

# Everything to Nothing

## Part 2

A novel by Mark Henthorne.

Sequel coming soon!

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## Chapter 58

‘Scarface! Scarface! Your mum is a scarface!’

I will never forget the first time I heard that word. I was nine years old and I heard the chanting coming from the other side of a wall in the playground during a break time at school. I could also hear somebody whimpering and after living with my twin for nine years I knew every emotion and sound that she made.

I ran around the wall and there was Sophia with her head in her hands, surrounded by a group of girls, while the girls chanted that word at her over and over again.

I did not care that my mum and grandad had brought me up to not hit girls, my twin was in trouble and she needed me.

With fists flying I made my way through the group. One of my punches caught one of the girls on her nose. I will never forget the look of surprise when my knuckles smashed into her face, stunned silence followed by screaming as the blood started to flow. I threw another couple of punches at the girls standing closest to Sophia and then she was in my arms with her face buried in my chest.

Every one of the girls was now screaming and crying so of course it did not take long for a teacher to arrive on the scene.

The girls, the bullies, were consoled by the teachers and of course it was Sophia and I who were in trouble. With no independent witnesses, it was the bullies’ word against mine and Sophia’s, and the fact that I had beaten up some of the teachers’ most precious, golden pupils did not hold me in good stead.

‘But they were bullying her!’

‘Well you shouldn’t hit girls!’

This teacher had always hated me and it was just my luck that it was her who found us all first. ‘They were calling my mum scarface!’

‘I cannot believe for one second that Chastity and Mimi were saying such horrible things.’

I remember Chastity and Mimi were her particular favourites. I mean, really, who the hell names their kid Chastity?! ‘They were! Why don’t you believe me?!’

‘I don’t believe you because you’ve been nothing but bother since you started in this school. Why doesn’t your nice grandad send you to a private school?’ She smiled sweetly at me after she said that and then it all fell into place.

I knew my family were different from other families. Whenever I was invited to birthday parties they were always in small houses, where the dad drove a normal car and the house did not have twenty or thirty unused bedrooms. Where the kid whose birthday it was got excited that they got a new colouring book as a present. For my last birthday one of the unused bedrooms became a storage room for all my presents, the highlight of which was my own drone.

So there it was. The first case of blatant jealousy that I encountered in my life which I could remember. Of course I would never be this teacher’s favourite. We were the children who had it all.

It did not take long for my mum to arrive. Despite her injuries she always walked with a straight back, always looked at people deep into their eyes.

It had been two years since she was attacked, and for the first couple of years we were sent to a boarding school while she recuperated at home, both mentally and physically. Slowly but surely though she created this steely confident front that she showed now as she walked, no stormed down the corridor to where we sat outside the head teacher's office.

But I knew then as I do now that this steel is just a front. Inside she was still unsure, hesitant, worried. Are people staring? Am I scaring children with my damaged face? What do people think?

Once she developed this confidence and recovered as much as she could, she went against our grandad and she removed us from the boarding school and placed us in a normal state school near the mansion much to her dad's disgust and amazement. I overheard the argument.

'They both go to one of the best schools in the country and you want to send them to a state school which is somehow rated as good overall and bloody appalling in most categories?!'

'Yes, and you know why? Because I don't want my children to be brought up away from me in a stuck-up boarding school on the other side of the country!'

'Well at least send them to a good school in this area! How about The Mount? You enjoyed it there!'

'I did, but its girls only. I want them to be together.'

Through the door of his office I heard him frantically typing on his keyboard. I had only come to ask my mum whether I could go for a swim. 'Here! On the Ofsted website. The new Academy then that's just opened. They school from primary right through to college. How about there? At least that's well rated in most categories!'

'No. They won't be going back after these holidays and I have already enrolled them at St. Paul's.'

'Jesus Sally! At least let them see the year out at Queen Elizabeth's!'

'No. St. Paul's or we're gone.'

'And where will you go to? You've got nothing.'

'I'll find a way. I did before. Do you want us to stay or go? Your choice.'

'Please! Think about this!'

'Stay or go.'

'Stay, but not St. Paul's! It's awful! Compromise with me here!'

'No.'

'Just tell me why then? Why that school?'

'I want them to learn about life, to learn that everybody is not as fortunate as them. And they certainly won't learn that at Queen Elizabeth's.'

'You exasperate me at times! All I want is the best for you and the twins and you act like this!'

'Are we done here?'

'I suppose I've got no choice, have I? I think I've paid that psychologist too much money! There's clearly nothing wrong with you now!'

There was a pause and my mum's tone completely changed. 'Don't be silly. I'm still hurting inside, but I just will not let that monster ruin my life. I'm taking back some control. This is the new confident me.'

‘Don’t get me wrong, I like it, but not when it’s accompanied with total irrational thoughts!’

‘Well tough. They are my children and don’t get me wrong, I appreciate what you have done for us since I was attacked, but I need some independence. I’m a grown woman and I can make my own choices about my future and my children’s. Look, I just want them to experience true life for a time. Make them realise that not everybody lives in a mansion with yachts and jets as their playthings. Like you did for me with...’

‘With Michelle...’

‘Yes, Michelle.’

‘You haven’t mentioned her for a long time.’

‘Well I’m just starting to face up to what I did to her and trying to forgive myself.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. We all did the wrong thing by that girl.’

‘We certainly did.’

‘Anyway, let’s not go down that road again. I disagree with your choice but if that’s what you want. I hope you’re planning on sending them to Eton and Marlborough though?’

‘Of course I am. And Oxford or Cambridge. But for now, they need to learn about life a little.’

I heard his phone ring and he said that he needed to answer it. I quickly opened the room door next to his office and waited in there until my mum walked past.

I was intrigued for years as to who Michelle was. When my mum was recovering, sometimes I heard her call Michelle’s name in her sleep, and then I learned that we had all done wrong by her. It was years later that that name would reverberate through all our lives and help to bring everything crashing down.

For now though my mum was storming down the corridor at St. Paul’s. Sophia leaped out of her seat and ran down the corridor and wrapped her arms around my mum’s waist. I stayed seated, looking down at my shoes. The head teacher through the window in her office saw my mum arrive and came out of her office to greet my mum.

‘Miss Gallagher. Always a pleasure.’ They shook hands and she led my mum into her office, closing the door behind her.

Sophia retook her seat next to me and took my hand. ‘Thank you,’ Sophia said. I grunted an acknowledgement. ‘Are we in trouble?’ I grunted a yes sound. ‘Will you be suspended again?’

‘Probably.’ A few months ago I had a fight with another teacher’s pet over the fact that he had hurt one of my friends. I was quite protective of the people I cared for and looking back now, I think I did have some ever so slight anger management problems. We sat in silence for a few more minutes until the door to the office opened and we were called into the office.

‘Jacob, Mrs. Brown has told me what happened. Can you tell me what happened?’

So I did, but of course Mrs. Brown’s version totally differed to mine. Apparently the girls were all playing peacefully with a ball until I arrived. I

demanded to play but was politely informed it was for girls only. Apparently I did not take this news very well and started to punch the girls.

