

Blood Bond

a novella

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ONE

In a pristine fertility clinic, halfway up a modern high rise on the expensive side of town, a couple sat on grey doctor's room chairs holding hands. They knew the tasteful décor, the polished floor and the sympathetic expression on Doctor Drayton's face well. They even knew, though both were hoping to be wrong, what the doctor was about to tell them.

"We've had all your tests back from the lab and I'm afraid it's bad news," she told them. Toni squeezed Greg's hand. He squeezed hers back so hard he felt his wedding ring dig into his finger.

"The clomiphene hasn't elevated Greg's sperm count, and there's little point continuing along this route. I'm sorry," Doctor Drayton said.

"My count hasn't increased at all?" Greg asked, trying to keep his voice level.

"No, I'm afraid not. The tests show it's still zero. Your hormones don't appear to respond to this type of treatment and, without even a low sperm count to work with, I'm afraid there's no possibility of trying an intracytoplasmic sperm injection."

"Well, what options do we have now?" Toni asked.

"Your best chance to conceive would be through donor insemination, where donor sperm is injected -"

"Yes, we know, we've read up about it," Greg interrupted.

"Well, you can rest assured that it's a safe procedure. We have a rigorous screening process, and Toni's chances of conceiving would be around eleven percent. Of course you can try as many cycles of treatment as you like, or as many as you can finance anyway. I'll give you our patient information pack about it." She reached into a filing cabinet behind her and pulled out a professional, glossy brochure which she handed to Toni. "I'm sure you'd like to have the opportunity to discuss it fully together."

Toni flipped the pages and settled on the finance information at the back. She glanced at Greg, who lowered his eyes.

"If you want to go ahead, make an appointment to see me and we'll discuss it in more detail. And of course if you have any questions, please don't hesitate – you know you can call my direct line."

"Thank you, Doctor Drayton, you've been very kind," Toni said, slipping the brochure into her handbag and managing a smile.

"Yes, thanks," Greg echoed, taking his jacket from the back of the chair.

"I hope I'll see you again soon," the doctor smiled, getting up to open the door for them.

The story of how Greg and Toni met, fourteen years earlier, was a good one: just the sort people who heard it remarked would be great to tell the grandchildren. They had been at the same university for two years without meeting. Greg was studying for a degree in Marketing, in a department based nowhere near the Psychology building where Toni was doing the majority of her seminars and lectures, so it wasn't likely that they'd meet. Toni lived in a shared flat on the east side of town in a quiet cul-de-sac called Cedar Close. Greg shared a large student house on the west side on a rundown estate called Cedar Crescent. Both lived at number seven. Given the similarity of their addresses, it was a testament to the postal service that their mail had never been mixed up before. But just as the second year of university was drawing to a close, and students were really only hanging around to wait for exam results, all the alert personnel at the post depot apparently had a day off at the same time, and Greg's exam results ended up on Toni's doormat.

She paid them no attention at first, since hers were sitting alongside them. She ripped open the envelope and scanned over the percentages.

"Yes!" she gasped, jiggling round the hall in her pyjamas. She had been pretty confident after all the work she'd put in, but the marks were even better than she'd expected.

Once she'd called her parents and some of her course-mates, the matter of the white envelope with the university crest stamped in red addressed to Mr G Armstrong returned to her mind. She picked up the envelope and examined the address. She'd heard of Cedar Crescent, even had a good idea where it was. It seemed to be mentioned in the local paper weekly, always in

connection with vandalism, car theft and house burglaries. She reached for a pen and hovered over the address label, about to write *return to sender*. But then she thought of poor G Armstrong, waiting for his results at number seven Cedar Crescent, and took pity.

It was midday by the time she arrived in Cedar Crescent on her bike. As she pedalled along a road crammed with illegal looking cars and front gardens filled with rubbish and broken furniture, she hoped Mr Armstrong would be out. Number seven had flaking paintwork and a Jack Daniels flag in place of curtains over the downstairs front window. The gate was off its hinges and leaning against a wheelie bin in the front garden. Toni dismounted and balanced her bike against a dead conifer.

She had made up her mind to put the letter through the door and go, but when she heard faint music inside, she thought she had better knock. As she stood waiting, she looked at the empty beer cans sprinkled over the long dying grass and changed her mind – perhaps it wasn't too late to push the envelope through the letterbox and go – but then she heard the music stop and footsteps approach the front door.

Her eyes met those of a nicely dishevelled blonde man, who put his head around the door in the manner of one accustomed to answering a knock in an unsavoury neighbourhood.

“Yes?” he said, his eyebrows arching over pale green eyes.

“Excuse me, but are you Mr Armstrong?” Toni asked.

“No. Do you want me to get him?”

“Yes, please,” Toni said. She would have explained, but the man disappeared as soon as he had given her a brief smile and a nod. He closed the door to and Toni heard him shouting.

“Greg! Greg, are you up? Someone at the door for you!”

There was a long silence before heavy footfalls on the stairs. Then the front door opened wide and Toni looked up at Greg Armstrong, who stood six foot three with a frame that almost filled the doorway, still pulling a black T-shirt down over his midriff.

“Are you Mr Armstrong?” she asked.

“Yes – Greg,” he said.

“Toni,” she replied. She almost forgot why she had come. “Oh – I think I have a letter for you. I live at seven Cedar Close.”

She held the envelope out to him and he took it, spying the red university crest.

“I think it's exam results – I just got mine this morning too,” Toni said.

He nodded and tore the envelope open. She wondered if it was proper to leave now, but wanted to stay. His inky eyes coasted the page and he let out a sigh that made the paper waver in his hand.

“I hope it's okay, I mean, that you've done alright,” she said, unable to bear the silence.

“I passed,” he said, and broke into an engaging grin. “Actually, I did better than I thought.”

“Really? Me too!”

They stood smiling at each other like that for a moment which became unnaturally long. He put his hand in his jeans pocket and shrugged.

“Well, thanks for bringing this,” he said.

“Oh, no trouble!” she replied, taking a step back down the path.

“No, really, thank you,” he said.

“That's okay.” She walked back towards her bike as Greg shut the door.

She was walking slowly and, just as the door closed behind her, she heard the voice of the guy who had answered it first saying “You didn't invite her in?” At that she loitered, pretending to search for the key to her bike lock in her trouser pocket.

“I'm not inviting her in *here*,” she heard Greg say.

“Then go after her!” the first guy protested.

Just as Toni gave up the fake search for the key and grabbed her bike, Greg opened the front door and stepped out barefoot.

“Hey!” he called, picking his way down the path as fast as he could without shoes. “You've come all this way. Do you wanna maybe go get some lunch somewhere? There's a pub on the corner of Rothwell Street. We could celebrate our results.”

“Sure,” Toni nodded.

Even over lunch that day, Greg couldn't keep his eyes off Toni. He'd never thought in terms of the kind of woman he wanted to end up with, but it struck him that she was it. Throughout the next year they shared everything, from nights in at each others' places to drunken pub crawls with each others' friends. Greg's housemate, Myles, who had opened the door to Toni that day, liked to take some credit for their introduction. He didn't hold back from telling Greg, in drunken moments, that he should hang onto Toni at all costs. She was the sort of girl who endeared herself to anyone she met.

Following graduation, Greg moved out of Cedar Crescent and took over the tenancy of Toni's departing flatmate at the flat in Cedar Close. They rented for a year while working hard to establish footholds in their first jobs. Greg caught a break when he secured a vacancy in the marketing department of SureShield, a large local insurance firm, and Toni got a placement in her chosen field of clinical psychology. It meant she worked irregular and often long hours at the hospital, but it was always comforting to come home to Greg who, depending on the time of day or night her shift had finished, had either a hot meal or a warm bed waiting for her.

As soon as their hard work began reaping better financial rewards, they bought a starter home a couple of miles out of town. Before the paint had dried and the creases had dropped out of the curtains, they got married. It was a low key ceremony at the registry office, followed by a lively reception where most guests were still drinking at midnight. Myles was the best man. His was the highlight of the speeches, where he had the room rolled up in laughter as he recaptured the scene of the newlyweds' first meeting at Cedar Crescent.

In the course of years, Greg was promoted to Assistant Marketing Manager at his firm. Toni's grandmother died, leaving her an inheritance she didn't expect. They decided to invest their new income in a larger house, a sunny white-walled detached place with four bedrooms in the suburbs, with a meticulously loved garden. They had turned thirty the year they moved in and had a hankering for family life. There was so much to do in their new home – Greg built a new kitchen while Toni worked at restoring the original fireplaces and finding the right colour schemes and furniture throughout – that a couple of years passed before they worried that something might be wrong.

They blamed it on their lifestyles at first. When they read the books, there seemed to be so much they were doing wrong: Toni had always been a smoker, and they were both guilty of drinking too much wine and neglecting their diets. They began looking after themselves better, taking the right supplements and keeping charts of Toni's cycle. When she found it tough to give up nicotine, she enlisted Myles' help. Having quit his high pressure marketing job in London only a year after graduation, he had moved back to their university town and set up his own business as a hypnotist. For the past five years he had been busy helping people quit smoking, lose weight and cope with phobias, which he claimed was far more rewarding than any office job. After just three sessions, which Myles insisted on waiving the fee for, Toni had gotten the addiction out of her system. There seemed to be no obstacles in the way of her and Greg starting the family their house was so ready for.

Still nothing happened. Month by month, Toni would break the news that her period was on time, again. They enrolled in a private fertility clinic and got themselves tested. Greg was the problem. His sperm count wasn't low, it was zero. Doctor Drayton had been reassuring: there was so much that could be done in this age of modern medicine. Advances had been made. There were fertility drugs – she threw statistics and percentages at them. They weren't unduly pessimistic. Maybe it would be a little harder to come by for them, but they would surely have a baby one day.

A year in and out of the clinic sapped both their belief and their funds. While neither lost sight of the fact that they shouldn't let their fight for a baby dominate their relationship, at times it became hard to keep things in perspective. It was hardest for Greg. While Toni was ardent in her refusal to see him as any less of a man for his lack of fertility, he felt it acutely for both of them. Besides,

he had a feeling he wanted a baby even more than she did. She painted pictures, late at night while they lay in each others' arms talking it over, of ways in which a childless marriage could be wonderful. He never really bought those images. He couldn't imagine not teaching his son or daughter to ride a bike. Couldn't see the big rooms of their house not cluttered with toys, with the paraphernalia of bringing up a child.

And yet this was the juncture at which they had ended up. The fact was, Greg couldn't father a child. They were faced with a choice: use a stranger's donated sperm, or remain childless. Having suspected they might end up in this position, they had investigated the possibility of using donor sperm in advance of their meeting with the doctor that day. There were so many stories of clinics supplying donors with genetic defects, and so much anecdotal evidence to back it up from the hospital where Toni worked, that they had had grave misgivings about the procedure before Doctor Drayton mentioned it. Of course there was a third alternative: to use a known donor.

