the news of her husband's death first reached her, she'd run away to grieve and to find herself. The stupid movie remained in the player and repeated for a whole month. Today, it would only repeat until she returned at 2:30 – The power light glowed green, she'd never quite worked out how to turn *auto-repeat*, off.

CHAPTER TWO

London, England

Judge Claire Bristol peered over the top of her glasses, a practised look designed to disparage.

"What the hell is the imbecile going to object to now?" Her lips moved as she thought the thought. This was the point at which the judge began her psychotic episode, an unexplained out of body experience. Sounds, muted to virtual silence, as if she'd closed a window to the busy noise of the world. In her mind she was transported out of her seat of power, the place from where she had judged and condemned many.

From her new vantage point she observed herself, still presiding over her court. The digital clock displayed 10.41:21. She waited for it to change, move forward, it didn't.

Standing in the aisle, the first security guard turned to pull his gun from its holster, too late. A bullet pierced the side of his neck before he'd even a chance to raise his weapon. His head toppled to one side, as if the neck were broken. The eyes first bulged then closed before he collapsed into a heap - dead.

The remaining two security staff were caught flat-footed with no time react. The assailant had already crossed the courtroom, leaping over the great wooden barrier in a single bound. His cold black revolver quickly found a position pressed against Claire's temple. The assailant stepped around behind her, wrapping his free arm around her should, pulling her into him. She smelled oil, burned gunpowder, all tainted with a mixture of sweat and fear.

"Everybody down! On the floor. Now!" he screamed at the court's complement, his volume leaving her ear ringing. In response, nobody moved, people seemed to just look at each other. Not knowing quite what to do.

Claire watched, her body visibly shaking as her moistened eyes shifted toward the gun she could not see. But she *could* see it. She could see herself, and a man was holding her at gunpoint. And she knew the fear she smelled was not his. She licked her lips and prayed.

The impeccably dressed defendant smiled in triumph, nonchalantly releasing himself from the dock and acknowledging his rescuer with a thumbs-up. He swaggered confidently over to the male of the other two guards, a superior smirk on his face, gesturing to the other he should handover his firearm.

"If you don't mind." He relieved the guard of his gun. "Thank you, my dear friend." He twirled the gun once around his index finger, placed the end of the barrel to the guard's forehead, smiled, and pulled the trigger.

Noise filled the court. A solo shriek, followed the gunshot. Multiple gasps, a combination of utterances, groans and mutterings continued. The defendant used his hand to wipe away some of his victim's blood that had splashed onto his face. He licked his fingers, then his lips, before arching a brow. "Silence!" he roared, before lowering his tone. "That one was going to be trouble. I could tell." He strode over to the female guard. "Now. . ." He reached around and removed the gun from her holster with his left hand whilst pressing his gun to the back of her head. "Are you going to be a good girl for me, hmm?"

A darker patch quickly grew around the crotch of her grey trousers.

"Oh dear." He frowned. "You'll get no medals for bravery. Relax!" He struck her across the back of the head with her own gun. She fell. The prosecuting barrister caught her unconscious body.

The defendant turned. A young man previously seated in the gallery burst into the aisle, theatrically rolling out from between the seats in a manner reminiscent of a Hollywood stunt man. Except for his movements, all time seemed to virtually stop. As if practised, or highly trained in combat, he appeared to take the revolver from the hand of the fallen guard in one quick, smooth movement.

Two flashes in rapid succession emanated from the barrel, no bangs could be heard, for there was no sound. The first bullet struck. Judge Bristol witnessed the blood splash onto the right side of her

own wig, followed by the assailant's involuntary release of his grip on her arm. The second bullet ripped into the assailant's chest, more blood splashed across the blotter before her. The gun slid away from her temple. Her captor fell to the floor. She could see in his staring eyes, he was already dead.

The young man remained perfectly still, down on one knee. Both of his hands gripping the gun, previously aimed slightly to the left of the judge, the gun was now trained on the armed defendant. His eyes focused unblinking. His lips didn't move. There was no sound but he successfully communicated – move, and I'll kill you. The defendant was caught, both guns lowered – game over.

Claire closed her eyes, relief, the moment was over. Eyes open, back in her own body, back in real time, she heard her heart beating in her ears. Audio service had been resumed the moment her captor's body had crumpled to the floor. The noise and confusion threatened to overwhelm her. Tears of joy had to be held back, she was a judge, an emotionless facade was to be maintained. She placed her hand to her heart, glad to feel it beating while she pondered the life and death moments that live between one heart-beat and the next.

With next beat of her heart came another moment. The side door crashed open. As the defendant turned to investigate, an armed police officer fired two shots into the defendant's torso before turning his weapon on the young man. Another moment, another silence. The officer's finger feathered the trigger, an over-long second lingered before his tension eased, he relaxed. At some point the young man had moved, already he'd assumed a kneeling position, his hands clasped behind his head, his body trembling

"Lay down your weapon!" ordered the officer.

"I can't," replied the young man through clenched teeth. "I can't fucking move."

"Lay flat on the floor, arms outstretched." Another officer pushed his boot into the young man's back. The first officer stood on the outstretched wrist and prised the gun from the palm of a sweaty hand. Claire watched the clock with increasing satisfaction, 10.41:36

became 10.41:37, then 10.41:38. . . every additional second bringing another reassuring beat of her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Hayden West lay stretched out on his bunk, counting all the flying insects that had met their end by finding their way inside the light fitting. Don't go into the light, wasn't simply good advice for humans, the entire animal kingdom should heed the warning. At least a hundred dead winged insects met death by fluorescent light fitting, and now a wasp would add to their number. Wasps deserved it, what purpose did they serve? He rolled onto his back. The boredom of prison remand was killing him. A week had passed, maybe, he wasn't quite sure, still they had not charged him. The Metropolitan police were holding him under *The Prevention of Terrorism Act*. How ridiculous, he was no terrorist. Hayden West, a first-year law student with no greater ambition than to drink until he was drunk, and to bed pretty girls. The police claimed, eventually he would be charged with murder and attempted murder. He knew there was no evidence. Surely it was just a matter of time before he was released. As he lay on his bunk watching the wasp flying manically around inside the plastic diffuser, Hayden's mind examined a number of cases where precedent had been previously set. In midst of the thinking and the boredom, he thought himself to sleep.

Nightmares telling of a different reality flooded his mind during a turbulent forty-winks. In the ensuing conspiracy, the government would manufacture evidence against him, nobody could take a shot at a British judge in open court and get a way with it. *They* wouldn't allow it, politics required *them* to conspire against him. Somehow they'd find him hanged in his cell. That way they could guarantee the truth would never come out.

He hung there, his body cold and lifeless, swinging gently, back and forth, but his mind still active, his eyes seeing everything. The body bag lay on the cell floor, waiting for him. A prison officer stood on a chair, reached up, and cut him down. He felt himself falling, braced himself for impact, and woke up sweating.

At her desk, Judge Bristol's facial expression clearly intimidated her mental state, troubled, she could handle this situation in one of two ways. She could pull some strings and get this boy released. Or, she could call in some friends and find out what exactly was going on. The judge decided on the latter as a course of action. After two drum rolls with her fingers, she reached for the phone.

Claire Bristol, accompanied by Detective Sergeant Miranda Stephenson, strode in step along the first-floor corridor in New Scotland Yard. A balding detective led the way.

"So, who exactly is he? What have you found out?" The judge asked the head of the investigating team.

"Hayden West," replied the officer, opening the door and gesturing the women should enter the incident room. "It's a bloody good cover. First-year law student, claims he's never fired a gun before. We've checked with his university in Oxford, they've confirmed he was supposed to be at the court that day. Some sort of assignment."

"What's the problem then? Why are you still holding him?" asked the judge, blasting him with her famed disparaging look.

"The. . ."

"Well!" The blast was verbal this time. The arms were tightly folded and the foot tapped impatiently.

"Erm," Another detective led the two visitors over to a video screen. The officers played the CCTV footage from inside the courtroom. The judge didn't look at the monitor, she'd no need, the images in her head were more vivid than any camera could ever capture. Besides, she was thinking about the name, West.

"Judge," began the chief officer. "I can't see why you are being so sympathetic, this boy shot at you, twice." He swivelled the screen around. "Look, first shot, missed your head by a mere six-inches."

"Yes," replied the judge. "Amazing. It was so fortunate, the way it hit the man holding a gun to my head straight between the eyes."

"Then, the second shot. . ." The detective leaned across, pointing at the screen.

The judge cut into the other's speech. "Yes, the second shot, luckily, also missed me. The bullet buried itself into right into the assailant's

chest. How lucky is that? Am I having such great luck this week that I should immediately go and purchase a lottery ticket?"

Miranda Stephenson folded her arms and rocked back on her heels, making no attempt to hide the smirk on her face.

The detective cleared his throat. "According to . . ."

The judge cut him again. "I am being held at gunpoint. Rambo junior, knowing full well the security guard standing closest to him has been shot dead, seizes the opportunity and takes the gun. Of the nine bullets in the clip, he fires just two. Of the millions upon millions of precise locations these bullets could find in my courtroom; my captor got one in the head and one in the chest. Brilliant."

"But . . ."

That disparaging look of hers appeared again. "But? I'll butt you in a minute! What other background do you have on this boy?"

The detective reached over to the desk and opened up a file. "Well, he fits a certain profile, bit of a loner, single. His father was French, Jacques Dubios, disappeared five years ago, suspected of terrorist links. His mother, Adelaide Dubios, deceased."

"How is it Mr and Mrs Dubois, have a kid named, West?" interrupted DS Stephenson.

The two other detectives, looked at each other, no doubt hoping the other would provide an answer.

The judge shook her head. "What do you have on the dead man?"

"McKinnon?" The balding detective picked up a file.

"No, not McKinnon. I was trying the case. I know all about him."

"Burrows, David A. Served in the British army, then was employed by various companies as a security contractor in the east. Dropped off the radar four or five years ago."

"So, a mercenary tries to free a man charged with importing drugs, caught with half-a-tonne of cannabis resin, by taking me hostage. A student shoots him dead, and your interest is in the student?"

The detective flicked his hair over in an attempt to disguise his six-inch wide parting. "Ma'am, he is the only one still alive."

"I see." Judge Goldstone stepped forward. "You've locked up this boy, on no evidence whatsoever. To me the evidence says hero, you hear terrorist. No wonder crime's on the increase. It's being

investigated by dumb and dumber." The judge's harsh sarcastic tone implied her patience was wearing thin.

"The problem is," began the most senior detective. "He took those shots at you."

"Shut up! You stupid little man," snapped the judge. "Do you have a brain?" She poked him in the forehead with her finger. "He had nine bullets. Had I been the target? Don't you think he'd have taken a couple more shots seeing as the first two missed."

"Mrs Goldstone. . ." the detective started.

