

CONNECTED

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CHAPTER 1

As the coffin was lowered, the sky darkened and a gust of wind ripped through the churchyard, stirring the ancient trees and momentarily lifting the masks of reverent solemnity gathered around the open grave. Peter studied the faces with a detached sense of curiosity. How well, he wondered, had these people really known his brother? His gaze came to rest on Isabelle. Even now - even through the tears - she looked beautiful. He tried to imagine the feelings welling behind those big brown eyes: anguish tinged with guilt, denial, loneliness - perhaps even anger. He shivered. His own feelings were somehow suppressed. His brother was in a box, about to be sealed away for an eternity in the damp, peaty earth beneath his feet, and yet he felt strangely calm, the whole service having washed over him like a dream from which he might awaken at any moment.

The call had come last Saturday as he and Abigail had been leaving for dinner. Isabelle had just returned home from visiting her parents in Paris to discover Martin's lifeless body slumped before the PC with his headphones on. The initial appearance of sleep, supported by the half bottle of scotch on the desk, had faltered at the sight of an empty container of tranquilisers, and finally shattered at the touch of her husband's cold, dead skin. Since then, Peter had been busy helping Isabelle prepare for the funeral, and somehow this had kept him from analysing his own feelings.

Isabelle's hand was on his shoulder. "Peter, you will be coming back for a drink, won't you?" For a moment he felt disorientated, "Yes. Thank you. I'll see you back at The Fields." In his head, he could still hear the music from the service - Albinoni's Adagio for strings and organ performed by a dozen of Martin's fellow musicians from the academy. The sound had totally filled the small church, sending him off into a world of memories. *Why do we like music?* It was a question Martin had sprung on him one evening by phone, sparking a friendly three-month debate. "Why are we so moved by certain pieces of music?" he had continued. It was an intriguing question. Certain passages in certain works evoke such a strong emotional response, one can't help but wonder whether something special is happening deep within the brain. Peter, always the scientist, had argued for social cause; from an early age, we learn to associate musical patterns with emotions. On joyous occasions we become used to hearing particular styles of music. When we next hear something similar, we are pleasantly reminded of those occasions and describe the music as uplifting. Martin on the other hand, the artist, would always assume a more poetic, philosophical and profound explanation, quoting Shakespeare, Milton or Wordsworth, and mixing in a little new-age mysticism for good measure. He had believed the answer went deeper than social conditioning, attesting that the essence of music was universal, acting on the brain in an innate, organic way and that ultimately it was a spiritual phenomenon, capable of freeing one's very soul. Peter thought this innateness unlikely, not least because of the cultural variation of musical schemas around the world. They had enjoyed many such debates over the years although regrettably, had had fewer opportunities recently. It would usually start with some off-the-wall comment from Martin - no small talk, no trivialities, just straight into whatever was on his mind. Sometimes it was just plain weird and Peter would tell him so, but generally he found it refreshingly different to the world of electronic systems design in which he passed his working hours. He would sorely miss Martin.

It was spitting with rain and Peter realised he was now alone at the graveside, except for his brother six feet below. He wasn't even sure how long he'd been standing there. Memories of their childhood and then the

last few conversations together had been replaying in his mind. There was something bothering him - an ephemeral sense of unease he couldn't quite identify. He put it down to circumstances and walked back to the car.

At The Fields, Isabelle had dutifully transformed from grieving widow to perfect hostess, smiling, flattering and refilling glasses. She had changed into a flowing, black evening dress giving the appearance of gliding as she moved gracefully around the room, her long, dark hair swinging as she turned. Some of the guests were now telling jokes and laughing, as though forgetting the occasion that had brought them together.

"You must be the physicist," came a slightly familiar voice from behind. It was the young curate who had conducted the service. He was a tall man, at least six two, with straight dark hair and a rather boyish face somehow currently displaying a mixture of humour, compassion and nervousness.

"Not any more. Contract engineer," replied Peter, surprised, "Is that how Martin used to refer to me?"

"I'm sorry! How rude. My name's Roger, I'm the curate here at Littlewick. You're Peter, his brother, right?"

Peter nodded. "It was a very moving service. Did you know Martin well?"