‘As you can see Miss Gallagher, the stories differ somewhat. The girls that were involved are some of my brightest, most caring pupils and I can’t begin to believe that they would use such an awful phrase towards Sophia. And of course, we unfortunately do have quite a negative history with Jacob, and indeed, his school report from Queen Elizabeth was hardly exemplary, far from it in fact.’

‘You’re a lying bitch.’

‘Jacob!!! Apologise at once! Where did you learn that word?!

‘What word? Bitch means female dog. You and Miss Smythe know exactly what happened. She’s never liked me and Mimi and Chastity are her favourites.’

‘I can assure you that none of my teachers have favourites. We treat all our pupils with the same level of respect...’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Jacob! What on earth has gotten into you?!

‘You know what Miss Smythe said to me, “Why doesn’t your nice grandad send you to a private school?”’

‘Now I will not have lies told about my staff! I can assure you that Miss Smythe would never say such a thing!’

‘Bullshit. Again.’

‘As you can see Miss Gallagher, despite his clear intelligence and his wide-ranging vocabulary for a nine-year-old, his behaviour really leads me no choice but to permanently exclude him from this school.’ Even Sophia knew what this meant and she took in a sharp breath of air.

I looked across at my mum who started to look down at her *Chanel* handbag and started to fumble around with it. Was that a smile on her face? If it was it was only a fleeting smile and she quickly resumed her confident look at Mrs. Brown. ‘Well needless to say I wholeheartedly disagree with your decision but it appears to be my children’s word against your ‘teacher’s’ word.’ I could have kissed my mum when she raised a finger of each hand and wiggled them in the air when she said ‘teacher’s’.

‘I would hardly believe that my teachers would lie, Miss Gallagher.’

‘Unfortunately I disagree. And who the hell names their child Chastity anyway?! To be perfectly honest, I have been disappointed with the level of this school ever since my children arrived...’

‘I hardly think comparing our school to one of the best boarding schools in the country is fair Miss Gallagher.’

‘Don’t talk to me about fair! How is treating my children like this fair?! Do you condone bullying? Do you condone my children having scarface chanted at them? How is that fair?! And there is one more thing I agree with Jacob about, you *are* a lying bitch and we will all be glad to see the back of you!’

‘Well! Well! I never... In all my days...’

‘Oh save it. Good day Mrs Brown.’

And with that she took our hands and led us out of the office and out of the school with her head held high.

We walked out of the school and when we walked across the playground I let go of my mum's hand and stared glumly at the ground while we walked with my hands in my pockets. Typically, Sophia now skipped ahead of us seemingly without a care in the world.

'And just where did you learn language like that young man?!'

'I dunno.'

'Hmmm. Sometimes I wonder if you're nineteen rather than nine little man.'

'I dunno. It wasn't my fault! They were bullying Sophia!' The injustice of it made my blood boil then even though I was only nine and it still does now.

'Hmmm. For now I want to hear nothing else from you until we get to the house.'

I sighed when I saw what car she had arrived in. 'It doesn't help, you know, when you bring the Rolls-Royce...'

'Your grandad has worked very hard to be able to afford things like this. We're not going to hide from his hard work just because it might upset a few people.'

I remember I did not respond to that but I knew that life would have been easier if the other kids thought Sophia and I were normal. I of course now realise the irony of this thought when I think that my mum used to pretend to be 'normal'. In fact, that was how she met my dad, by pretending to be exactly that, normal.

As usual Alfred was at the wheel and after we had clambered into the luxury car we drove through the streets of the town. I noticed that Alfred took a different route than usual and I felt my mum tense up beside me.

'Alfred! Alfred! Why are we going this way?' She sounded quite frantic.

'Sorry, ma'am. The road is closed. An accident.'

'But this is the road where Michelle...'

She did not finish the sentence and instead took in a sharp intake of breath as we went past a house on the street. I was surprised when my mum started to shake next to me and as we reached the end of the road I saw her wipe a tear away from her eye.

We proceeded in silence for the rest of the journey, through the countryside to the gates of the grounds to the mansion. The huge gates swung open and one of the security guards waved at us as the Rolls-Royce made its imperious progress along the long driveway to the distant house.

The driveway meandered through a coppice of trees then came out of the trees and ran through the large lawns past the lake with the island in the middle of it on which my grandmother was buried in a beautiful tomb. I tried to avoid going onto the island as much as possible, it gave me the creeps.

As we stopped outside the mansion I started to pray that my grandad was not home. I looked up at the window to his office and he was stood there, looking down at us, certainly with a look of surprise on his face to see his grandchildren home from school earlier than usual.

It did not take long for him to make his way down from his office and he was just coming down the stairs when we entered the house. My mum had us by our

hands again and she did not make eye contact with her dad, instead she stormed past him, dragging us along behind her.

‘They’re home early,’ he said to her as she stormed past him.

‘You were right.’

‘I was right about what?’

‘My children *do* deserve better than that shit school!’

He started to walk along next to us. ‘What on earth has happened? Has he been suspended again?’

‘Oh no. Better than that. Much better than that. He’s got the full-house this time! Permanently excluded!’

I expected my grandad to hit the roof. Start shouting furiously at us. Instead, he stopped walking and started to laugh and laugh and laugh. I glanced back as my mum continued to drag us along the corridors towards our rooms, and he was doubled-up with mirth. ‘Permanently excluded?!’ he managed to say between bouts of laughter. ‘Permanently excluded?! That’s my boy!’

\*

‘You! In your room and I do not want to hear a sound from you for the rest of today! Sophia, go to the library and read a book.’

‘Yes mummy.’

She skipped away again, seemingly in her own little world or bubble or both, while I was dragged into my room by mum. The first thing she did was grab my PlayStation control pads and throw them into the hall outside my bedroom. My laptop and iPad quickly followed. She then walked over to my desk, took down some maths books from my bookshelf and dropped them onto the desk.

‘Start with that book. I want every question answered. Once you’ve done that book, move onto the next and then the next and then the next. And if you’ve finished them all before bedtime, start again.’

I sullenly walked over to the desk and took a seat then opened the first book. The first book was for age four and she stood over me for a few minutes while I started to answer the baby questions. When I had done a few pages she told me to carry on and then she left me alone.

Slowly but surely I ploughed my way through the baby books and continued going through them, not even looking at what age level of maths I was completing. At some point a maid arrived and left me some foul-smelling soup with a stale bread roll, no doubt all part of my mum’s punishment, but I did not even look up from the book. I was engrossed with something called algebra and trigonometry. It was only when my mum came up to see me that I looked up from the books.

\*

‘I don’t think you laughing hilariously at the fact that your grandson has been permanently excluded from school really helped matters!’

We were sitting in the drawing room, my dad with a large glass of whiskey on the table next to him, and I had a large glass of white wine in my hand.



‘Well it’s one for is bucket list isn’t it! I wish I had been permanently excluded from school!’

‘That’s not appropriate! And anyway, you couldn’t get permanently excluded from school mainly because you *never* went to school!’ We both laughed for a moment and then I asked, ‘What are we going to do with him? He’s clearly got problems. He would have been excluded from Queen Elizabeth’s too if we hadn’t offered to build them a new cricket pavilion. Unfortunately St. Paul’s barely has a playground never mind a cricket pitch!’

