

# Everything to Nothing

## Part 2

A novel by Mark Henthorne.

Sequel coming soon!

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## Chapter 81

From Broome International Airport I had organised one of my grandfather's jets to pick me up and fly me out of Australia. It was only when I arrived at the airport that I directed the pilot to fly me to the family's island in the Maldives via the capital city Male and a transfer onto the family's seaplane.

I stayed there, crying my eyes out, alone in one of the rooms, refusing to see or speak to anybody.

My family knew I was there on my own, and despite numerous phone calls and emails from my mother and granddad I remained alone. I could not bring myself to speak to them yet about what happened in Australia.

After arriving back at the Sergeant's estate I stayed with them for two weeks while we organised the funeral arrangements for Maiya. I also had my arm fixed at the local hospital there. The Sergeant understandably refused to let the boy stay on his estate.

When he saw him in the back of the car he did not need me to tell him who he was and he refused to have that monster's spawn live in his house. I had no option other than to send the boy ahead of me to Broome where he was lodged with a foster family while I finalised everything in Derby.

I eventually left Derby and spent a further week in Broome being interviewed by different police officers about what had happened out in the Karlamilyi.

How did she die? What about the flood? Did you not predict a flash flood given your training? Why did I not call for help? Tell me again what he did to your mother. Why was he not found before? Why did you not tell the police you were going to look for him? Where is his body? Are you sure he is dead? Tell me how she died? What about the flood? Why did I not call for help? Where did the boy come from?

He sliced her throat. We were having sex so I did not think of a flash flood despite my training. I did not have time to call for help. He threw acid in my mother's face after he found out she was cheating on him although her cheating on him was totally understandable as he was a drunk and a fiend even then. My family's security looked, the police looked, although nobody had looked for many years. We did not tell the police we were going to look for him as it is a private family matter and to be honest, we did not expect to find him. His body floated away down the creek. I did not have chance to retrieve his body as my main concern was for Maiya. Yes, he is dead. He stabbed himself in the chest. He could not be deader. He sliced her throat. We were having sex so I did not think of a flash flood despite my training. I did not have time to call for help. The boy must be the son of David and one of his captives.

On and on they went, the same questions again and again, slightly rephrased. Did they not see that I was suffering just as much as the Sergeant and Max?

Eventually I was allowed to leave Broome and the country on the condition I was to return whenever they demanded I return. I signed whatever they asked me to sign then got myself out of town and Australia as quickly as possible.

I could not stand the thought of returning to the U.K. so again I sent the boy ahead of me. He travelled on special documents my grandfather's travel

specialists acquired for him, and I paid for the foster family to travel with him. When he arrived in the U.K. the family handed him over to my mother who I had instructed to care for him at home and I would explain all when I arrived.

After a month on the island I ordered another plane and flew back to London where a Rolls-Royce was waiting to pick me up from the Heathrow private jet terminal, a side of Heathrow that ordinary travellers barely know exist never mind get to experience.

As the Rolls-Royce proceeded imperiously through the countryside outside London, I desperately tried to find something to say my family.

How do I explain what happened out there? How do I tell them I had failed my beautiful Maiya so badly?

By the time I arrived back at the house it was late and I did not see anybody as I made my way along the lonely corridors. My mother must have been informed that I had arrived back as she came to my room to see me.

We only exchanged pleasantries though, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, how was the flight, etcetera, etcetera, with my mum finally saying that we will speak more in the morning.

First thing the next morning though I was up early and went out for a run through the grounds of the house. I ran quickly and did a few laps of the grounds until I decided to head out of the mansion and continue my run outside the grounds.

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When we heard that he had left Australia we tried to get in contact with him on our island in the Maldives but all we received in reply was silence.

Then we tried to contact the police in Derby and Broome but they would not speak to us about an ongoing inquiry despite my father attempting to use his influence. We then tried to contact the Sergeant for days only to be met with rudeness by his housekeeper followed by more silence.

After persevering we managed to get the Sergeant on the phone who told us in no uncertain terms that we should never contact him or Max, they wanted nothing to do with us or our family ever again.

Clearly something had gone badly wrong in Australia.

I knew from the moment I walked into my son's bedroom that our thoughts were correct.

Even when he returned from fighting against who knows who at who knows where for the S.A.S. he did not look so sad.

He looked gaunt, like he had the world on his shoulders, with massive bags under his eyes like he had not slept or not stopped crying for a long time, maybe both.

I remembered when I was much younger I had hidden away on an island in Thailand over a broken heart. Was that it? Had he found a love only to lose her? I had no idea at that time how close I was to the truth although of course I expected a break-up by text or something similar rather than what had actually happened.

From my bedroom window I saw him running around the grounds of the house a few times early the next morning and I decided to go out and join him. When he had run past my window one more time I jumped down from my balcony and tried to follow him.

Even at my absolute prime I could not have kept up with him and now if he was running at his usual pace I would not have stood a chance. Even his running seemed down though; he did not seem to have his usual flowing grace. Dare I say it was almost like he was plodding along.

I nearly called out his name until I saw him turn away from the route he had taken on his previous lap and start to head towards the outer wall of the estate and the gate that was in the wall. I watched as he pushed through the undergrowth and he quickly inputted the code which allowed the gate to be opened.

After giving him a few minutes to clear the gate I followed him through and followed him along the level path then up the hill. Not so long ago I would have been able to easily run up that hill. Now I stopped halfway up out of breath and cursed myself for getting old and unfit.

I caught my breath for a few moments then walked up the hill, remembering a time a few years ago when Jacob followed me up the same hill and it was there I told him the full story of what had happened.

Now it was my turn to spy on him from just below the brow of the hill and it was his turn to start to recite the names of the people who had so influenced our family, Michelle, Simon, David, Sarah, the Sergeant, Max and a new name that I did not know, Maiya, and it was this name that he always returned to.

I took a few tentative steps along the path, higher up the hill when I heard him stop his recital. I heard him sniff the air and then he said, 'Still having the same perfume prepared for you at Harrods, mum?'

It seemed only right that the same way I had discovered him was the same way he discovered me. I walked up the rest of the hill to find him sitting on the same log where we had sat all those years ago.

He was sat looking down at David's derelict garage as I had done so many times in the past. I sighed and walked over to him.

'Why would I change? I've been wearing it for years and have a good relationship with the perfumers.' I sat down on the log next to him. I tried to take his hand and I was shocked when he pulled his hand away from mine. 'Have I done something wrong?'

'Yes. You started a relationship with that cunt.' He gestured towards the garage.

Again I was shocked. I had never heard him use language like that before, especially in my presence. And what he said did not make sense. Without my relationship with David, which was a loving relationship to start with, he would not be here.

'Without David...'

'Yeah, yeah. Me and Sophia would not be here.'

'Whatever has happened in Australia is not my fault.'

He turned to look at me and for one moment I thought he was going to either punch me or cry. He turned away though and continued to stare down at the garage.

‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. All of this is not your fault.’ He now took my hand, thankfully.

‘Hmmm. I will let you off this once. Do not use language like that around me again.’

‘I won’t. I’m sorry.’

I stroked his hand for a few minutes while we both stared down at the garage. I had noted in the local news that at last planning permission had recently been granted for the remains of the garage to be knocked down and a small housing estate would be built there following the death of the owner of the land.

My dad had tried numerous times through the years to buy the land and get rid of the memories of that garage for me however the elderly owner refused to sell no matter what my father offered. The land had been in his family for generations, blah, blah, blah. Idiot.

I gave him a few more moments to compose himself then asked, ‘So, what happened out in Australia? We haven’t had any news from you for a while, not since you called us from, what was it called? Marble something or other. And you’ve been hiding away in the Maldives by all accounts for the last month. What happened?’

‘First of all. Where’s the boy?’

‘You don’t need to explain to me that he’s David’s son. I could see that with one glance, those blue eyes.’

‘So where is he?’

‘I did not want to him to stay here so he’s been sent to boarding school...’

‘He’s my brother...’

‘No, you only have one sibling, Sophia. He is that monster’s son. That is all.’

‘We can’t just abandon him!’

‘We haven’t. He’ll be well cared for and has gone to one of the best boarding schools in the country. He receives an allowance from us and we’re in the process of finding him a foster family. We’ve also started the process with lawyers to make sure he has no legal rights to any part of the family’s fortune. We’ll support him until he’s eighteen and then that’s it. Don’t argue and I don’t want to talk about it anymore. That’s what’s been decided with your grandad although if you want to visit and see him that’s entirely up to you. I have no idea why you would though.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘What happened in Australia?’

‘You genuinely don’t know?’

‘We tried to find out. The police refused to tell us and the Sergeant refused to speak to us until finally he briefly did speak to us only to tell us never to contact him or Max ever again.’

‘I don’t really blame them.’

‘Why?’

It was then that he started to shake then cry. My brave son, my S.A.S. fighter, was crying his heart out, tears were rolling down his face. I took him in my arms and he buried his face in my chest.

‘I failed her, I failed everybody. I thought I had more time to plan what I was going to do. He killed her though, right in front of me!’

I stroked his head, ran my fingers through his hair. ‘There, there. It’s okay. You’re back home with your mum and family now.’ I let him compose himself again for a few moments and slowly the tears and shaking subsided. ‘Who was she? Tell me.’

And he did. He told me everything that had happened since he had left and I felt my heart breaking for my son as he told me how Maiya was slaughtered right in front of him and he had to stand there and watch it happen despite all his years of training.

He cried some more then I asked the only question that I wanted to know the answer to.

‘Is David dead?’

He nodded and I let out a sigh of total relief that had been inside me for over twenty long years.

He was gone, out of our lives forever at last.

‘Did you kill him?’

‘No! Even that closure was denied me. He knew I wanted to so much and he knew that despite my broken arm he could not beat me. So he leapt away from me, right to the edge of the creek and... and... he stabbed himself in the chest....’