The man paused, looking across the room and out through the large bay windows, his face seeming much older as it filled with sadness and regret. "We spoke together a lot, but I'm not sure how well I really knew him. He and Isabelle were regulars in the congregation and they frequently hosted my discussion groups here at The Fields. Martin used to be such a wonderful person to have in the group. He would lead us in all sorts of interesting and unexpected directions."

Peter smiled; he could imagine Martin leading them all up the garden path. "Did you see him much over the last few months?"

"No, not much really. For a while we missed him at the church, then a couple of weeks ago, he turned up again. He seemed distracted, but..." An elderly lady with blue hair grabbed the curate by the arm and led him off rather unceremoniously to another group of guests. He threw an apologetic glance back at Peter, mouthing, "We'll talk later".

Peter didn't wait. Instead he wandered off through the huge old house. To name his home "The Fields" after the "Academy of St. Martin in the Fields" for which Martin had so often played, had been typical of his brother's shamelessly corny wit. Peter could picture him now, violin tucked tightly under the chin and that frantic look of intense concentration written across his face as the bow whipped back and forth.

It was a spacious, but wonderfully cosy house, its low ceilings crossed with dark wooden beams. The main building dated back to sometime in the sixteenth century, but it had been extended and converted over the years creating a rambling maze of corridors and unexpected nooks and crannies. Martin used to say that every square inch told a story. He had believed that houses absorbed the emotions of the people who lived in them and for those who were receptive, these emotions would periodically re-emerge. This was his explanation for tales of ghosts and the good or bad "vibes" he professed to feel in various surroundings. Despite a certain romantic appeal to the idea, Peter didn't believe any of it. He accepted that rooms and buildings could have their own character, but that this was due to physical properties which could be measured. The proportions of the room, the placement of the doors and windows, all had significance. The colours, lighting and general décor influenced one's mood, as did the subtle odours and the way sounds echoed or were absorbed. And after all, it was subjective; not everyone felt the same way about the same rooms.

Wandering into Martin's den, he felt a shiver run down his spine. The place was still a mess. Imagining Isabelle had found it too upsetting to tidy, he made a mental note to sort through it for her. As he looked around, he was searching for an explanation. *Why does an apparently happy and successful man kill himself?*

To one side of the desk stood an electric keyboard and synthesiser, the floor around which was littered with music scores and haphazard piles of books - books on music, art, poetry, philosophy, theology - and also a few which surprised him: chaos, consciousness, neural networks, complexity and so on. Peter leafed through a few, their margins full of his brother's illegible scribbling. *Since when had Martin been into trendy science - or science at all for that matter?* Martin had always maintained that science killed the beauty and mystery of the natural world. It was one of the recurring arguments they had enjoyed together. For Peter, nature's beauty could only be enhanced through better understanding.

Around the computer were hundreds of papers, mostly printouts from the Internet with a few drawings and handwritten notes. Pinned to the wall was an arresting sequence of colour images he immediately recognised as fractals from his studies into non-linear dynamics at Cambridge. These complex and strangely beautiful patterns, arising from quite deceptively simple mathematical equations called Mandelbrot sets, had the fascinating property of self-similarity at every scale. This meant that no matter how far you zoomed in on any one part of the image, the same overall pattern was repeated indefinitely. An intriguing consequence of this was infinitely long boundaries contained within a finite area - a fascinating concept, but not terribly useful, he thought to himself. What *had* Martin been up to? He remembered one of the last phone calls again. "I know everything!" Martin had exclaimed enigmatically with almost equal emphasis on each syllable. The line had gone dead before further elaboration and Peter had shrugged it off as a passing moment of his brother's weirdness, but the more he thought about it, *this* was what had been niggling at the back of his mind. Was it an accusation, as in, I know about you and Isabelle? Peter was very fond of Isabelle and over the years he had begun to imagine that under different circumstances it might have become more. Perhaps these feelings were mutual, but even if that were true, neither of them had dared express it with anything more than the occasional hug or handshake lasting just a moment too long, or the knowing glances as eye contact was made across crowded rooms. Had Martin noticed such an exchange and jumped to false conclusions? The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed. Peter was devoted to his family and his brother had known this. But then what had Martin meant with "I know everything!" Did he seriously think that after reading a few pop-scientific paperbacks, the sum of all knowledge had become his? No, Martin was too much of an intellectual for that.