While a known donor cut down on the potential worries about genes, so were there associated problems with the absence of anonymity. Greg and Toni had discussed these at length. Of course it would be weird. But, on balance, better to know exactly where your child was coming from. To have looked into the history yourself, and been as certain as you could that there was nothing to worry about, had to be preferable to trusting the life of your only offspring to some doctor you were paying. To someone who, after all, had not met the donor. Had merely paid them so that they might sell the product on for a profit.

The night they had received the news that donor insemination was their only viable option, Greg and Toni got drunk on red wine over a barely touched meal in their lovingly crafted kitchen.

"So, do you think we should do it?" Greg asked, slurring his words as he leaned across the table towards Toni, whose vest top straps were sliding down her shoulders.

"Yes, I think we should," she said, leaning towards her husband. "You should ask him."

"And if he says no?"

"Then we go back to the drawing board."

"But if he says yes?"

Toni paused for a good few seconds before promising: "Then I'll do it. For you. For us. So we can have a family."

He leant in and kissed her hard. It seemed an odd thing to do given that he'd just made her promise to sleep with another man.

TWO

Greg and Myles met every couple of weeks for a drink in The Cloak and Dagger. If it was a weeknight, they tended to meet later and stick to a couple of pints and maybe a chaser. If it was a Friday, however, they'd get there after work and stay until closing time, which usually resulted in a crippling hangover. Greg was glad this particular meeting was taking place on a Friday night: he felt he needed to be a bit drunk before he broached the subject.

As he'd left the office that afternoon, he'd put his head round Nancy's office door. Nancy was SureShield's Marketing Manager, and Greg's boss. She was also Myles' girlfriend. Greg had introduced the two of them five years ago.

"See you Monday," he said.

Nancy looked up from her computer. "Think you'll have just about recovered from your hangover by then?"

"It's called man-flu, Nancy," Greg grinned.

Nancy's phone rang. "Have fun," she said, before she picked it up.

Greg had been about to ask her if she'd made any plans for the evening, but he supposed the phone had probably saved her from confessing she intended to work late. He glanced at his

watch and saw it was ten past five. He picked up his pace as he walked through reception and out of the glass front doors. His stomach turned over as he thought about meeting Myles in just twenty minutes.

The Cloak was a good choice of venue because it was on a main road along which regular buses to Greg's passed, and Myles could easily walk or stagger the half mile home to the house he shared with Nancy. The pub looked rough from the road, with flaky paintwork and tarnished bronze lettering, and inside was nothing fancy either, but it served cheap beer and decent meals. The owner, an ex-roadie called Ron, wanted the pub's atmosphere to match its name and installed dingy lighting, a jukebox comprising rock and metal classics, and an impressive collection of plastic skulls with daggers, spiders and dead roses adorning them. Greg sat at the table in the furthest corner, pulled off his tie, and gulped down an inch of his pint.

Myles didn't keep him waiting long. Any of the regulars who glanced over at them sinking their first and second pints would have realised they weren't talking about anything serious. They hadn't seen each other for two weeks: there was the football to pull apart, a quick chat about work and a bit of gossip about mutual friends.

"Anyway, let's eat, I'm legless already," Myles said.

Greg glanced at the blackboard for the menu.

"Why do you even look at that thing? Ron never writes anything different on it. You up for the Burger Challenge?"

Greg felt his stomach churn again as he thought of how soon he'd have to put his proposal to Myles: one more pint and he'd dare to mention it, any more than that and it'd be bound to come out all wrong.

"Nah, not that hungry. Might just go for the jacket potato and salad."

"Oh, are you and Toni still watching your health?"

'Health' was Myles' way of asking about whether or not Toni was pregnant yet. Greg had mentioned his problem to Myles after a lot of Friday night drinks at The Cloak some months back. Myles was the only man he could ever mention it to.

"Not exactly," Greg said, and Myles caught on that something was wrong. He ordered the food, got another round in, and then asked what was up.

Greg was glad to be able to get it out in one go, without questions or reactions. Myles had always been good at listening. This was the most difficult conversation he'd ever had to initiate in his life and it seemed to take forever to arrive at the point. Myles listened patiently, regarding him with steady scrutiny.

"Well, first of all, I'm flattered that you would ask me," Myles said finally, when Greg ran out of words.

"Don't do that bullshit playing for time to respond thing, Myles," Greg said, "what do you really think about it? What's your gut reaction?"

"I have to talk to Nancy about it, obviously," Myles said.

"Of course," Greg said, sitting back. "Look, sorry, I was just anxious about bringing this up. I don't want you to rush into a decision."

"But my reaction – my personal one, not taking anything else into account – is that of course I'd do it," Myles said.

Greg nodded. He couldn't seem to manage a verbal reply.

"I think you're right to be concerned about anonymous donors," Myles added.

"Yeah, but you need to think about the strangeness of it as the kid grows up. We'd have to be honest."

"I know. It would be weird in a way. But the baby would be yours. Yours and Toni's. I wouldn't have a claim to it. I don't want all of that anyway."

"Don't you think you and Nancy will have kids?"

"Greg, if we were gonna have kids we'd have had them by now. Nancy's forty-one this year. We're both into our careers, and we're pretty comfortable with our money. Neither of us want to exchange that for nappies and sleepless nights. You're welcome to it."

"Jesus, sorry, me and Toni have been so intent on having a kid that I sometimes forget it's

not what everyone else wants.”

“Means we’ll probably be willing babysitters. It’ll be a novelty for us,” Myles said. “Anyway, what do I do? Come to the clinic, get it on with a test tube? Will there be nurses?”

“Actually, we’re not gonna do it that way,” Greg said. “It costs obscene amounts of money to do in a clinic what you could do naturally for nothing.”

They were both silent as that hung in the air. Myles let out a breath through his nose and suppressed a smile.

“And Toni’s agreed to this?”

“Of course she’s bloody agreed to it – would I be sitting here asking you to do it if she hadn’t?”

“Well it’s just a bit unorthodox, that’s all. You’re asking me to - “

“I know what I’m asking you to do. We’re all adults, aren’t we? It’s just one night. It’d be purely mechanical. At least, it’d better be,” Greg warned, breaking into a grin for the first time that evening.

“Yeah, yeah, course,” Myles said.

They both drank deeply from their pints. Ron brought their food over and chatted with them for a minute. AC/DC’s *You Shook Me All Night Long* came on the jukebox. When Ron went back behind the bar, singing along with the first chorus, both men looked down at their plates and did not feel very hungry.

“Greg?” Myles said.

“Mmm?” Greg said, nibbling at a slice of cucumber.

“You wouldn’t *be* there would you?”

Greg almost choked. “You think I wanna see you naked?”

“And this isn’t gonna make you – make us – well, stop us hanging out together?” Myles was so rarely lost for words that Greg had to make the most of it. He looked up at Myles.

“I’m sure you’re not that good in bed.”

They both sniggered and then ate in silence, each re-running the conversation in his head. By the time Ron rang the bell for last orders, they had managed to blur it a little.

Myles and Greg had been mates since Greg’s first week at university. Greg had walked into his first Principles of Marketing seminar a couple of minutes late. It was fortunate that the seminar leader was not much of a timekeeper either and was not there to witness the tardiness, for this particular guy enjoyed any excuse to humiliate an undergraduate. Greg had hurried to the last available seat in the room, affording himself a swift glance around at his classmates. Trapped in their chairs by their swivel desktops, which were not even big enough to balance a notepad on, most betrayed a nervousness Greg identified with.

Dr Mallow, the undergraduate-despising seminar leader, dispensed with welcome speeches and got straight into the subject of the Principles of Marketing. Since he knew none of the students’ names, nor would ever learn any, he asked questions using the student register he had brought with him. He didn’t believe in starting slowly either, and blazed in with a complex question that Greg wasn’t expecting and didn’t fully understand. This wouldn’t have mattered quite so much had Dr Mallow not chosen Greg to pick on first for an answer. In the long silence that followed, during which Greg grappled with the question while being distracted by counting the chairs Mallow had in place of a neck, the room grew quieter and lonelier. Mallow dealt with Greg’s lack of response by staring hard at the class register as though it was a stinking turd. The rest of the class held their breath and watched.

“Every year it’s the same,” Dr Mallow said. He exhaled with all the effort he could muster. “You undergraduates get more stupid and less equipped for university study every year.” Finally he looked up from his register and scowled at the class. “I may have picked on Armstrong first but I am certain that you are all equally as useless as he evidently is.”

And that was the moment which the guy sitting next to Greg chose to give Dr Mallow a comprehensive answer, in three points with detailed examples, to his question. Greg stared at the guy who had just saved the class and couldn’t help feeling grateful to him for reducing the heat, even if (as his answer to the question rounded into its third minute) he was a swot. When the guy

had finally finished, Mallow allowed himself a small smile and admitted: "Perhaps I spoke too soon. Perhaps this year will be different. I hope the rest of the class will follow Armstrong's example and prepare thoroughly for these seminars. Thank you, Armstrong, for your efforts – they were worth the wait."

To Greg's amazement, the swotty guy nodded and smiled acceptingly instead of correcting Dr Mallow, bestowing Greg with a flash of conspiratorial eye contact before the seminar continued.

Greg thought about that as the rest of the class tried to keep up with Mallow's fast-paced teaching style. Why had this guy allowed him to take the credit? What would happen when Mallow discovered their true identities? And how had the guy known that *he* was the real Armstrong? He must have only glanced at him because he happened to be sitting a metre away and looking in the right direction.

After the seminar, the swot offered Greg his hand as soon as Mallow had made his hasty exit.

"Myles Maconochie," he smiled, like a salesman. Greg wondered if he was gay.

"Greg - "

"Armstrong, I know," Myles grinned.

"Thanks for stepping in. I didn't know what to say."

"No problem. I did the course last year. I'm retaking. This bit's all old hat."

"Oh, right. So, doesn't Mallow recognise you from before?"

"I was in a different group. Besides, Mallow makes a point of never knowing one undergraduate from another."

"Sounds like you know how to pull all the fast ones round this department."

"Got time for a pint? There's plenty more of the inside track. Who's your lecturer for Marketing Strategy?"

So, although Greg had reservations about how much he'd really have in common with this guy, he tagged along with him to the bar. He never regretted it. Myles knew a lot more than just which lecturers gave fair marks and which needed a bit of careful handling. He lived off campus and knew the city centre inside out, including where to drink cheaply, where to blag entry to clubs and where to go to find the only available taxi at four in the morning. He also knew lots of people, which may have had something to do with him never forgetting anyone's face or name or pretty much anything they'd ever told him. Perhaps this was the reason why he also seemed to have quite a knack with women. Whatever it was, Greg benefitted too whenever he went out with Myles.