I took in a sharp intake of breath. I did not think for one moment that he would have had the courage to do that. He was always a coward. He must have realised that the end of his road had been reached after he had destroyed yet another member of my family’s life.

‘His body?’

‘The creek was still running fast so he was gone before I could do anything. And anyway, my main concern was for Maiya.’

‘Of course. Of course it was.’

The frustration of it. I could not even feed his body to the pigs. I sighed another long sigh. At least he was gone now, out of our lives forever.

Now I had to look after my son, set him on the road to recovery. I drew him back towards me and he buried his face into my shoulder.

I held him tightly again for a long time until he leaned away from me, wiped the tears away from his eyes and he talked for a long time about Maiya and how much he loved her.

I listened as much as I could yet inside of me I was celebrating, I was celebrating so very much.

He was gone, that monster was gone at last!

\*

After a month at home with my family where everybody doted on me and cared for me, I felt ready to return to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. I wanted to immerse myself in my work and forget about everything.

My heart was not in it though. Only a month from re-joining I requested to leave the regiment and the Army as a whole.

My superior officers were surprised, disappointed and of course asked me to remain. I refused all offers and I was disappointed when they stated that they still expected me to work my notice period of twelve months.

For the first time in my life I asked my grandad to intervene although at the time I did not realise that he had an ulterior motive.

He called me into his office and I was there when he made only one phone call to a General in the Ministry and that was it, I was out of the Army. I stood up from his desk and thanked him. I turned to leave his office, knowing he was busy, when he stopped me.

‘One more thing, Jacob. Take a seat again. I don’t know if you’ve heard that I’ve had some upheaval in my security detail, quite a lot of upheaval to be honest. Some bloody Arabian Prince has offered a ridiculous amount of money to my Head of Personal Security and all his team to go and join his security in Abu Dhabi or Dubai or some other dusty concrete jungle. He and they have accepted despite what I thought was a reasonable counteroffer. You just can’t find loyal people anymore. And that’s when I started to think...’

I knew instantly where this was leading to. ‘Thank you, grandad, but I need some time on my own. I was going to go travelling...’

‘It will take me months to replace him and his team which basically means I will be near enough stuck in this mansion. You’re here and ready to go.’

‘I’m really not ready...’

‘I need you, Jacob, the family needs you. We’ve all supported you while you were in the Army. It would be good if you spent some time with the family, especially your mother. I feel it would be, well, unfair on her if you were to disappear again.’

This confused me. The amount of travel he did I would *never* be at home anyway. ‘You’re hardly here so I don’t understand how travelling with you will get to mean I spend more time with mum?’

He sighed and glanced at his computer screen just as the phone started to ring. It looked like he was meant to be having a call now so clearly this conversation was taking more time than he expected.

He let the phone ring out then said to me, ‘There’s more to it than just being my Head of Security...’

‘Wait. Your Head of *Personal* Security or your Head of *Security*. My understanding is that the two jobs were distinct with the Head of Personal Security reporting into the Head of Security.’

‘I was thinking of making some changes to that structure... Look, I did not want to go into the finer details right now. I was hoping you would just say yes.’ He sighed again as the phone rang again. This time he answered. ‘Yes? Yes, I know I’m meant to be having a call now. Push it back an hour. Right, well push my whole day back an hour. I know they’ve waited a long time to speak to me.’



Well if they want the contract that badly then they won't mind waiting another hour. Look, they need me more than I need them so they *will* wait. No calls for an hour.' And he slammed the phone down. 'Sometimes I do wonder whether it's all worth it...'

I raised an eyebrow at that and gestured around his sumptuously decorated office and then gestured out of huge windows behind him where you could see the huge grounds of his estate along with the large helicopter that was on the helipad.

He laughed. 'I see your point. Where was I?'

'Changes to the structure?'

'Oh yes. Well my Head of Security is due to retire soon so I was thinking I could hustle that along a little bit with a nice package to see him on his way. He has been with the family for years before we were as rich as we are now. And therein lies my fundamental challenge. Now that we are so wealthy, who can I trust? When I start advertising for a new Head of Security how do I know that whoever I recruit can be trusted? With you however...' He left it hanging and I could see his point. 'And there's more to it than even this. Do you know what my biggest concern is with all this? My biggest worry? Something that keeps me awake at night?' I shook my head. 'I don't have an heir, Jacob. I don't have anybody to leave all this to...'

I had never seen him as emotional as he was right at that moment. 'Surely your daughter? Sophia? Me?'

'No, that's not what I meant. The house, the money, the assets, are all left to you three in my will. My concern is the *business*. I don't have anybody to leave the business to!'

'And as your Head of Security I will get to see the inner workings of your whole organisation, see how you work, see how to control your empire?'

'Exactly!'

He rocked back in his chair, a big smile on his face. 'Like I was coming into your business through the back door?'

'Exactly. Nobody will suspect a thing! With your experience they'll just think you're just my Head of Security, so what? Think of the things you'll see and hear though!'

'Almost like a spy?'

'Yes! Of course people will shut their mouths when you're nearby, they'll know you have my ear, but you'll still hear and see things and most importantly I will be able to *believe* whatever you tell me! And while you're doing that you can watch and listen to *me* and learn how to run this huge empire I've built. Then when the time is right you take over. Obviously that's the long game. I'm not going anywhere just yet! With your experience in the Army people won't suspect a thing when I bring you in as my Head of Security and what people always forget about you is your phenomenal intelligence! You had a First from Oxford by the age of fifteen!'

I had to admit it did sound interesting. 'Sophia?'

'Don't be daft. She would forget her head if it wasn't attached to her body.'

'You do know that her being ditzy and dizzy is all an act?'

‘It’s a bloody good act!’ We both laughed. ‘And anyway, she’s too caught up in her modelling and that boy she’s seeing.’

‘Still don’t like him?’

‘Gold digger.’

‘I thought his family were quite wealthy?’

‘Yes, but not as wealthy as us.’

‘Who is?’

‘Nobody.’

‘So unless she marries me you’ll always disapprove!’

‘Touché!’ We laughed again. ‘So, are you on board?’

‘Reluctantly yes.’

‘Perfect! For the next week I’ll be here or in London then I’ll be in New York which will be my current security’s last assignment. I’ll want you in New York to see how things operate and then we can do a proper handover when we get back to London. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

He stood up which I signalled as a sign that we were done and he walked me over to the door of his office with an arm around my shoulders. We shook hands and then he closed the door behind me. I heard the phone start to ring then he swore and cursed as he walked back across his office to answer it. I listened for a few more moments.

‘I thought I said no more calls for... Oh hello my gorgeous princess!’

It was Sophia. I could tell instantly from the tone of his voice. To say he doted on her would be an understatement. He worshipped the ground she walked on.

‘Of course, of course. I’ll get somebody to transfer the money to you straight away. How much? Twenty thousand pounds? Oh, one hundred and twenty thousand. Yes, yes. I’ll do it straight away. No, no. Don’t worry about it. I’ll pass it through the accounts as a gift. It’s fine. Honestly.’

I shuddered to think what mess she had got herself into now. One hundred and twenty thousand pounds gone just like that. I laughed to myself and made my way back through the house to my room.

As I lay down on my bed my thoughts of course turned to Maiya. They always did and I knew they always would. I had no idea it was possible to love somebody so much in such a short space of time.

The only other person I had felt like that with was Katherine, but this was so much more. Plus I did not have to watch Katherine have her throat cut right in front of me.

We had received word through official channels that David’s body had been found after a long search during a heavy wet season, far down the creek from where we fought. The camp I found had also been found and using the maps in the diaries they found the rest of his camps along with the graves of his victims. The families had been informed.

With a lot of pressure by my grandad through official channels we had managed to obtain copies of his diaries. To be perfectly honest, most of it was quite mundane.

It was only when he returned to civilisation that they got more interesting and of course my family now knew the full story of how he made his way across south-east Asia and into Australia.

He stole the rest of the girls after Alice and Riley from various places in Western Australia and after trawling through news archives it was even possible to find stories in the newspapers and online about a girl going missing in some remote corner of Western Australia at around the same time that he made an entry in his diary recording the fact. Even with massive police manhunts the girls were never found, the sheer size of Australia and remote places he lived in helped him avoid capture.

He was not stupid though. He always stole the girls from different places, never returning to the same place twice, so nobody ever joined the dots about girls going missing from towns and villages which were so far away from each other with sometimes years between each abduction.

They were always classed as separate and unconnected incidents. He may have been a monster but he certainly was not stupid.

While I gathered my thoughts about what my grandad had asked me to become, it did not come as any surprise to me to realise that there was no way I was ready to do what my grandad was asking me to do. Yet, now as I thought deeper about it, I hoped it would take my mind off things and help the family, something I had not done enough of in recent years. And I had to admit it all did sound very interesting.

Little did I know then the things I would find out, things which would start to drastically unravel and destroy our family again.

## Chapter 82

I could not believe the pain. I could not believe that such pain existed. I could not believe that a person could endure such pain both physical and mental.

The image of seeing my beloved Simon's severed arm lying in the grass, the watch I bought him for his twenty-first birthday glittering in the sun, destroyed me and my life.

The story of what happened that day, how my fiancé ended up being crushed to death by an oak tree, has been well told. My God, even as I write these words I reach for the bowl next to my bed and vomit into it.

My gorgeous man was so badly destroyed by the car and the tree that the police said in their report that if they did not know who the passenger in the car was they would not have been able to identify him. He was crushed beyond recognition, unidentifiable is how badly destroyed he was.

Did David take drugs that day? You know what, I very much doubt it. Even now after spending months and months thinking about that day, I cannot believe that David purposefully took drugs. That is incredibly difficult for me to write as I want to blame him so much, I want to have closure, but I cannot believe that he took drugs that day, it just was not *him*.