The judge made to speak but the detective, forgetting protocol, held a finger up, indicating he wished her to be quiet. DS Stephenson cringed, she knew the judge would make him suffer for his familiar address. She stepped out of the way.

The judge stepped closer. "Detective, have you been out to my house, come to any of our barbecues?"

"No," he replied, bowing his head.

"Perhaps I've sent you and your family birthday or Christmas cards? Or maybe our children play together and have sleep-overs?" She rocked on her heels, unfolded her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Detective, do we frequent bars and restaurants together?"

"No ma'am." The officer turned his head, avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, so were not friends then, not really? Not in a familiar way," she spoke in her best plummy voice.

"No, my lady."

"Yes, you're correct, we are not. Therefore, it is Judge Bristol to you, and don't ever refer to me as Mrs Goldstone again," she cursed him whilst sneaking a wink at Miranda.

"Sorry, judge."

"Apology accepted. Now, what were you saying, you great buffoon?" She slapped him harmlessly around the head with a flimsy two-page report.

"If," the detective continued, "He wasn't shooting at you, watch." He replayed the incident in real time.

Judge Bristol watched, open mouthed, she'd never seen it this way before. The events happened at lightning speed. "Flip!"

"Let's suppose for a second, he wasn't shooting at you. That's the perfect assassination. The boys over in armed response, they've

tried to do what the West kid did, none of them can get even close. Nobody can shoot like that. You'd have to be a world class marksman." The judge did not listen beyond the last sentence. She closed her eyes momentarily, a concerned grin appeared on her face. She opened one palm and then the other, calculating, on the one hand. . . "No."

"Judge?"

"Sorry, I was miles away."

"Well we think." He rewound the recording. "There's a reason he didn't shoot McKinnon. We just don't know what it is."

Miranda moved closer examining the still on the screen. "Simple. The damage has been done. While West has a gun McKinnon doesn't have a hostage. He represents potential threat but not actual threat. The Kid's a law student. He cannot claim self, or third party defence until McKinnon, by action causes imminent danger."

"That told you." The judge brought her hands together. "Sorry guys." She turned to the detectives. "You have nothing, not one single shred of evidence to justify his continued incarceration. Whether by luck or by judgement, this boy appears to have saved my life, and your blushes. What would you do if somebody saved the Queen or the Prime Minister? Ask for legislation to bring back hanging? I'll be in chambers this afternoon, and I *will* release him." The judge signalled to Miranda, they were leaving. The two women exited the incident room smartly, leaving the two male detectives open-mouthed.

As they reached the car, Miranda decided she had to pry. "Claire," she began. "We go way back. What just went on in there? Why do you so want this boy released?"

"It is called justice, I believe. There is no hard evidence."

"But there is the possibility he was trying to kill you. Surely it's better to be safe than sorry."

Claire Goldstone pulled her glasses off and ran her fingers through her hair. Still on the desired side of fifty, she remained a very attractive woman. "He wasn't trying to kill me, I'm sure of it. The situation is simply ridiculous." She dismissed the other's comments.

"I'm going to need an application to be made on his behalf. Can you arrange it, call Brookie for me?"

"She's your sister. Why don't you call her."

"It is better coming from you, besides, you know Brook, she can talk for England."

"Sure, no problem." Miranda pulled out her phone.

"Miranda." Claire turned and looked at the detective over the top of the car, she paused, tapping the frame of her glasses against her teeth. "Miranda," she placed her hand to her brow, squinting in the bright sunshine. "If your life depended on it. Who would you trust with a single shot? Who has the best shot within a limited time frame? Who would you want to take that shot? A matter of life and death?"

"Like if I was being about to be taken hostage or under threat like you were?"

"Not necessarily, but yes one single shot to nail somebody. Who's finger would you want on that trigger?"

"What, do you mean in the entire force?"

"Don't limit yourself to the police force. Anybody you know, or anybody that you have ever met. The Terminator, Robocop, anybody?" The detective pondered drumming her fingers on the roof of the Mercedes.

"Aha, that's easy!" Miranda's face brightened. "Single shot, your husband, Alex. Well, him or Robocop."

"Miranda, we have known each other a long time, I trust you, but I need you to swear to me, you will never divulge this information. In fact if it ever threatens to become public. I want you to do your best, your utmost to bury it."

"Of course, Claire, you know that," the female officer replied.

"Get in," ordered Claire, sucking on frame of her glasses she seemed both nervous and excited.

Miranda eyed her friend with suspicion. "What's going on Digger? What's happening inside that head?"

"Don't call me Digger, I hate it, it reminds of scrubber." She started the engine.

"You are Judge Claire Bristol."

"Miranda, one can make nicknames out of initials but Judge is not my name. Besides, my surname is Goldstone."

"Why have JCB on your licence plate then?" she said, reaching back and pulling the seat-belt over her shoulder.

Claire didn't dignify the question with answer, she merely shrugged her shoulders and quite deliberately selected drive. After moving all of thirty feet, she stopped the car abruptly and turned to her passenger.

"I wouldn't normally do this, but seeing as you are the detective. Work with me on this line of enquiry. It's just crazy."

"Okay, but what's crazy."

"This. It is just so bloody incredible, I don't believe what could possibility be staring me in the face."

"Will you quit stalling, Claire, get on with it. You've got the car stopped in the middle of the car park."

"I breed horses, right, heredity is everything."

"If you say so."

"My daughter, Kim, she could ride a horse practically before she could walk. My son, Mark, the farmers have been taking to shoot clays since he was four. Now he can beat them all, blindfolded. Like you have just kindly highlighted, his dad is an excellent shot."

"What's your point?" Miranda shifted round in her seat.

"Hayden West can shoot, Alex can shoot." Claire replied selecting drive again, and pulling onto the main road.

"Yeah, me and you can both swim. What's your point?"

"Miranda, just commit that information to evidence. Now let's move on to the subject of Hayden West, mother's name Adelaide. You remember Delly, Adele West, my best friend."

"I remember Adele, tragic, how could I forget?"

"So, what if dumb and dumber have made a mistake, a typo."

"I don't get it."

"What if Adelaide is Adele?"

"What's your point?"

"What if Adelaide Dubois is Adele West?"

"Claire, you are reaching for some crazy shit. You shouldn't speak ill of the dead. If that's what you're saying."

"Okay, so twenty years ago. I split up with my husband, leaving him with my best friend for company. When I come back, Adele's moved to France, she's married within three months and pops out a kid soon after."

"But she came back to visit us." Miranda calculated dates, counting on her fingers.

"Not for the first year she didn't."

"I don't remember," admitted Miranda

"No, she didn't, and we didn't actually see her son. She always referred to the child as 'Beebee', her brown baby. I never did know what his name was."

Claire retold the story of the time she'd left her husband. Miranda already knew the summary, aged eighteen, she'd worked as barmaid for Alex, before following in her father's footsteps and joining the Met.

As it was, Miranda thought that Claire's reaction to the situation was a little bizarre. If, as Miranda believed, Claire's best friend had her husband's child. Miranda could not understand why Claire was being so calm and understanding. If Miranda were in that position herself, she would be spitting nails. Twenty years ago, Claire had left Alex, her husband. She had written separate letters to both Alex and Adele, telling them they should be together. Claire said, she wasn't coming back, and that the two of them should get on with their lives, together, for she loved the both of them. There was no denying Claire, loved her husband, that was not the issue. Circumstances made it seemingly impossible for Claire to ever return. A miraculous sequence of events and the death of her father enabled Claire to return and resume marital bliss. Whilst Claire had been away, her husband and her friend had obviously slept together. Adele must have conceived. What was she to do? Stick around and make life complicated for Claire and Alex, perhaps even be the cause of another separation.

"Adele must have left England before she started showing, deciding, it was for the common good," mused Claire.

"Yeah, back in the day we used to do a lot of crazy stuff, for 'the common good.'"

"So Adele, brought up her son with her new husband, Jacques. No doubt, when the right time came. Adele would have revealed all. But I know Adele. The right time, would be tomorrow, or the day

after, never today. Being killed in a fire was not part of Adele's plan. Adele, therefore had never gotten around to telling anybody her secret."

"You've be watching too much TV, next you'll be telling me about Area 57."

"It's Area 51."

"Whatever."

CHAPTER FOUR

As the two women walked from the silver Mercedes to the prison, Claire Goldstone felt increasingly frequent pangs of guilt. By the time she reached the interview room apprehension caused her mind to race and her heart to pound with excitement. She paced, wringing her hands together turning her engagement ring around her finger. If her theory was correct, Adele West had done what she'd done, for the common good. When Adele died, had Claire known, or indeed had her husband known, Hayden should have come with them. Claire felt, for some reason, she should have taken over the responsibilities of Hayden's mother.

"Digger, stop stressing, don't get ahead of yourself, sit down," said Miranda.

"Can I have a cigarette."

"You don't smoke."

"I don't want to light it. Just to hold it."

The jangling of keys followed by the bang of the cell door ripped Hayden from his sleep.

"41152 West! Your solicitor's on the phone," the guard announced.

"I don't have a solicitor," objected Hayden, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Well, tell them it's the wrong number than." The guard grinned as he waited by the door. In Hayden's mind the conspiracy had started. He didn't have a solicitor, because he didn't need one, he'd not been charged, not even questioned. Who could be on the telephone? The prisoner's mind raced as he walked along the wing. For some reason the sight of the telephone scared him. The phone sat alone on a table in a room designed for discussion with counsel.

"Push zero," said the guard, pulling the door to. "You're here for terrorism, so I'm not supposed to leave the room but you ain't no terrorist and I need to empty my bladder. If I'm not back before you're done, wait for me." Hayden sat in the chair, took a breath, lifted the receiver and pressed the button.

"Hello?" he questioned, tentatively.

"Hi," a woman's voice enquired, surprising him. "Hayden West?"

"Yes," his single word reply lacked conviction.

"Hi, I'm Sylvia Brooke, I've been asked to submit your bail application. I just need a few details." The caller spoke enthusiastically.

"Bail application?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"I didn't make a bail application."

"That's right, I've been asked to make one on your behalf."

"By who?"

"No idea, no paperwork as yet, but we have to hurry. Digger is looking at it this afternoon."

"Digger?"

"Yes, sorry, Judge Goldstone."

"Wait a minute," Hayden screwed up his face. "You're submitting a bail application to be heard by the judge I'm accused of trying to kill. The same judge that put me in here."

"Digger didn't put you in there, and we don't have time for the Spanish inquisition."

Hayden hesitated, charmed by her silky smooth voice. "I don't want to make a bail application. Unless you want to get me an overnight pass to come visit you. You sound like a babe. Thanks anyway."

"Do you like in there then?" She ignored his flirting.

"Seems like a safe place to me."

"Safe from?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Mr West, I've no idea what you are talking about."

"I'm sure you don't. Tell your boss I'm totally competent, and capable of making my own bail application, should I wish to do so."