‘Some people are just not cut out for academia.’

‘But he’s only nine!’

‘I hated school from the moment I started. I hated being told what to do. Some people are just born to be a free spirit. It probably makes sense. His father was not exactly academic, nor was I.’ We had an unwritten rule that David’s name was no longer spoken, a bit like Voldemort I suppose. ‘Maybe the attack had more of an impact on him than we suspected...’

‘But they’ve both been counselled. That was the first thing you did. You got them sitting down with a child psychologist to talk through what they had witnessed.’

‘That’s true and the psychologist said they both seemed to have compartmentalised it, Sophia especially.’

‘Maybe that compartment has been broken for Jacob?’

‘Maybe the compartment was never sealed properly. Maybe we were too focussed on getting you back to health that we did not focus enough on Jacob.’

‘Maybe.’ There was a moment of silence between us and then I asked, ‘Should we get another psychologist for him?’

‘No idea. I’ll speak to my consultant on Harley Street and see what he says, see if he can recommend somebody.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow.’

We both took a sip from our drinks and then I said I should really make sure Jacob has gone to bed. I had put Sophia down an hour or so ago after we had a swim together in the indoor pool.

I wandered through the house to his bedroom and opened his door, surprised to see him still sat at his desk, now with the desk light the only illumination in the room.

‘Jacob, it’s time for bed. Go and have a wash and brush your teeth.’

‘Five more minutes mummy.’

I did not know how to react to this. He was actually asking me to spend more time completing a punishment?! But he was also disobeying me. I made the decision that I could not back down. ‘Now please.’

He tutted but stood up from the desk straight away and walked to his ensuite bathroom. I stood in the doorway and made sure he washed and brushed his teeth thoroughly then he put his pyjamas on and climbed into bed. I sat down on the bed and looked down at him.

Christ, he looked so much like his father it pained me. How could I love and hate a face so much? He had inherited his dark hair and his light blue eyes and I

could already tell now that he would leave a trail of heartbroken ladies behind him when he was older.

‘You know what you did wrong, don’t you?’

‘Yes, of course I do.’

‘What did you do wrong?’

‘I hit girls.’

I leaned down and kissed him lightly on the forehead. ‘Good boy. You also did something totally correct though. You protected your sister. But in order to protect your sister you should never, ever hit girls like that. Ever. Do you understand?’

‘Yes mummy.’

‘Good.’ I glanced over at his desk where the desk light was still switched on. ‘I didn’t know you enjoyed maths so much?’

He yawned. ‘Those questions are lot more interesting than the ones I do at school.’

I stood up and walked over to the desk and looked down at the open book, flicking through the pages. It had been many a year since I had opened a maths textbook yet even I recognised that this work was far in advance of what a nine-year-old should be able to do. I closed the book and blinked a few times at the title of the book, Advanced G.C.S.E. Mathematics.

‘What on earth? Jacob? Jacob! How did you know how to answer these questions?’ I walked back to the bed with the book in my hand but he was fast asleep. ‘How could we have missed this?!’ I asked out loud.

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‘Daddy! Daddy!’ I burst into the drawing room just as he was standing up to go to bed.

‘What on earth is all the fuss about?!’

I could see that he was happy that I had accidentally called him daddy, an endearment I had sworn to never call him again. ‘Look! Look at these books!’

‘Okay, okay. Calm down! What am I looking at?’ He picked up his glasses from the table and looked down at the books. ‘What am I looking at here?’

‘He’s clever! Stupidly clever!’

‘Huh? Is he stupid or clever?’

‘Clever! Very clever!’

‘Sally, I have absolutely no idea what I’m looking at here. What do all these squiggles mean? Who the hell is Pythagoras?!’

‘This is a G.C.S.E. maths book! He should only be studying this from the age of fifteen!’

‘Right, so what is a G.C.S.E. maths book doing in your nine-year-old son’s room?’

‘I think it was one of mine.’

‘So he copied your answers?’

‘No, don’t be silly. I never looked at this book.’

‘Is that why you only got a B?’

‘Ha ha. Seriously, how did we miss this?!’

‘Slow down, slow down. We don’t even know if these answers are correct. Are there answers at the back he copied?’

‘Nope. Nothing.’

‘Right, well, Alfred is good at maths. Let’s get Alfred. He used to help you with your homework didn’t he?’ He walked over to the wall and pressed a button on the intercom. Alfred was of course still in his office near the kitchens. He would never leave his office until he was sure that we were all in bed. ‘Alfred, its Jacob. Can you come to the drawing room please?’ Alfred asked whether we wanted any food or drink to which my dad replied negatively and he joined us a few minutes later.

‘Sir, how can I be of assistance this evening?’

‘Drop the sir and pour yourself a whiskey.’

‘Yes, erm, Jacob.’

‘And top me up while you’re there.’

Alfred did exactly that and then he asked us again how he can help. I took up the story. ‘You may have realised there was a little bit of bother at school today, again, and as a way of punishment, or what I supposed would be punishment, I gave Jacob some maths work to complete. Can you take a look at this and let us know if any of it is correct?’

I passed the book to Alfred who sat down and slowly started to make his way through the book, occasionally taking a sip from his whiskey. When he was done he did not say anything for a short time and then asked, ‘And you say Jacob completed this book, read the text and then completed the questions at the end of each chapter and the exam level questions at the end of the book?’ We both enthusiastically nodded. ‘I must warn you that there are some questions in this book that I would have struggled to answer so I am not sure whether those answers are correct, however I would certainly say that 95% of this book has been answered perfectly correctly.’

My dad leapt out of his chair. ‘Hot damn he’s a genius!’

‘Well I could not comment on whether he’s a genius or not, however he’s certainly very good at maths if he’s learned the theory today and answered the questions today with no outside help.’

‘Oh bugger.’ My dad slumped back into his seat. ‘He used his iPad...’

For a moment it did not register and we all looked glum and then it struck me. ‘No! No he didn’t! I took it from his room! And his laptop too!’

My dad was back out of his seat. ‘Are you sure?!’

‘One hundred percent. They are in my room!’

‘Then he *is* a genius!’ He shook Alfred’s hand much to the butler’s surprise and then stated, ‘That’s the problem then! He’s frustrated and bored! Plus some anger management problems but I bet once we get him completing the right level of work in school those anger problems will fade away! Sod getting him in front of a psychologist again, we need to get him in front of a professor of mathematics!’

I was delighted that it appeared that we had found out the root cause of Jacob's problems, and my dad seemed overjoyed which was strange for a man who did not have an academic qualification to his name.

For the rest of that evening, the whiskey bottle was quickly drained.

## Chapter 59

Before I carry on I feel I must apologise. My mum is kind of forcing me to contribute to this story so excuse me if this all seems a bit rushed at times. It is not as if I want to be doing this. I do not think my childhood is that relevant to this dark tale so I want to hurry through and get to the parts that really matter. However, some background is necessary and apparently writing really helped my mum with her psychological trauma after she was attacked. Let's hope it helps me in the same way.....