With the chatter from the other rooms dying away, he went back to check on Isabelle, whom he found in the kitchen wiping what appeared to be tears from her eyes. As he put his hand on her shoulder, she swung round to embrace him.

"Why did he do it, Peter?"

The warmth of her embrace and the soft vulnerability of her slight French accent were momentarily intoxicating. "I ... don't know, I suppose he was..."

"He wasn't ill," she interrupted quickly, exasperation in her voice, "he was just - somewhere else."

She sat down, gazing absently through the window at the grey hills beyond. "For the last months, he was going through the motions, but his mind was elsewhere. He'd spend days on end sitting in his den with those

bloody headphones on, only appearing for meals. Sometimes he'd spend all night in there."

"What was he doing?"

"I don't know - composing mostly I think, among other things. You know, he was always obsessed with something, but when he spoke about it, it never made much sense to me. I suppose he was ill," she conceded. "It was a severe form of depression according to the doctor."

He put the kettle on and sat with her at the kitchen table. "Do you remember him saying anything in particular - something that struck you as strange or out of character?"

"Bof! He seemed out of character for most of the last few months really. There were certain themes - he got quite spiritual at one point - kept talking about heaven and life after death, but mostly it didn't make any sense. At first he seemed euphoric, but soon became frustrated when nobody else could understand why. I'm afraid I wasn't much help to him."

"You mustn't blame yourself!"

"No, well, you see, I was frustrated with his spending so much time working, and so when he tried to share it with me, I said I wasn't interested. I asked him to see the doctor, but he wouldn't accept that he was ill. That's when I decided to go and spend some time with my parents. After that, I think he just withdrew into his own little world and well, we all know what happened then."

"Did you ever hear him say that he knew everything?" Peter thought he noticed Isabelle's cheeks redden slightly.

"Perhaps, I'm not sure. Did he say that to you?"

"The last time we spoke - on the phone. Hey, I was wondering - would you let me sort out his den for you? It's a total mess in there, but there may be something important."

"That's very kind of you, Peter, but don't you need to get back to work? And what about Abigail and the children?"

"No, I'm between contracts at the moment and in any case, Abigail's got her mother coming over tonight. Staying for three days no less." Peter put on a mock grimace. "If I could be of some help, I'd like to stay a while."

For a few moments, she fixed him with a thoughtful stare and then slowly closed her eyes, letting the tears come once more. "Oh Peter," she sobbed.

That night, as he lay in the bath reflecting on the day, Peter thought of the way the young curate had addressed him as *the physicist*. In spite of Martin's lack of faith in Science, Peter knew that his younger brother had nevertheless been proud of his first choice of career as a theoretical physicist. Academia, as a career path, makes perfect sense to other academics in the same way that selling out to industry is beyond their comprehension. As a postgraduate physicist at Cambridge, Peter had dreamed of unearthing the "Theory of Everything" - the Holy Grail of theoretical physics from which everything in the Universe could potentially be explained. The recognition for such a discovery would go far beyond the Nobel Prize, but the dream had faded and the financial lure of industry had eventually become too great. With many of the University's research projects at least partially sponsored by the private sector, offers of employment had arrived on Peter's desk with some regularity, but besides serving to stroke his young ego, most were not given a second thought. He was a scientist, God damn it! The truth *had* to be more important than material wealth, he had argued to himself at the time. Then he had met Abigail.

The young human resources manager from London subsequently turned his noble, academic, and somewhat bohemian life upside down. Suddenly, fancy restaurants, holidays abroad, and the desire to get onto the property ladder rose up Peter's priority list. The final clincher came one morning in the form of a little pink test-strip soaked in urine; Abigail was pregnant. Later that year when offered a job with a large international electronics firm (effectively doubling his salary), he accepted.

Now however, eleven years on, as he dipped his head below the surface of the now lukewarm bath water, he remembered the exhilaration he had once experienced as a true scientist. Back then, he had felt like an early explorer sailing the seven seas in search of new worlds. His voyages had been charted to the edge of knowledge itself, and what lay beyond was the stuff of dreams. Every so often there would be tantalising hints of mainland, but except for a few small and seemingly disconnected islands, the new world had so far remained elusive. Of course, there was always the possibility that nothing was left to discover but more small islands. Perhaps no unified theory existed. Perhaps the laws of the universe were governed by no more than collections of random oddities - islands of logic in a sea of chaos. If so, further attempts at unification would be futile. But did he *really* believe that? More likely it was just another convenient excuse to abandon the search. The universe and its governing laws, as so far discovered, were, he believed, far too elegant not to fit together in some beautifully satisfying way.