When Greg asked Myles how he remembered so much and made so many connections, he said it was a matter of listening.

"People don't listen to each other. They think they do, but really they miss most of it. If you start listening, a lot more goes in."

Greg didn't buy it. If anyone could become as seemingly lucky, smart and popular as Myles was just through listening, then that would be what everyone did all of the time. There had to be some sort of trickery going on – or at least an unusually high IQ or some sort of ridiculous telepathic gift.

Greg gave up trying to figure Myles out after a while. Once they'd been mates for a few months and had a colourful history of drunken nights out behind them, Greg came to accept the way Myles was to the point that he stopped trying to find reasons for it. During Greg's second and third years, he shared a house with Myles and couple of other blokes. Seven Cedar Crescent was always a dump, but they had a laugh there and it held good memories. And Greg would never forget the moment he had met Toni for the first time, appearing as if by magic on the front doorstep. The only other callers that year had been kids trying to post fireworks and police questioning neighbours about a man found dead at number fourteen.

Even once Toni and Greg had moved in together, and they'd made the transition from student life to their first jobs, Greg and Myles didn't lose touch. Toni got on with Myles from the outset, which helped, but there was more to it than that. Although Greg had graduated with a better degree than Myles, Myles had what was commonly referred to as the gift of the gab and had shone at an

interview for a fantastic first position at a big firm in London. Greg had gone in for a more plodding pace in his own first job, which had included a depressing amount of photocopying and coffee fetching. Myles was living fast in the capital, enjoying the perks of a generous relocation allowance and compensating for long hours with regular healthy bonuses. Meanwhile, Greg was on a modest monthly wage and saving hard for a deposit on a house. Despite their differences in lifestyle, when they met up for regular weekends something clicked back into place. It could be relied upon.

When Myles quit London after his first year and came back to their university town to start his own business, Greg and Toni were glad to see him more often and noticed how much more relaxed he became after his first month out of the city. Perhaps if Myles had not moved back, he and Greg would have drifted apart. But now he was home again their friendship only strengthened with its endurance.

Still, what friendship was *that* strong? Greg held his head as he came to the morning after The Cloak, and wondered what the hell Myles would be thinking as he woke up with Nancy beside him. And what Nancy would say when Myles relayed the proposal to her. The more Greg forced his aching head to go over it, the less probable it seemed that things would work out how he and Toni wanted. He pushed his face into the warm pillow and threw an arm over his head to further block out the morning light.

Sometime later Toni sat on the edge of the bed and he heard the chink of a glass being set down on the bedside table. He groaned some grateful expression of thanks at her, and was thinking about reaching out and pulling her under the covers with him, when she woke him up fully by saying: "Greg, Myles is here." Blinking, Greg peered over the edge of the duvet at his wife. She'd probably been up hours, but the glow in her eyes now was for the news they were about to hear. Myles was standing in the doorway of their bedroom, looking immaculate and wide awake with no trace of the hangover Greg was feeling.

"I wanted to tell you together," he said. "I'm going to do it."

"You are? I mean, you spoke to Nancy?" Greg hastened to sit up.

"It's all settled," he said.

Toni looked at Greg and they hugged each other tight. Greg knew Toni was crying. He looked at Myles over Toni's shoulder.

"Thanks," he said.

"I'll go downstairs and put the kettle on," Myles said, leaving the Armstrongs alone with their news.

THREE

It was not the sort of situation friends wanted left in the air between them for weeks on end. They settled on the next favourable date in Toni's biological calendar. A week spent waiting for it to come around was long enough.

As the time drew closer, Greg formed definite ideas about how to handle the situation. As he explained to Toni, it would be much better if he spent that particular night at his sister's house. She had two young kids herself and Greg could make sure his hands were full all evening with babysitting. He would try to concentrate on what the end result of the evening might be, all the while immersing himself in someone else's family life as a reminder of what he might be about to gain. He told Toni not to hold back. In no uncertain terms he asked her to make the most of that one night, in the hope that it might increase the chances of them never having to go through it again.

After Greg left for his sister's early in the evening, Toni sat at her dressing table and examined her reflection in the glass. She had never cheated on Greg. She didn't feel as though she was about to cheat either, since he had told her to do this. She did, however, feel guilty about the tingle she felt when she thought about sleeping with Myles. He was Greg's best mate and, over the years, had become one of hers. She trusted him, she liked him. He was an attractive man. Her feeling excited about being allowed to undress him made her more anxious than Greg was that this night should not be repeated. As Myles' car pulled up on the driveway, she smoothed her dress down over her hips.

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Part of the reason that Greg and Toni had always been close was that they managed to talk about the things that were difficult, or unflattering, or sensitive. While they had never put themselves in a situation as potentially complicated as this one before, they still talked about it beforehand – they had agreed that it served no purpose to discuss it afterwards.

“What do you think Nancy made of it all, then?” Toni asked, as she and Greg made dinner one night.

“Who knows? I was beginning to think maybe I should have talked to both of them together about it, with you there as well.” Greg concentrated on slicing tomatoes.

“Oh I don't know. I don't think she'd feel right discussing stuff like that with me.”

“You always take her personally, babe. I keep telling you – she's like that with everyone.”

“It's not that I mind how she is. There's nothing wrong with it. I suppose she's not false at least. I just – well, we're not friends exactly. I think it's better that you and Myles discussed it in private. Gave him a chance to be able to react honestly.”

“Do you know what crossed my mind?” Greg said, pushing the tomatoes to one side of the board and starting on an onion. “I wondered if he discussed it with her at all.”

“Why do you say that?” Toni turned away from the hob and gave him her full attention.

“Just say the whole thing were reversed, and they were asking me this,” Greg said.

“Yeah?”

“I just don't think Myles would even ask me without you being there too. He knows I wouldn't make a decision like that without you. I think I knew he'd decide on his own, which was why I didn't even consider asking to see them both together.”

“But why is that? I mean, they've been together five years, she's no pushover or anything, they're both pretty headstrong. Why does he get to take the lead?”

“It's not that he's taking the lead. It's just that they're completely separate people. He does what he wants to do, she does what she wants to do, and they just happen to come home to the same building each day.”

“They're not seeing other people or anything, are they?”

“No, I don't think so. I am almost sure Myles isn't, anyway. I don't think they need each other that way.”

“Really?” Toni wrinkled her nose.

“Maybe they do when no one's looking.”

“I've never seen them kiss in public. I don't think I've even seen them hold hands.”

“Maybe they're uncontrollable behind closed doors.”

“Hmmm, I can't imagine it. I think there must be some sort of convenient arrangement. Perhaps it's money.”

“They both earn their own tidy sums. I just don't think either of them have to worry.” Greg tipped the vegetables into the pan, which hissed and crackled because Toni had let it get too hot. She grabbed a spoon and stirred vigorously.

“I wonder what it is then,” she said. “What's the reason they stay together?”

Greg set the chopping board down and kissed her on the cheek. “I don't care, as long as they do.”

Toni opened the door as Myles walked up the drive. It was just beginning to get cold outside. The trees in the front garden shivered. Toni folded her arms across her chest, feeling the breeze. Myles looked her in the eye as he reached the doorstep.

“Hi. You look great,” he said. There were no traces of nerves in his voice. He opened his arms in greeting and hugged her, as he had hundreds of times upon arrival at the house, adding a

kiss on the cheek as he always did. His hands were warm and steady on her back, his cheek smooth against hers. Toni began to doubt Myles even felt the peculiarity of it all. He seemed so natural about it. She took a deep breath and tried to let her anxiety out.

They went into the kitchen, where Toni opened a bottle of white and poured two glasses. Myles made conversation: how was work, was her car still playing up, had she seen that film on television last night? She answered without thinking about her words. They sat on the sofa in the living room, not too close, and sipped the wine. Toni stroked the russet cushion covers with her free hand. So many scenes had played out on this sofa, which was old enough to have worn arms and a back slightly faded from the sunny bay window. This was where Toni and Greg had eaten junk food dinners whilst watching trashy films; where they'd read countless books and newspapers side by side on Sundays with coffee; where they'd fallen asleep on each other late at night. Maybe there were still a lot of scenes to be set there too. Perhaps this would be where they'd feed their baby, and where visitors would sit and have a hold with the new arrival.

Myles reached over and touched Toni's shoulder.

"I can hypnotise you, if you want. I can make sure you don't remember any of it," he said.

Toni looked at him. At once her nerves were gone.

"No." She shook her head. "I want to remember it."

Myles nodded and stroked her shoulder with his thumb. Her heart accelerated as his fingers slipped under the strap of her dress.

Two weeks later Toni was experiencing none of her usual PMT symptoms. She didn't feel tearful or bloated or get a nagging headache over her eyes. She felt tired and vaguely dizzy. She took it as a good sign and Greg took it even more optimistically. Every hour he checked how she was feeling, examining everything she said and trying to convince himself it was a symptom of early pregnancy rather than PMT. She tried to talk him into not getting his hopes up, but she knew when he made her sit on the sofa while he did all the Hoovering that her words were not going in. The moment when she knew for sure was when he brought her a bar of her favourite chocolate and, when she placed a square of it on her tongue to melt, she suddenly felt sick and had to spit it into a tissue. Excitedly, they unwrapped a home pregnancy test.

After two minutes spent trying not to look, the confirmation became more and more distinct. Toni was pregnant. Years of anticipation and still the news felt even better than either of them imagined it would.

When they told Myles he grinned and muttered *brilliant* and put an arm around each of them. He asked all the polite questions like when did you find out and when's it due and how are you feeling but, when he and Greg were alone, he gripped his best friend's shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"I want you to know that I don't think of it as mine. I gave it to you and, as such, it's yours. I will never think of myself as that kid's dad, okay? That's your role. I'll just be a proud honorary uncle."

Greg swallowed. He thought of a lot of things he could say but he didn't trust any of them to sound right out loud.

FOUR

She was born, two days late and perfect, in February the following year. They named her Susie. As with many newborn babies, she didn't look like either of her parents. She had blue eyes which reserved their most longing looks for the two people she knew best, and not a hair on her delicate head. The delighted grandparents, family and friends that trooped into the house to circle around the centre of attention were so impressed with how exhausted yet happy Greg and Toni were that they hardly thought about the unconventional circumstances within which Susie had arrived.

Greg and Toni had been realistic about what the first few months would be like. They had talked about the effect so many nights of broken sleep would have on them, and how radically their lives would change. But despite the tiredness, and the changes (both expected and surprising) neither lost their sense of wonder about the whole thing. Greg sometimes leant over Susie's crib, watching her sleep. And even when Toni got up for a 3am feed she felt a half-dreamlike sense of everything being just how it was meant to be.