So it turned out that I was a quite a clever young man. Well more than quite clever, borderline genius. Once that had been realised and I was put into advanced classes in a private school not too far away from the mansion, I settled down and started to flourish.

I completed G.C.S.E. mathematics at the age of ten gaining an A\* and a personal note from the examiner stating it was one of the most perfectly answered papers he had ever seen in over twenty years of marking papers. By twelve I had achieved another A\* at A-level and by fifteen a first from Oxford in Advanced Mathematics.

And that was when more trouble started. I got bored. My mum and grandad were so enthused with my progress that they registered me for my Masters as soon as I had finished my degree without even bothering to ask me what I wanted to do. I remember that really pissed me off. So like a typical teenager, I rebelled.

I told them outright that I was done with maths and I would not be studying it anymore. This led to some ferocious arguments with both my mum and grandad who could not believe that I was turning my back on something that I was clearly so gifted at. I retorted that they had controlled my childhood from start to finish and I was not letting them do it anymore.

When my mum called me ungrateful, I called her a controlling bitch and that was when my grandad lost his temper. Even at the age of fifteen I towered over them both however that did not stop my grandad literally dragging me to my bedroom by my ear. Of course I could have fought back and no doubt got free but I could not exactly hit an old man.

So I took the pain of him dragging me through the house on the chin and tried to block out his ranting at me while we walked, my mum following us a few paces behind. With a surprising show of strength my grandad threw me into my bedroom and told me I was grounded indefinitely until I apologised to my mum.

He slammed the door behind him and I raised my middle finger in their direction. I then threw myself onto my bed where I beat my pillow and generally had a massive tantrum until tears were rolling down my face. Even then I did still have some anger management problems although not as bad as when I was younger.

When I had calmed down I switched on my television and was just in time to watch the news. It was 11<sup>th</sup> September and the news was full of the anniversary of 9/11 attacks. I had of course learned about them at school but it had been years ago and now the video clips of the planes slamming into the Twin Towers and the subsequent collapse of the buildings caught my attention.

When the news item finished I switched off the television and reached for my iPad, selecting the YouTube app. The first video I watched was a clip from CNN. The North Tower had already been struck and out of that perfect clear blue sky another plane came. The CNN camera was already pointing up at the top of the smouldering North Tower so it was perfectly positioned to capture the moment the second plane slammed into the South Tower.

The first thing you hear is the sound of the plane and then it comes into view. You do not really realise in normal circumstances just how fast a plane moves however you quickly realise how quickly a plane moves when it flies into a stationary building, when there is a solid point of reference like the South Tower.

The camera shows the plane crashing into the tower and you can hear the screams of the people on the ground as they witness the atrocity. I must have watched that video a hundred times and every time I watched it made my blood boil more and more. The sheer injustice of it. What gave them the right to destroy so many innocent lives?!

I spent the rest of that evening watching clip after clip on YouTube and the more I watched the angrier and more frustrated I became. I even watched some of the conspiracy theory videos but they were just a bunch of wackos professing that the 9/11 attacks were created by the United States Government or other such rubbish.

Then I started to watch other videos, the 7/7 attacks in London, the attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi and the Bali bombings. Each one made me more and more furious and it was after watching another video of the 9/11 attacks that I made my decision.

I went over to my desk and switched on my laptop and quickly navigated to the Army website where I started my application to join up. I would be sixteen in a couple of months so it would be my plan to join as soon as possible.

I knew exactly how my mum and grandad would react though and they did not disappoint.

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‘You’ve decided to do WHAT?!’

We were all gathered in the drawing room, Sophia included, and my mum was using her hysterical voice, the voice she used for only the most serious of situations.

‘I’ve decided to join the Army. I’ve already applied and been accepted.’

‘You can’t just apply and be accepted! You need to attend training and courses.’

‘You remember that school trip I went on to France? Well, erm, it didn’t exist.’

‘What the hell do you mean it didn’t exist?! I signed the consent form!’

‘Yes, you signed *a* consent form, one that I knocked-up on my computer five minutes before giving it to you.’

‘If you’re saying what I think you’re saying then you are in more trouble than in you’ve ever been in!’

‘There was no trip to France and for that week I was actually at an army recruitment centre.’

She leapt out of her seat and walked so quickly to me that I could not react at all when she slapped me across my face. ‘How dare you! How dare you lie to me like that!’

It looked like she was about to strike me again then thankfully Sophia was by her side and she led my mum back to her seat on the sofa.

My grandad also looked furious at my deceit. ‘I thought we had brought you up better than that, young man. Lying to and tricking your mother like that is totally unacceptable.’

‘What has happened to you? I can’t believe you would do that to me.’

The look of pain on my mum’s face broke my heart. I took a deep breath and tried to calm the situation down. ‘I didn’t do it to lie or trick you. I did it because I knew you would never agree to it.’ I moved across the room to sit next to her on the sofa, taking her hand in mine after I had sat down.

She looked deeply into my eyes with tears brimming in her eyes and whispered, ‘Why? Just tell me why?’

‘I need to do this. I need to give something to my country. All the terrorist attacks that keep on happening, we need to fight back, we need to resist.’

Now the tears were flowing down her cheeks, on her right side flowing smoothly, on her left side rolling over the scars. ‘You can contribute in other ways. Your grandad has military connections and many military contracts. There, that settles it.’ She patted my hand. ‘You can contribute by working for your grandad.’

‘No, no I can’t. I can’t work in a nice office getting paid a fortune while there are young men out there getting shot at and blown up while I tell my P.A. what I want for lunch. No. Not happening.’

She looked at my grandad with pleading eyes. ‘Daddy? Help. Please.’

‘I don’t know what to say. One part of me is proud of you another part thinks you’ve lost your mind. I agree with your mother that with your intelligence you could contribute in other ways yet that intelligence will always be there. You need to do what your heart tells you.’

My mum leapt off the sofa and screamed at my grandad. ‘Well a fat lot of good you are! His intelligence won’t be there if he’s fucking DEAD will it?! I cannot believe you are taking his side!’

‘I’m not taking any sides. What I’m saying is that Jacob is old enough to make his own decision.’

‘No he’s not! He’s a boy!’

‘I had been running my first business for two years at the same age that he is now.’

‘Yes, but you weren’t getting shot at!’

‘Hmmm, that’s not strictly true...’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?!’

‘Nothing. Another time.’

‘Mum, please, I don’t want it to be like this. Please understand that I need to do this.’

‘Sophia! Please give this room some sanity!’

I looked across at my twin sister and studied her face. As my mum was attacked when I was young I could not really remember her face before she was attacked but if I ever needed to know what she must have looked like I only had to look at my twin. To say she was beautiful was a massive understatement. She has everything our mum had, the most amazing emerald eyes, long jet-black hair, full lips, perfect nose plus our dad's dark complexion. From the age of twelve the modelling agencies were knocking down our door to get Sophia onto their books but our mum refused every one of them and Sophia did not seem that interested as well.