He recalled his forays into string theory, the most promising avenue to date for such unification of the basic laws. In truth, it was more a group of theories in which space-time was argued to compose of tiny filament loops vibrating through as many as ten spatial dimensions. Peter found the concept fascinating, but while providing a framework potentially capable of explaining many aspects of the observable universe, it had so far been impossible to verify experimentally. Furthermore, the mathematics involved in any exploration of the field was fiendish. Most of the equations in their full form were either unsolvable, or required so many assumptions and trial and error, one was left wondering whether the endeavour was one of discovery or invention. Peter was a keen and competent mathematician, but string theory had eventually proved too much even for him.

His thoughts once more returned to his brother. As a violinist, Martin had been fascinated by the idea of everything boiling down to vibrating strings, but had quickly become lost as Peter elaborated. Martin's last statement, "I know everything" once again echoed in his mind. *Had Martin finally discovered the meaning of life, the universe and everything?* He chuckled to himself. When it came to science, Martin couldn't discover his own arse with both hands.

The next morning, Peter was awoken by an aroma of fresh coffee and the sound of the dishwasher being emptied in the kitchen below. It was several moments before he could work out where he was. Sunlight filtered through the curtains bathing the room in a warm and optimistic golden glow. He drew the curtains and opened the window, closing his eyes to the sun, now rising over the eastern ridge of the valley, and sucked in the cool, earthy morning air. A thin layer of mist hovered a few feet above fields, still damp from the night's rain, and a crescent moon hung in a cobalt sky alive with birdsong from the copse at the end of the garden. Spring was on its way. If there could be a heaven half as good as this, Peter mused, his brother would be happy.

It was certainly a far cry from Bracknell. Eight-thirty - Abigail would just be dropping off the children at school - he would call after breakfast. He found Isabelle in the kitchen reading the paper. A loaf of home-made bread sat on the hot-plate of the Aga next to a pot of steaming coffee.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here."

She smiled. "Help yourself, Peter. You know where everything is."

He sat down and buttered some bread. For a continental, Isabelle had adopted the English country life as though born to it.

"Will you stay here? - Keep the house, I mean."

"I don't know. It's a big house. Seems a bit silly now it's only me."

It was the sort of house that needed a family. Peter knew they had wanted children, but for some reason it hadn't happened. He now regretted the question. "I'll start on the den after I've called Abigail. Is there anything else you'd like me to do while I'm here?"

"No, just the den would be lovely. Thanks again, Peter. I really appreciate this."

Abigail's mother answered the phone and Peter instinctively moved the receiver six inches from his ear. Her voice, while not particularly loud, had a certain combination of pitch and tone which could carry great distances and this morning it seemed to penetrate to the very centre of his skull. After some five minutes discussing the church service, and what a shame it had been that the weather hadn't been nicer, he finally managed to get her to put Abigail on. He knew at once he'd called at a bad time. Sam and Kate, it transpired, had been particularly stubborn that morning in their preparations for school. It had all started when Sam had told Kate that uncle Martin would go to hell. Apparently, he had heard somewhere that committing suicide was a sin and that sinful people were duly barred from the pearly gates. Sam was ten years old and just tended to accept things, good or bad. Kate, on the other hand, at seven and half, was distraught. Martin had always had a particularly soft spot for his niece and she had utterly adored her uncle. News of the death had been bad enough, but Abigail had consoled her with the thought of seeing him again in heaven one day. Now however, the little girl had confronted the reality of never seeing her uncle Martin again. Abigail was cross with Peter. She hadn't wanted to tell them it was suicide, but after some intense debate, Peter had convinced her they were old enough to know the truth. Perhaps it had been a bad call, but now there was nothing could be done to change it.