"Okay, whatever you say." The woman's voice changed, the warmth vanished. "That's fine with me, Mr West, so I don't need to work through my lunch-break."

"Not on my account, babe," he replied sarcastically.

"Tut tut. You've got a strange way of showing your gratitude when people circumvent red tape to try and help you." An abrupt click was followed by the absent sound of dead line, sexy voice was

gone. He kicked the desk and leaned back against the wall, trying to fathom what was going on. "Tu es con," he said to himself, pinching his nose-bridge.

In his cell, Hayden lay on his bed listening to all the bizarre sounds of prison life, banging of doors, jangling of keys. There was the manner of dialogue. In prison no conversations are normal. Words are either whispered or shouted, nothing is ever plain *said*. Finally, there was the thinking. Locked up on your own for twenty-three hours of every day, you could think of almost anything. There was no other to check theory with, so you just thought and thought. When you were done thinking, you had time to go ahead and think some more. At this moment, Hayden was single-handedly addressing UK gun crime.

"Okay, he mumbled to himself. "You've spent £2 million in an operation clearing 200 handguns from the capital. Duh! Why don't you just buy-in handguns at £500 a piece, scrap value, 200 that's only a £100,000 and you'll increase market price of guns on the street. The little bastards at the bottom of the food chain will steal them and sell them to you. I am so never paying tax for you to waste it."

"West! The police are here to see you." A prison officer opened the cell door.

Hayden rolled off the bed. "I've only been back her ten minutes."

The officer stood in the doorway. "You can't be public enemy number one anymore, they've sent two birds to see you." The guard laughed, keys jangling, as he led the way along B wing to the interview room. "There you go." The guard stopped outside a heavy sapele print door. "Two lovely ladies, enjoy."

Hayden installed himself in the seat opposite the two women. Miranda examined Hayden's face, his features, she looked to the judge, nodding her agreement. There could be no doubt, this boy was the bastard child of the judge's husband. He was in prison, why was he smiling? That would be the Adele influence, Adele always smiled, even in the face of adversity. Claire was briefly reminded of the last time she saw Adele, and, yes, she'd a smile on her face. Claire squinted as she scrutinised the boy's face. Alex could never deny him,

he was so obviously part of the Goldstone clan. Claire came straight out and asked the question.

"Hayden, does the expression, plaything, mean anything to you? Have you heard it before?"

The prisoner laughed, before leaning over so as he was very close to the judge. "You are a very attractive woman, but I think you are a little old for me."

Claire smiled, it began as a weak, sarcastic smile, but then it just blossomed. Claire knew the voice of his father was speaking. "I'll take that as a compliment," she replied. "But does it mean anything else to you?"

"Three things," He held three fingers aloft. "Plaything was a word that caused arguments between my parents. Plaything is written on my mother's headstone. Some American people paid for stone. I don't what it's all about. And it's the name of a horse my mother had when I was a child."

"Okay, thanks," Claire replied. "Sit tight, you'll be out of here within a couple of hours."

"How does that work? Who are you anyway?" Hayden became agitated, shifting in his seat, more conspiracy theories, and now assassination plots ran through his head. "Some bogus solicitor rang, trying to set me up. I didn't try to shoot that judge. You can't pin it on me."

"We know," Miranda tried to reassure him, but her flat tone made it sound worse.

"No, you don't," he exclaimed. "You're just saying that. As soon as I'm on the street, I'll have an accident. You can't just let me out of here, you need a judge."

Claire rolled her eyes, she'd forgotten about the wig she wore in court. "Duh! I am a judge! *The* judge, the one they say you shot at! As soon as I leave here, I'll be in chambers, I'll shuffle some papers, sort your application, you'll be free." Looking at her face, he recognised her. Hayden felt relieved, although he didn't understand. Why would she visit and subsequently release him? Hey, whatever, he was going to be free.

"Look at me Hayden." She spoke to him the exact same way she did when speaking to her own children. "You are not to ask why, not ever. Believe, you have powerful friends, they have gotten you

out of here. They will be watching you from now on, you kind of got lost in the system, but everything's fine now."

"Yeah, my mum said something like that. People looking out for me. I never believed her," he replied calmly.

The two women exchanged looks, open mouthed. "What exactly did your mother tell you?" Claire asked in a slow, deliberate manner.

"She said, my real dad would always look out for me. When the time was right, he'd find me."

"So, Jacques, is not your real dad then," Miranda asked.

"That dick head, hell no! I think my mum only married him to take the pressure off my real dad. She said it was love gone wrong. The story goes. My mum loved my dad, but it was her best friend's husband. She loved her best friend too, her best friend also loved her. Look, pretty much everybody loved everybody. Way too much love! I think maybe they all took ecstasy. Way too much love, not enough birth control. That's the way I see it. Anyway, she had to leave her best friend and my dad. She said it was for the common good. My mum was never unhappy, at least that's what she said. She used to say, some people give all their love and get no reward, she got me out of the deal, and that was plenty." Both women, seemed touched by the romance.

Claire took control, she cut the conversation. "The sooner I get back in chambers, the sooner you get out of here." She glanced at her watch.

"I don't have a bail application, told them not to bother."

"Yes, Brooke, the bogus solicitor, told me. It doesn't matter anyway. By definition, anybody not wanting to be released from incarceration is not of sound mind. The application has been made for you anyway."

CHAPTER FIVE

Oakland, California, USA

Daniella Goldstone answered her front door. The girl standing before her had been crying' mascara ran down her cheeks. Against the background of night the taxi disappeared, off down the street. Daniella looked at the girl and her luggage, sighed, turned her back and returned to the open plan kitchen.

"Same room as last time." Daniella, spoke without formerly acknowledging, or facing the visitor. The girl made a theatrical event of dragging her cases and bags into the hall before dumping herself down at the kitchen table.

"Why can't you get on with your mother? Every month the same thing happens." The Hispanic woman spoke whilst expertly chopping carrots and onions. "Every month," she continued. "You must spend at least two or three days here. You argue with your mother, you say bad things, horrible things, and then, you go back to live with her."

"Auntie, this time it's different," the girl replied. "I won't be going back. I'm going to get my own place and get a job."

"And give up your education that your uncle is paying for?" Daniella concentrated, continuing to chop. Common sense dictated it was more important not to lose her fingers, than to pay too much attention to this girl. Daniella Goldstone had always been very intuitive woman, her husband, Morgan, is scared of her, he refers to her as voodoo woman.

"Where's, Uncle Morgan?" The girl made the quotation mark sign with her fingers, as she said the word - uncle. Daniella raised her and caught her. The chopping stopped. Daniella instantly knew what this latest spat, was all about.

"You, are a very disrespectful young lady." Slowly, Daniella resumed chopping.

"I'm fed up with this family, I just want to be on my own, dammit." declared the girl.

"So, what are you doing here? Why don't you just go away," snapped the older woman.

"I'm fed up of all the secrets and lies in this family. Every day a new secret, another lie."

Daniella exhaled audibly, put down the cabbage, dried her hands on a tea towel and slowly walked towards the girl. "You have become, just like your mother," she began. "Too emotional. You are sent to train in law, but still you want to cast aspersions and throw random allegations without first looking at all the evidence." Daniella, knife in hand, stood over the girl she called her niece. "Things have been explained to you, but like your mother, you never listen. I guess you've finally read the details on your full birth certificate."

"You know! How do you know?"

"Of course, I know, what you *think* that you know. I am not your auntie, you are not my niece, Uncle Morgan, is not your Uncle."

"So it's true, you are my stepmother then." The girl sounded horrified.

"I am not your stepmother," Daniella waved the knife at the young woman. "I am nobody to you, so don't come into *my* house trying to abuse me, and making false accusations to my husband. Wow, you are really stupid. I will tell you again, one time, from the top." She stopped waving the kitchen knife with the twelve-inch blade at her visitor, she pointed it directly at her face.

The girl stared at the knife point, almost crossing her eyes.

"Is like this. Your father's name was Strauss. He was English. He knew your mother for only six weeks before he died from the Jamericans. Your Uncle Morgan, my husband, was his cousin. Your Auntie Georgia, is not your Auntie, she is my husband's half-sister. You do have a real Uncle, Alex, he lives in England. All the blood, is complicated."

"Why then, is Uncle Morgan's name, on my birth certificate?" the girl frowned.

Daniella realised, she appeared to be threatening the girl, with the knife, she reached over and set the knife down on the worktop. "Beebee, we all wanted the best for you, I don't know the words, branding or dynasty, maybe, I don't know. Auntie Georgia, your namesake, she is a very powerful judge. Uncle Alex in England, he is

a high powered lawyer. His wife, your Auntie Claire, she is also a high judge in England. They are all like you, like me, Goldstones."

"But I was a Goldstone anyway, wasn't I?" Beebee, still didn't understand. She shook her head.

Daniella walked around the worktop and resumed chopping the cabbage. "Your father died before you were born. It is the law, your mother has no right to put your father's name on the birth certificate if he is not available to contest it. Wasn't it you that elected to study family law?" she sneered.

Beebee slapped her own forehead. "Sorry, Auntie, my bad," she muttered.

"Sorry? Sorry won't cut it, not this time." Daniella stabbed the knife into the cabbage. The Latino part of her blood was perilously close to its boiling point. "Remember, I am not your Auntie. We have no blood. I am going upstairs. I have to change the bed."

"Okay, I get it. I am sorry, I'll take what ever punishment, you and uncle Morgan dish out, but I'm not going back to my mother's, no way."

Beebee knew she had insulted the woman. Daniella and Morgan had looked after her as one of their own, almost since her birth. Beebee's mum, Natalie, had remarried, twice, during Beebee's twenty years. The latest husband, Roger, just wanted Beebee out of the way. He'd succeeded in convincing Natalie, without him she'd be left of the shelf. Left on the shelf and being alone were Natalie's greatest fears. Besides, Roger, like Beebee's own mother was white. She sensed, he felt awkward, even in this day and age, explaining to third parties, why Beebee was a different colour. At home Beebee felt as if she were a foster child. Now that she was older, she felt like a lodger. She'd seen her mother's bank statement. Every month, money went into her mother's account from a company named Absolution-US. It was as if her own mother were being paid to look after her. At the age of fourteen, quite miraculously, she landed a weekend job at some stables, a lot of the horses were named Absolute *something*. Back then she dismissed the coincidence. When she'd reached eighteen, she'd started to work in her uncle's bar, also named Absolution. This situation, Beebee described as 'weird shit', but it kept her in clover, therefore she simply allowed it.

"El niño muerto ha vuelto de nuevo," she called to Daniella, Daniella, halted in her tracks, cursed in Spanish before, turning to face Beebee.

"What did you say?" Daniella looked at Beebee, anxiety written on her face.

"You know exactly what I said, Remember, I heard it from you first." Beebee said smugly.

"Where did you hear this?" asked the Hispanic woman, anger rising within.

"For the purpose of this conversation. Can I just call you Daniella." Beebee spoke calmly and earnestly.