I know that she had coped a hell of a lot better than I had since the attack when we were seven years old. Other than the small scar in the shape of a teardrop next to her left eye where a drop of acid had splashed when our bastard father had attacked our mum, nothing seemed to have affected her at all. She just got on with being a child while I was stuck with my phenomenal intelligence and memories that would always haunt me. I wanted to hate her for that, but I never could.

Now she had blossomed into an amazing young woman. Ferociously intelligence in her own right, although the finer point of maths would always be a mystery to her, she was popular at school with an endless queue of young gentlemen ready to sweep her off her feet, whereas I had always struggled to make friends and at times almost became a recluse, locked away in my room intensely studying mathematical problems that would be way beyond the capabilities of almost any other teenage boy. I had absolutely no idea on whose side she would take but no doubt what she was about to say would be as profound as usual.

'Dream what you want to dream, go where you want to go, be what you want to be. Because you have only one life and one chance to do all the things you want to do.'

Where the hell did she get that one from?!

'I read that somewhere and it kind of stuck with me.'

'So you're siding with your brother?!'

'I'm not siding with anyone but I do agree with grandad. It's Jacob's choice.'

'No it's not his choice. As your mother it is my choice! You're not an adult and I refuse to consent to this!'

'I'll be sixteen in a week and I have already received my start date which is the day after my birthday on the Monday.'

'No. I will not let this happen.'

'It's already happened and it continues happening.'

She walked across the room with her arms wrapped around her body, staring at the floor, her whole body shaking while she muttered, 'This is madness. This can't be happening...'. She opened the door and walked out of the room upstairs to her bedroom.

For a moment none of us said anything, lost in our thoughts, until my grandad said, 'Whiskey.'

He walked over to the other side of the room and poured three large glasses of whiskey and gave one each to me and Sophia. 'To the future,' was his simple toast.



I took a large mouthful of my drink and swallowed it down which resulted in me spending the next thirty seconds doubled-up with my head between my knees seemingly coughing my lungs up. It was my first taste of real liquor and boy, didn't my body know it. 'Jeeeesus! You could fly to the moon with that stuff!'

I glanced across at Sophia who more sensibly took a small sip of her drink, pulled a face of dislike, and put the glass down on the table next to her. 'Not for me thanks grandad. Right, I think I'll go to bed.' She came across to my side and gave me a light kiss on my cheek. 'Goodnight trouble.' Then she gave our grandad a long hug and a big kiss on his cheek before she left the room.

For a few moments we both just stared at each other until my grandad said, 'Well you've surprised me with this one. A noble gesture. Foolish, but noble.'

'Did you know?'

'Yes, of course I knew. You know as well as I do how my family security works. You're followed everywhere and you may think you can dodge your way across the country, oh and the tricks you played at King's Cross almost worked, however you've got to remember that my security are the finest in the country so it will take more than the antics of a fifteen-year-old to shake them.'

Of course I knew how the family security worked. We are the grandchildren of a wealthy man so we are a massive kidnap risk therefore we are escorted or followed everywhere.

Poor Sophia when she's on a date has to go to the cinema or for pizza knowing that somewhere nearby there will be a member of our grandad's security detail watching her every move.

So when I went through the charade of pretending I was going on a school trip to Paris I knew that I would have to shake off the security. The train I needed to catch departed from King's Cross so my plan was to try and lose them in that busy station. So I went down onto the underground at King's Cross, got on a train and just at the last second as the doors were closing I leapt off the train trying to pretend I was on the wrong train. That was on the Piccadilly line and I did exactly the same thing on the Victoria line *and* the Circle line before going back up to the mainline station for my train to Reading.

I had no idea if my plan had worked. The security detail is discrete yet efficient and will only step in when they feel like one of us is in danger. That way, as my grandad explained, we were still able to live our lives like normal people with the added bonus that if we did ever get into trouble all we had to do was shout 'Help!' and seemingly from nowhere the security were meant to appear.

'So if I didn't shake security why didn't they grab me if they suspected that I was trying to lose them?'

'They didn't think you were in any danger and they were intrigued as to where you were trying to go to.'

'When did they tell you?'

'As soon as you arrived at the army barracks. They asked whether they should stop you and I said no.'

'Thank you.'

'So ironically you were free of security for those days you were at the army. I suppose if the army can't protect you though no-one can!'

We both laughed. ‘Do you think mum will be okay?’

‘Hmmm, I’m not sure. This one has hit her pretty hard. Sometimes I wonder how many shocks a person can take before they simply breakdown. To say your mother is a strong lady would be a massive understatement.’

We both took another sip of our whiskey. ‘It kind of grows on you this stuff.’

‘It helps when you don’t drink it like coke! Just sip it and savour the taste. So, you’ve already got your joining date?’

‘Yep.’

‘Where will you be based?’

‘Harrogate at first then Catterick.’

‘Specialism?’

‘Just a standard infantry soldier at first, then who knows. I’ll see when I’m there.’

‘Pay?’

‘Around fifteen thousand a year to start.’

‘Fifteen thousand?! You could earn that a month working for me!’

‘That’s hardly the point.’

‘Good. I am very proud of you. Most young men in your situation would either not bother working at all and just live off our money or take the easy path and come and work for me where they would hardly bother working knowing that I could never fire you. Well I could, but the last thing I need is to have *that* conversation with your mother!’

We both laughed. ‘Thank you. It means a lot to me that I’ve got your blessing. I’m not sure if I’ll ever receive my mum’s blessing though.’

‘Don’t worry. She’ll come round. Just a bit of a surprise for all of us.’ He took a last sip of his whiskey then said he was going to go and finish off some work in his office.

‘Thank you for your support, grandad.’

‘I’ll leave this to you however let me know if you ever need any help. I know many people in the military, from the highest ranks of officialdom to the darkest reaches of covert operations. Oh, I almost forgot.’ He reached into his pocket and took something out of it. ‘I had a feeling what the family meeting you called would be about so I took the liberty of bringing this with me.’ He handed me a watch, a very nice watch. ‘This watch has been handmade to my own exacting requirements by one of the best watchmakers in Switzerland. There are only five of them in the world. Your mother has one, I have one, Sophia will receive one at some point in the future, whenever I think she’s not so scatty that she’ll lose it, so in twenty years or so! And there will be one spare. Although it looks like a normal watch it is near enough indestructible, you could hit it with a hammer and not much would happen to it. Do not hit it with a hammer. Basically, it is a normal watch apart from one little feature. If you press the buttons in a certain pattern like this, you’ll notice a red light appears under the number twelve. That means a distress signal has been sent to one of my many security posts around the world. If you’re in the United States, a message will be sent to my stations in New York, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and Seattle. Russia, to Moscow, Yekaterinburg and Irkutsk. China, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and out west to Xi’an and

Chongqing. All these stations are manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Simply repeat the pattern to turn the signal off. Now I've already informed security that I will be testing this watch this evening so they'll ignore the signal this time, however, if you are ever in desperate need, send the signal and people will be with you very quickly. It uses G.P.S. so they will know instantly exactly where you are. See it as an early sixteenth birthday present. Oh, I don't have much coverage in Antarctica so try not to run into any trouble down there!