So that left Sarah. My old friend Sarah. We were actually friends. And at that thought I retch into the bowl again. We used to go out drinking and clubbing together. Hell, she was there the night that Simon and I got together!

My God he was so good looking. So good looking that even Princess Sally had wanted to date him, so much so that on the night that Simon and I got together, Sally was meant to be having a date with Simon. Her car broke down though so she did not make the date so Simon went out to a nightclub and got talking to me. That is how Sally met the mechanic, David.

You see how all this comes full circle? If Sally's car had not broken down. If she had not met David. Perhaps Sally and Simon would have fallen in love and I would have fallen in love with somebody else, maybe even David, and lived happily ever after. Ha. Ha.

So that left Sarah. Even with Mr. Gallagher's resources she could not be found. There were rumours she had left town. There were rumours she had died that very same day from a drug overdose. She just seemed to disappear. The streets of the city are awash with derelict people, homeless and drug takers and alcoholics. She was just a needle in a haystack.

Which meant the closure I so desperately wanted and needed was denied me. With no Sarah there was no closure.

On the day Simon died all four of us had been in the city for the final fittings of our outfits for my marriage to Simon. David was going to be his best man and Sally my maid of honour for crying out loud! We were all so close and then it all changed because of whatever drug Sarah managed to slip into David's drink.

My life was so perfect. I literally had everything I had ever wanted and then it all turned to nothing. Before the accident I had just graduated with a First from Oxford and had obtained my dream job working as a lawyer at a City of London magic circle law firm. I actually started at the company but I did not last long

there. I was not right mentally, obviously, so I had lots of days off and I did not pass my probation. I was fired after only six months.

All this proved too much and I slumped into a more depressed state. Throughout my teenage years and into early womanhood I was always obsessed with my weight. I had always been naturally a bit big boned and a bit plump, and when Simon and I got together, well, I relaxed a little and put on a bit more weight than I liked.

Through the grief of losing Simon I was barely eating anyway and then combined with losing my dream job, all this clouded my mind and I became obsessed again with my weight. *Obsessed.*

Barely eating became never eating and when I did eat to keep up appearances in front of my family, my fingers soon went down my throat and I vomited it all back up again. I was a mess, physically and mentally.

Does the pain ever fade away? It does fade, slowly. Does it ever go entirely? No, never. My heart had been shattered into a thousand million pieces but thankfully I had a good family who helped me get through it.

The anorexia never totally left me, I was still underweight when without me knowing my father enrolled me on a part-time Masters course. It was such a sweet thing to do and I loved him for it and it turned out it was exactly what I needed.

I threw myself into that course with all the enthusiasm and dedication I could muster. It was not long before the tutors asked me to switch to a full-time course which I sailed through, with a focus on legal and corporate structures and how companies use these legal structures to avoid taxes, laws and regulations. I graduated with a Distinction and top student honours from my cohort.

As soon as I lost my focus and stopped studying the misery returned to me. The depression descended on me like a ten-tonne weight and I began to lose weight again. I had to have something to keep my mind off the pain so I spoke to my tutors about continuing my studies to the next level. They were thrilled and they could not enrol me onto the research degree Doctor of Philosophy in Law fast enough.

It was not long after I had completed my Masters and enrolled onto Doctorate course that I received a phone call which knocked me back again and brought all the horrible memories flooding back.

\*

I had not seen her in months, and certainly not called her for even longer. The last time I had seen her was by accident when we bumped into each other on a high street. Although she did not say anything I could see that she looked me up and down so many times and I could tell she was thinking about how much weight I had lost.

She was quite crafty when she called me as she knew that if I knew it was her calling I would not answer. So she withheld her number and I answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Michelle, it’s Sally.’

I lifted the phone away from my ear and my thumb hovered over the red end call icon. Then I thought maybe it was something serious, maybe it was her father. At least he had kept in touch with me, calling me occasionally to check I was okay. A lot more than his daughter had ever done. With fear I was about to receive some more bad news I stayed on the line. How much do I wish I had pressed the red icon instead? A lot.

Instead I reluctantly said, 'Hi. You withheld your number.'

'I know. I needed to speak to you urgently.'

'What about?'

'My waters have broken.'

'Oh.' When I bumped into her in the high street she already had a small baby bump showing which she took great pleasure in showing me. Twins she said. Unknown to her at that time, I threw up in my mouth.

'Can you give me a ride to the hospital?'

'Can David not take you? At least you've still got a partner who can run you around to places.' I hoped those words struck Sally like a dagger.

'Please Michelle, I really need you.'

Then over the phone I heard, 'I'm trying to watch the fucking television! Will you shut the fuck up whining at her?!'

It was clearly David's voice. I could almost understand if Sally had stayed with David and ostracised me and he had remained a good guy but by all accounts he was now a drunken alcoholic bum and his brief tirade towards Sally confirmed that.

'Can you not get a taxi?'

'I can't. I've got no money.'

Well I could not stop the smile spreading across my face. 'You've got no money? Nothing? Even for a taxi journey?'

'They're coming a week early! I was going to take some money out of next week's benefits to take care of the taxi. I've just spent all my money on food and stuff for the babies in preparation for next week.'

'Benefits?' Another smile grew on my face.

'Please Michelle, I really need you now. I'm scared. I don't want to do this on my own.'

'Where are you?'

'At home.'

'I guessed that. Where is home now?'

She told me her address and I told her I would be there in fifteen minutes. I only decided to say I would help her so I could gloat at her and revel in her predicament of having everything and now having nothing, just like me despite her family's wealth.

Quickly I got dressed and drove slowly from my house to a rough area of town where I would never normally go to. I pulled up outside a decrepit looking apartment block and across the street was a group of youths drinking and going off the smell when I exited the car, they were also smoking copious amounts of marijuana.

When I pressed the buzzer for Sally's apartment I waited for a few moments then I heard Sally come down the stairs and she opened the door.

'Ohhhhh fuck me these contractions are already killing me!'

I was tempted to say, 'I wonder if Simon experienced any pain when he died?' though I managed to restrain myself. Instead I said nothing. Just took the bag from her hand, opened the passenger door, helped her sit and then drove us to St. Katherine's Hospital.

\*

'Come on Sally, you can do it! One more big push! Go on!'

With her face bright red and a thick sweat on her brow, Sally took a deep breath and pushed and pushed as hard as she could.

'That's it! Well done! The head is out!'

I hovered in the background, now dressed in an appropriate hospital gown and cap, watching Sally give birth to new life, I felt the vomit and bile starting to rise up the back of my throat. The rest of my time in that room passed in a haze.

When the midwife lifted the baby girl from between Sally's legs, cleaned it and handed it over to a nurse then turned her attention back to Sally for the next baby, I could not take it any longer.

There was Sally, giving birth to beautiful new life, the father being the man who had killed my beloved Simon, I could not take it any longer.

Unnoticed I ran from the room, shaking and crying. Outside the room I leaned on the wall of the corridor, trying to compose myself which I failed to do.

Thankfully there was a restroom right outside the room and I burst into it. Kneeling in front of the toilet I threw up my life and soul into that porcelain bowl, and when there was nothing less to be vomited, I wretched and wretched over that bowl for what seemed like a lifetime.

The image of that new life being born, that precious gift of new life being given to Sally and her horrible monster of a partner would haunt me for a long time.

## Chapter 83

After the horror of watching Sally give birth to new life, I did not contact her again. I did not even know the gender of the second baby, did not know their names and nor did I want to. A week later she tried to call, this time not withholding her number, but I did not answer. I wanted nothing to do with her or her children and I would only ever speak to her one more time in my life, right at the very bitter end.

Instead I immersed myself totally in my Doctorate. I had always found corporate structures fascinating for some reason, how a company could register itself on say the F.T.S.E. 100 totally legitimately, yet behind this apparently perfectly legitimate top-co there would be potentially hundreds if not thousands of companies all set-up all throughout the world for usually one sole reason, to maximise profits and minimise taxes paid.

In family-owned companies it can be even more complex with Family Trusts and investment companies integrated in the ownership of the companies to maximise wealth and of course reduce the impact of the t-word.

Companies created in Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Luxembourg or even the Channel Islands, all set-up to increase companies and individuals' wealth as much as possible.

Do this well and you can pump huge profits into your top-co which in turn boosts your share price which in turn could lead to you becoming a very wealthy person.....

I am not so naïve to think that you do not end up with some skeletons in your closet if you become so rich. Indeed, my own grandfather had indicated as much many years ago.....

\*

'Ohhh grandfather!' I stamped my foot. 'Pllleeeaaassee!'

'Who do you think you are? Sally?'

'Sorry.'

'Hmmm. You are the daughter of my son and my granddaughter, not the daughter of a billionaire who has more skeletons in his closet than an oil baron who lives in a haunted house!'

'He doesn't have skeletons in his closet! He has just worked hard and sometimes had good luck on his side!'

'Good luck?! Nineteen seventy-eight, he was applying for a military contract. His main rival fell from a ten-storey high balcony. Verdict, suicide, but the rival had never shown any signs of depression or suicidal tendencies. Nineteen eighty-four. Sally's father had just lost a court battle over the copyright and patent of a now common household product. You know which I mean?'

'Yes, of course. That is what made him most of his money.'

'He should be a pauper after that court battle. He lost fair and square. Three days after the judgment his rival went missing from his own yacht in perfectly calm seas off the Monaco coast. Verdict, an unfortunate accident resulting in



drowning. Utter drivel. Everyone with half a brain knows that, although Mr. Gallagher may not have pushed him off that yacht with his own hand, it was a hand connected to an arm belonging to Mr. Gallagher. Proof of this theory, none.'

'Therefore he is innocent until...'

'Rubbish. He is as guilty as a man holding a smoking gun!'

'Grandfather that is why we have courts, to present evidence to find out if a person is innocent or guilty. You can't say he is guilty just because you think he is! You need proof.'