Susie was two weeks old when Myles and Nancy came over to see her. There was apprehension about it on all sides, palpable as Myles walked through the door first and tried to disperse it by hugging Toni and clapping Greg on the back. Nancy had her arms laden with flowers for Toni and gifts for the baby, which excused her from physical contact. Susie was in her pram, where Greg had left her sleeping after he'd taken her out for a walk. She stirred at the noise of voices in the hallway and let out a small cry. At this, Myles walked towards the sound and, finding the pram just inside the living room, ventured toward it. Greg and Toni stood in the doorway and watched, Toni holding her flowers, while Nancy hovered behind them still holding onto the gifts.

As Myles peered into the pram, Susie let out a loud cry and flailed her arms.

"Oh dear, she doesn't like strangers," Myles said. He reached down and picked her up. Considering he had little experience of babies he held her like a natural and, as her blue eyes opened and looked up at him, she stopped crying. He didn't coo at her or use baby language as he gazed at her tiny form cradled in his arms. He didn't trust any sound to get past the lump in his throat. He just looked down upon her for a long moment and hardly dared to breathe.

"Right, who's for a drink? Nancy, you prefer red or white?" Greg asked, breaking away from his position at the door with his arm around Toni.

Toni unwrapped the presents and made small talk with Nancy while Myles walked around the room rocking Susie in his arms. Toni wasn't sure how, but being around Myles had not been difficult even in spite of Susie's conception. His behaviour towards her had stayed the same. Sometimes when she caught his eye or glanced at him in a certain light she remembered the way his hand had felt on her or the way his breathing had changed next to her ear. But he remained easy to chat to, always keeping things lighthearted, never far from the next witty comment.

And as for Nancy, well, she and Toni had never had an easygoing friendship anyway. There was always a sense of them being pushed together because their men happened to be mates. Now Toni saw, in every flash of eye contact Nancy couldn't avoid, in the uncomfortable way she sat on the end of the sofa, in the way she took little sips from the glass Greg handed her as though it might just be something poisonous, that Nancy would never stop thinking about her sleeping with Myles.

Susie began to cry again.

"Oh Myles, she's probably cranky because she's due a feed," Toni said, leaning her head back on the sofa to look at him still engrossed in his cuddle.

"Here, hand her over," Greg said, putting down his wine glass and stretching his arms out towards his daughter.

Myles watched the baby go willingly into Greg's arms. She was different with her parents somehow. It was hard to pinpoint but, as Greg sat beside Toni and they got Susie ready for her feed, there was a kind of closeness between the three of them that no outsider could be included in.

Myles sat in the armchair and looked across at Nancy, who was folding up the pieces of wrapping paper that Toni had torn off the gifts for Susie. Gifts he'd chosen and wrapped. She hadn't said so but, every time they even danced close to the subject of Susie, Nancy turned away from it like it made her nauseous. He observed her now as he picked up the wine Greg had poured for him, sitting there folding the squares of pastel coloured wrapping. How could she not look at the more compelling sight of the family just two feet away? Myles himself could not tear his gaze away from them. There wasn't a chance he'd ever do this with Nancy. He stared at Toni, and the image of

her naked underneath him in bed returned to his mind. He knew Toni had slept with him that night for Greg and for the chance of having a baby, nothing else. Yet she'd still managed to want him more than Nancy ever did. His whole body filled with the unpleasant sensation of jealousy.

*

Three months later it was that balmy, blossom edged time between late spring and early summer. Greg had come home from work early one Friday and he and Toni had sat in the garden, under a tree, playing with Susie. She was a lively and responsive three month old who was sleeping well through the nights and keeping Toni busy during the days. That afternoon they had just found that she liked being tickled and that, if they got her at a certain spot under her chin, she would laugh hard.

When a cooler breeze brought the beginning of evening on it along with petals of snow-white blossom, they carried everything indoors and Toni gave Susie her feed. Greg began assembling a few things for their own dinner in the kitchen, stopping now and then to check on how his daughter's feeding time was going. Just as Susie had been put down for the nap a good feed seemed to induce, there was a knock on the front door. Susie stirred but closed her eyes again and Toni went to answer it.

"Myles! I didn't expect to see you," Toni said, as she opened the door to see him standing there, hands in pockets as though he'd either done something wrong or was just feeling the evening chill. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes. Well, no. I just came round on the offchance," he replied, avoiding her eyes and then suddenly addressing them. "Nancy and I split up."

Over dinner the three of them talked about it. Myles was upset – enough to need to talk it through and to down the wine a little too quickly, but not so much that he couldn't get through a substantial dish of pasta. Nancy was simply too focused on her career. Although he had always known this and it had never bothered him because he'd been just the same, he had to admit that seeing his best friends have a kid had changed his mind about what he wanted.

Greg's heart jumped when he heard that. He set his wine down and pushed his plate aside. Suddenly he wasn't hungry anymore.

FIVE

Nancy and Myles worked around things in the impersonal way they'd handled much of their relationship. They got on with the bits other couples find tough in the midst of a split: they sorted through the detangling of their finances and possessions, and Myles packed his things. Everything was businesslike: as concise as it could be, with emotions removed to a safe distance. Once Myles ended it, he didn't spend another night in their house. She was relieved he wanted to conduct things that way. She wouldn't have stood for long heated arguments and would never let him see her cry.

From the start he agreed that she should stay in the house. Other than the money, which he'd get back eventually, he had no stake in it. His plan was to stay with Toni and Greg until he could find somewhere to rent. He'd foreseen their willingness to let him stay.

It seemed a good arrangement. Myles was a willing and almost permanently available babysitter. Whenever Toni and Greg wanted to go out, whether it was to see friends, snatch a few hours privacy over a meal in a quiet restaurant or just go to the supermarket without taking Susie, Myles was there. He learnt quickly how to change a nappy, how to stop Susie crying and which bits of her routine happened when. Despite the fact that he'd chosen to end the relationship with Nancy, he appeared sore enough not to be rushing out to begin dating again. He was happier shut in the nursery babysitting or spending time alone in the spare room.

Toni couldn't remember how she'd managed without this third pair of hands before. Although Myles had plenty of clients to keep him busy, he scheduled his hours to suit himself and them, which often entailed not working the office hours that Greg was forced to stick to. It meant that Toni nearly always had an extra pair of hands to call on, no matter what the time of day and, even if she didn't need anyone to do anything in particular, just having another person there to ease the load and provide adult company was a bonus.

She noticed that, while Myles made himself available during the day whenever possible, he had the tact to disappear when Greg was home. He frequently claimed a hankering after eating out alone and left the house for long periods, or else expressed the desire to catch up on books and newspapers upstairs. The spare room at the front of the house had become his. Toni had thought he'd be comfortable there as the bed and the room were both sizeable, so he'd have space to store his things and spread out a bit. However, when she glimpsed inside, it appeared he had nothing more in there than a change of clothes and a few paperbacks. He was so quiet that Toni sometimes checked the drive for his car, as it was the only way to be sure whether he was home.

Greg didn't feel so at ease with the new arrangements. To him Myles was like a ghost skulking around his house, of whom he caught a brief sighting now and then. He had never thought the idea of Myles staying for a few weeks was a good one, but had put a positive face on it and joked with Toni that it would be handy having his drinking buddy on call. Yet since Myles had come to stay they hadn't been out for a drink together once. True, it was great that he and Toni could get out of the house and do things as a couple again, but even when they were home Myles often chose babysitting over any kind of social interaction. He was very good with Susie – anyone could see that – but Greg naturally felt over protective. If Greg ever made the slightest hint that he thought Myles was spending too much time helping out with the baby, Myles needed no further incentive to back right off and spend the rest of the night in the spare room.

That was something that bothered Greg more than the babysitting – the silence. He didn't once hear a sound from that room. Not footsteps, a radio, a creaking bed, a phonecall...it was eerie.

"Don't be stupid," Toni had said, when Greg mentioned it in bed one night. "I'm sure he's simply trying to be mindful of Susie."

"I just have a feeling that he's not being quiet so that he won't disturb us. It feels more like he's being quiet so he can *hear* us," Greg said.

"You really are a drama queen sometimes. What are you reading at the moment?" she said, flipping over the paperback he'd been flicking his eyes across without absorbing the past two nights. "Well if you will read this horror trash – no wonder!"

Greg knew that when Myles did come downstairs for a short spell of adult conversation, it was almost always with Toni and during the day. He didn't feel right about it. He trusted Myles, of course he did. And he trusted Toni even more. He'd trusted them both enough to let them sleep together that one time. There was no chance anything was going on behind his back, but something about the way Myles confided in Toni made him feel awkward. What if they did have some sort of spark between them now? He couldn't help being paranoid, though he tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. Toni had never once wavered in the way she was with him. He knew her so well he was sure he'd know if she was hiding something.

Besides, Myles was going through a tough time, though he'd never show it. Maybe that's why he needed to talk to Toni now, Greg decided. She had a knack of drawing out what was really bothering you and making you feel better about it. Two blokes couldn't have a heart-to-heart like that.

It was just that Myles had never seemed like the kind of person who needed to share his thoughts with anyone. Greg had always got the impression that Myles guarded his thoughts as jealously as a father would guard their child. He couldn't see Myles laying himself open to anyone, even someone with a knack for taking care of vulnerability like Toni. Greg couldn't see Myles letting

anyone get familiar with his weaknesses. Maybe it was because he spent all day fixing other peoples'.

Seeing Nancy every day at the office didn't help Greg to feel any less awkward about Myles living at his place. Like her ex-boyfriend, Nancy would never let on that she was suffering, but Greg picked up on little things that told him she was. Nancy was working late more and more often in the weeks after she and Myles split up. It was partly because the company had made a loss lately and needed to pick up the pace, but Greg knew Nancy was really avoiding going home to her empty house. When the two of them stayed late for meetings or to satisfy increasingly harsh deadlines, she let the occasional thing slip out. She asked after Myles one night.

"He's alright. Keeping himself to himself," Greg answered. "You miss him?"

He hadn't been sure whether she'd think he was prying, but to his surprise she laughed at the question.

"No, Greg, no I'm definitely not. I miss having *someone* I suppose, but I don't miss him. Do you know how hard he was to live with?" She looked down at the paperwork on her desk.

"I think I can imagine."

"I actually think it's a relief. He was so pigheaded at times. Once he got something in his head he wouldn't change his mind, to the point of being obsessive." Nancy met Greg's eyes. "Sometimes he frightened me to death."

Greg wasn't sure how to respond. There was a delicate balance between his relationship with Nancy the boss and Nancy his friend, not to mention his position in precarious territory between his boss and his best mate. But then he was probably one of Nancy's closest friends, given that she devoted so much of her life to work.

Greg arrived home late one night to find Toni cooking while Susie lay peacefully in her rocker. He crossed the kitchen and kissed his wife, careful to keep his voice down as he asked her how her day was.

"I should have put her upstairs half an hour ago, but I was doing this," Toni said, gesturing at the tempting pan of risotto that was just coming to the right consistency.