"Why would you want to do that?" queried Daniella.

"Because, you're not really my auntie," replied Beebee. "You're more like my mother, and if I called you mother, it would be disrespecting her, my real mother, wouldn't it?"

Daniella, taken aback, stood hands on hips. She had expected this conversation. She had seen it coming, but not now, not at this time. Beebee continued. "Daniella can we speak like women? Just for a while. I know that the requirement to use a sanitary towel, does not make you a woman, but I want to try to be an adult."

"Maybe. Maybe now is the time. Maybe you are a woman now, but I don't think so, not with your tantrums," Daniella replied.

"El niño muerto ha vuelto de nuevo." Beebee repeated. "I was ten years old, I heard you arguing with my mother downstairs, it was the first time I ran away from home. That's what you said. I didn't understand it not then, but I wrote it down, sort of. I've never asked anybody what it meant, but I've spent so much time with you I can almost speak Spanish. I know now what it means. I've known for some time. The dead child has returned. Is that right? What does that mean? Do you think that I am evil?"

"No, is nothing like that. Don't worry," replied Daniella, nervously.

"Okay," Beebee suppressed the oncoming tantrum. "Woman to woman, honestly. What did you mean?" Daniella, looked at Beebee, she decided maybe it was time to reveal a few more of those deep family secrets.

"Do you really want to know? Do you think you are mature enough?" she asked the girl.

"We are about to find out," replied the other, breathing deeply, bracing herself.

"Do you believe in him, the greater power?" asked the Hispanic woman, looking skyward.

"No, not really. Why?" responded Beebee, Beebee had a new, sincere, kind, edge to her voice.

"Here's the thing," started Dani. "I was there, when you were born. I saw it, with my own eyes. But if I hadn't been there, on that day at that time. I would not believe. If I was asked to stake my life on it. I would swear that you and your mother, you are not related. Your mother, I think maybe she feels the same." Beebee, was not shocked in any way, for some time, she had felt the same way too.

"Tell me something I don't know." She grinned and placed her hands onto her knees.

"Your father was married to another woman, when he met your mother." This wasn't news to Beebee, she listened intently. "Your father's wife, Helen, she had a termination just before he came over here, she did not tell him, this I believe is what caused the end of the marriage. As if somebody had intervened, Your father came here, for a holiday, he met your mother on the first night he was here, you were conceived, and your father died soon after."

"Meaning what?" Beebee, didn't quite follow. This seemed to be a variation on the original story.

"Strauss and his wife, they have been trying for a baby for five years. Your mother understood the words celibate and contraception, she has chosen for most of her life to ignore them. You are the only product from your mother's many encounters. It makes no sense. I don't understand how you came to be, unless he," she pointed upwards, "chose to replace the murdered one."

"This is some deep shit!" Beebee, ran her fingers through her hair.

"There is no doubt, that you are your father's daughter. If he were here, he could never deny you. Every year you get a birthday card with some English money inside, correct."

"From Auntie Helen."

"Helen is not your auntie. Helen was your father's wife. When you were a little girl, you were just like her. You have grown to be more like your mother. If you claim that you are an adult woman, I

will trust you with a secret, but only if you promise, not to ask me any questions." Daniella, decided it was time for her to know.

"Okay, I promise," agreed Beebee, trying to mentally follow her family tree. She remembered as a little child trying to draw a tree with her crayons. She had become so frustrated because the tree never looked right, she'd just scribbled all over the paper. How appropriate, that scribble seemed right now.

"Most people believe, and all the documentation says your father was murdered in England, shortly after your birth. Is not true, your father was murdered by the Jamericans here in Oakland just after he met your mother."

"No!" gasped Beebee, in disbelief.

"Is true," confirmed Daniella, a look of sadness descended on her. "Morgan hunted and killed them, but is a waste, is an eye for an eye, it could never bring Strauss back. How could it?" Daniella's eyes filled with tears, but her face smiled. "After he'd killed them, Morgan and I, we had to leave the country until things cooled down. We travelled to England, many things happened in this time. We came back when you were born. It was a very difficult but special time. Your auntie Georgia and Morgan had been separated for twenty years, we found her. During this time the family became strong, none of these things would have happened if it wasn't for your father. The point is, Helen must never know the truth. She had her termination when she was unwell." Daniella pointed to her brain, twirling her index finger. "It caused the break of her marriage to your father, it was a mistake. She knew nothing of your mother, Helen, still believes that if your father hadn't of died, he would have come back to her. In her mind, she had a termination but you still appeared. Your father had insurance, she has kept half of the money for you. Now that you have come of age, you will receive half of the income from his house."

"Auntie Daniella," called Beebee, putting the accent heavily onto the word, auntie. "I'm sorry for disrespecting you. Every day is a school day, so, yeah, I got it." For once, Beebee, wasn't being sarcastic. Daniella sat next to her on the sofa, she pushed her arm around her niece's shoulder.

"Do you know why I am telling you all of this?" she asked the younger. Beebee, shook her head. She had no idea. "We've all had enough of this, we discussed it the last time you threw the toys from

the pram. It has been arranged. You're going to finish your degree in England at Oxford University. Next semester, they will be expecting you. You can refuse to go but you will be cut off."

Beebee didn't object, she didn't even get mildly angry. She ran around the room, impersonating an aeroplane.

"You mean, you are sending me to a place where I'm not in my auntie's shadow? Thank you!" She raised her eyes and placed her palms together.

"Beebee," announced Daniella. "There is many you don't know, most of it you don't want to know. Back in the day, your uncles were bad asses over there, be careful, your name and reputation will precede you."

Illinois Supreme Court, Springfield, USA

"I think what the UK Judge is saying is fundamentally right, and to work towards some sort of combined, rather than unilateral legislation has many benefits." Judge Georgia Goldstone senior liked to be mobile. Eleven other judges sat around the large beech table. Georgia walked among them like she was their kindergarten teacher. "Turn to page fourteen. . ."

The judges shuffled through the documents in front of them. Georgia took the opportunity to pour herself a glass of water.

"Okay," she continued. "What the British are saying, and I hear Germany and France are in general agreement. Is . . ." She took a sip from her glass. "If we legalise the distribution and cultivation of drugs containing cannabinoids, it will have beneficial effect on the problem of drug trafficking. If you've read the report, you will see she has provided projections for both one-hundred, and two-hundred and gram limits."

"I'm not sure that I agree," said Judge Pearson.

"Simple, and I'll summarise for those whose schedules didn't allow them to read the report. Claire Bristol says. If an individual is allowed to cultivate or possess an amount of the substance within defined parameters. The illegal market is destroyed and a new market formed."

"And how does that affect law and order in positive way."
Georgia raised a finger. "Jo Average will find it cheaper to grow his own, and will prefer to do so rather than seeking supply from questionable sources. Trade of the specified drugs will be conducted openly."

"But with a cheaper supply his usage will increase."

"Unproven, and unlikely. It's like cigarettes. If you're a one pack a day guy, that's what you are. It doesn't matter what they cost you."

The judges looked at each other, eventually the heads nodded in agreement and the grumbles began to sound positive.

"So how have we solved any problems other than simply legalising and illegal practise?"

"Firstly, the market price will fall, we have already touched on that. There will less profit in dealing those type of drugs. A dealer will no longer be such a lucrative pastime."

"Perhaps."

"Secondly, of course there are those who will exceed the limit, and we are aware of that."

"How do you propose to deal with those that do – harsher penalties?"

"No, they are forecast, even welcomed. Local trade Mr Pearson, local trade. We have Americans supplying drugs to other Americans – the product was made in America. The money stays in the USA – rather than finance extremists in the Middle and Far East. After the market has settled a new price, the government can proceed to investigate the possibility of licensed quantity suppliers and retailers, with that comes revenue from inevitable taxation."

"Taxation, congress will love that part. I must give this further study," announced Judge Pearson. The other judges nodded their agreement - they always did. Of all the circuit judges, Pearson was the one Georgia needed on side.

CHAPTER SIX

Hayden and Miranda crossed Brixton Hill, turned the corner and were welcomed by the sight of an African traffic warden proudly fixing a parking ticket to the car windscreen. Miranda removed the ticket and made a point of screwing it up and dropping it into a litter bin close by.

"You still have to pay it. You are parking illegally" said the warden.

"No, you have to pay it, mate," she replied, getting into the car as Hayden got into the other side.

"What are you talking about?" said the African.

Miranda ignored him.

"What was all that about?" Hayden buckled his seatbelt.

"It's a company car. He's a taxpayer." She pulled into traffic. Hayden turned his head around, examining the inside of the car.

"Company car," she repeated pulling a magnetic blue light from under her seat.

"Can we use it?" Hayden grinned.

"No, that's one thing I *will* get in the shit for."

"Do actually like being an officer of the law?" He said in French accent.

"Pays the bills. Sure I do."

"Is this what you wanted as a career?"

"My Dad was a copper so..."

"So?"

"So now I've made the rank of detective, I'll ask the questions, not you." She winked at him.

"We've just passed the coach station," said Hayden.

"We're not going to the coach station," she replied, turning left, following a sign, M4, M40, Paddington.

Miranda pulled over outside a row of shops in West London. Hayden quickly released himself from his seatbelt and placed a hand on the door lever. "I thought you were taking me to the train station,

or even back to university. What am I doing here?" He asked, still influenced by paranoia.

"The judge wants to see you, in there." Miranda pointed to El Negril. "She couldn't come to collect you herself, it doesn't look good. She thought you might fancy some decent food," The detective spoke without looking at him.

"I think I'd rather just go home."

"This is a police car, not a taxi. I think the nearest tube station is Ladbroke Grove."

"Is this for real?"

"Restaurant is there in front of you, tube station is down the street. Your choice."

"But. . ."

"Get out -now."

"Okay," he replied, getting out of the car. "I'm still not sure if you've helped me, but thanks if you have. I appreciate it." He carefully shut the door, looked left, then right, and disappeared the restaurant.

Inside was fairly quiet. Old reggae music played quietly in the background. The judge sat alone, relaxed in her chair nodding her head slightly to the music. She beckoned him, gesturing with her hand whilst sending a warm smile. The waiter pulled out a chair. Hayden scanned the room suspiciously before sitting down. Claire let out a little laugh. "Are we checking for snipers?"

"Has to be done."

"It's rather a pointless exercise, don't you think? If somebody was going to assassinate you, would matter if you saw you. Dead men tell no tales, apparently."

"So, I hear." He pulled his chair closer into the table.

Claire summoned the waiter and ordered drinks. Moments later she watched him gulping a pint of lager as if he'd an unquenchable thirst.

"Hit the spot?"

"Hell yes." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

She frowned, passed him a napkin, turned her attention to the waiter, and ordered food.

"Tell me more, of what you know of your real father," Claire asked, at what she deemed was an appropriate time.