'My proof is the coincidence that two of his main rivals both died under extremely mysterious circumstances.'

'Only two though. I'm sure to get to a position such as his he would have to push a lot more than two people!'

'Nineteen eighty-eight. Aircraft contract with a major American aircraft manufacturer to make numerous electrical components and the software to run a plane, a contract that would make his company the largest electrical and computer software company in the U.K. and up there with the world's biggest.'

'And?'

'The government stopped him claiming that this contract would give him a monopoly on the industry. The two main people who blocked the signing of this contract were found dead two days after this announcement, one from drowning in his own swimming pool and another was knocked down by a black cab in London.'

'And Mr. Gallagher was the perpetrator?'

'I have no proof and I don't think anybody does unless he bought them off or killed them, but don't you think it is all a little bit too coincidental?'

The kettle had long since boiled but it went unnoticed by both of us.

'I can see what you mean grandfather, yet you can't accuse people without proof. That can't be done in this country.'

'I know we are talking about your best friend's father so try to be neutral about this and ask one simple question. Does everything I have said to you sound a little suspicious?'

'Okay, as a neutral, yes, it does. However, I know Mr. Gallagher better than anybody apart from Sally and he is not capable of ordering these things!'

'I have to disagree with you. You know his fatherly side. You only know how nice he is to you and Sally. Have you ever been to the office with him?'

'No.'

'Have you ever sat in with him during one of his business meetings?'

'No.'

'I have.'

I could not keep the surprise out of my voice. 'You have? When?'

'Just before I retired from the Army, before you and Sally were born so before I had met him informally. They wanted an experienced soldier's opinion about an electronic component Gallagher and the Army were working on. At that time I was only pushing pens and paper waiting for my pension and some random officer walked into my office and invited me into the meeting. I think he was told to go

and find anyone who was experienced in the field and I was the first person he saw.'

'Okay. Then what happened?'

'I was taken to a meeting room and sat down and listened to all they said. I've seen him socially since then, since you got to know Sally we have been together to many of the functions he has thrown for you both, parties etcetera, right?'

'Yeah, we have.'

'Right. Well the difference between him on that day and him on his own grounds hosting a big party was astonishing. He was evil Michelle, pure evil. The electrical component has since been banned by the Geneva Convention as being too, well, evil to be used on any battlefield. But all he saw, Gallagher, were the pound signs flashing before his eyes. He has no idea it was me, and probably does not even remember the insignificant old soldier who so strongly opposed him during that meeting. He had answers for every objection I had. All the military could see was certain success on the battlefield and all he could see was the large contract that was just about to land on his desk followed by an even larger cheque!' My grandfather took a deep breath and then continued in a quieter voice. 'Don't say that you know him, you don't. Only when you have looked him in the eye across a table where you are discussing the future of his company and the future of his bank balance and you have seen the evil, determination and pure greed in his eyes can you truly say that you know him.'

There was silence for a moment while we contemplated everything that had been said. Eventually I asked the only question that could be asked, 'What was the component?' For a moment I thought that he was not going to tell me but he did.

'It fitted onto the top of a man's rifle, gun, whatever. It was a small box with some kind of powerful laser in it. I, of course, do not know the exact technical specifications, I don't even know if laser would be the correct word. But I am led to believe that the soldier pressed a button on the gun and the box emitted some kind of powerful laser. How it works is not important. What is important is the result of pressing the button. It blinded, blinded Michelle, the enemy soldiers.'

'Oh my God! That's horrible!'

'Exactly. The laser had a wide field of fire too so it is not as if the soldier had to point it straight into the enemy's eyes, just in the general direction would suffice. Now imagine a whole battalion...'

'How many men is that?'

'It would vary from around five hundred to one thousand men. So imagine a whole battalion armed with one of those boxes. If all they have to do is point them in the general direction of the enemy troops they would have been able to blind and therefore kill probably a brigade of enemy troops without even trying.'

'And a brigade is how many men?'

'Around one thousand five hundred to three thousand depending on their roles etcetera.'

'Bloody hell! Three times the number?'

'Yes, easily. Of course, these men would not stare at each other across a battlefield and therefore it is not as if a whole brigade could be wiped out in one

engagement but imagine the power during any engagements that this component would give!’

‘I can imagine the effect on the morale of the enemy soldiers too.’

‘Exactly. And this is the weapon that your kind and caring father-figure desperately wanted to sell to our military!’

‘That is truly horrible.’

‘I know. Now what do you think of Mr. Gallagher? Still think he is incapable of ordering murders of anyone standing in his way?’

‘It is different, I mean creating a weapon to kill a country’s enemies and personally ordering the murder of another man are greatly different things, but from what you have said about his actions during that meeting, well, you never know do you?’

‘Indeed. You never know what a man is capable of when his success is being threatened. If you had seen him in action Michelle, then you would think he is capable of ordering another man’s murder. Trust me, you would.’

\*

For some reason I never forgot that conversation we had all those years ago. I suppose I never forgot it as it seemed to be so contrasting to the man I knew. He had always been so kind and caring to me, and he adored Sally.

To apparently be responsible for deaths and for promoting so passionately such an evil weapon just seemed so alien to me when compared to the man I thought I knew.

The whole Gallatronics’ corporate structure was immense and it fascinated me. It did not appear that there was any country in the world it did not touch and I had direct access, his personal mobile phone number, to the man at the very top. So I made the call.

\*

‘So lovely to see you after so much time, Michelle.’

‘You too, Alfred.’

I was standing in the doorway of the Gallagher mansion and it felt so strange to be back here. This was always like a second home to me and then came my estrangement from Sally which meant I had not been here in years. Mr. Gallagher was like my second father, Sally the sister I never had. And of course, it was here after Sally’s eighteenth birthday party where Simon proposed to me. Engaged at eighteen to the most handsome man... I thought my life was complete.....

Alfred, the Gallagher’s long serving butler, gestured for me to enter the house which I did and stood in the immense entrance hall. The pictures of Sally’s mother still dominated the hallway and I thought about how they used to frighten me so much after Sally’s mother had died. That was so many years ago now and even though the pictures were wonderful works of art, even they did not do her justice. She truly was a stunningly beautiful woman. Cancer took her away from her family much too soon.

I followed Alfred up the immense marble staircase and he asked after my family and how my university courses were progressing. I noticed he was breathing hard when we reached the top of the stairs and wondered if he ever gave any thought to retiring. This family had been his life though so probably the mere mention of the word would bring him out in cold sweats.

We made our way through the house and I involuntarily shivered when we walked past Sally's old bedroom, the door of which was firmly closed, to his office. In all the years I had known the family and all the times I had visited the mansion, I had never actually set foot in his office. I don't know why this surprised me now. As a girl and young woman I had no real reason to go in there and now I hesitantly knocked on the door.

'Come.'

Slowly I opened the door and there he was, sat at his computer, staring at the screen, a look of steel in his eyes which quickly disappeared when he saw who was stood hesitantly in his doorway. His face instantly brightened and he stood up from the desk.

'Michelle! So good to see you!' He came around the desk and kissed me lightly on both cheeks, taking my hand as he did it. 'I looked at my calendar this morning expecting to see the same old boring schedule of meetings then I saw your name and my day started to look a whole lot brighter and now here you are!'

By morning I knew that he probably meant at four a.m. 'And here I am. Thank you for taking the time to see me.'

'Nonsense! I would have cancelled my whole day if that is what was needed to help you! Please, take a seat. Drink? Water? Tea or coffee?'

'Some water will be fine, thank you.'

I waited as he poured some water from a decanter into a glass and then I asked, 'Have you heard from Sally?'

'Nothing directly. You?'

'Not for a while. You know she has children though, yes?'

He wriggled a little in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. 'I wasn't informed directly. Shall we begin? Remind me what your Doctorate is on?'

I explained it to him and he nodded knowingly then he said, 'I'm not sure that I'm the best person in my organisation to be speaking to. I have a hoard of tax advisors, lawyers and accountants who do all this for me to ensure everything is done in the most efficient and profitable way.'

'I'm happy to speak to them but if you don't mind giving me some thoughts it will look very good in my thesis, speaking to the man at the very top?'

He hesitated and he glanced at his computer screen and tapped something into the keyboard. 'Okay then. Be gentle with me though!'

I laughed. 'Would you mind if I recorded you?'

He wriggled again. 'On second thoughts I'm not that comfortable doing this without a lawyer... In fact you should really speak to my lawyers and not me... You're not going to write anything bad are you?'

For some reason he looked genuinely concerned. 'No, of course not.' I laughed then said, 'Unless you say something bad!'

'Yes, quite. Shall we begin?'

I placed my phone on the desk and switched on the voice recorder app. We talked for over the allotted hour and I am so glad I persisted and was not just brushed off to a minion lawyer or accountant. He knew more than he initially let on and no doubt he knew more than he actually said.

When we were done I suddenly felt brave so I asked him, 'It probably falls outside the scope of this interview but I'm interested, nonetheless. During the early days of Gallatronics there were rumours that, well, accidents kept on happening to your competitors or indeed anybody who seemed to be standing in your way.....'

It was only the second time in my life when I saw him go so red. The first was in a very expensive restaurant in Mayfair where he was treating Sally and me to dinner after our G.C.S.E. results. First of all the maître d' did not recognise him despite him dining there frequently and then he placed us at the worst table in the restaurant, right outside the toilets.

He blustered his way through the first course but when a waitress spilled sauce on him then the redness came along with a ranting tirade. We did not make it to second course. I found out from Sally that not to long after that he bought the freehold of the building the restaurant was in and put the rents up to an extortionate level. The restaurant had no option other than to close following which he promptly sold the freehold. Money buys power.

'You're not wrong this falls outside the scope of this interview young lady! What rumours are you talking about?!

'Well, erm, it doesn't matter...'

'It bloody does matter!'