"Hey don't worry, I'll take her up now," Greg said, gently lifting the baby. She stirred and grizzled a little. "Where's Myles?"

"Oh, he's upstairs."

Greg carried Susie through the hall and stroked her soft hair. She calmed down and looked at him as he rocked her gently in his arms. He smiled down at his daughter as she batted her tiny hands towards his face. He went to tickle her chin with one finger and she grasped it suddenly and held on tight. He stopped where he was, at the foot of the stairs. She had never done that before. He turned about and went back to the kitchen to show Toni. By this time Susie had grabbed each finger in turn as he'd put it in front of her and was gurgling happily over her new game.

Before the dinner was completely ruined, Greg took Susie up to bed, still hanging onto his finger. A minute after he put her down her eyelids were already fluttering as she struggled to stay awake. When he stepped into the hall and closed the nursery door behind him, Myles opened the door to the spare room.

"Oh, hi mate. You just getting in?" Myles asked.

"Yeah, yeah, just put Susie down," Greg said.

"At least you got home in time for that." Myles tapped him on the arm.

"Toni's dishing up downstairs – have you eaten?"

"Yeah, thanks. Like the shirt by the way."

Greg looked down to remind himself which one he was wearing. The navy one.

"Oh. Cheers."

"You got something on the shoulder though – here." Myles brushed something off the back of the shirt, holding Greg's arm out straight as he did so. "I think I got it all – it comes off just like that. Looks like pollen or something. You must have brushed past a bush. It's really easily done."

"Thanks. I'll stick it in the wash tonight."

Greg was still brushing at the back of his shoulder when he arrived in the kitchen. Toni had set

two plates out and two glasses of wine. They chatted throughout dinner, always with one ear on the baby monitor. Not that Susie woke before feed times. She was settled into her routines and slept well.

They had long since finished eating and were deep in conversation when Myles came in, holding something in his hand.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Susie was crying," he said.

Greg and Toni both glanced at the baby monitor, which had remained silent.

"I went in to see if she needed changing or something," Myles continued, "and she had this in her mouth."

He opened his palm and revealed Greg's wedding ring. He placed it on the table between them where all three of them stared at it.

"Oh my god," Toni said, recovering first. "How did she get your ring in her mouth, Greg?"

"I don't know. I don't see how she could have," Greg said, staring at the ring and his empty finger to check it wasn't a trick.

"She was grabbing your fingers earlier. She must have pulled it off," Toni said.

"She's not strong enough to take my ring off, Toni."

"Well, did *you* take it off when you put her down?"

"No, of course I didn't. It must have fallen off my finger or something." Greg put the ring back on and noticed that it was a bit looser than it used to be. Long hours at work and a new baby had made him drop a few pounds lately. Still, he was sure it hadn't been in danger of slipping off his finger.

"She's gone right back to sleep now," Myles said, "she stopped crying after a few minutes."

"And why didn't we hear her on the monitor?" Toni said, going over the kitchen worktop where it stood, its green light blinking intermittently.

"Is the battery low?" Greg asked.

"I suppose it must be," Toni said, opening the back. "And didn't I ask you to get more batteries yesterday? I don't suppose you remembered. Thank god Myles was there."

"I'll get them tomorrow."

"Is that tomorrow as in the day *after* our daughter chokes to death?" Toni snapped.

Myles sidled out of the kitchen, leaving them privacy which they hardly noticed they'd gained.

They made up later. They always did. She apologised for snapping at him and he apologised for having his mind too entrenched in work the past couple of weeks. They made allowances for the fact that they were both tired. It was high time, though, that they started thinking more about childproofing things around the house. Susie was getting to that stage in her development where it was natural to explore things by sticking them in her mouth. It could have been so much worse. They'd have to be more careful.

Greg was as determined about it for his daughter's sake as for the sake of preventing another scene where Myles came out the hero. If it had been anything other than his wedding ring that had found its way into Susie's mouth, Greg might have accused him of planting it there. He had a horrible sense that Myles wanted to prove him a sub-standard father. Myles gave him the sense, without doing or saying anything directly, that the genetic father must somehow know best. And although he didn't believe that theory for a moment, he didn't want to share his family's space with someone who he suspected did.

He found it hard to sleep for thinking about it. He had dreams about his wedding ring choking Susie to death. He found it easy, in waking moments, to drift into suspicious daydreams about Myles winning Toni over and convincing her that he had some advantage in being Susie's natural father.

He woke in a sweat after dreaming that Myles had set fire to the house and rescued Toni and Susie, leaving him to burn. He could still see Myles' face looking up at him, laughing smugly like a magician who's just dumbfounded his audience, one arm around Toni as he held Susie and watched the flames. He sat up in bed and ran his hands down his damp arms. Every hair on them seemed to be standing rigid. Toni hadn't stirred. Her dark hair lay in S shapes against the

pillow.

He got out of bed and peered out over the back garden. Lit by the moon, it was still and silent. He had to get over this jealousy thing with Myles. That's all it was. He couldn't handle Myles being in the house because of his involvement in Susie's life. Myles had done everything he could to make things alright: he'd tried to help out, he'd given them space, he'd started looking for flats to rent. He'd probably done all the right things in handling such a potentially awkward situation. And all Greg could do was suspect him of trying to come between him and Toni. He was being immature. The stress at work didn't help, but he could hardly use that as an excuse.

He crept out of the bedroom and the short distance down the hall to Susie's room. He was too rattled to sleep yet. Maybe her sound slumber would inspire him. Besides, after the incident with the ring, he couldn't check on her enough. The door was open and, before he got through the doorway, he saw Myles in the moonlight from the window. He was sitting in Toni's nursing chair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, peering into Susie's crib as she slept.

He had to go.

SIX

Myles found his own place within a week. His intention to rent and his lack of fussiness about what was only going to be a temporary crash pad made the process swift and simple. Greg wondered why he hadn't done it before. Perhaps he'd got a little too cosy in their family home. Greg had to admit he was relieved to see him go. He felt guilty, however, when it crossed his mind that maybe Myles had been in need of the company after splitting up with Nancy. Still, it had been his decision.

Life in the Armstrong household went back to normal for a while. After a month or two, Greg and Myles even resumed their occasional nights out at The Cloak and Dagger. Myles always asked after Susie and Toni, and Greg felt comfortable chatting about them now that Myles was removed to a distance.

Things didn't remain perfect for long. When Susie was six months old, Greg lost his job. His company had merged with another and redundancies had been unavoidable. Nancy had been luckier.

"Well, try to look on the positive side," she had said to him when they'd had chance to talk about it privately in her office. "The new boss comes over as a real prick, and you won't have to work for him."

Greg managed a weak smile.

"And your redundancy package isn't bad, is it?" she checked. "It'll give you time to look for a new job."

"They haven't cheated me or anything. It's just that, when you've got a kid to support, there's so much more to worry about. What if I don't find anything for six months? Even a year?"

"Someone with your obvious talent for the job soon will. You'll come across really well at interview – you did when you came here. You just need a strong CV and the right contacts." She flicked through her rolladex and pulled out a business card. "I went to college with this guy. He's a recruitment consultant and he specialises in marketing vacancies. Give him a call. I'll tell him about you. I'm sure he could help."

Greg knew, when he thought logically about it, that he would find another job. Toni did her best to reassure him and pointed out that they still had her maternity leave money to live on, not to mention modest savings if they really needed them. Even if she went back to work a bit earlier than they'd envisaged, and Greg stayed at home with Susie, what would it matter? It would just be a change of plan. Greg knew she was right. Nonetheless he wanted to work and felt happier being the provider. He'd already failed to contribute to the biological process of having a child, and

he couldn't bear the thought of not being able to provide materially. He became more optimistic after an interview with Nancy's recruitment consultant friend, David. It was going to be a matter of using David's contacts, and a few that Nancy came up with, to knock on doors and find the right opening.

Despite all these positive steps on the road to finding a new job, Greg couldn't relax. It became impossible to sleep. At first there were broken nights with a couple of hours' sleep followed by an hour or two of watching over Susie. Then he stopped sleeping altogether. Toni would stir in the night to notice him either wide awake or gone. He took to wandering around the house and garden, like a zombie. When she got up in the morning she'd find him sitting under a tree or staring out of a window. He was getting more and more unhinged. Within a week, he'd declined rapidly into complete bewilderment.

When Toni realised the situation was beyond her remedy, and that Greg was too confused to know what to do next, she called Myles. He agreed to come over immediately and try hypnosis to help Greg sleep.

"But I don't want hypnosis. I don't even believe in it," Greg said, when Toni told him Myles was on his way.

"We have to do something to get you to sleep, darling. Please just give it a try. He really helped me when I wanted to give up smoking, remember? I wasn't sure that would work but it made all the difference. I think he's very good at what he does and he wants to help you."

"I don't trust him, Toni."

"What do you mean, you don't trust him? He's your best mate."

"I know, I know. Maybe I'm just so tired that I'm paranoid. I don't like the idea."

"Alright. But I don't like the idea of you wandering the house sleepless for another night. It's messing with your head."

"That's it. That's what I'm scared of. That it'll mess with my head. The hypnosis."

"Come on, Greg, it didn't do me any harm, did it? You need to be in a fit state to go to interviews. David thought he might be able to set something up for you next week, and you've only got a few days to go before you leave work, so you'll be able to put all your energy into it. But only if you start getting some decent rest. This wakefulness is only adding to your stress and I'm really worried about you."

Greg just nodded and looked past her. She had the feeling that, whenever she talked to him for more than a few seconds, he wasn't able to take it in. She didn't dare leave Susie with him anymore. She almost cried with relief when Myles pulled up on the drive.

He was very insistent with Greg, resisting his confused protests and presiding over the situation within minutes of stepping through the door. Toni found it hard to tell whether he'd started hypnotising Greg or not. The process appeared seamless as Myles guided Greg into an armchair in the lounge and began talking to him. He motioned for Toni to leave. She picked up Susie from her playmat and carried her out into the garden, where the afternoon was hot and still. She wished she'd picked up Susie's sunhat, but didn't want to go back into the living room to get it now that Myles was in there with Greg.

She didn't remember anything about the times he had hypnotised her to help her stop smoking. It was a matter of knowing you were talking normally with him one moment, and the next feeling as though you had dropped off and missed something but having no idea what or how long you were out of it for. She had no memory of what he'd said or done while she was hypnotised to make her change how she felt about her habit but, half an hour after the first session when she'd reached for her pack of cigarettes she'd felt repulsed at the thought of lighting up. The feeling wore off after a while but after a couple more sessions of hypnosis she lost interest in the habit completely. If only he could help Greg in the same way, she thought, as she wandered up and down the lawn shielding Susie's head with her hand. They'd never get through this if he didn't get some rest. The last few days it had felt as though someone had extracted her husband from his body and she was dealing with just an empty shell.