"I can't deal with it any more, you're going to have to come home and sort it out yourself. *You* can explain it to them because I've had it up to here!" she screamed and then hung up. He looked across at Isabelle, calmly reading the paper and wondered whether she ever erupted like Abigail. Somehow he couldn't imagine it. He would call back in the evening when tempers had subsided. Perhaps he would try to explain things to Kate, although for the moment he hadn't the faintest idea what to say. He didn't actually believe in heaven and hell - nor God for that matter - but had grudgingly agreed to make believe he did for the children's sake. He wasn't at all comfortable with this decision, but could see no lasting harm in playing along until such time Kate and Sam could make up their own minds based on a more complete appraisal of the facts. He recalled the story of a friend whose father, having dressed up as Santa Claus for his fourth Christmas, removed the beard and hat explaining that the jolly, red-suited fellow did not really exist. His friend claimed he had never recovered from the shock and Peter had often thought it might explain a few things about the chap's generally misanthropic character. He poured himself another coffee and headed for the den.

CHAPTER 2

Doug's mobile beeped twice. Forcing his eyelids apart, he slowly brought his watch into focus. It was 11:30 am and his head felt as though it had been clenched all night in a vice. He scooped the mobile off the floor. "Yeah?" he managed to croak, his large hands almost crushing the flimsy plastic. His throat was dry and sore from whiskey and self-rolled filter-less cigarettes. There was no answer. He squinted at the phone's display and realised it was just a text message from Kal:

Check it out! DZ13 in drop

He flung the phone on the bed and slumped wearily in front of the PC. Sure enough, a file named DZ13 was sitting in Kal's drop box on one of the department's communal servers. He started the download and went in search of the coffee whose aroma was drifting down the corridor. In the kitchen was a medium height, slim girl with jet black hair wearing nothing but his flatmate's rugby shirt. Unfortunately the shirt nearly reached her knees.

"Good party wasn't it?" chirped the girl.

"Obviously better for some than others," Doug replied, "I assume Brian's the lucky man?"

There was a slight pause and a look of confused indignation and then she said "No, I'm with you, you plonker. Don't you remember anything?"

For a moment, Doug was in a panic, until the girl broke into high-pitched laughter.

"Got you there didn't I?" she shrieked. "Don't worry; I didn't touch you – yet."

Her accent was a paradox, somewhere between Cockney and Surrey, but with a hint of the exotic. Her eyes were something different again, shining with intelligence and yet playful and promiscuous. There was definitely more to this girl than met the eye, although what met the eye was pleasantly sufficient for Doug in his current state of mind.

"Yeah, I think I would've remembered," he said.

"You better believe it, big-boy!"

She eyed him up and down, her gaze lingering a little longer on the down.

"You must be Doug then!"

There were two cups of instant coffee on the draining board. "That's me," he said, grabbing one of them and heading back to his room.

"Oy, that's Brian's!" cried the girl.

"I thought you said you're with me," he said, without turning. "Bacon and eggs will do fine!" he added. *That lucky bastard*, he thought.

The download was 60% through. He lit a cigarette, leant back with his feet on the desk and sipped the coffee. "You forgot the sugar!" he shouted. The hangover was a killer. He searched in vain for some aspirin, wondering what had got Kal so fired up after a good party. Why the hell wasn't he in bed suffering like the rest of us? DZ, standing for Dream-Zone, was Kal's pet name for the evolving fractal patterns they had discovered. By performing some carefully chosen mathematical transformations on a number of Mandelbrot sets, they had created a moving sequence of constantly evolving patterns. The cool thing about them, was that when viewed on the computer screen, the shifting images would evoke a sort of trance, lasting only thirty seconds, but seeming much longer. Sometimes, this would be followed by bizarre and vivid dreams.

Kal had coined the term "Dream-Zone," and had even persuaded him to co-author a paper on it, though Doug hadn't really considered it a very serious avenue of research and had since tried to distance himself from the whole thing. Kal on the other hand, was convinced that it represented a major breakthrough, not perhaps for their chosen degree course of mathematics and computing, but in the area of cognitive science. Lately Kal had seemed quite obsessed with it all, claiming he was on the verge of something big, but then Kal was often like that. Even at the party, he had wanted to show him something. "It'll blow your mind," he had told him, but having spent the entire day slumped over a screen at the computing centre, Doug had been in no mood.