'Wow! Thank you so much! So you press the buttons like this, and indeed the light appears! Awesome!'

'Don't be afraid to use it. It doesn't matter what the reason is just use it if you're in trouble. Okay?'

'Roger that.'

'Good man. Right, I've got some work to finish. See you in the morning.'

Whenever we parted he had always given me a hug, now though he reached forward and shook my hand. It seemed, in his eyes at least, I had grown up.

\*

When I was a child walking through the mansion at night always used to freak me out. There were so many unused rooms, full of furniture covered over with dust sheets which meant for a child they were also full of ghosts and ghouls and goblins.

Maybe once or twice a year when we hosted the larger extended family for a family event or my grandad would host a corporate event here, the mansion would come alive with all the rooms being used. For the rest of the time the rooms just sat there, creepily and eerily empty. When we were children, playing hide and seek with Sophia led to some quite lengthy games. It got to the point that we made areas of the house out of bounds otherwise the games would go on for hours!

Feeling slightly tipsy after the whiskey I wandered through the house, along the long corridors, occasionally opening random doors and walking into the room. Even though the rooms were unused the maids still frequently cleaned them, once a week I think, so I was able to sit down in random chairs on top of the clean dust sheets and admire the artwork or antiques in room after room.

Here there was an unused living room, with huge sofas, luxurious antique chairs and a real *Picasso* hung on one of the walls. This room was *unused* and there was a frickin' *Picasso* on one of the walls! It still baffled me that we had so much money that we could just buy a *Picasso* and put it in a random room in the mansion and forget all about it. I remember I asked my grandad about it one day.

'That horrible thing?! It's lucky it's on a wall at all. Ugly monstrosity. But still, if somebody is going to pay me good money for it in a few years then I'll keep it as an investment, but I don't want to look at it. It hurts my eyes!' I laughed as I looked upon it and remembered his story. It was bloody ugly though.

I meandered through the rest of the house until I reached my mum's bedroom door. I pressed my ear against the door and it broke my heart to hear sobbing

coming from the room. I discretely knocked on the door and without waiting for an answer I entered her room.

\*

This had been my bedroom for all my life other than the years when I was estranged from my father. Some might say considering the memories in this room why did I continue to use it? The memories keep me grounded. They remind me of the good times before it all went so badly wrong the day that Simon died.

The nights I shared here with Michelle were some of the best of my life. And when I lost my virginity to David in this room on the night of my eighteenth birthday? That was the best night of my life. There was no denying that truth despite what happened afterwards.

And now here I was again, sobbing into my pillow, knowing that I was just about to lose my son forever.

All I needed now was for Sophia to tell me she was pregnant or had decided to join the Foreign Legion...

I really did not know how much more I could take.....

\*

This whole wing of the house had been given over to my mum, Sophia and me. We had our own bedrooms, living and dining rooms, plenty of spare rooms for guests and even a small kitchen. It gave my mum a sense of independence, with every room furnished how she wanted it rather than how my grandad wanted. I'm sure she had placed another Picasso on one of the walls in a prime location just to wind him up.

I entered her bedroom which was sumptuously furnished. The whole bedroom was furnished floor to ceiling in *Armani* décor with plenty of *Versace* thrown in too. Through a door to the side was my mum's dressing room which when she was young was the size of an average bedroom.

Now though she had had a wall knocked down between the dressing room and the bedroom next door and her clothes and shoes and perfumes and cosmetics now flowed from the original dressing room through to the converted bedroom. The original entrance to the bedroom had also been sealed closed and one could not even tell from the corridor where the original entrance used to be.

Through another door was her bathroom which again was huge and decorated in gold fixtures and fittings, with a massive jacuzzi bath in one corner. It was her domain, her room to escape from it all.

I had not been in here for a long time; there was no real need now that I was older. The layout of the room was the same as always, with the massive bed dominating the room. I had no idea what size the bed was, it looked like two king size beds joined together. Like many of things in the mansion it was custom designed and handmade.

The lamp on my mum's bedside table was still on which cast some light through the murky room. She was in the middle of the bed and I could see the

outline of her body under the thick duvet. As I approached the bed she said, 'Go away!'

I sighed. 'Mum, please listen.'

'No! Go away!'

I reached her bed and sat on the edge of it. I was facing her however she quickly rolled over and showed me her back. 'Please, I don't want it to be like this.'

'Then withdraw your application and it won't be like this.'

'I can't.'

'Yes you can.'

'No, I mean I can't. I need to do this. I've lived a life of amazing privilege so far and I will be forever grateful to you and grandad for the opportunities you've given me, I truly will. But I can't sit here in this luxurious mansion going to the best schools knowing full well that I will walk into a well-paid job in grandad's company when I know that those murdering bastards are getting away again and again with the atrocities they commit. I need to fight back, to do something good with my life. Can you understand that?'

'No.'

I sighed again. 'Can we talk tomorrow once you've had chance to get used to the idea.'

'No. I'll never get used to the idea. You're going to die!'

'Don't be silly. How can you possibly know that?'

She quickly turned back to face me. Her eyes were red from crying and the look on her face scared me. She looked manic, borderline demonic. 'Because we're cursed!' she screamed at me. 'This whole family is cursed!'

'Now don't be silly. How are we all cursed?'

'Michelle... Michelle.....' There was that name again, Michelle. She slowly rolled back away from me and slumped back down onto her pillow.

'I keep on hearing this name, this Michelle. I have done all my life. Who is she?'

'Who was she. She's dead.'

'Was she a relation? A friend?'

'A sister...'

'A sister? But you don't have a sister, you're an only child.'

'Like a sister to me.'

'What happened?'

Without looking at me she whispered, 'I curse you Sally with all the soul that is still left in my body... I curse you to a life of misery, a life full of pain, suffering and misery so then you'll have a small idea of what my life has been like since you chose him over me, since you abandoned me. I curse you Sally, and your children, with all my broken heart and broken soul I curse you for eternity.....'

'What on earth does all that mean? Why would someone say that?'

'Not now. Another time. Go away now. Please.'

'But mum...'

'No. Go. Tomorrow. We'll talk tomorrow.'

I shook my head and leaned across the bed and gave her a light kiss on her cheek. 'I'm sorry I've disappointed you, mum.'

'No, no. You haven't disappointed me. I'm proud of you at heart. I just wish I could be proud of you for another reason than joining the bloody Army. Go now. We'll talk more in the morning.'

'Okay. Sleep well.'

I quietly left her bedroom and made my way the short distance down the corridor to my room with my mum's words still reverberating through my head. 'I curse you Sally with all the soul that is still left in my body...'

Who and why would somebody say that to their 'sister'?

Something truly awful must have happened.....

\*

It was an unwritten rule at home that when we were all in residence we all met for breakfast at seven thirty before my grandad left for work and before Sophia and I left for school. No phones were allowed, no iPads, nothing. Even my grandad would not bring anything to the huge table in the breakfast room.

I always briefly stopped and looked out of the window at the view every time I stepped into breakfast room. Out of the huge French windows was a large balcony, on which, in one corner, stood a jacuzzi. Beyond the balcony were the large front lawns and also the driveway which ran along the side of a lake. Past the end of the lake the road disappeared into a coppice of trees towards the imposing wall and enormous gates of the estate. At this time of the morning there was still a light mist over the lake giving it an eerie appearance.