Myles strode out onto the patio and squinted up at the bright sun. Toni immediately gave him her

full attention as she hurried across the lawn towards him.

"He's sleeping," Myles said, smiling at her.

"Now?"

"Yes, don't worry." Myles squeezed her arm as she came up to him. "As soon as I brought him out of hypnosis he told me he couldn't wait to go and take a nap. He went upstairs. I didn't look but I'm sure he's asleep."

"Thank you so much." Toni choked back a lump in her throat. It was such a relief.

"If I were you I'd let him sleep through the night now," Myles said, stroking Susie's fair hair.

"Okay, I will."

"He was exhausted, wasn't he?" Myles said. "I expect it's taken its toll on you too."

Toni didn't say anything. She didn't trust herself to, in case tears came out instead. Myles took Susie from her and, holding the baby with one arm, embraced Toni with the other. They stayed like that for a while, then he guided them back indoors and into the coolness of the house.

Myles came to the house every evening of that week, which happened to be Greg's last week at work. He seemed reliant on Myles' hypnosis to get to sleep – something which Myles assured him would cease as soon as he'd gotten over this difficult week and had settled back into a proper sleeping pattern. A whole week had been a long time to wander about sleepless, Myles reasoned, so it would take perhaps as long again to re-establish a normal routine.

Greg felt himself growing calmer and more focused as the week went on. He had trouble remembering the things that had happened in his gruelling week without sleep and recalled nothing of Toni persuading him to undergo hypnosis with Myles.

"Thank god you did though," he told her, kissing her forehead.

He remembered nothing of the hypnosis itself, but was in no doubt of the benefits it was affording him. Toni was grateful to have him returned to his old self. Everything that had seemed impossible just last week was back in reach.

"I was really scared seeing you wandering lost through every night." Toni stroked her hand down his back as they fell asleep together in bed the night before Greg's last day at work.

"I know." He turned over and drew her against him. "Everything's going to be alright y'know. We'll be fine."

After Greg's final day at work, Nancy organised a low-key goodbye drink in the bar across the road. She was annoyed to be losing such a talented assistant manager. She knew redundancy had hit him hard but, in common with Toni, didn't expect him to be out of work for long.

What neither of them expected was Greg walking out in front of a bus that afternoon soon after leaving the bar. The bus driver explained to the police that he saw him step out from a crowd of pedestrians waiting for a green light at a crossing. The other pedestrians said they heard him sigh before he stepped out. Before anyone realised what he was doing, the bus had hit him. The driver didn't even have time to slam on the brakes.

SEVEN

Toni's devastation was absolute. Her parents and Greg's sister came straight to her side when she got the news. Within a couple of hours, Myles was there too. She didn't know why, but he was the most comfort to her of all of them.

Going into work the following Monday was one of the toughest things Nancy had ever had to do. Half the department (and the company, it seemed) had already heard the news, but she had to front an official briefing nonetheless. It was unbearable to spearhead the grief of the entire company when she hadn't even begun to feel the worst of her own, private grief. It was down to her to organise the flowers for Toni and to go through Greg's desk. Of course, he'd cleared everything personal out anyway, but she went through everything carefully.

While colleagues around her spent all day talking about the bastards in management not caring how redundancy affected people and weeping over how that poor little baby was going to manage without a father, Nancy had only one conviction in her mind: Greg wouldn't do it. She knew a lot of people said that when someone close to them committed suicide and that it was a common response since the suicidal don't discuss their intentions. But this was more than that: Nancy was confident in her ability to judge which way people would turn. It was a large part of her job and she wasn't managing a successful department for nothing. If she was wrong about Greg, she was losing her touch.

As secretaries spent the day red-eyed around the water cooler and people lingered mournfully past Greg's old desk on their way to discuss his death more fully with someone else, Nancy found it just as difficult to work. If he hadn't killed himself, what had happened? She contemplated the possibility of someone having pushed him. The police had the names of the other people waiting at that crossing, had taken statements from all of them. All had said the same thing. No one had seen anyone run off. They had all been rooted to the spot, some of them speckled with his blood. None of them had seen him trip or stumble. She herself had had to verify that he couldn't have been drunk. He'd had one pint of beer at his farewell drink, and it had taken him an hour to get through that. There was no suicide note. He hadn't phoned Toni or said anything out of place to anyone. There had been plenty of goodbyes and I'll miss you's at the bar, but those were all related to his job, of that Nancy was convinced. She had seen Greg and Toni together enough times and heard him talk about her and the baby often. He wouldn't go without leaving her something. More to the point, he just wouldn't leave her.

Nancy jumped when her phone rang. It was David.

"Just wondered if Greg said anything to you about the Keynes & Co interview this morning? He was due at eleven, and they've just called me to say he was a no show. I'm a bit pissed off to be honest because I sent him an email -"

Nancy cut in to explain the tragic news, at which David was hasty to apologise and back off. She didn't want to let him go without gleaning a few details though.

"Wait a minute – did you send the email to him here?" she asked.

"Yes. I didn't have an alternative address for him and I figured he would check his mail before he left for good. I should have followed it up with a phonecall I suppose, but I was stuck in interviews myself on Friday afternoon and didn't leave the office until after seven."

"You still have the email you sent I assume?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Forward it to me, would you?"

Nancy put the phone down and bit her lip. She picked up the phone and dialled one of the technicians. Within half an hour, Nancy had logged into Greg's email account on her PC. At around two on the afternoon of his death, he had received an email from David telling him he'd got an interview at SureShield's biggest rival, Keynes & Co. He'd added that they needed someone quickly and had thought about headhunting him only six months previously when another vacancy had come up, so his chances already looked good. Nancy found Greg's response to the email – a brief but polite thanks to David half an hour later. He wouldn't have had much time on Friday, she reasoned to herself. More interestingly, she noticed that he'd also forwarded the email, along with a few personal ones that he had presumably wanted to keep, to his home email account at around three-thirty.

"Why would he have done that if he hadn't intended to show up for the interview?" Nancy said to herself. She shook her head. Greg would have jumped at the chance to work for Keynes & Co, especially after the way SureShield had treated him. It would have been perfect.

She scanned her eye down the list of other emails he'd sent that afternoon. Most of them were to clients, but one was to Myles. It caught Nancy's eye because she was still smarting whenever she saw or heard his name. She opened it out of nothing but curiosity. She felt guilty even as she double clicked on it. Using Greg to look at a message concerning Myles just for the sake of prying was nasty, but she couldn't help it. Maybe it was about her. Dear Myles, Nancy is falling apart without you, why don't you patch things up? Yeah, right.

It was a message thanking Myles for his help in curing Greg's recent insomnia. "I really appreciate it," Greg had written, "and it must have been quite a pain in the arse for you to get over to ours every night this week just to hypnotise my stupid brain for half an hour. I owe you a drink or several I reckon."

Nancy closed the message and logged off Greg's account. She pulled some paperwork out of her inbox and tried to shut out the suspicions she was having about her ex-boyfriend.

*

After the weekend, Toni's parents returned home for a couple of days as they owned their own business and couldn't leave it for long. Greg's sister, Amelia, went back and forth from her house to Toni's with her husband and their two young kids. Myles offered to stay in the house with Toni for a few days to help out with Susie and so that she wouldn't have to be alone. In truth he did a lot more than that. He rang friends and relatives to tell them the news that Toni just couldn't get out without breaking down again. He dealt with the funeral arrangements, the coroner, the solicitors. All of the stuff Toni would have done if she'd had to, but that Myles was glad to have saved her from. Where suicide was involved, some people seemed to think they had the right to get holier-than-thou. He changed and bathed Susie, took her out of the room when she got loud, put her in Toni's arms when she needed comfort. He cooked simple meals and tried to get her to eat something. He hoovered, did some washing, emptied the bins.

"No wonder you were Greg's best friend," Toni's Mum had remarked to him. "You're just like him."

The funeral was arranged for the following Monday and it looked set to be well attended. Myles had most of the arrangements under control but he sat down with Toni the Friday before to run a few things past her. It was exactly a week since Greg's death.

"Myles," Toni said, a cold cup of tea in one hand and her head in the other. "Do you think he could have done it because of the insomnia?"

"What do you mean?" Myles pushed the paperwork for the funeral arrangements aside.

"Well, during that week he couldn't sleep he did some pretty strange things. He filled the kettle with milk, left his mobile in the fridge, that kind of thing. I had a hard time keeping up with him. Do you think he could have walked out in front of that bus because he was still suffering from the effects of the insomnia?"

Myles watched her carefully and measured out his response. If he dismissed the idea right off, he would upset her.

"Did he seem confused that day? What did you think when you saw him that morning?" he asked.

Toni lifted her head and shook it. "He was fine, Myles. He was back to his old self completely thanks to your hypnosis."

She wasn't the kind of woman to kid herself. Now and then she was showing sparks of anger at Greg. Myles reached across the table and touched her hand. She caught his eye and he could see she was reigning back tears. She drew her hand away and folded her arms.

"What did you say to him in hypnosis exactly? What made him sleep like that, when nothing else had worked?"

"I wouldn't set much store by the hypnosis, Toni. People tend to think there's a lot more to it than there is."

"How do you do it? How did you get Greg to sleep?"

"The same way I got you to stop smoking."

"I don't remember anything about it. I don't know how you did that either."

Myles lowered his eyes and bit his lip, as though he was coming to a decision. He looked up at Toni, still awaiting an answer.

"Look, this is something I wouldn't normally say," he said, placing his hands on the table. "In fact, I've never said this before, but I think it will help you understand if I explain it to you."

Toni leaned in.

"There is no such thing as hypnosis." He watched the startled reaction cross her face. "At

the risk of having you reach for the cigarettes, I didn't hypnotise you. I have never hypnotised anyone. Hypnotism is an elaborate hoax, just like magic or mind-reading.”
Toni narrowed her eyes as she listened.

“What *does* work very well indeed is suggestion,” Myles continued. “And the only reason people don't realise this is because it's so simple. Anyone can do it, but very few people actually bother. They, like me, see what amazing affects it has on people and, because there's money to be made from it, neglect to spell out the truth to the world – although of course it's there if you want to look for it.”

“I suggested a thousand times to Greg that he try and sleep. Why didn't that work?”

“It's about the technique you use when you present a suggestion. The slightly more subtle ones tend to go in better. People unconsciously resist the obvious, just as their subconscious picks up all those things that are just below the surface.”

“So if you were merely making a few suggestions to me that I quit smoking, why don't I remember you doing that?”

“Because I suggested that you shouldn't. If everyone remembers how I do what I do, then there's a chance they'll emulate me and put me out of business. Can't have that, can I?” Myles smiled.

“Can you suggest people do things that they don't want to do?”

“Of course you can. Sales people do it all the time. If you learn the technique you can either use it helpfully or greedily. Depends on whether or not you want to be able to live with yourself, I guess. And of course, some people are more susceptible to suggestion than others. Greg was a lot harder to influence than you were.”