"I don't really know," Hayden mused. "My mum always spoke very highly of him. It wasn't like he used her or anything. I never believed her romantic pink and fluffy tale though. Now I am maturing, I'm beginning to see more. As I go through my own experiences in life, I am starting to understand, everything mum says is true. But there are things that my mum has said, they are impossible. I wouldn't like to test her theories. Some of them seem, well, crazy."

"Give me an example," said Mrs Goldstone as she signalled the waiter for more drinks.

"Okay, well, for one, she said, when my father became aware, he would come for me. I can forgive her that one, she was gone before she ever got around to telling him about me. But you know, she said the strangest thing. She said, if I was ever alone in the world and life ever seemed impossible, her best friend, my father's wife. She said I was to find her and she would be every bit a mother to me as she, my real mother, could. Imagine that, that's unbelievable, she always was a little too romantic." Hayden, swigged his beer.

Claire fought to remain composed. "Who is your father Hayden, do you know?"

"No idea," Hayden replied resolutely. "I probably know more about his wife."

The judge nearly choked on her glass of wine.

"His wife's name is Claire, she comes from Hertfordshire and she works in the legal profession." Hayden's speech began to slur a little. The lager was taking effect.

Judge Goldstone, knew she was playing with fire, but she couldn't resist. "You've never thought to track down your father, his wife. Maybe you have family out there. Who knows?"

"I've thought about it. I thought about it every night in prison. My mother would continually lecture me, on the needs of the many, the desires of the one, and selfishness. If I seek this Claire woman, maybe she has children, a different life. If I turn up, it will change her life, my dad's life. I could cause mayhem, and for what?"

Claire hid her smile from him by looking away, all this resolute discipline had one root.

"I live my life in confidence," he continued. "Up my sleeves I have aces, trump cards. The secret is to win without using them. My mum always told me, help was at hand, I believe her. When I finish university and I'm qualified. I'll find my people. I have relatives in America, I've a father somewhere but I'll go to them as somebody, not a begging nobody."

"Hayden, calm down," the judge begged him.

"I've got it all written down." Hayden pulled out half of what appeared to be a birthday card. On the card were scribbled words. The card was dark at the edges, perhaps singed as if subjected to heat. Scribbled on the card, apparently random words. Absolution, Daniella, Beebee and Oakland, were the only words she could make out. "When I finish uni, me and Google, we are gonna get to the bottom of this."

"Putting your education first is important. I'm sure your mother would have been proud."

Hayden paused for thought. "Why do they call you digger? What the hell kind of a name is that?" He asked, scratching his head.

"That, young man, is very long very old and most tedious story. Your food is getting cold," she replied.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"What is wrong with the world today? It's a sad state of affairs when we congratulate Claire and Alex, as they approach their twentieth wedding anniversary. Relationships of this length have become the exception rather than the rule." That's what Brooke had said at the party.

Alex put the strength and resolve of their marriage down to his wife, Claire, being his fine and worthy opponent. The couple had battled their way through the last twenty years. Battle is too strong a word, it creates the wrong impression. Let's stay with, fine and worthy opponents, it is a more apt description. Twenty years was not the total of their relationship. The format and parameters of the relationship had been set many many years before they entered the institute of marriage. In London's courts they had been opposing counsel, on numerous occasions, and in school he was the object of her teenage crush.

The experience of the courtroom had set a precedent for the handling of domestic issues. An issue would be raised, a debate would ensue, a verdict would be reached. Unless there was substantial new evidence, there would be no appeals or re-trials. Four years into the marriage, she'd quite deliberately used her professional and political muscle to block a request from one of his clients for a planning development. It had cost Alex's company, tens of thousands of pounds. After the furious argument, they reached a verdict, there was a penalty, the issue has never been raised since.

Today another household conflict loomed upon the horizon. Claire studied her husband, he was not aware of her gaze, his back was turned. If Alex had seen the look in her sultry blue eyes, he may well have requested medical attention. Surely the daggers would have to be surgically removed from his back.

Claire was preoccupied, deciding when and where to initiate this conflict. Her frustration involved the fact that this could not be a fair trial followed by a fine hanging. This was to be more of a pre-trial. She needed to find out if there was indeed a case for him to answer. Would this be best tackled in public? A restaurant maybe. No, that wouldn't work, in public her husband would more likely refuse to have the conversation. The pressing item on the agenda was best addressed in the privacy of their own home. Briefly, she thought to tackle this issue later in the evening, in the bedroom perhaps. Almost immediately she dismissed the notion as wholly inappropriate, bad form, even. Here and now, as he sat there in the lounge. Would that be her best strategy? Now, yes, lounge, no. This issue needed to be tackled more formally. Claire needed to be opposite her husband, she needed to look him in the eye as she questioned him. Finally she summoned him to the dining room.

"Alex may I speak with you at the dining table. Sort out your bits first, two minutes." She turned on her heels and headed for the kitchen. By bits, she meant his laptop computer and various papers, strewn across the carpet.

In the kitchen, Claire poured two glasses of wine and took them through into dining room. The bottle, she left in the kitchen. Quite deliberately, she placed the glasses opposite each other, using the breadth of the table rather than the length. The conversation needed to be formal, but with some degree of intimacy. Alex seated himself, Claire Goldstone looked her husband in the eye just long enough for the situation to become uncomfortable. They'd been adversaries for far too many years, she couldn't intimidate him if she tried. Unsettle, yes. Intimidate, no.

"Alex," she started. "Within the context of our marriage, and contractual obligations, more specifically, forsaking all others, i.e. with reference to fidelity. Do we have any secrets from one another?"

"What would make you ask that question? Why now? At this time?" This was an Alex Goldstone standard *stall* response, he would have replied the same to any question. If she had said, can I borrow your car? He would have made exactly the same answer.

"We are coming up to twenty years." She forced a weak smile. "I don't know, it's just been playing on my mind recently."

Alex knew her reply to be a lie. Questions like this didn't ever just pop into his wife's head. There was more to it. Mainly for reasons of expedience, he decided to force a more appropriate question, after which he would let her cut to the chase.

"Define in your own terms, the exact period of time you refer to as, our marriage?" He made eye contact with his wife, almost as if he were mocking her.

She leaned forward, Claire Goldstone didn't like to be mocked. "From the time you said, *I do*, right up until this moment, right here." She slapped her palm down onto the mahogany surface of the table. The bang coinciding with the last word of her sentence.

Alex didn't like his wife to be upset but unnecessary lies were, well, unnecessary. He would tell the truth. "Yes," he replied.

Claire, shocked, open her mouth, but was initially stuck for words. Unbalanced, not by the content of his simplistic answer, but by the ease, the manner in which, he readily offered the information. "Adele?" she questioned.

"Yes," he replied, clasping his hands before him on the table. Claire was not an emotional little girl, she'd always suspected that her husband and her best friend had a sexual relationship. After meeting Hayden, she of course knew what had gone on. Hayden was physical evidence. Claire didn't need confirmation of his infidelity. She was after other, more important information. "How long did the affair go on for?" She pressed him in a strangely nonchalant manner.

Alex showed no signs of remorse or regret. "I've no idea, an hour or two, maybe," he replied whimsically.

This answer pleased Mrs Goldstone, she knew he wasn't lying. It was a fact, eighteen years ago, she had left - him. Alex and Adele did not cheat. She had not been betrayed. The two of them had not only, her written permission, but they also had her genuine and heartfelt blessing. The judge let out a sigh of relief. What exactly did an hour or two, mean? She thought they'd had an affair for the month or so she had been away. Claire withdrew, she had no right to question him further on this matter. Her husband, did however, continue and provide her with some sort of explanation.

"I can't really explain it, I don't have the words." Alex leaned back, he looked tired and distant as his mind carried him back to those times. "Either the truth is a beautiful thing, or the truth will set you free. I've never been sure exactly which it is. Would you like to know the truth, Claire?" He did not wait for her answer for he knew that she would not provide one. "My wife had left me. On that self-same day, I received confirmation of my brother's death. Okay, I knew he was dead all along, but it became official. I felt guilty. The police asked me to identify a body, I was next of kin. I was so relieved when I saw my own brother's corpse on that slab. The journey to the morgue pained me. I believed it was your body I was needed to identify."

His wife's eyes dropped.

Alex leaned forward, clasped his hands together and continued. "I can't describe the place that went to, words in the English language cannot describe it. You'd need to be a professor of quantum physics, to at least, in part, understand where I was. I was standing at the edge of an abyss, alone in darkness. Wife gone, brother gone. What was the fucking point? Adele, I don't know, I'm not sure. She gave me *something*. Just like that, there was hope and light, and a lot of other positive feelings. In my deepest thoughts, I truly believe, whatever she gave me, it cost her. She was never the same after that night."

Claire gave her husband a sympathetic but questioning look.

Alex caressed the rim of his glass. "She just changed, one day she was up, next she was down. Then you came back, you were what I wanted." He reached out and took her hand. "Believe it or not, you and I together, that's what she wanted too. One day, without warning, she left and returned to her parents in France. A year later she was married. A totally different Adele came to visit us. I'd taken something away from her." Alex seemed really down, staring down at the table, engulfed by a deep sadness not synonymous with his usual demeanour.

Claire, content, encased his hand with her own. He had no case to answer, he had not cheated, nor was he aware of the consequences of their actions. Adele had never told him.

"Mr Bullseye," she announced before taking a sip of wine. She then lowered her head, right down onto the surface of the table to catch his view. "The truth, will set you free, and yes, the truth can be,

a beautiful, truly wonderful thing. Let me ease your mind, set you free, as it were."

His eyes, changed direction and focus to meet hers.

She placed a hand under his chin and lifted his head. "You didn't take anything from Adele, quite the reverse, she took something from you. As for a beautiful thing? If life is beauty, then the truth is also. Adele had your son." Claire already had plenty of time to digest and process the information she had imparted. Several days had passed since she'd met and talked with Hayden.

"What the . . ." Alex sat bolt upright.

"Ironically, remember that lad who they said tried to take a shot at me?"

"What about him?"

"Must run in the family. I remember when we first met you liked to draw your weapon – regularly."

"You're kidding me, right?"

Naturally, Alex had a million questions. Claire tried her best to answer them. Three bottles of wine later, with the dawn chorus sounding, she'd gotten through most of his initial questions.

Alex had no choice in the matter, his wife had accepted this potentially relationship threatening news with such grace and consideration. Claire had already decided the way forward. Hayden, intimated he would look for his father after he'd first finished university. The couple were to observe his wishes. The Goldstone's would manage his luck. Already, Claire had engineered his eviction from the shared student house in which he lived. As luck would have it, Hayden met a woman at university, a tutor's acquaintance. Her brother was apparently going to Australia for two years, she needed to rent out his apartment, it wasn't about the money. She needed somebody who would, in exchange for a nominal rent, teach French to her daughter. Hayden grew up in France. How lucky was that?