It never ceased to amaze me just how lucky and fortunate we are so the words that my mum said the previous evening left me even more confused. How are we cursed? We did not look bloody cursed as I looked down at the huge spread of food laid out on the table.

Sophia was already there eating a piece of toast and she smiled at me as I entered the room. She was dressed in her school uniform and I was surprised that she thought she would be allowed to leave the house dressed like that.

For one, I'm pretty sure her school had a strict dress code which stated that skirts should be below knee length. Her skirt was barely waist length! And as for the blouse she was nearly wearing. It must have been three sizes too small for her. Her breasts, which had grown exponentially in the last few months, were near enough ready to burst out of the garment. She looked up from her mobile phone as I sat at the table and said, 'Morning soldier boy.'

'No mobiles at breakfast.' She shrugged, twirled her hair and popped the gum she was chewing. 'Classy.'

'Bite me.'

'You'd better get rid of both before they arrive.'

'I might.'

'You need to grow up.'

'Whatever.'

So intelligent yet still so immature. We sat in silence while she watched what sounded like a One Direction video on her phone, popping her gum seemingly in time to the so-called music. I do not know how she does it, but the split second before my mum walked through the door the phone disappeared from her hands and the gum stopped being chewed and popped. Did she swallow it?! Gross.

The first thing our mum did when she entered the room was give us both a kiss on the cheek and then appraise Sophia. 'If you think you're leaving the house dressed like that young lady you've got another thing coming. Go back upstairs and put on your proper school uniform. And where on earth did you get that blouse?! It would be the correct size if you were eleven years old! Up. Get changed. Now.'

'But muuummm...'

'Don't muuummm me! Changed. Now.'

'Gorrrrrrdddd!' She pushed herself away from the table and stomped through the breakfast room leaving us with this witty repartee, 'You're such a prude!'

My mum blinked once in surprise but did not deign to offer a response. It was only a few seconds after Sophia's departure that grandad arrived. 'Sorry I'm late. Been up since three speaking to China.' He gave my mum a light kiss on her cheek. 'What on earth is wrong with that young lady this morning? All I said was good morning princess and I got 'Gorrrrrrdddd' in return!'

'Clothing issues.'

'Ah, I see.'

She clearly had not slept at all yet she gave us all her best radiant smile. My God despite her injuries she was still stunningly beautiful.

'You seem to be better this morning. How do you feel about this young man's news now you've had chance to sleep on it?'

'I wouldn't exactly say I've slept on it...'

'Yes, I did think you looked like you hadn't had much sleep.'

'Indeed I haven't,' she turned to look at me, those green eyes that had seen and gone through so much, seemed to pierce my very soul, 'but I can reluctantly give my blessing. If this is something you really need to do then so be it. I think you're completely crazy though, and there won't be a moment that goes by when I won't be worried sick. Dad, can we at least see if we can get him into Sandhurst?'

'Well I think you need to be eighteen to get into Sandhurst and also have certain qualifications, but I'm sure I can make a few phone calls...'

'No, no, no! You're both not getting this are you?! I don't want the privilege of easy access to Sandhurst or having a 'phone call' made. I want to start at the bottom just like any other soldier and if I have the capabilities to be promoted through the ranks then so be it. What won't happen is my privilege making my life easier than others in the army. And for the love of God, if you do want to visit me please don't arrive in a chauffeured Rolls-Royce or the Bugatti Chiron. Just travel normally like normal people in a normal car.'

'Well I know the Brigadier up in Harrogate so I'm sure he'll let me land my helicopter at the barracks.'

For a moment I was going to hit the roof, and then I noticed the slight smirk at the corner of my grandad's mouth and then he burst out laughing followed by mum. 'Oh ha, ha, ha. Very funny grandad. Please. Just be normal.'

'Okay okay. Normal it is!'

I rolled my eyes and it was just then that Sophia came back into the breakfast room. I saw my mum glance at her but she did not say anything now that Sophia was dressed more appropriately. Instead she told her about grandad's joke and we all relaxed and talked as normal families do. I was desperate to ask my mum about what she had said last night yet I knew now was not the time. I made it my goal though to find out before I left for the army.



## Chapter 60

The day I had been dreading rapidly approached, not that I was dreading joining the army, I feared how my mum would react when I finally left home to join up. Numerous times since the night she had told me about the curse I tried to broach the subject with her and every time she avoided my questions, quickly changing the subject or becoming purposefully distracted by something else.

It was early Sunday morning, the day before I was due to join up, and I could not sleep due to a combination of excitement and worry. Dawn had barely broken and I looked out of my bedroom window to see my mum running through the grounds heading towards the back of the property and deeper into the estate.

Quickly I threw on some shorts, a t-shirt and my trainers, opened the French doors to my balcony and leapt from the balcony onto the lawn below. After landing I quickly broke into a fast jog and ran after her as quickly as possible.

I had always been a good runner and certainly if I had not been so immersed in my mathematical study it was probably something I could have pursued at school, maybe even at county level. I ran along the paths through the rear of the estate expecting to catch-up with my mum at any second and eventually I saw her up ahead at one of the rear gates to the estate.

The gate itself was overgrown; it looked like it had not been opened in years. When I was younger I occasionally came out here to play, to make a den or other such things, though I had never seen anybody exit the estate this way before.

I surprised myself when I stopped running and decided to watch my mum from a few hundred yards away. I felt a bit bad spying on her like this though I was curious as to what she was doing and where she was going.

There was a small numeric keypad next to the gate which my mum had to reach by pushing aside branches and a bush. I saw her tap in some numbers however I had no idea what numbers were required to open the gate.

Again running through some bushes and ivy which were hanging on the wall, my mum opened the gate and disappeared through it, the gate closing behind her.

I ran quickly to the gate and pushed the bushes aside again which had sprung back into place after my mum had left. I peered through the murk at the keypad which was filthy, like I said, the gate and the keypad did not look like they had been used for years, and on four buttons the filth was slightly less. I therefore knew which buttons to press, the order of how to press I still did not know.

Yet something in the back of my mind came to me and I realised that I recognised those four numbers. Obviously with my background I was quite good with numbers and I stared at the keypad, racking my brain and then it came to me. I had seen those numbers very recently as it was my grandmother's birthday recently and as per family tradition we had all gone to the island on the lake where my grandmother's marble tomb was situated to pay our respects. On the outside of the tomb was a large commemorative stone which had her date of birth and date of death carved into it. The numbers my mum used on the keypad made up her date of birth.

I tapped the keypad in the appropriate order and listened as the bolts on the gate slid back and I was able to push my way through the bushes and ivy, through

the gate and out of the estate. The gate had an automatic closing mechanism however the gateway was so overgrown I had to assist the gate closing by pushing branches out of its way.

Once the gate was closed and locked, I turned and looked along the thin dark path which wound its way through more thick undergrowth. I peered down at the ground and saw a fresh imprint of my mum's trainer in a muddy spot so I started to slowly jog along the path following her trail.