“Why?”

“Probably because you really wanted to give up smoking and, although he wished he could sleep, there was a lot of anxiety clouding his thoughts that was making it harder for things to get through to him from outside. There are some people you can't influence at all because they're so closed to suggestion – Nancy, for example. She never let her bloody guard down.”

Myles and Toni grinned at each other as they thought of Nancy's austerity. It was the first time Toni had found anything amusing since Greg's death.

That night Myles checked the answerphone. He had taken to diverting Toni's home phone straight to the machine so that she wouldn't be bothered by all the legal and administrative things he was trying to deal with on her behalf. He wasn't expecting to hear a familiar female voice when he hit play.

“Hi Toni, this is Nancy. I wasn't sure whether to phone you or not. It's about Greg. I found something in his email that I think you should see. I'll explain more when I talk to you. I don't want to do this over the phone. It's really important though. It's about the whole suicide thing. Please call me. I'll be at work until late tonight. Come to the office if you like.”

There was a click as she hung up. The mechanical voice informed him that the message had been left at four-fifteen. He checked his watch. Two hours ago. He pressed the delete key and turned on Greg's computer.

EIGHT

“I've got to go out, Toni. Will you be okay for a couple of hours?”

Toni got up from the sofa where she had just finished feeding Susie. Myles was putting his coat on in the hallway.

“Sure. Be as long as you like. Is everything alright?” She noticed that he looked rather flushed.

“Yeah, fine. I just need to sort out a couple of work things and pick up some stuff from my flat. I'll see you later this evening.”

“Okay, bye then.” She only just got the words out before he'd closed the front door behind himself. A moment later he sped out of the drive.

Myles had been in such a hurry that she hadn't thought to ask him if he wanted something to eat

when he got back. All week he'd looked after her. She had barely touched a thing in the kitchen. Now, with Susie on the verge of sleep and the prospect of being on her own in the house for the first time since Greg died, she grasped the idea of occupying the time by preparing a meal for them both. She looked about for her handbag. She could text him, just to check he'd be coming home for dinner.

She hadn't looked at her mobile all day. When she pulled it out of her bag she saw that she had received a text. She expected it to be Amelia, or maybe her Mum or Dad. She raised her eyebrows when Nancy's name appeared next to the envelope.

Nancy had put a personal message on the flowers that had been sent on behalf of Greg's colleagues at SureShield, but other than that Toni hadn't had any contact with her. She opened the text. Her heart rate shot up as she scrolled down it. She stood in the living room, wondering what to do. She looked from Susie to the phone and back again. There was no time. She now knew where Myles had gone in such a rush. She had to get there too. She scooped up her sleeping daughter and fumbled for her car keys.

*

Toni parked illegally outside the SureShield building and sprang out of the car. Myles' car was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he wasn't here after all, maybe she'd been wrong. She glanced up at the five storey red brick building as she ran round to the backseat to get Susie. She saw the lights on in part of the top storey – where Nancy's office would be. Reception was lit up too although the revolving doors leading into it were still. Toni found they gave when she pushed them gently: they hadn't been locked, which meant there had to be some security personnel around.

“Hello?” she called, marching through reception with Susie in her arms. She had only been in this building once, when Greg had showed her around, and although she knew his department had been on the top floor, she had no idea where the lifts were or how to get to Nancy's office quickly. The security gates to the left of the high reception desk were gaping open. Surely they wouldn't leave them unattended? She called out again.

As she leaned over the desk to see if there was a bell or anything, she saw a security man slumped over in his chair. She almost screamed but then he snored and it dawned on her that he was only asleep. She called louder to him but, despite being just a couple of metres away, he didn't stir. She tried snapping her fingers and commanding him to wake. He slumbered on.

She dashed through the open gates and spied the lifts in the distance, at the end of a corridor, so she headed towards them, only stopping for a moment to note a second security guard fast asleep on the floor on the way. She sped up as much as she could with Susie in her arms. When she arrived at the lift doors she jabbed the call button and waited, switching Susie from one hip to the other and realising how big and heavy she'd gotten since she'd last carried her for a long time like this. She accepted, after three more prods at the call button, that the lift was out and she'd have to take the stairs. Before they'd even made it up the first flight, Susie was grizzling. Toni tried to soothe her but knew it was useless: it was past her normal bedtime and she was picking up on her mother's disquietude.

As Toni finally reached the fifth floor landing she paused and looked through the window in the heavy double doors she thought led into Greg's old open plan office. She saw a vaguely familiar layout of desks and partitions and thought she'd been lucky in chancing upon the right end of the building. Susie went quiet, allowing Toni to catch voices coming from beyond the doors. Adrenaline coursed through her. Myles and Nancy were not far away.

She thought the better of storming in and catching them by surprise. She could hear their voices well enough to discern that emotions were running high. What if Nancy's text message hadn't meant what she'd thought it had meant? What if they were just having a row, or he'd come straight here to tell Nancy she was wrong? “Tried to get you on your answerphone. Worried

about you. Think Myles is dangerous and Greg didn't commit suicide. Please get in touch." Maybe he'd heard the answerphone message and gone to reason with her.

Toni slipped through the doors and tuned into their voices as she stole closer.

"You're insane." It was Nancy's voice. Her office must be just around the next corner, Toni judged. "No one's going to believe I had an affair with Greg!"

"Why not? If your little note says so they will. I'll say I always knew about it. That I split up with you because you couldn't get over him."

"Anyone who knows me will know I didn't write this." She was trying to sound confident.

"So? All the people who knew Greg believed he killed himself, didn't they?" Toni pushed her fingers against her lips, felt the heat rise to her face and bile fill the back of her throat.

"I didn't. I knew he wouldn't kill himself."

"Well you've just been a bit too clever for your own good then haven't you?"

"And if I don't write this? I mean, why should I? You're going to kill me anyway, so why should I scrawl some pathetic note for you?" Toni swallowed hard. She looked down at Susie, who'd grabbed at Toni's hair and was happily clutching it for the meantime. Toni wished she'd left her in the car.

"Look, I don't give a shit if you write the note or not. People will believe what I say. Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Toni heard Nancy cry out. She flew round the corner and saw Myles through the door into Nancy's corner office with his hand on Nancy's wrist, about to wrestle her out of her chair.

"Myles! Stop!" Toni called.

He swung round and that was when Toni saw the gun in his other hand. She felt her legs threaten to buckle and her head begin to swim. Nancy stood up and began shouting, causing Myles to shout over her and Susie to start crying.

"Greg had an email practically offering him a job the day he supposedly walked out in front of that bus!" Nancy was yelling. "Check your email! Greg sent the message home – he was intending to go to the interview on Monday!"

"Nancy, you'd better shut up unless you want this gun in your mouth!" Myles yelled, pushing her backwards as she tried to shove past him towards Toni.

"If this bastard's wiped the email I have copies, including one I've given to the police – he's not going to get away with it!"

"The email doesn't prove anything!"

"He told Greg to kill himself – he hypnotised him!"

Myles brought the gun up to Nancy's head.

"Myles! Put the gun down!" Toni screamed at him. Susie let out a cry.

"He's never gotten over you and that baby!" Nancy shouted. This, and maybe Susie's cry, seemed to discompose Myles for an instant. Nancy used the opportunity to lunge her knee into his crotch and knock the gun out of his hand. Ignoring the pain, Myles recovered quickly and grabbed her wrists to restrain her. He had no chance of getting the gun back. It had spun into the far corner of the office. His only option was to back her against the window.

"Goodbye, Nancy," he said, his voice full of hate. With all the extra strength his anger had provided, he yanked her towards him and then propelled her through the window pane. Her scream and the crash of breaking glass mingled to make the silence a second later horrific. It was superseded by a commotion in the road below, but Toni had already started running by then.

Clinging to her screaming daughter, she sprinted back the way she had come, through the double doors to the stairwell. She took the stairs as fast as she could without losing her footing. As soon as she heard the double doors bang above her, all she could think of was the gun: was he training it on her back right now? Was he aiming it near Susie? Her skin crawled with fear, making her shudder. The stairwell was open. If he looked down it from that top floor, he could see most of the staircase all the way to the ground. She couldn't risk running all the way down while exposed like that. So far she had only made it onto the floor below. There were matching double doors to her left and right. She took the right hand ones and kept on running.

She heard Myles yelling her name as the doors shut behind her and even over the noise of Susie

crying. Toni couldn't run any faster without causing Susie more distress, but to keep going seemed her only option. As the first corridor branched into two more and the one she ran down branched into two more after that, she was aware that she had no idea whereabouts she was in the building. She glanced through windows as she flashed by and saw similar arrangements of desks and dividers and filing cabinets everywhere she looked. Having not heard Myles behind her yet, she tried a couple of doors to executive offices, but they were all locked.

Where were the stairs? She had covered half a dozen corridor lengths and not seen any. How was she going to get them both out of here? She stopped at another juncture and felt her breath rattle painfully in her throat. Susie's face was scarlet and she was crying hard. A door banged some way off.

"Toni!"

Myles was following the noise.

She darted into the nearest open plan office and wound through the maze of desks and cupboards. She thought of crouching under something and waiting for him to give up. If she just held Susie still, maybe she'd give up crying and he'd never find them. She wasn't sure if he intended to hurt them or not but somehow wasn't willing to take the chance, especially as she'd just seen him throw someone out of a window. There was a door at the far end of the office – maybe it led to some stairs or a fire escape. She dashed over to it and peered in. It was a board room. All that was in it was a table and six chairs, plus two easy chairs and a coffee table in the far corner. She and Susie slipped in. The door could be locked from the inside and so she snapped it tight fast.

There was a phone on the coffee table between the two armchairs. Toni picked it up but found it was dead. If only she'd brought her handbag with her mobile in it from the car, but she'd been in such a rush to get into the building she'd left everything behind. She sat on one of the easy chairs and rocked Susie until she calmed down a little. Her mind was too panicked to think: what should she do now? Her main priority was to keep Susie safe. If only she could leave her somewhere so that she could try to sneak out of the building and raise the alarm. With Susie crying in her arms Myles was never going to be far behind them.

The coffee table was a modern leather cube, completely hollow when turned upside down. It was small but the sides were just about high enough to contain Susie safely. She looked around the room. It had to have some level of soundproofing. Maybe it wouldn't mask a scream but it would make it hard to detect a bit of crying. She pulled off her sweater and wrapped it around Susie, swaddling her cosily in the upside down cube. Susie looked up at her with big trusting eyes.

Toni went to the window to try to get her bearings. She was at the back of the building, looking over the garden area where people went for their lunch in the summer. She was viewing it from one side and knew she couldn't be far from the end of the building and therefore another flight of stairs or perhaps a working lift. She took one last look at Susie, swallowed back her tears, and went to the door.