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the student bar, Leanne, Georgia's room mate, was about to pull. The guy ordered drinks, for himself, Georgia and Leanne.

"Three more of those moon cocktails please, yeah that dark green stuff."

"Cheers." Leanne laughed, linking his arm. "You're one cool cat, you know that."

Georgia, wasn't really paying attention. She'd spotted, and was eyeing a man across the other side of the room.

"Hey, I gave you a twenty!" The man with Leanne, called to the barmaid. "What? Are you trying to fiddle me!"

"Sorry." The girl, realised her mistake and corrected the error.

"We're gonna have a dance, have some fun, back in bit." Leanne shouted to Georgia as she led her new found love interest to the dance-floor.

"You cow!" Georgia giggled, still watching the guy on the other side of the room. "Drag me, to this bar and leave me on my own. Why don't you?" Leanne stopped, and followed Georgia's gaze.

"You little dog!" said Leanne. "I see what you're looking at. Cor! He's a bit of a dish, isn't he! I bet you all of next week's ironing, you can't pull him, tonight."

"The guy's as sweet as pie. Get me a spoon, girl. I just wanna eat this one up." Georgia, grinned and headed in off the man's direction.

"Hey," Georgia tapped Hayden on the shoulder. He turned to look at her. In that moment, for them, the music stopped, everyone and everything seemed insignificant. Both parties believed this was a moment of poetry. The realisation that all the writings pertaining to love, and soul mates were true. Not even a thought was spared, for Beebee's coat in the cloak room, they left the club together. In Oxford's city centre, they walked the streets until the early hours of the morning. Beebee stood behind him as he put his key into his door, she felt a little apprehensive. There was a solid metallic clunk, as the catch released, he gestured for her to follow him in. She held a finger up, indicated he should wait, her phone was ringing.

In Oakland, California, it was late in the evening. Daniella Goldstone felt uncomfortable. She had a strong feeling, something bad was about to happen, a feeling of impending doom she had experienced in her life before. Concerned, she made her way upstairs to check her family. Her son was in his room, on his computer, she hugged him and told him not to make his eyes go square. She took a breath, before entering her daughter's bedroom, Kayla, was asleep, her mother was relieved to see the rise and fall of the covers in time with the child's breathing. Daniella, silently walked to the bedside and felt her daughter's forehead with the back of her hand. Kayla, was fine, both her children were fine. She took out her telephone and rang her husband.

"Hey, honey," she spoke with false confidence. "Everything okay in the bar?" It was rare that she called Morgan at work, she didn't want others to think that she was checking up on him.

"Yeah," he replied "Everything's cool here. Why wouldn't it be?" The fact that his wife never called him at work jumped to the fore of his mind. "What's going on there?"

"Don't worry," she reassured him. "Everything is fine here baby. I just had a funny feeling, that's all. Is nothing really, I'll let you get on with it."

"I know about your, funny feelings. Trust me, if you've had a funny feeling. I'm not leaving the office." Morgan said jokily, but Morgan was not joking. Daniella's, funny feelings, always needed to be heeded. Daniella, ended the call and squinted slightly, as if trying to tune into some intergalactic frequency. She rang Beebee.

"Auntie Daniella," her niece answered the phone. "What a surprise!"

"What are you up to?" Daniella asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, you know how it goes, working hard. Actually," She faked a yawn and smiled at Hayden while looking him up and down. "I was just going to bed, it must be like, four in the morning."

"As long as you are okay. Just be careful." Daniella, knew she was up to something. "Okay, I'll call you tomorrow, during the day. Go to sleep."

The student closed her phone. "My auntie." She shrugged her shoulders. "Strange woman," she said, returning her phone to her

pocket, wondering what the call had really been about. "Back to the task at hand," she exclaimed, pushing Hayden inside his apartment and kicking the door shut.

Daniella, flicked through her phone book, found the number and rang Claire.

In her bed at home in England, Claire answered the call, before the ringing disturbed Alex. "Morgan, Alex is sleeping right now." She answered, seeing Morgan's name on the caller display.

"No, is Daniella. Is everything okay over there?"

"Daniella." Claire rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, everything is fine." Her eyes focused on the clock by the bed. "At four o'clock in the morning. Are you okay?"

"No, is bad," replied Daniella with certainty. "Something somewhere, is very wrong." Daniella was famed in the family for her premonitions and spiritual intuitiveness. If Daniella Goldstone called you at four in the morning and said something was wrong, you were a fool to ignore her.

Taking care not to wake her husband, phone in hand, Claire, slid out of bed and checked on her own children. "Everything is fine here," She whispered to Daniella as she made her way downstairs to the kitchen. Chatting away, she reached into the cupboard for a glass. The glass slipped from her grasp, bounced on the marble worktop and skilfully, but foolishly, Claire, caught the glass before it hit the floor. "Shit!" she cursed, tossing the broken glass into the sink.

"Claire! Are you okay? Are you still there?"

"I'm here, I'm fine. I've just stupidly cut my hand on a glass," said Claire, examining the palm of her hand. A three-inch gash ran north-west to south-east.

"Are you sure that you are okay?" repeated the Hispanic woman.

"Yeah, it's fine It's just a little cut." Claire wedged the telephone in between her shoulder and her cheek. She squeezed her cut hand with the other. "It doesn't seem right, it's not even bleeding, there's no blood. This just seems wrong."

"Listen, I'll let you sort yourself out, I'll call you at the weekend." Daniella left the conversation.

Claire ran her hand under tap, she wasn't sure why, but there was no bleeding. The phone rang again. Who else could be ringing at this time? With her good hand, she answered the phone.

"Where is Hayden at university?" Daniella asked, forgoing any pleasantries.

"He's at one of the Oxford universities, why?" Claire rolled her eyes in exasperation, wondering why this information was of such importance, at this time in the morning.

"Fark!" Exclaimed Daniella, "He is with Georgia, they must be stopped."

"And you get this information, from where?" Claire couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You cut your hand, yes."

"Yes."

"Is bad? No."

"No, er, yes. It's pretty deep."

"No blood?"

"No, no blood."

"Then, they are together. Is a bad thing, but there is no blood. If Hayden and Beebee, were together, it would be bad, they are not your blood relations, even so, I think it would still be very bad. They are blood relations to each other, remember, Beebee is Strauss' daughter, not my husband's"

"They were bound to meet up at sometime, so what if they are together." The word, together, echoed in Claire's head the second it had left her mouth. "You don't mean together, together, do you?"

"Claire, is the early hours of the morning. Why else would we be having this conversation?"

CHAPTER NINE

Beebee, pushed Hayden against the worktop in his kitchen, placing both her arms around his neck. The kettle had boiled but neither noticed, neither cared. The moment of their first kiss loomed large, imminent. Hayden, moved his lips towards hers, but at the last moment, Beebee moved her head back. She smiled at him, took his hand and lead him into the bedroom.

It is said, traffic police are the bottom of the food chain, each and every one of them suffers from delusions of grandeur. Claire sighed and cursed as she pulled her Mercedes over and lowered the window.

"Do you mind stepping out of the vehicle madam," the officer asked through the open window.

Claire looked at the miserable rain behind him, and the spray generated by the passing vehicles. "Yes." she replied.

The officer stood back from the car, waiting.

Claire, looked in her vanity mirror, trying to do something with her hair, using just her fingers.

"Come on, I haven't got all night," said the officer.

Claire frowned. "You specifically asked me if I minded stepping out of the vehicle. I stated quite clearly, that I did mind."

"Madam, you are required to step out of the vehicle." The police officer's voice contained an edge of controlled aggression.

"I assure you, you are quite wrong. I am not required to leave the vehicle, you may however, get in." She removed her handbag from the passenger seat.

The police officer opened the passenger door and sat in the seat beside her. The pen and the little ticket pad came out. As he put pen to paper, his radio spoke to him.

"The keeper of vehicle registration mark JCB 8A8Y is Judge Claire Bristol."

The officer stopped, as if frozen. Claire, sighed again whilst restarting the engine. "Get out," she said, calmly leaning across him and pushing the door open.

When Hayden returned from the bathroom in his boxers, Beebee, was already naked in his bed. She shuffled over to one side to make room for him. She tapped the empty portion of the bed-sheet, beckoning him with a single finger. Her generous suggest smile told him to 'come and get it'. Okay, she had made a mistake, he was not Adonis. He was not Mr Right but sex was sex, and he looked like he could be quite good at it.

Hayden slid into bed and slipped his boxer shorts off. For some reason the sense of urgency left the situation. This woman was certainly potentially partner material, the type of girl he could take her to meet his mother, if he had one. There was plenty there to be going on with but he feared the chemistry would not go bang. However, all components were in place. There was a girl, naked in his bed, and there was nothing on the telly. Get the deed over and done with, then get some sleep.

Beebee was becoming impatient, she rolled over and kneeled astride him. Slowly she bowed her head and kissed him, the kiss felt awkward. She hoped he was better at actual sex than he was at kissing.

As far Hayden was concerned, her kiss lacked passion, but he was confident that she would get up to speed in that department, over time.

Beebee's enthusiasm was waning – fast, nevertheless she started to lower herself on to him, but Hayden wasn't comfortable relinquishing control, not this early in proceedings. In a deft manoeuvre, Hayden grasped both of Beebee's shoulders, wrapping his left leg around her right leg, inside to out, he swivelled the pair of them around, one hundred and eighty degrees. Now he was atop of her, his hips, between her thighs. She chuckled, a bassy, pornographically dirty sort of chuckle. He lowered himself the point where he was about to enter her.

"What is your surname?" he asked. Under the circumstances, it was a stupid question, now was not the time for small talk and pleasantries.

Beebee frowned. "Goldstone." She raised her head up to kiss him. "This is not the time to be having this conversation."

"As in US judge, legalise cannabis, Georgia Goldstone." He pulled his face out of her reach.

"Yes," she replied, pushing him away.

Hayden rolled off, and lay beside her, on his back. "Fuck."

Beebee's brief moment of annoyance left. She rolled onto her side, resting her cheek in her palm and her elbow on the pillow. "Georgia Goldstone, is my auntie, actually my name's Georgia too. I suppose because my auntie was always around, they couldn't have two Georgia's, so they call me Beebee."

"But why, Beebee?" His eyes focused on hers, never once straying to her fully exposed body.

"I don't really know, I've always assumed it's a variation on the word, baby."

"I've been studying your auntie at uni. Her views are becoming popular on an international scale."

"They're not original, they came from somebody else, my other auntie, she didn't steal them or anything."

"In England, judge Claire Bristol, hang on a minute, she's your aunt too. This is just so weird." Hayden screwed up his face.

"No, it's not weird, Claire's my auntie, she married my Uncle Alex, she's Claire Goldstone. What's weird about that?"

"Alex Goldstone, from Goldstone stud. They're huge over here."

"And in the US, I worked for my Uncle in the stables in Oakland."