'Well, the copyright and patent case in the mid-eighties. I believe you lost then...'

'Then the other guy fell off his yacht, right?!'

'That's the story I heard...'

'Who the hell from?!'

'Various sources...'

'Well you can tell your various sources that back then I was exonerated of all blame in that case. He was quite elderly and it was apparently not the first time he had fallen off his yacht due to him losing his balance!'

'Wasn't the judge at the hearing a friend of yours?' I had done my own research into the case so I knew that this was true.

He went even redder and I realised I had crossed the line. 'Now you listen here young lady. I have taken time out of my very busy schedule to help you with your thesis about corporate structure, not to be grilled in the comfort of my own office, in my own house no less, about things from a long time ago like I'm back in court! Now if you don't mind.....'

He gestured towards the door and turned to look at his computer screen. 'Thank you for your time.' He did not respond so I grabbed my phone which was still recording the conversation and left his office.

I never returned to his office or the mansion ever again.

## Chapter 84

I completed my thesis not long after speaking to Mr. Gallagher. It was strange though, at one point the document seemed to be amended by itself. The 'Date Modified' changed to a date on which I did not work on the document. I did not think much about it, presumed it was just a problem with Windows or something, and carried on working on it until it was ready.

It was not long after I noticed the document was modified that I received a phone call from a member of Mr. Gallagher's accounting team. She sounded nice enough and had heard that I was working on my thesis and wondered if there was anything she could add. In return, I would be able to advise her as she was also thinking of doing further academic work. It seemed like a good and worthwhile exchange of knowledge so we agreed to meet.

A week after speaking to her we met in a coffee shop in trendy Shoreditch. She was around my age, quite pretty and we soon settled down into talking about Gallatronics after we had ordered our drinks and exchanged pleasantries.

There was something strange about our chat though. For starters she seemed nervous, anxious perhaps, and also seemed to be speaking like a robot, like the information she had to impart had been scripted to her. Any probing questions I asked her to expand on a subject were all met with, 'Sorry, I don't know much about that.', and then she would continue talking like I had never asked the question.

What she had to say was quite interesting but all quite basic stuff that I either already knew or was far too basic to go into my thesis.

I quickly realised this was probably a waste of my time so I closed my notebook and started to ask her about her academic studies. Again, her answers did not seem to stack up to much scrutiny and again when I tried to get more information from her she avoided the questions.

With a quiet sigh I removed the probably from my previous statement about time, took a sip from my coffee which was still half full, then excused myself and went to the ladies.

After returning to the table I was almost tempted to just leave however the coffee was very nice so I ordered some cake and sat back down at the table.

We talked some more, she refused a slice of my cake, and I quickly finished the coffee noticing that for some reason it did not taste quite as nice as I remembered. Maybe it was clashing with the cake.

Not long after finishing the coffee I said I had another meeting to attend and left the coffee shop.

I never saw or heard from her again.

\*

Outside the coffee shop it started to rain and I sighed a long sigh. What a waste of time. I was wearing a thick coat and good shoes so I decided to walk in the rain down to Liverpool Street Station and catch a train home before the worst of the rush hour.

After all that had happened home was still with my parents and they had helped me so much to come to terms with losing Simon. I was still very close to them and had no intention of moving out. In fact the mere thought of losing them on top of everything else that had happened was not a thought worth thinking about.

It was as I was approaching the station that I felt my phone buzzing in my bag. It was crowded, noisy and still raining so I did not answer it.

It was a decision I regretted so much for the rest of the short time remaining to me.

Instead I went down onto the Tube and caught a Central Line train westbound. I planned to change onto the District Line at Notting Hill Gate and start heading down to south west London.

As the train arrived at Notting Hill Gate I put my book away into my bag, took my phone out and looked at the missed call log. It was a number that I did not recognise and I was half tempted to just ignore it.

However I had placed a few calls and sent a few emails recently about obtaining some post-doctorate work. So instead of changing straight onto the District Line I went to the station entrance where I could get a signal and called back the number. It only rang once and was answered by a woman who sounded harried.

‘Hello. This is Michelle Walmesley. I have a missed call from...’

‘Hi Michelle. This is Doctor Wilde at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. You need to attend the hospital at once.’

I froze then started to shake. It was my parents. I knew it was my parents. They were due to perform tonight at The Royal Opera House and they would have been making their way into London about this time on that death-trap thing my dad called a motorbike. Hell, they even near enough go past the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital on their way.

‘Is it my parents?’

‘I’m afraid to say it is. There has been an accident. You need to come here now. Where are you?’

‘I’m at Notting Hill Gate.’

‘Then you need to either get a taxi or come on the District Line to Fulham Broadway and either walk from there or get a taxi. Come straight to the hospital, Accident and Emergency reception, ask for me, Doctor Wilde. Okay?’

‘Sure. I’m coming now.’

‘Good. And Michelle, hurry.’

I quickly contemplated getting a taxi but at that time of the day it would have taken an age through the traffic so I ran through Notting Hill Gate tube station and onto a southbound train.

I was crying by the time I got to Fulham Broadway. People stopped to ask if I was okay but I just rushed past them, running as fast I could through the station to the exit where I looked for a taxi.

The rain was still hammering down though and I could not find a taxi so I started to run towards the hospital, tears still rolling down my face.

I had to cross a few busy roads which I just ran across. Cars screeched to a halt, horns were pressed yet I just carried on running.

I burst into the hospital and screamed at the staff to show me the way to A&E. A kindly old porter took me by the arm and led me through the hospital. I saw a sign for A&E and pushed him away then sprinted away from him.

With a loud crash I threw open a set of double doors and screamed at the doctors and nurses that I was Michelle Walmesley and they should take me to my parents right now.

A doctor who turned out to be Doctor Wilde came around from reception, took my arm and led me away from the reception area to a private room.

I knew before she even started to speak that they had died. Why else take me to a private room? Why not just take me to them?

‘Michelle, I’m so sorry to tell you that there was an accident involving your parents and a heavy goods vehicle. Unfortunately their injuries were too severe and there was nothing we could do to save them. They both passed away a short time ago. I’m so sorry to.....’

I had no idea what she said after that other than I remember she said they had wheeled my mum’s stretcher into my dad’s room so they could be together at the end.

They died within minutes of each other.

They had both died.

I still needed them.

I still needed them so badly and now they were gone.....



## Chapter 85

I enjoyed working for my grandad. It was good to be at home, close to my mother, Sophia and our wider circle of family and friends.

The job was not too difficult either, certainly nothing like being shot at or having bombs thrown at me. It mainly consisted of organising my grandad's travel security, making sure that he was always safe, making sure the rest of the family were always safe including my mother and sister.

Being so wealthy we were a permanent kidnap threat, blackmail threat and extortion threat and it was my job to make sure all that was taken care of.

My grandad had always taken a 'hand off approach'. Everybody was to live normal lives as much as they could, however there would always be security present. So for example, if my mother was to go shopping she would not have security directly with her, but they would be close by, monitoring. Unless there was a specific threat then the security would be stepped up to 'hands on' with all of us being escorted everywhere by highly trained operatives.

I was also granted access to the inner workings of my grandad's business and also to people that I did not even know existed. I was his public security however there were people, silent, secretive people who were his private security. Our paths rarely crossed and that side of my grandad's business and life was not something I wanted to learn anything about or become involved in.

At first.

It was during one of the rare times our paths crossed that I heard the name that had reverberated throughout all my life and still seemed to be intent on reverberating throughout my family's life. The name was Michelle.

My grandad was on a business trip to Curacao to speak to some of the plenitude of banks on the island and also to speak to some of the managers of his more obscure Gallatronics companies based on the island. Organising his security was easy and I managed to have some down time in one of the Gallatronics hangars at the airport while he was engaged in meetings.

Hearing some voices coming from a room off the hangar I knocked and opened the door just as one of the men said, 'Like we did to that Michelle bitch all those years ago?!' He and the others around the table laughed.

I looked around the room and there were five men there, all dressed in black, black t-shirts, combat trousers and boots, all of them large men, full of muscles and hard looking. I had encountered men like this frequently during my time in the S.A.S. and I knew exactly who they were.

They were my grandad's 'private' security or enforcers or killers even, whatever you want to call them. It did not escape my attention that the table was covered in various weapons, and from a glance all top of the range modern armaments. There were also a couple of weapon and personal defence magazines scattered on the table too.

All of the men looked at me and one of them said, 'Who the hell are you, boy?' while he rested his hand on one of the guns. He was a mountain of man with a strong South African accent.

'Jacob.' I smiled pleasantly at him.

‘Did they not teach you at whatever prep school you attended to wait for a reply when you knock on a door before opening it?! Jacob Gallagher I presume? Aren’t you your grandad’s lap dog?!’

‘I’m head of his security if that’s what you mean.’

‘Head of his security?!’ All the men around the table laughed. ‘You know nothing about his security!’

‘You mentioned Michelle. She is a close family friend...’

‘Don’t you mean *was* a close family friend? Not that much of close family friend considering what was done to her.’ They all laughed again.

Now he was starting to piss me off. It would actually be an interesting fight one on one. Unfortunately I was heavily outnumbered and the only weapons I had with me were my hands.

‘And what does that mean?’

The South African man snarled at me. ‘Ask your grandaddy. Or maybe if you look in the third basement you might have your eyes opened.’

‘What third basement?’

‘Piss off, boy. Go hold your grandaddy’s hand some more.’

‘Now look here...’

‘No you look here Mr. S.A.S.’ He stood up and picked up one of the guns. ‘We don’t report to you. We have nothing to do with you. We all report into X...’

‘What’s your name?’

‘X.’

‘And your name?’ I gestured to another of the men.

‘X.’

‘Very amusing.’

‘And I’m only going to tell you one more time and then I’ll most likely lose my patience.’ He cocked the hammer of the gun. ‘Piss. The. Fuck. Off.’