Her hand rested on the handle and she was about to open it when she saw, in the dimness, Myles walk past the desks just metres away. He was holding the gun out steady in front of him as he searched. Toni slid down on the floor and made herself as small as she could between the door and the wall. If he looked in through the window, would he be able to see her? Yes, probably, if he looked downwards – but she didn't dare to move. From the door at least Susie would be obscured from view by the large table and chairs. She prayed for Susie not to make a sound now.

As she crouched there, barely allowing herself breath, she wondered how she would know when he had gone. The room was reasonably soundproofed – there were no giveaway footsteps to help her. The dim light from the windows in the office beyond cast a long rectangle of grey light from the window in the door onto the blue carpet. The patch of light began inches from Toni's knee. It was in this patch that she saw Myles' silhouette hover. He was looking in, resting the butt of the gun on his shoulder and letting the barrel point at the ceiling. He turned his head both ways, then

tried the door handle. If he shoots at the lock, Toni thought, there's a good chance he'll shoot through my head. Miraculously, Susie didn't make a sound. Myles' shadow wavered and was gone.

Toni held her breath until she heard him shout her name again and, by the echo of it, could tell he had moved on into another office or corridor somewhere. Susie began to whimper. Before Toni could lose her nerve, she unlocked and slipped through the door, using her car keys to twist the lock mechanism shut again behind her. Keeping low, she scuttled to the nearest desk with a phone on it. It was dead too.

Back out in the corridor, she heard Myles calling her from somewhere fairly distant – perhaps even the floor below this one. She ran to the end of the corridor and saw signs for a fire exit leading to what looked like a cleaning cupboard. When she opened the door, she saw a stairway lit by florescent emergency lighting. It was pretty steep and dusty, and there were no helpful banisters on the breeze block walls, but Toni didn't care. This had to lead to the ground floor and out.

After every dozen or so steps there was a blind corner, which Toni rounded with her heart in her mouth just in case she came running into a gun with Myles on the end of it. She reached the ground floor, panting hard, her hands smeared with peppery dust from the walls on the way down, and paused at the door. She had no idea where this came out and who was on the other side of it.

She eased it open an inch and listened. Nothing. She cast her eye through the narrow gap and saw part of the reception area she'd been through earlier. It felt like hours ago. Just ahead of her would be the security doors, with the street just strides beyond. She felt suddenly optimistic. She was almost there. She edged out and closed the door behind her, so busy looking both ways for any sign of Myles coming that it came as a shock when she looked towards the security doors and saw they were shut fast. Not flapping open, as they had been when she'd come in past the sleeping security guards, but sealed and impassable.

Had the guards woken up and secured them? She looked to her right and saw the one who'd been slumped in the corridor earlier hadn't moved. Her blood roared in her ears. No, Myles had been here. He was seconds ahead of her. Where was he now?

She looked toward the lift that had been out earlier and noticed that the doors were open. She didn't want to go back into the building now that she had almost gotten out of it, but a lift would be more bulletproof than anything else, and maybe she could go back and lock herself in that room with Susie. The lift was a fifty metre sprint away. It was a distance that seemed to take an age to cover, and all the while Toni imagined the gun pointing at her back. Just as she reached the lift doors, there was a distinct *ping* and they closed.

“Oh *shit!*” Toni cried, banging her fist against the steel door that had just sealed against her.

“Toni!” Myles called to her. She swung round with a frightened gasp. He was standing by the security doors she had just run from. He held the gun by his side and looked as though he was about to collapse rather than hurt anyone.

“Did you kill my husband? *Did you?*” Toni demanded, finding enough boldness in her sudden anger to take a few steps towards him. He lifted the gun and pointed it at her. She stopped and raised her hands.

“Toni, I didn't kill Greg. He was my best friend. You have to believe me. We don't have much time.” His eyes were too avid, too chaotic. This wasn't the mindfully presented man Toni was accustomed to.

“I don't have to believe anything you say. I just watched you kill Nancy.”

“Greg and Nancy were having an affair.” He said it as though it was a renowned truth.

“Bullshit!”

“She didn't leave me any choice. You musn't believe her lies. She made up the whole thing about me having something to do with Greg's death to turn you against me. It was all

because she was jealous. She thought I was in love with you. That's why she started an affair with Greg."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She was right about one thing. I am in love with you."

"Don't be stupid."

"Since you gave birth to our daughter, I...I don't know how to describe the bond I felt between the three of us. Words aren't strong enough. I fell in love with Susie the first time I saw her. I've never, ever been in love, Toni. And then I fell in love with the woman who gave her to me."

"Susie was never yours, Myles, not really. She'll always be Greg's and mine."

As her words cut through the gap between them, Myles relaxed the arm that held the gun and brought the crook of his elbow up to his face. He wiped his brow and let out a muffled sob. When he uncovered his face Toni could see his eyes were full of tears.

"Let me look after you both, now that he's gone. That's all I want to do. I love you both so much. I'm part of your family."

Toni took a deep breath and a step towards him.

"Look, why don't you give me the gun and we'll talk about it."

"We have to get out of here, Toni. We have to get out of here quickly. We'll have to hide for a while."

"I know. Give me the gun and we'll talk about where to go." She took another couple of steps forward, close enough to see the tears running down his cheeks. She'd never seen him cry.

"Where's Susie? We can't go without her."

"I left her outside. You wanna come with me to get her?" She was an arm's length away. She reached out slowly and touched his arm, the one that wasn't holding the gun.

"You do believe me about Greg and Nancy, don't you?" he asked, looking her in the eyes. She squeezed his arm through the leather coat he was wearing.

"Sure."

"I think he killed himself because he couldn't have her without breaking your heart."

Toni swallowed. With great effort she forced herself to stroke his arm and conceal the hostility in her eyes. In the distance she could hear sirens.

"Give me the gun and we'll go and get Susie, okay? We don't have much time, huh?"

"I can't give you the gun. I'm not gonna hurt you or Susie, don't worry. I couldn't. But I need to make sure we all get out of here and away to somewhere safe."

"Please just put it away then – it makes me nervous."

He looked down at her and smiled. "Sure." He tucked the gun into the inside of his coat. The sirens were growing louder. They sounded as though they were only metres away. Perhaps they were pulling up outside now. Myles grabbed Toni's hand and they began to walk down the corridor.

"Toni, I'm sorry I messed this up. I didn't come here to complicate things. It was meant to all be far simpler than it turned out," Myles explained.

"Mmm-hmm." She was listening to the vehicles pulling up outside. The sirens were silenced. Myles wasn't paying them any attention. He seemed to be absorbed in her.

"You were never supposed to have been dragged into it all. But Nancy wouldn't let it go, would she? She nearly ruined everything with her lies."

"I know." She heard the crackle of a police radio echo along the corridor, though it was still a long way from them. With a pretence of flicking her hair over her shoulder, she glanced behind and caught a blue light flashing across the ceiling. "Does this way lead outside?" she checked, looking about her as they approached the end of the corridor with doors on either side.

"Yeah, I came here a couple of times to train some of Nancy's team in influencing customers. These doors lead straight out into the garden at the back. We can get away without being seen if we hurry."

They hurried to the glass doors leading into the garden Toni had overlooked earlier just in time for Toni to spot a policeman with a gun drop into place in the landscaped shrubs. She turned and grabbed both of Myles' hands, swinging him round to face her so that he had his back to the view.

"Ready?" she asked. She felt the urgency to run.

"As long as you're with me, I'm ready. Let's go and get Susie." He leaned down to her and kissed her lips. She felt the warmth of his breath as the hard gun under his jacket pressed against her chest.

They pushed on the door together. Though Toni glanced out, she saw nothing move outside. She hoped that there was at least one armed policeman out there. As they shoved the door and it burst wide open, Toni strode out with Myles but, as soon as they heard the megaphone, they stopped still.

"Put your hands in the air. We have the building surrounded with armed guards. Do not move or we will shoot. Stop and put your hands in the air."

From the corner of her eye, Toni could see Myles raise his hands as she did the same. She looked around at the armed police stationed at various points in the garden, guns trained on Myles.

"Mrs Armstrong, step away please."

Toni almost failed to respond to her own name spoken over the megaphone. A WPC was beckoning her off to the right.

"Mrs Armstrong! You must move – you're in danger!"

Toni didn't look behind her again. She ran at breakneck speed towards the WPC. She threw herself into the woman's arms, sobbing for Susie.

It was only when she had managed to communicate whereabouts her baby was and someone had been sent into the building to find her that Toni dared to look back. Myles stood with his hands in the air.

"We know you are armed," the megaphone boomed. "Take your weapon out very slowly and place it on the ground."

Myles moved his hand into his jacket. Even at this distance Toni could see he was shaking. He withdrew the gun gradually and reached forward as if he was about to bend and put it down. Suddenly he spun it round in his hand and cocked it at his temple. Every officer in the garden flinched and itched their triggers. Toni clutched her throat in terror.

"I repeat, place your weapon on the ground."

Myles' face was a mask of determination. His forehead creased with the stress and sweat gathering at his temples. His eyes darted in the direction which Toni had run.

"Toni!" he yelled.

The WPC hurried to guide Toni round the corner of the building and out of sight. Myles continued to shout to her.

"I will always fight for you and Susie! You can't forget about me! I'm your family, Toni!"

Toni braced herself for the crack of the gunshot. She felt the WPC's arm around her and she walked her off to the side of the building. She stared at the ground passing beneath their feet and wondered why this was happening to her. How she needed Greg right now. She had never gone through anything truly difficult without him and tried to imagine him next to her.

"We'd been just about to follow up a call from Miss Nancy Stanton about an email that aroused her suspicions about your husband's death," the WPC was saying. "It seems we were too late."

The gunshot never came. Myles took the gun from his head and laid it carefully on the ground. He replaced his hands in the air and stepped back. At the officer's command, he got on the floor and waited for a dozen armed men to arrest him. Although he made no move to resist them, he came out of it with a few injuries as well as handcuffs. They had all seen Nancy's body on the concrete as they'd arrived on the scene. When they'd roused the first security guard it had become obvious what had happened. Three officers hustled him round to the front of the building, towards one of the waiting police cars that had drawn a large Friday evening crowd. As Myles was led past Toni he began to struggle.

"Toni! I'll never stop loving you! Never!"

Just then a sergeant emerged from the building with Susie in his arms, crying for her mother.

"That's my daughter!" Myles yelled. "I want to see her! She's mine! I'll never stop fighting for her, Toni!"

The officers bundled him into the back of a car, leaving the gawping crowds to witness Susie being placed back in Toni's arms.

Toni watched as the car drew away and the sirens recommenced. She looked at Myles in the backseat, craning his head to meet her eyes, and then down at Susie, who seemed unaffected by the chaos.

“Oh Greg,” she said under her breath. “What did we do?”