He reached for the phone and dialled his friend, only to be met with another stupid voicemail greeting:

"Congratulations on calling Kal, the king of cool. Kindly converse after this."

"Pick up the call you crazy clown!" shouted Doug, immediately thinking of a four lettered c-word which would have continued the alliteration more satisfyingly.

After a few seconds silence he added, "It's Doug - I'm downloading - I'll call after."

He checked the screen. The transfer rate had slowed right down and the download was still only 65% complete. He got up and stretched, memories of the previous night starting to break through the haze. In many ways, it had been a typical student party except, being organised by Kal, had boasted a more agreeable female to male ratio. Quite how he achieved this remained a mystery. To Doug, Kal was basically short and chubby with bad skin and slicked back hair, and yet swarms of attractive girls appeared drawn to him like flies. Admittedly, the guy had a keen sense of humour, and he always seemed able to afford the trendiest gear, but beyond that, it was a puzzle. Doug on the other hand, who considered he ought to be fairly attractive to the opposite sex, had not managed to pull for months. At the party, he had seemed to be getting all the right signals from a tall, elegant, but slightly older looking girl by the name of Susan, but somewhere in the course of events, she had disappeared and Doug had found himself getting incredibly drunk instead - or perhaps the getting drunk had come first - he couldn't remember.

He stripped off, wrapped a towel around his waist and headed to the shower-room. Campus accommodation at the University of Essex was fairly basic - half a dozen almost identical concrete tower blocks deposited in the middle of picturesque Wivenhoe Park on the outskirts of Colchester. What had once been the inspiration of John Constable was now a tribute to the worst of sixties architecture. Doug's room was on the twelfth floor of "William Morris", the first tower as you approached from town. Kal's was three blocks further in and on the thirteenth floor. The wood and plaster was scratched and dented from a myriad careless students tramping in and out, but it was warm, dry, five minutes from the lecture halls, and relatively cheap. Doug held in his stomach as he passed the kitchen, but the girl had already disappeared back into Brian's room. He could hear them arguing about something as he passed. Perhaps he ought to try his luck later, he mused mischievously.

On the bathroom floor was a small puddle of vomit, but with no recollection of having been responsible, he stepped gingerly over it and into the shower. The water felt good and slowly the vice began to loosen its grip. As he massaged the shampoo into his scalp, he heard the bathroom door open. "Morning!" he shouted - to no response. "Miserable git," he muttered. Of the eight other guys on Doug's floor, Brian was the only one he could really call a friend. Although reading history and philosophy, which had little in common with his own combination of maths and computing, Brian also played second row for the university's first rugby team and

since the beginning of the season the two had become close friends. Each standing about six foot four and weighing in at some two hundred and ten pounds apiece, some people even mistook them for brothers, but beyond their muscular builds and short spiky hair, the resemblance was only superficial.

As Doug stepped out, he heard one of the other showers running and turned to see who it was. Glistening under the fluorescent-lit jets of steaming water and now wearing nothing but a broad grin, was the girl from the kitchen. Doug stepped back into the vomit, small pieces of diced carrot squelching up between his toes. "Shit!"

"No, that would've been worse!" said the girl, still facing him, "...but only just," she added. "I was going to ask you to soap my back, but with that on your feet..."

He wrapped the towel around his waist and stuck his foot back under the shower. As he came out, she was proffering the soap invitingly. He looked at her properly now, his mouth gaping unconsciously. She was incredibly well toned, her breasts round and firm, while her shoulders, arms and stomach were defined, but not overly muscular.

"Look I can't! Brian's a mate!" he said, walking towards her.

"Don't worry about him," said the girl, pulling the towel away and tossing it on the floor.

"What if he comes in though?" he said, as he stepped into the cubicle with her.

"It's finished between me and him," she replied, pulling him closer.

"Well I suppose that's all right then," whispered Doug as their lips came together.

"I'd say so. By the way, I'm Cindy."

"Doug," he replied, still somewhat stunned at how quickly things were happening. Not unlike some of his recent dreams, he half expected to be catapulted into some other improbable scenario with the typically frustrating incongruence of such fantasies. She put her arms around his waist and squeezed while sucking hard on his tongue. She was strong. For several minutes they twisted and turned, kissing and exploring each other's bodies with their fingertips.