‘Sorry to disturb you gentlemen.’ And I left the room. I quietly closed the door behind me and sighed.

Something clearly happened to Michelle that my grandad knows about and most likely ordered. But what? Why would my grandad order something terrible to happen to Michelle, his daughter’s best friend?

There was no way I could speak to him about it and clearly I was not going to get any further with the thugs in that room. And what on Earth is the third basement? My grandad’s head office in London has basements but there are five of those, the third being a car park. That could not be it. His New York office also had basements though again from memory the third was a gym and swimming pool complex.

So where else have basements in his life? I pondered it for a few moments then it suddenly clicked into place.

The mansion has basements although only two as far as far as I knew. Is there a third that I don’t know about and if I do not know about it then why do I not know about it?

The reasons why soon became clear when we returned to the mansion later that week.

As soon as I was able to I went into the basements. The first was a huge wine cellar. There were racks upon racks of wine down there, some decades old. Part of the basement had even been sealed off and was permanently refrigerated at what cost I did not care to think about. My grandad saw the wines as an investment; I saw them as a decadent waste of money.

The second was used for storage, mainly furniture storage which could be used for entertaining. There was nothing surprising down there, just row upon row of tables and chairs, mirrors and even some wardrobes and beds.

On the presumption the third basement was accessed from the second basement I started my search in the second basement around where the stairs descended from the first to second basements. It did not take me long to find the thick steel door hidden behind some mirrors.

There was a layer of dust at the base of the door so it clearly had not been opened for a long time. There was a code entry panel on the door and I hesitated for a moment before I inputted the obvious code. The code was the same as all the locked doors around the mansion, my grandmother's date of birth. I should really speak to my grandad about coming up with some different security codes! With a clunk and some whirring sounds the bolts slid open and I was able to open the door.

The first thing I noticed was the dust. Clearly nobody had been down here for years? Had my grandad forgotten about this third basement? Highly doubtful. He probably just had no reason to come down here anymore and believed that whatever was down here was safe from prying eyes, certainly prying eyes from outside the family anyway.

Next to the door I found a light switch and I flicked it. Slowly but surely row upon row of fluorescent lights reluctantly flickered to life and once the basement was lit another thing quickly struck me. The vault was huge. It looked like it ran near enough the full length of the house although to be honest, I struggled to see the other end.

I looked at the items nearest to me and here, casually flung in one corner of the vault, was what looked like a Picasso. Now my grandad generally did not buy copies or fakes so I could only presume it was an authentic original. I took a few paces over to it and pulled it forward.

The painting behind that was clearly a Monet and the signature at the bottom confirmed that. I pulled the Monet forward and there was another Picasso so I pulled that forward and there was another painting leaning on another painting leaning on another.

In all there were ten in just that one stack. Based on an average selling price of fifty million pounds, there was half a billion pounds' worth of paintings just casually stacked up in the corner of this filthy basement. £500,000,000.

And that was not the only stack of paintings. There were more. A lot more.

There were shelves of gold and silver antiques and shelf upon shelf of dusty files.

Thankfully whoever had organised the files had been quite efficient and there seemed to be an alphabetical system in place. I searched through the Ws first of all and could not find anything so I moved back some rows to the Ms and delved through those files. It did not take me long to find a file entitled Michelle.

On my way through the basement I had noticed one solitary dusty table and chair which I now made my way back to and switched on the lamp which was on the table.

After dusting off the chair I sat down and started to read and finally my eyes were opened.

## Chapter 86

Their funeral was well attended. They had been performing in the West End for decades and many of their fellow performers and even fans turned out for the service, so much so that the church was full and many waited outside listening on the speakers.

Their actual burial was a private family affair. Sally did not show up of course however her father did send a large bouquet of flowers and donated a significant amount of money to their memorial fund which I had set up. I had an inkling he might even attend and I presumed he would have done if we had not so recently fallen out. I had been meaning to call him to apologise but then this happened and I never got round to it.

Despite the police's best efforts, they had still not found the driver of the heavy goods vehicle which had killed my parents. After the accident he fled the scene and no trace of him had been found.

The company who had rented him the truck showed the police all the appropriate paperwork they had, driving license, H.G.V. license, proof of address. They were all fake. Every single one of them.

Story of my life. First Simon. Now my parents. No perpetrators in both cases. How much more pain could I endure?

The police were at a loss as to why somebody would give all the fake documents, hire a truck and ram my parents off the road, crushing them both under the wheels of the truck. We did not have any enemies as far as we were aware. They were opera singers for crying out loud, hardly people who went around creating enemies.

The police focussed their attention on the West End for a while. Did anyone want them out of the way? Were they stopping somebody else's success? I did not believe for a moment it was anything like that. The West End was of course very competitive, but actually hiring somebody to kill my parents?! I just could not see it.

All I could do on the day of the funeral was go through the process like a robot. Say thank you for coming, yes I miss them dearly, the usual nauseating platitudes.

I wished to be anywhere else but there...

At the wake I had a sandwich and glass of water and then near enough straight away after consuming them I ran to the toilets and shoved my fingers down my throat, taking pleasure in the taste of the vomit in my mouth.

Once it was all over I got a taxi home by myself and entered the lonely house. I walked through a few rooms in a daze, noting that my dad's reading glasses were still on a table in the lounge, the dinner my mum had cooked for them to eat after the show was still on the kitchen table waiting to be warmed up in the microwave. There was now mould growing on it yet I could still not bear to touch anything.

Instead I went upstairs to my bedroom, took my clothes off and climbed into the lonely bed where I cried all night into the early hours of the morning.

That was my routine for quite a while. Wandering around the house, crying, hardly eating and if I did eat I would throw it straight back up again. I lost so much weight though I was happy I was losing the weight.

One day I tried to go outside. It did not end too well. I had a panic attack as soon as I reached the end of our garden path so I ran back into the house, slamming the front door behind me.

A few relations called by to check on me. I went through the process, I am coping fine thank you, yes I am eating well, yes I know I have lost weight. And on and on, ad nauseam.

I of course knew I was unwell mentally and physically yet I had been down this road before with my anorexia and I knew I would start to feel better soon. It was a few weeks after meeting the woman in the coffee shop and the day my parents died that I started to feel odd and then more than odd. I started to feel ill, then very ill.

I got so bad I had no option but to call my doctor and demand a home visit. They refused saying they only did home visits for the elderly and those unable to visit the doctor. I begged them saying I was so ill but the bitch receptionist based her decision solely on my age which left me no other option but to call an ambulance. There was no way I could get to the hospital by myself. I could not even get out of my garden without having a panic attack.

When the paramedics arrived they examined me, took my blood pressure, heart rate, etcetera, and one of them noticed the dead flowers in vases dotted throughout the house and cards of commiseration on the mantelpiece and tables in the lounge, all of which I had not cleared away.

‘Michelle, you appear to be quite underweight, borderline malnourished. I can’t help but notice the cards around the house so I presume you’re grieving at the moment?’ He did not give me chance to reply. It was pretty obvious anyway. ‘I think we need to get you into hospital and get some nutrition into you. How does that sound?’

I nodded my agreement and they placed me in a wheelchair, covered me in a blanket and wheeled me out to the ambulance.

I would never return to my family home.....

\*

Finally my eyes were opened. The file contained page after page on Michelle’s life, where she worked, where she studied, boyfriends, who her parents were, what they did for a living.

Everything about Michelle was in that thick file and her life was detailed over years. Michelle was my mother’s closest friend so I can only presume that being so close to my mother my grandad wanted her closely monitored.

The thickest part of the file was in relation to her fiancé Simon’s death, the terrible car accident which sent my family and Michelle’s family down this dark path. It was that car accident which ruined my father and mother’s lives and turned my father into the monster he became.

Obviously it was clear that Michelle suffered greatly after Simon’s death and it was noted in the file that she was in and out of hospital suffering from anorexia and was in and out of clinics where her mental health was frequently assessed.

She got through it though, and it looked like in the file she was having a very good career in law and academia until the accident that appeared to tip her over the edge again. This accident involved her parents being killed in another road traffic accident involving a heavy goods vehicle which knocked them off their motorbike and crushed them under the wheels of the truck. It was a horrendous accident which clearly devastated Michelle again.

When that accident had been outlined there were only a few pages left in the file. A few of the pages consisted of a transcript of a conversation between my grandad and Michelle in which Michelle appeared to be interviewing him about his company.

It was a verbatim transcript, not notes, so I could only presume my grandad had recorded the conversation somehow. It was labelled as having taken place in his office here in the house so again I could only assume he had some kind of recording equipment in his office. I made a mental note to investigate that.

The transcript seemed to be a conversation in relation to Michelle's thesis, all about the structure of my grandad's companies, legal and tax rules, all quite tedious stuff and of no interest to me.

I was about to move on in the file when I noticed a few exclamation marks at the bottom of the page so I carried on reading and was surprised to see that the conversation clearly got heated at the end, so heated in fact that Michelle was asked to leave. She asked some question about my grandad's past which he took umbrage to.

Did she get too close to the truth?

Then there were a few pages which outlined that they somehow hacked Michelle's computer to obtain a copy of her thesis and unbelievably there was a note in this file which directed the reader to another file in which her whole thesis was printed.

I flicked through the next few pages and reached the last pages in the file.

And finally my eyes were opened.

The accident to Michelle's parents: it was planned by my grandad's security.

Her illness: a result of the accident and.....

There it was. The truth. Finally the truth. One word.

It was not anorexia that killed Michelle.

It was not a broken heart due to Simon's death.

It was not a destroyed heart due to her parents' death.

It was dimethylmercury.

## Chapter 87

‘Have you seen Michelle recently?’

For the first time in years I had returned to the mansion to see my father. For once, mine and David’s life was going well. He had got a job and had recently been promoted, and then my evil father had decided enough was enough and tried to ruin our life again by contacting David and sending him into another spiral of depression and drinking.