The path was flat for a while then it started to climb up a hill and it was up the hill my mum had ran. I ran up the hill and just as I was about to run over the brow of the hill I heard her voice nearby so I stopped. I could not see her though and I realised that she was just over the brow of the hill.

I could not tell what she was saying so I decided to get closer without wanting her to know I was there. I stepped off the path and pushed my way through the thick undergrowth, walking around then up the hill, making the last few yards in a crouched position being as quiet as possible.

As I reached the top of the hill I looked around me, peering through the bushes. At the top of the hill there was a clearing and my mum was sat on a log looking down the hill at an old derelict garage. I knew the garage; we had driven past it enough times as it was on the B5671, the back road to the nearest town.

I watched her and her eyes never lifted from staring down at the garage. She was not saying much now, however once every thirty seconds or so she would ask 'Why?' or say the name 'Michelle' or 'Simon'. She also said, 'If the Mini had not broken down...' and she followed that with 'But then I would not have Jacob and Sophia...'

She muttered the name 'Sarah' a few times and then quickly turned her head towards my direction and I froze, keeping as still as possible. I saw her blink a couple of times in surprise and then she said, 'Why are you spying on me Jacob?'

How the hell did she know I was there?! She paused and did not say anything more, waiting for me to respond.

When I did not she said, 'Jacob, you're upwind of me and that's a pretty distinctive deodorant you wear. Come on out of the bushes.'

She had got me. I had not even put any deodorant on yet that morning so how on earth?! I put my nose down near my armpit and realised that the smell of deodorant from the previous evening was still lingering on my body. With a sigh I pushed myself out of the bushes and stood in front of them, looking down at her as our eyes met. We did not say anything for a few moments until I said I was sorry for spying on her.

'How long were you following me for?'

'I saw you running so I thought it would be good if we could run together. I was just about to catch you up when you left the estate so I was curious to know where you were going. Sorry I spied.'

'Don't worry. It must be a bit weird to have seen your mother run out of the estate. I'd be curious too.' She smiled at me and said, 'You look so much like your father when we met. He was a good man then. He took care of me on a night when I was scared witless.'

'What happened?'

‘That’s where it all started.’ She pointed down the hill.

‘Where?’

‘At that garage. That’s where I met him.’

‘Why have you come here today?’

‘It’s the anniversary of when we met.’ She paused for a moment. ‘He gave me two wonderful things, you and Sophia, and I would not change that for the world.’

‘But he also destroyed your life.’

‘He did *not* destroy my life. He made things... inconvenient.’

‘Inconvenient?! Not having any milk when you want a cup of tea, that’s inconvenient. Not having an umbrella when it’s raining, that’s inconvenient. Having acid thrown in your face is a damn sight more than inconvenient.’

‘True, I suppose.’

‘No suppose about it. What happened? What drove him to commit such a heinous act? I’m old enough to know now.’

‘I know you are, but I don’t want you to know.’

‘I need to know. You need to tell me why he did what he did. You owe me that much. I was there when he did it. I’ve lived with the memory of your screams all my childhood...’

She sighed, a long, drawn-out sigh. ‘Okay. Take a seat next to me. This will take a while...’

\*

She talked for a long time, how they met, how their love blossomed, how he found out the truth of who she was when she ended up on television at the Monaco Grand Prix. The fateful day a week before Michelle and Simon’s wedding, how Sarah ruined everything, and the horrendous car crash which killed Simon and ruined my dad mentally.

How my dad had breakdown after breakdown, how my grandad disowned my mum when she sided with David instead of helping Michelle. My mum talked of her trip to the hospital to see Michelle and how Michelle on her deathbed cursed my mum and our whole family.

Then my dad seemed to straighten himself out when Sophia and I arrived, how my grandad ruined that for his own selfish reasons and how somehow my dad found out about my mum’s new relationship which tipped my dad firmly over the edge leading him to attack my mum and flee the country.

‘See, this is why I did not want to tell you because now you’re going to look at your grandad in a whole new light. What he did finished David off and I never really understood why he did it. I’ve never really forgiven him for it and I don’t think he has ever really forgiven me for walking out on him and continuing to support David. He explained it that he wanted you and Sophia to grow up in a stable environment so he let David work and earn a decent living and we were doing okay. Then dad decided he wanted us back in his life so he sent those pictures to David which crushed him again hoping I would leave David and come running back to him. Why my dad thought that such tactics would work is something I’ve never really understood. We did not speak for years and it was

only after David attacked me that we were kind of reconciled. You, Sophia and me, we did not have anything. The man I was seeing did not want to know me after I had got attacked. It seemed all he wanted was my good looks and my body rather than actually caring about me or my family. So that was another thing I had to deal with during that time. Thankfully I've since had my revenge on him with a little help from your grandad. I really had no option for all our sakes to try and forgive my dad for what he did and return to the mansion in order to give you both the best start in life that I could. It killed me to do that but I know it was the right thing to do. Now we just don't talk about it but it's always there, hanging over us. I'm sure one day it will all come out again. For now though it is buried away, hidden, not mentioned, I suppose for Sophia's and your benefit more than anything else.' She paused for a moment. 'You must promise me that you do not mention any of this to your grandad. Please don't let it impact your relationship with him.'

'How can I do that knowing how he treated you?'

'We were both wrong. We both treated each other very badly. It's behind us now as you can see our relationship is good now. Will it ever be like how it was before the car crash? No, of course not. Things were done and said that can never be forgiven, by both of us may I add, and now we keep on going, remaining strong for you two.'

'Does Sophia know any of this?'

My mum firmly shook her head. 'No. No. And please don't tell her. She has handled things a lot better than you so please do not ruin that by telling her this dark tale. Please. Plus I do not think she would handle it very well. She's nowhere near as mature as you.'

'Yeah, tell me about it!' We both laughed. 'So where's my dad?'

My mum sighed again. It was clear this was taking a lot out of her. 'The last time we had any sign of him was years ago in the Australian deserts. Your grandad has vast resources at his disposal, limitless money, limitless people to use, and we were so close to catching him but every time he just managed to elude us. Trust me when I say you do not want to know what he has done since fleeing England.'

'I would like to know.'

'No, another time. We've tried everything to catch him. A policeman was so, so close to capturing him and then David did some horrendous things to him and the girl he was with. After that, nobody has seen anything of him for years. I'm hoping he's dead but I don't think we're that lucky. I'm certain that one day he'll darken our lives one last time.'

I pondered her words for a moment and then I said, 'I'll find him mum and we'll have our revenge.'

She looked at me and smiled sweetly. 'My father has had some of the best men in the world trying to find him. The Australian outback is vast and he could literally be anywhere out there. One person can just disappear out there and he knew that, why else would he have gone there?'

'I'll find him. I promise you now. You have my word.'

'I hope you do, Jacob, I really hope you do. Yet I can't see how that will be possible.'

She looked exhausted after she had finished telling her story so I put my arm around her and she rested her head on my shoulder.

We both looked down at the garage where it all started all those years ago.

Little did I know then the pain and misery my promise would inflict on our family years later.