"You're like some sort of 'Golden child', well in with the judiciary and the international mafia of the racing world. Charmed life, or what?" Hayden jumped out of bed, pulled his boxer shorts back on, took a shirt out of his draw, he smelled it before throwing it to her. "I've met Judge Bristol. She got me out a situation a few years back, although her intervention was unnecessary. Stupid trumped up charges. I could have handled it. To this day, I don't understand why

she did it. What was in it for her? Hold on, but Claire Goldstone's white and Georgia Goldstone is black."

"And I'm brown, you're brown. What's your point?" A muffled Georgia spoke as she pulled his shirt over her head.

Hayden chewed on his tongue, putting circumstantial information together and coming up with the strangest of conclusions. "My mother used to call me Beebee, when I was a baby," he said sheepishly. "Beebee, because I was her brown baby, acronym."

Georgia's phone rang. As she reached over for her jeans, to retrieve the phone from her pocket, Hayden's phone began to ring. Georgia's phone, displayed the name 'Auntie Daniella', she rolled her eyes and rejected the call. Hayden studied his phone's display he didn't recognise the number calling him. To add to the confusion, there was a knock at the front door. The students panicked, rushing around, trying to put on some sort of decent attire. Whoever was outside, became impatient. The door knocked again, this time, with greater intensity, three heavy bangs put the fear of God into them. Georgia, hid in the bedroom, whilst, Hayden, phone in hand, answered the door.

"Judge Bristol." The surprise caused Hayden's voice to rise in pitch. "What brings you here, this early in the morning. Come to think of it. How do you know where I live?"

"None of that is import right now," Claire replied glibly, snapping her phone shut. His phone, stopped ringing.

She looked him in the eye. "I'm looking for my niece, Georgia. Where is she?"

"I don't know your niece," objected Hayden, first looking her phone, then his own. "Why would you think that she was here? And how the fuck do you know my telephone number?" He asked, eyeing her.

Claire returned a colder, harder stare. "Why didn't you answer your phone? What took you so long to answer the phone? What were you doing? Why are you dressed like your mother never taught you how?" Claire realised the insensitivity of her last question and held her hand up to apologise.

He didn't understand her gesture. "None of this is really any of your business. Again! How did you get my phone number?" Hayden

attempted to return her stare but she was far too experienced for him. Her smirk said, don't even try it. He lowered his eyes.

Claire stepped into the apartment. "If my niece has been here, you could be in serious trouble young man!" She wagged her finger at him in a motherly fashion. She placed a hand on each of her temples, as if performing some form of telepathy. As Claire turned and placed her hand on the door handle as if to leave, Daniella rang Georgia's telephone again. In the bedroom, Georgia, tried to turn her phone off, but it was too late, Claire had heard it ring. "Fuck!"

Claire let go of the door-handle "I suppose you are going to tell me that you have two telephones, are you?" she demanded, hand on hip. "Hayden West, you are playing with fire. Tell me who's in there?"

"You may be a judge, but you're not my mother, you can't come here, to my house, and tell me what to do!" Hayden barred her path.

"Beebee! You come out here, right now. Do you hear me?" Called Claire over his shoulder.

The bedroom door opened, Georgia crept out. "Auntie Claire. How the devil are you? What a pleasant surprise!" she said, a cheeky grin on her face.

"If you've touched her." The judge waved a furious finger at Hayden as she moved towards him.

"Nothing happened Auntie, honest. I swear to God." Georgia stepped between the pair of them.

"I don't believe you, Beebee, I'm going to have to send you home to the US, you can't stay here now. One day you will understand, and maybe even thank me."

Initially, Claire's bitter tone arrested Georgia. Georgia took a deep breath and found a little spark of defiance, she raised her head and looked at her aunt. "My name's Georgia. Call me Georgia, not Beebee, my auntie is not here right now. You can't send me home, I'm twenty-one years old, dammit. I've told you, nothing happened and I'm not lying. Why would lie? I don't need to lie. If something had happened, it's of no importance, and it wouldn't concern you, we would be both consenting adults, anyway, nothing happened."

"If you stay here, what will you do for money?" Claire looked her up and down.

"I already get the rent money from the house in London. I can get a job, like other people do. If all else fails, there's always Auntie Helen, she'll look after me," she threatened.

Claire's face said she didn't appreciate Georgia's tone. "Helen is a woman on the edge. She has not been the same since your father died. If you start bothering she is likely to lose the few marbles she has left. Leave her in peace."

Hayden intervened. "Can somebody here, please tell me what the problem here is! I don't get it. Like she said, nothing happened!" Claire looked at the pair of them in turn. Both were at the end of the third year for anyway. They were right, they were both adults. "I suppose you youngsters should sit down," the judge suggested. Hayden propped himself, arms folded, against the edge of the dining table. Georgia sat on the arm of a chair, her phone rang again. She held it in the palm of her hand. "I really need to get this, it's Auntie Daniella, it's the third time she's rang."

Claire beckoned for Georgia to pass her the telephone. "Dani, I think everything is okay. I'm sorting it out this second as we speak. I'll call you when I'm finished."

"Please," replied Daniella, she hung up. There was no point in pursuing the conversation further.

"Hayden," Claire began. "I am surprised one as bright as yourself hasn't worked things out a long time ago. Three questions. What's my name? What do I do for a living? Where do I live?"

"Claire Goldstone or Bristol, depending on who you talk to, you are a judge, and I have no idea where you live." Hayden replied, without really thinking.

"Tell me three things, about your mother's best friend." She continued.

Hayden began to rattle off his answer. "She's married to my dad, her name's Claire. . ." Hayden lips continued to move but sound stopped coming from his mouth.

"That's right," said Claire. "My husband is your father." Hayden gasped.

Claire turned to Georgia. "And how are we related?"

"You're my Auntie, according to Daniella. You're my real Dad's brother's wife," replied Georgia, a puzzled expression on her face.

"And Hayden, if you please. Where does that leave you two?" Claire asked, straight-faced.

Hayden stared into space, the cogs of his brain turning slowly, digesting and computing all the information.

"We are cousins," he said, before turning to Georgia in an apparent state of shock.

"God, I think I am going to be sick." Georgia ran to the bathroom.

Claire cursed, proof of the extreme nature of the situation. Claire Goldstone never used foul or abusive language. Today was the exception to what was an almost lifelong rule. She hadn't even cursed under the pain of childbirth. "I thought you said nothing had happened."

"Nothing did," replied Hayden, swallowing hard. "We did however, redefine the word, close."

"How close is close?" asked Claire, a squint in her eye.

"You really don't want to know," replied Hayden, still in shock. He held his hand up, his thumb and his index finger as close as he could get them without touching.

Claire wasn't looking "I don't think so. No, I don't want details." She shook her head. "Actually, I really need to wash my face. Do you mind?" Claire made to push open the bedroom door.

Hayden snapped out of his shock. "Judge! Georgia's in the bathroom. . . How do you know there's an en suite through there?"

Claire paused in the doorway. "Hayden." She smiled. "Think of all the good fortune you've been blessed with over the past three years. Your father and I bought this flat for you to live in whilst at university. And I know your phone number because I bought it. Free upgrade my arse." She closed the door.

Hayden sat thinking, he realised how many things had changed since the incident with the gun in the courtroom. How could he have been so blind. It was scary, how they had just reached into his life and made adjustments.

Georgia returned from the bathroom, she seemed drained, and a little lost. She and Hayden, looked at each other for a few seconds. At first, Georgia felt ashamed. Hayden stared into space. Georgia took a moment whilst she thought things through, very

quickly her attitude changed, no longer did she feel any shame. It dawned on her, she was the most senior of the next generation, she should take charge.

"Boy that was close." She smiled at her cousin.

"Tell me about it." Hayden smiled back, nervously.

"Don't worry." She walked over and slapped him on the back. "We did the right thing. We didn't actually need auntie Claire. We had decided it was wrong, way before she turned up. I don't know if you felt it too but from the moment we kissed. It felt all wrong." Hayden took a deep breath. He looked at his cousin, deciding whatever he said wouldn't really offend her. "That was the worst kiss ever! It was like, well, it was like kissing my sister. Not that I have a sister, but if I had a sister, you get me?"

"I getcha." She smiled. "Cousin, sister, whatever!"

"Did I hear my name being mentioned." The judge returned from the bathroom.

"Claire." Georgia deemed it necessary to drop the, auntie, prefix for what she was about to say. "I'll admit it, we all most got well, funky."

"Funky?" echoed Claire.

"Yeah, funky!" Georgia couldn't help but grin. "We were both up for it, we kissed, but then it felt wrong, so we quit. Before you ever got here or Daniella ever rang. It wasn't going to happen. Frankly, I want this whole episode stricken from the record, as you lot say. I don't want no, kissin' cousin jokes to plague me for the rest of my life."

Claire looked at the two of them in turn. "Do you have weekend plans?" She pointed her finger, alternating between the students. Hayden shook his head.

"We were. . ." started Georgia

Claire cut her off, "serious plans that you cannot cancel or rearrange?"

"No," replied Georgia.

"Okay, there is no time like the present. Georgia, did you drive here?"

"No, I didn't. I only live about a mile away."

"Nevertheless, take my car, get some bits together, you're coming with me." She threw her niece the keys. "Hayden, it's

probably time that you met your father." She looked him up and down. "You need to eat more," she added. "Do you have any actual food here?" Claire was reminded of the first time she went to Hayden's father's place, she had said exactly the same thing. Hayden was his father's son. Contrary to her suspicions he had a fridge full of fresh fruit and vegetables. Yes, like his father's fridge, all those years before, it contained a substantial quantity of beer. Claire felt motherly, she had a new baby, two in fact. Claire knew Georgia was a bit of a minimalist, she wouldn't take very long. She took ownership of the kitchen, and cooked the three of them breakfast.

Beebee stopped short of putting the last fork-full of scrambled egg into her mouth. "So, we are the true heirs, now officially recognised as members of the Goldstone dynasty." Hayden cast his fork onto his empty plate. "Or the hidden bastards of the dead."

Beebee flicked up her eyebrows. "El niños muerto ha vuelto de nuevo."

"The dead baby has returned," he translated.

"Dead babies, babies of the dead. It's all the same to me." She stood up and took his plate.

Whilst the cousins cleared the table, Claire made a call. "Alex, I'll be home in a couple of hours. . . There will be two extra for lunch. . . I'll explain when I get there."

CHAPTER TEN

Sarratt, Hertfordshire, England

Hayden stretched, fully extending his arms and legs, leaning back in his chair on the terrace, stuffed with a belly full of barbecued chicken. Beebee sat next to him, laughing taking things her in her stride, but she wasn't faced with the same situation as her cousin. Yesterday morning, Hayden started the day, an orphan, all alone in the world. Today, he was sitting down to lunch with his newly acquired family. Alex Goldstone was his real father, he'd inherited a 14-year old brother, Mark, a 12 year-old little sister, Kimmy. He was the step-son of the infamous Judge Bristol. Brooke, he supposed was his Aunt. Then, there was the cousin he'd just recently contemplated sex with.