The question came out of the blue and I was surprised but managed to compose a reply. ‘Not for years. How does she fit into this?’

‘She’s dying.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘She’s dying. She never recovered from losing Simon, never recovered from losing him in that way. Seeing your fiancé’s severed arm lying in the grass can really destroy someone’s life. She became severely anorexic and now the doctors have said there is nothing they can do. I’ve heard from my sources she has only days to live, if that.’

I slumped into a chair in front of his desk. ‘I had no idea.’

‘Yes, I know you don’t. If you’d only supported her as much as you did David perhaps she would have pulled through.’

‘Don’t you dare try to blame me for this. Don’t you dare! I tried my hardest to support her but she cut me off...’

‘Do you blame her? After all, you still insisted on being with the man who had killed her fiancé. Not exactly the greatest foundation for a friendship is it?’

‘Are you done? Anything else you’d like to blame David or me for?’

‘I think I’m done but depending on how long you’re planning on staying for I’m sure I could think of something else.’

‘For the last and final time it wasn’t his fault!’

‘Oh yes, it was this mystical Sarah’s fault. For the last few years I’ve had private investigators combing the country trying to find her. Ex-police detectives and a couple of ex-members of MI5 and nothing. I’ve had people camped outside any address that I could find a record of her living at and she has never once returned to those addresses. It’s like she never existed. Funny that.’

‘So now you’re saying that Sarah doesn’t exist? I think you need to speak to Michelle again about that.’

‘Yes, Michelle’s testimony certainly helped save David. How much did you pay her to go along with that story?’

‘My God. How can you say that? What’s happened to you?’

‘No Sally. The question you should be asking is what happened to you? You abandoned your best and closest friend in her darkest hour, and you abandoned me, the loving father who gave you everything you ever needed or wanted, who raised you as a father and a mother.’ His voice broke as he finished the sentence. Sally looked up at him and noticed the tears rolling down his face. ‘You broke my heart the day you left, you broke my heart and I’ll never, ever be able to forgive you for that, and I’ll never, ever be able to forgive David for the pain he has caused. Please, leave now.’



‘And I’ll never, ever be able to forgive you for the pain you’ve caused me. With one phone call and one letter you’ve ruined our lives again, your only daughter. David is slumped in his armchair drinking again; I can’t work because every time I apply for something you stop it. There is no point even attempting to change my identity because you’d find me. Our lives were back together. We were a family. We were happy.’

‘I think you need to speak to your dying friend about ruined lives and happiness. She’s in a room off ward six at St. Katherine’s. Go and see her. I have. Then you’ll know about ruined lives! Now get out, get out, get out and never, ever return to this house! Get OUT!’

I burst into tears and ran out of the room and down to my old car that I had managed to save up and buy. Quickly I drove down the long driveway, past the lake and the island where my mother was buried and out through the gates.

\*

I walked along the corridor off ward six at St. Katherine’s until I found the room with Michelle’s name scrawled on a whiteboard attached to the door. Hesitantly I stepped away from the door and then with a deep breath I approached it and looked through the window.

Through the gloomy light I saw a human form with a single sheet thrown over. The form was skeletal and could hardly be recognised as a woman. From this distance the person in the bed looked like they were asleep so careful to not make a noise I opened the door and entered the room.

The first thing that struck me as I entered was the number of machines in the room, all of them whirring and clicking, doing whatever they needed to do. I did not need to be a doctor to know that these machines were keeping Michelle alive. As I approached the bed I stopped and studied my friend.

My eyes were drawn first to Michelle’s hair. Her hair was not just thin; she was practically bald with a few wispy strands of hair covering her scalp. The skin of her face looked dry and pallid; her eyes looked like they had collapsed into her head. It was clear that her lips were also dry, they were cracked and broken. One arm was out from under the sheet and I noticed bruises, a lot of bruises, dotted up and down her lower and upper arm. Then my eyes looked at Michelle’s body.

There was no trace of breasts bulging the sheet, instead what bulged the sheet were Michelle’s ribs, I could see each individual one, and her sharp hips were also protruding into the sheet. Her once voluptuous body did not have flesh on it, she was purely skin and bones and nothing else.

Not wanting to wake her, I was about to leave when suddenly, but slowly, Michelle turned her head. For the rest of her life I did not forget the sounds of Michelle’s joints creaking and cracking as she moved so very slowly and gently. I would also never forget the look in her once sparkling eyes as she opened them and looked into my sparkling green eyes.

Michelle seemed to try to take a breath which she struggled to do, and when she did the sound made me want to run screaming out of the room. The single breath rasped and rattled around the room as Michelle made a desperate attempt

to suck oxygen into her frail body. When she spoke her voice was faint and crackly so I had to take a step closer to hear her. I wished I had not. As Michelle said the first words to her in years I smelled her breath and it smelled of death.

‘Why... are... you... here?’ Michelle spoke the sentence hesitantly, pausing over every word.

‘I came to see you.’

If she had physically been able to Michelle would have laughed but instead she stared at me with venom of pure hate in her eyes. ‘I... don’t... want to see... you.’

‘I came, I came...’ And for a moment I could not think of why I had come to see my dying friend. ‘I came to see if there was anything I could do for you...’ The words I spoke trailed off as I realised the emptiness of them even as I spoke them.

Now Michelle did laugh; a bitter, hollow, rasping, coughing, spluttering laugh that had me reaching for the emergency button to call a nurse. But Michelle managed to bring herself back under control and took a few more deep breaths that caused me to think of graves when Michelle’s expelled air was sucked into my nose.

‘You came here to see... And what the... hell can you do for... me? A bit late don’t you think?’ Michelle started to cough as she finished speaking, and with a great effort she reached for a tissue by her side and spat a blood-stained glob into it.

‘I’m so sorry Michelle. I had no idea you were so sick.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Why is what?’

‘Don’t be... thick Sally. You had no idea I was sick because you... have not spoken to me... or my family... for years. You abandoned me for that murdering bastard!’ Michelle coughed again, her body now curling up being racked with pain. Eventually she stopped and her eyes bore into mine again.

‘He, David, didn’t murder anyone. It was a tragic accident.’

‘It was no accident!’ She shook her head from side to side causing my stomach to flop over again as I listened to her joints groaning and creaking. ‘He was driving like a... lunatic! If he’d been driving at thirty instead of eighty... Simon would still be alive!’

Now at a whisper Michelle said the words that would haunt me for the rest of my life, her breath rasping the words out, and the stench of the words would also stay with me forever.

In a haunting, crackling, rasping whisper Michelle said, ‘Why... why did you not drive with David that day? Why was it Simon’s arm lying in the grass when it should have been yours?’

‘You can’t, you can’t mean that?’

‘My life was ruined that day... and now... and now I hope that yours is ruined too. The girl who had everything... now I hope you forever have nothing. 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!’

The last word was a rattle of death as Michelle forced it out of body. For the second time that day I burst into tears and ran from a room.

\*

Michelle though simply closed her eyes; at last at peace now that she had said to Sally what she had wanted to say to her for years. As she closed her eyes a warning buzzer went off on the blood pressure machine as her pressure sank to a dangerously low level. This buzzer caused a warning light to go off on the nurse’s station in ward six but by the time the nurses got there it was too late.

As Michelle closed her eyes she saw Simon standing in front of her, a heavenly glow radiating around him. He was dressed how she remembered him best, the night he proposed to her. Smiling at her, with a single finger he beckoned her towards him.

With a smile of her own she took a couple of steps towards him as he started to walk away.

So she followed him, catching him up, taking his hand as they entered what was waiting for them through a bright circle of light.

\*

Nobody ever knew about my visit to Michelle that day. I never told anybody and I did not believe that anybody could truly curse another person. But through the dark days that were rapidly approaching the words would haunt me, and they would haunt me for the rest of my life.

## Chapter 88

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

During my time in the S.A.S. I had learned about all kinds of nasty ways a person could be killed, and the poison dimethylmercury was one of the worst. Even the smallest exposure, a few drops, would ultimately be lethal. Ultimately because the poison did not kill you instantly, it killed you slowly and painfully, possibly as long as months after exposure.

And that is what they used to kill Michelle.

Fucking dimethylmercury.

That poor innocent woman killed by a coward's poison.

Suddenly the pieces all tumbled into place like an elaborate jigsaw and I finally saw into the darkest reaches of my grandad's world and mind, helped by the final pages of the file.

Clearly she had been investigating my grandad and had got too close to the truth. A note on one of the last pages said an accident to her family would most likely make her ill again and that illness could be used to cover up her poisoning.

There was a short sentence stating where and how the poisoning took place and even the person's name who spoke to Michelle in the coffee shop on the pretence of helping her with her thesis. Then the accident to her parents and the person's name that drove the truck.

And there it was, right at the end of the file, the last sentence, written in my grandad's distinctive hand, "Too close to the truth." And a simple red X was drawn next to the end of the sentence which clearly made it a death sentence.

I turned over the last page and there was a copy of her death certificate. How and why was that on the file?! Highlighted by a yellow highlighter was cause of death, "Complications caused by the illness anorexia."

So I now knew why it was highlighted.

It was highlighted to highlight the fact that they had gotten away from it, nobody knew the real reason for her death.

Dimethyl-fucking-mercury.

\*

Why oh why would my grandad keep files like this?! It was perhaps the stupidest thing I had ever seen and no doubt if I dug more into the mountains of files I would find similar tales.

I can only presume that he assumed that nobody would ever find them, but even then, why keep them? For memories? To look back on his successes and gloat over those poor unfortunate souls whose shadow of his hand cast a pall over their lives?

Considering I was now being a traitor towards my grandad, I reluctantly pulled down another file from the shelf and flicked through it. This one concerned an employee who they thought was selling company secrets. Thankfully this one ended with the words 'No further investigation necessary.' rather than another red X.