"How come I missed you at the party last night. You're bloody gorgeous," he finally offered.

"It's probably something to do with the fact that you were pissed as a newt by the time I got there!" She glanced at the door and paused, clearly slightly concerned at the prospect of interruption.

"Listen, why don't I go and get my stuff from Brian's room and meet you in ten."

"Good idea, I'm in room nine."

He didn't feel entirely comfortable about stealing Brian's date, but lust was getting the better of him.

Back in the room, the download had bombed at 65%, but he couldn't care less. The empty beer cans and pizza boxes decorating the floor were crammed into the bin and the ashtray emptied on top. He straightened the bed and looked around, the room suddenly tidier than it had been in weeks. That'll do, he thought, regarding himself in the mirror. He flexed his muscles in what he imagined to be a body-builder pose. He was in pretty good shape thanks to rugby training, but could still lose a pound or two around the middle. He wondered what she did to keep in such perfect condition. Perhaps it was just lots of sex. He pondered this for a moment, the thought intriguing him immensely. He found most aerobic exercise as boring as hell, but sex was said to be equivalent to quite a workout, and he couldn't ever imagine tiring of that.

There was a knock at the door and in danced Cindy dressed in black leather jeans and a tight black cotton top that stopped somewhere short of her navel. Her hair was still wet and fell limply about her shoulders. He

took in her face properly for the first time. She had delicate, sculptured features with high cheekbones and a small straight nose. Her eyes were emerald green and full of life. She was really quite beautiful, he decided. "Can I – err - get you anything?" he asked awkwardly, suddenly aware of how little he knew about this girl, other than the fact that she seemed to want to have sex with him - not that he had a problem with this, but it seemed an odd reversal of roles nonetheless.

"No thanks, I have everything I need right here," and with that, her arms flew up above her head and the top was gone. Almost as quickly the jeans were round her ankles and kicked off.

"Yes I can see that." He barely managed to say the words before she had pushed him onto the bed and thrust her tongue into his mouth. He gasped for air as she finally pulled back and started to work her way down his neck and chest, her head moving in slow circles, each getting tantalisingly lower. The sensation of her warm lips and the way her cool damp hair lightly tickled his skin sent Doug into a trance. Time froze. Never before had felt so aroused.

From outside, came a loud crash followed by the sound of a car alarm. Cindy raised her head to look through the window.

"Don't stop now." Doug groaned, "It's just another idiot dropping bricks onto parked cars!"

For several weeks, there had been a spate of incidents in which various projectiles had rained from tower windows. It had started with water bombs, then the water turned to paint, prompting angry warnings from the dean after his old blue Mercedes gained a red roof one afternoon. When it progressed to heavier objects including bricks, the police became involved although miraculously there had still been no casualties. Unfortunately upon arrival, the police had made the mistake of parking too close to one of the towers. As soon as the men had stepped clear of the patrol car, a fridge had crashed through its roof. Eventually three stoned first-years had been taken away and since then, things had been quiet – until now, that was.

The wail of the car alarm was now accompanied by screaming - female, high pitched, hysterical, and soon to be joined by others. The clatter of opening windows resonated through the blocks as students peered out to investigate, while an air of panic started to permeate the buildings. Doug reluctantly got up and joined Cindy at the window. Leaning out slightly he could just make out a small red car, perhaps a Golf cabriolet, with its indicators flashing. It was at the bottom of Kal's tower and there appeared to be something protruding from the top, though what exactly, was unclear.

"What's going on?" said Cindy.

"Looks like something's been dropped on that red car down there. I thought we'd seen the last of all that shit."

"I don't like it. Why are they still screaming like that?"

"It's all right, I know someone in that tower. I'll give him a call."

Doug picked up his mobile and dialled Kal's number again. Still the stupid greeting.

"I want to go and see," Cindy said putting her clothes back on. All Doug could think about was getting back into bed, but he knew the moment was lost. He pulled on his boxers and then, bending over double, just managed to force a pair of jeans over the top.

A siren could now be heard racing towards the campus. As they made their way along the road between the towers, a small crowd was forming around the red car. The ambulance passed them, blue lights flashing, but the siren now off. It was not until they reached the edge of the gathering that their worst fears were

confirmed. The object jutting through the torn roof of the cabriolet was in fact a pair of legs. They were short, brown and chubby and one was bent impossibly at the knee. On the feet were a flashy new pair of trainers that Doug recognised immediately.