Hayden watched Brooke whilst picking meat out from between his teeth using a cocktail stick. He'd an unhealthy attraction to her. The realisation, the single mother, was his aunt meant he'd have to get over his crush. He'd experienced her voice first, she'd been the solicitor who'd first called him in prison. Then she'd played the mysterious woman with the flat to let in exchange for French lessons for her children. He shook his head and looked away. In retrospect, so much was obvious. "So, Dad, will I ever get used to calling you that? You always been a racing fan?"

"I'm no fan. I can't even ride a horse. Hate the damn things. It was your mother's and her best friend's fault. Things just got out of hand."

"How so?"

"Long story, the Americans, they had a man, Martin Luther King, I think that was his name, or was it Malcolm X, I always get confused between the two. The point is, they had somebody, a person who tried to unify the African Americans. Somebody, the people could rally behind, a leader if you like. What did we here in Britain have? I'll tell you, we had a horse."

Hayden laughed. Beebee looked confused.

"Don't laugh, yes, a horse, it's true." Alex shifted in his seat to face Hayden. "A long time ago, before, when your mother was still alive. I bought my wife a horse. The horse, named Absolution, won its first race on her birthday."

"This is making sense now. So Absolution was the daddy of them all?" asked Beebee.

"Yes," replied Claire.

Alex leaned forward in his seat. He glanced at his wife. "I secretly bought her a very good horse and entered it into a particularly bad race. The idea was, we'd only just married, so when the horse won, it would be announced over the public address system. . . First number four, ridden by, whoever, owned by Mrs C Goldstone. It would then dawn on my princess, she owned the horse."

"Uncle, you're such a sweetie," said Beebee.

"He has his moments." Claire reached over and rubbed the back of her husband's hand.

Alex continued. "Before, we get back, close to point. I need to explain, this was at the time when we owned a bar, also named Absolution. The bar was, in the main, frequented by members of the black community. I told your mother." He looked over to Hayden. "About my plan for Claire's birthday. The conversation was overheard by Miss Miranda 'gossip' Stephenson, the barmaid. She told the world, his wife and his dog!" He paused to sip his lager. "On the day of the race, half of the black community in South London bet their hard earned cash on Asbo. I also, need to explain, the mentality of these people. Claire's married to a black man, therefore, he owned her and her possessions."

Claire slapped his leg.

"The upshot of this mentality. Absolution was a horse, owned by a black man, one of them, a cause worthy of their support. The horse won, they cleaned up. South London bookmakers lost thousands. On his second start, the local community wagered indecent amounts of money on him, the horse, duly obliged, and made them all richer."

"Then there was that listed race, The March Stakes, I never dreamed he'd win that." As the church bells sounded 3 o'clock Claire instinctively checked her watch.

"That's right," said Alex. "At the third time of asking, the horse was set a much stiffer task, the people however, kept the faith. Absolution landed the odds, again. The horse became a local hero. No longer was it about the money. These people felt that this was their horse, Absolution was the people's horse. When the horse went missing, feared kidnapped. The people left no stone unturned, nor avenue unexplored in the search for him. In their minds, Absolution had achieved legendary status and ever since that time the people have followed the Goldstone stables."

"And it all started from a birthday present?" asked Hayden.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Claire. "Adele's horse, Plaything, kept up the tradition with a win in a Nursery race. The community were not overly concerned as to the quality of the race, a winner was a winner. More recently, Absolution's last foal was their champion. The dam, Cryogenic. . ." She looked at her husband, and slapped his leg again.

"What's all that about?" asked Hayden.

"At school they gave me 'Ice Queen' as a nickname. Alex decided I was even colder than that. He called me cryogenic. That's how the horse ended up with that name. Then, as is good naming convention, the foal was named Absolute Zero."

Hayden decided, maybe he did have room for one more piece of chicken. He stretched across the table, knocking over a jug of Pimms in the process, emptying the contents into Brooke's lap. Brooke jumped up. "You. . . Arrgh," she let out a piercing shriek, then stumbled. A patch of blood appeared on the shoulder of her blouse and expanded rapidly, turning the white cotton to red.

The man in the clump of trees had his concentration broken by the church bells sounding 3 o'clock. "Fucking English," he mumbled as he studied the photograph in his gloved hand. The woman was fairly attractive, she'd not hidden the fact that nature had begun to highlight her blonde curls with grey. He tucked the photograph back into his breast pocket.

Laying flat on his stomach, smoking a cigarette, he watched the people chatting on the other side of the field on their terrace,

eating and drinking. The barbecue was over, he loved barbecue. His stomach rumbled. He licked his lips and discarded his cigarette.

Scanning left to right, facing him; a mixed-race male, well-built, early twenties. A mixed-race girl, similar age, pretty, very animated. A black male, late forties, temples greying. Next to him, the woman in the photograph. The three with their backs to him; two teenagers, one boy, one girl, mixed-race, either side of another woman, probably European, her bra showed through her cotton blouse.

The woman in the photograph leaned across to the black man. Play-fighting? She was laughing. She sat up straight. Distance? Two hundred metres, maybe. The mixed race man stretched across the table, and then fell back into his seat.

Presented with a clear site of the target, he took his opportunity. "Mange du merde et meurt, pute!" he mumbled as he pulled the trigger and felt the recoil just as the woman in the white cotton blouse stood up. Frustrated, he briefly squeezed his eyes shut. "Fuck! Merde!" he cursed, gathered up his bag, took his rifle and walked quickly back to his car.

"What the fuck?" Hayden caught Brooke before she fell.

"Everybody! In the house! Now!" ordered Alex, signalling to the others to keep low.

"Dad, look." Mark pointed out over the fields.

"What?" His father dragged him to the ground.

"I see it," said Hayden, "There's a car on the other side of the hedge, to the left of the trees."

"Mark, go for the one-o-seven, hurry," snapped Alex, rising to his feet and walking out into the garden.

Mark disappeared into the house. Alex grabbed some dry grass from a brown patch in the lawn and tossed it into the air.

Mark returned with the rifle. "Dad."

Alex took the weapon, checked it was loaded, and turned almost ninety degrees to the left of where they'd seen the car. He took aim at the gate where there was a gap in the hedgerow. Hayden moved closer to him. Alex stood perfectly still, his sights on the gate. Hayden

picked up the glint of the sun on the metallic car through the hedge. His eyes narrowed. "Approaching - three-hundred metres."

Alex wiggled the fingers on his right hand to relieve any nervous tension, before bringing them to meet the trigger.

"Two hundred metres," Hayden said calmly.

Alex stood firm, concentrating, not acknowledging the information.

Hayden remained as still as his father. "One-hundred metres." Only his lips moved.

Alex's finger applied slight pressure to the trigger.

"Fifty," said Hayden.

Alex exhaled slowly. The moment the Land Rover appeared at the gate, he squeezed the trigger. Two fields over, the horses bolted down to the far end of the field.

Hayden watched the car continue on its way behind the hedge. "Fuck it. You missed."

Alex, rifle in hand, walked quickly towards the gate. Hayden ran to catch up with him, opening his mouth to speak but stopping when heard the crash of the vehicle hitting a tree. He smiled whilst shaking his head. "Were you a sniper in the army or something?"

"No."

"That was awesome."

"No. It was, necessary."

"It's gone straight through," said Claire, examining Brooke's wound. She reached out and pulled Beebee over. "Apply pressure here." She pressed Beebee's hand against Brooke's shoulder. "Do you think it was an accident? Where were they shooting from?"

"The Grassy Knoll?" said Beebee.

"What?"

"You know when they're assassinating somebody, there has to be a grass knoll involved."

"Beebee, this is not the time." Claire said sternly. "I don't think anybody was deliberately trying to kill Brooke."

"Just tryin' a make light, sorry."

Brooke sat on the kitchen floor leaning against the cupboards, a trail of her blood led to the conservatory. She managed a weak smile. "What shall I wear, that's what I asked myself this morning. It

was either this." She tugged at her blood-soaked blouse. "Or the bullet-proof. Guess I made the wrong choice, huh?"

"Guess so," agreed Beebee.

"Fuck, this hurts."

"Kimmy, can you bring me that bottle of brandy, over there." Beebee pointed.

"Does that actually work?" asked Brooke.

"It's not for you, it's for me, dammit." Beebee replied.

The girl brought over the bottle. Beebee stretched over a reached three glasses with her free hand, pulled the top out of the bottle using her teeth while looking to Claire. Claire shook her head. Beebee poured two glasses. Kimmy began to cry.

"Kimmy, come here baby, don't cry." Brooke reached out to the little girl. "Come, keep Brookie company." She pulled Kim down to sit next to her.

Claire called for an ambulance. While waiting for the phone to connect she turned, stopped and held her breath. She shuddered at the sound of the single shot from the high-powered rifle. Although not of any faith she made the sign of cross across her chest and bowed her head. The sound of a single projectile differed from the shotguns used by the farmers, echoing in the rural afternoon sky. Through the conservatory glass wall she watched her husband lower the rifle and stride away. Just the one shot, she closed her eyes in resignation - Alex never ever missed. She pursed her lips, in all probability, somebody was dead. "Ambulance service please. . . Yes, we seem to have had a nasty accident, a gunshot wound. . . Good heavens no, nothing like that. . . Hunting." She chuckled. "No, no need for the police. . ."

The metallic gold Land Rover had come to rest beside a tree, having first broken through the hedgerow on the other side of the lane. The nearside wheels hovered in the air where the ground fell away to the ditch. Alex raised his rifle as he approached. "He's gone."

"He didn't get far," said Hayden pointing through the steam rising from the radiator, to a body laying face down on the other side of the ditch.

"Seems not," said Alex, weapon raised, as both men approached the body.

Hayden rolled the body over with his foot, and quickly turned away. The bullet had entered the skull through the side and exited via an eye socket. Alex pushed the head with his rifle butt so as the bloodied side of the face met with the dirt. He crouched down and started rummaging through the pockets. "Search the car," he called to Hayden before taking out his phone.

"What about fingerprints?"

"Don't worry about it," he replied as he dialled. "Richie, I've got a mess over at my place, I need it cleaning up, quick-time. . ."

"Just this rifle, and this bag. Not much in the bag apart from a box of shells, bullets, whatever you call them," said the returning Hayden.

Alex took the rifle. "SV-98. Brook was lucky. He's an amateur. He was never going to do too much damage from that kind of range with a silencer on." He returned it to Hayden. "Well all I found was a phone, a pack of cigarettes, some cash, and a photo of Claire," said Alex. "No ID. Here, put them in the bag. Let's get the Land Rover out of sight, into the garage."

Hayden moved closer to the body. "He looks like my Dad, well, step-dad, but he's dead." He crouched and moved some hair away from the face. "Fuck! It is." He jumped back. "It's Jacques."