I opened another and another.

One concerned a journalist who they thought had information on a contract my grandad was working on.

Another was a file full of accounting records which reference countries like the Cayman Islands, the Virgin Islands, Curacao and other hotbeds of offshore financial activity.

On and on the files and shelves went. Stacks and stacks of them. His whole life was here in these files and the more I looked the more of those red Xs I encountered.

Considering what he had done to Michelle, a close friend of the family for crying out loud, and all these other people whose lives he had impacted on, I quickly realised that there was not just one monster in our family, there were two.....

I closed the file I was looking at and made my way deeper into the basement, surprised to see that the far-right corner of the basement was sealed off with a concrete wall in which was a metal door. The walls of the sealed off area stretched for maybe twenty feet creating a twenty by twenty-foot square in the corner of the basement.

I was very curious as to what was in there. Near the entrance there was £500,000,000 worth of paintings casually stacked against a wall so what on earth was in there that was worth sealing off?! I tried the door and was not surprised to find it was locked.

What I was surprised about was the simple lock and in a basement full of files it did not take me long to find a paperclip.

It took me all of five seconds to pick the lock then I opened the door. I stood in the doorway and looked into the room, the light from the basement casting a light shadow onto the floor. I was tensed up, ready to move and defend myself in an instant depending on what was in the room.

Cautiously I leaned into the room, looked left then right and found a light switch on the right. I switched it on and then relaxed when I saw that the room was free of all threats.

The fluorescent light was still flickering and making a buzzing noise as I stepped into the room where I paused to look around.

On the far wall were three bunk beds, six beds in total, all neatly made. There was a table in the middle of the room which was clear of all items except for a couple of magazines.

The first magazine I picked up was entitled *Rifles* and the second *Man: The Ultimate Killing Machine*.

I knew them both from my time in the Army and I was taken aback to find them in this room and even more taken aback to see they were this month's editions so clearly somebody had been down there very recently.

I put them down exactly as they were positioned when I picked them up and continued to look around the room. On the left wall there was a rack, a gun rack which was full of the latest weaponry, rifles, machine guns, handguns and even grenades of two types, stun and explosive. What on earth?!

On the other wall was a small kitchenette, immaculately clean and next to the kitchenette was another door. This door though was solid and thick, much more secure than the door between this room and the basement. I was now confused. The door was positioned on the outer wall of the basement so there should be nothing beyond that door but the foundations of the mansion so what on earth was going on?!

This door did not have a simple lock and instead was a key code lock. I tried the obvious, my grandmother's date of birth but this did not work. I tried my grandad's, my mother's, even mine and Sophia's and each one failed to open the door. I stood back and gave it a light kick of frustration.

I turned away from the door and surveyed the room again with my hands on my hips. I was genuinely at a loss. My first thought was a safe room for the family to evacuate into. There were two problems with that though.

Firstly, we already had a safe room, it was off my grandad's office, hidden behind a bookcase. We all knew about that which led to my second problem.

I did not know about this room and I can only presume my mother and Sophia did not know about this room so what's the point of a safe room that nobody knows about?!

I scratched my head and sighed.

After a few more moments of contemplation I took a few steps back to the table and looked down at the magazines. I had seen these magazines before and then it all fell dramatically into place.

When I had encountered the Xs in Curacao, along with all the weaponry, older editions of these magazines had been on the table.

So this was not a safe room for the family. It was a room for the Xs to stay in when my grandad was in residence which he was not at the moment hence why they were not here.

I turned quickly around and stared at the door. They had to get into the house somehow and I had *never* seen them in the house so behind that door there must be.....

A secret tunnel.

For all these years my grandad had had his personal private army stationed here to protect him should he ever feel threatened.

The more I found out the more I realized just how little I truly knew about my grandad.

I was slowly starting to see the truth though, slowly but surely.

## Chapter 89

Even though I had her real full name conveniently noted for me in Michelle's file, it still took me some weeks to track her down.

First of all I tried to check the Gallatronics' Human Resource records but people like this lady were never really on the company books. Whatever manner they got paid was a mystery to me although I assumed it was via complex offshore banking transactions which would be untraceable back to the Gallatronics empire.

So I called in some favours through MI5 and the London Metropolitan Police though and eventually they came good for me.

Without informing her who I was, I called her on the mobile number my friend in MI5 had been able to trace for me. I pretended to be from a security company who was looking for some well-trained personnel and her name came well recommended to me. She agreed to meet me and later that week we met at a gastro pub in Soho.

When she arrived she was led through to the table and I stood up to shake her hand. She was quite pretty, petite, with short, cropped hair. Her eyes were blue and I noticed them because her eyes were all over the place, one second looking at me, the next over my shoulder, the next towards the door of the pub. Clearly a life in the dark world of assassinations made one quite observant. She was taking all of it in.

I had a requested a quiet table and we were off to one side, in a booth, so there was nobody else next to us. The restaurant was fairly noisy so I was comfortable we would not be overheard. Once she was settled at the table she seemed to relax a little and her eyes became less shifty.

'Thank you for taking the time to see me today.'

'No problem. So you're setting up a new security company?'

'Well the company has been in existence a few years, however we're branching out into new fields, key person corporate security being one example which I understand you have experience of?'

'I do indeed. The main role I've had recently was at IBM, planning and delivering security packages for their Executives.'

'Here in London?'

'Global.'

'Excellent.'

'And your company has been running for a few years you say?' I nodded. 'Funny, you said your name is Jacob Galvin yet when I looked on Companies House for a Jacob Galvin there was only one Jacob Galvin registered as a Director and he's a painter and decorator in Scarborough.'

'Quite. My company is not registered here in the U.K. It's offshore, Guernsey in fact.'

'Good answer, but I'm not too sure I believe you.'

'You're suspicious by nature, I like that. What other experience do you have?'

'I have plenty, although I don't know whether you do. Have you got business card so I can check your company and you are who you say you are?'

‘You spoke to a young lady called Michelle a long time ago, Michelle Walmesley, about her Doctorate thesis I’m led to believe, in a coffee shop in Shoreditch...’

At the mention of Michelle’s name she took a sharp intake of breath and went pale.

‘Who the fuck are you?!’ She made to stand up and I reached out a hand and placed it on her arm.

‘There are men outside. I think you know what that means, don’t you?’

She froze for a moment then nodded and sat back down. She reached into her handbag and pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Her hands were shaking.

‘You can’t actually smoke in here.’

‘Do I look like I give a shit right now?! Who the hell are you?!’ Then she paused and looked hard at me. ‘Oh my God... Oh my fucking God... You look like him... You fucking look like him... You’re... You’re David’s son! Which makes you Sally’s son and his...’ She trailed off and did not finish the sentence.

‘Yes, I am Jacob Gallagher, grandson of Jacob Gallagher, the Chairman and C.E.O. of Gallatronics.’

‘I need to leave! Even as his grandson you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into!’

‘No, I think I do. I’m totally aware. I’ve seen files...’

‘My real fucking name is written in a file?!’

‘Yes. In one of the company’s secure areas.’

‘Not that secure if his fucking grandson has access!’

‘I’m also his Head of Security.’

‘Oh fuck me! I really need to leave.’

One of the staff came over and asked her to put out the cigarette. She did not look at the waiter, just stared at her hands and muttered, ‘I’m leaving soon.’

‘You seem very worried about all of this?’

‘Worried?! Fucking worried?! Please, I need to leave. I want no part of this anymore. Please tell your men to stand down!’

‘I will. Soon. What I want to know is what you did and why you did it?’

‘Then read the file!’

‘I’d like to hear it from you.’

‘It was a long time ago. I’m not sure I can remember the finer details...’

‘You need to leave now, madam.’ The waiter again.

‘I suspect even as his Head of Security you do not know everything that goes on. And certainly as his grandson you don’t know *anything* about what goes on...’

‘I know perhaps more than you think.’

‘No, no, no. You think you do, but you don’t. If it’s still like it was when I left, you’re his public face, his public security. You make sure his business trips are safe, that he can get from the car to his meetings without being hassled. You’re nothing more than a glorified bodyguard with a flashy title!’

She took another drag from the cigarette which drew the ire of the waiter again. ‘Madam, please. You must step outside.’



This time she smiled sweetly at him and politely told him to go and fuck himself. ‘You literally know nothing. Ask him about the private side of his business. Ask him what goes on at the dark sites he operates...’

This was news to me. ‘Dark sites? What dark sites?’

‘So handsome. So intelligent. Yet so naïve. You’ve got no idea, truly no idea.’

This time before I could stop her she bolted out of the booth and ran to the entrance of the pub. I quickly made after her and quickly caught her up. I grabbed her by the arm on the busy, noisy London street. We had to shout over the noise of the vehicles speeding by.

‘Tell me! Tell me what you know!’

‘I can’t! He’ll kill me!’

‘He won’t! I’ll protect you!’

‘Uh-uh.’ She shook her head vigorously. ‘Not from this. Not from him. Let go of my arm otherwise I start screaming!’

‘No, wait! Tell me what happened to Michelle and why!’

She freed her arm from my grip and pushed herself away from me, teetering right on the edge of the pavement, right next to the traffic roaring by. ‘I poisoned her! I poisoned that innocent young woman on HIS orders!’

‘Why? Why though?!’

‘She was too close to the truth...’

‘What truth?!’

She shook her head and then leapt into the road, right in front of a passing number seventy-three bus. The driver did not stand a chance and neither did she.

The bus hit her and for a moment her body made an ‘L’ shape around the front of the bus, before she was dragged under the bus, the back of her head smashing into the road, splitting open like a ripe melon. Her body was dragged along under the bus until the driver managed to bring it to a screeching, shuddering halt.

Without a word to anyone or a glance over my shoulder, I walked quickly away.

There was only one person I could speak to now.