“Oh my God, it’s Kal!” he said, staring at the trainers. Several people turned to glare at him as if knowing the victim somehow made him responsible. The ambulance men had opened the door and were leaning into the car, obscuring any view of the body. Even so, there seemed surprisingly little blood around. Perhaps he had survived, he thought to himself, but a glance up at the open window thirteen floors above was enough to remove any such hope. Cindy buried her head in Doug’s chest as he wrapped an arm around her. The ambulance men stood up and walked slowly back to the van with a look of defeat on their faces. There was no hurry. No medical attention was necessary; just a stretcher and a black bag. Doug moved closer. Through the open door of the car, he could now see Kal’s face, eyes open with a trickle of blood over his chin and throat. The neck had evidently snapped on impact with the driver’s seat, forcing his head the right way up while his chest and body remained inverted. Only a small hole had been torn in the vinyl roof. Doug started to feel sick and just managed to get away from the crowd before vomiting. At that moment, two police cars arrived from which four men appeared and started clearing the area.

“Did anybody see it happen?” one of them asked. Silence.

“Does anyone know which floor he came out of?” It was the same man again. He was in plain clothes, a huge man in both height and girth with a deep gravelly voice. Some of the bystanders turned and pointed at Doug. “He knows him,” one said. The big man moved towards him. He had a tangled thatch of grey hair atop a bushy grey beard and moustache. His equally shaggy eyebrows were raised and what little face could be seen through all the hair, seemed to repeat the question.

“I didn’t see it happen,” said Doug, wiping his mouth nervously, “...but it’s Kal Gupta and his room’s on the thirteenth floor.”

The big man looked up, waved an arm and the two uniforms were dispatched inside. The fourth policeman was much younger looking, obviously more junior and rather gangly in appearance. He too was dressed in plain clothes and was busy scribbling something in a notebook. “And your name is?” he asked.

“Doug - Doug Richards!”

“And where were you when it happened?”

Doug looked around for Cindy, but she had disappeared. “I was in my room.”

The big hairy face was asking for more.

“Room nine, twelfth floor, William Morris - It’s the last tower on the right there,” he added pointing back up the road.

“Thank you Mr. Richards. We’ll let you know if we have any more questions.”

He whispered something to his gangly colleague then turned to the crowd. “We’d appreciate if you all went home now. We’ll take it from here.”

Doug looked around for Cindy again, but she was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t even know how to contact her. He wanted to go up to Kal’s room. He wanted to know what had happened, but he knew they wouldn’t let him in. There had been a suicide the previous year - some first year with a history of depression and bad grades. Doug hadn’t known him personally, but by all accounts he had been a seriously troubled young man. He was fairly sure that Kal had not suffered from depression, at least not in the clinical sense, and his grades had always been excellent. They had been friends since sharing a flat in the first year and had sat together

at most lectures. In fact Kal had been one of the most cheerful students he knew - always optimistic and game for a laugh. Doug felt a lump in his throat. It made no sense. He looked up at the window again. It couldn't have been an accident though; the windows were all fitted with stops that usually prevented them opening all the way, unless purposely removed.

Another car pulled up and was approached by the big man. Gangly-features was trying to disperse the few remaining stragglers. Doug started back to his room, wondering again why Cindy had disappeared. Just then, his mobile beeped twice indicating another text. It was from a number he didn't recognise and simply read "Need 2 talk – Cxx". It had to be Cindy, although he hadn't given her his number. He toggled through the options and selected *call*.

Cindy answered immediately. "Are you OK?" she said.

"No, not really! Where did you go?"

"I had to get away from there. I'm sorry. Can we meet by the lake?"

"What? Now?"

"Yes".

He wanted to ask why? - Why the lake? - But she had hung up. He re-dialled, but it went straight to voice mail. "Damn it! What's going on?" he said to himself, as he turned and set off across the grass. The ground was waterlogged from the previous week's rain and soon his trainers and socks were soaked through. A cold wind blew across the park piercing Doug's thin sweater like icy needles. He'd probably catch a cold now and have to miss the match on Saturday. He stopped. What was he thinking? His best friend had just become part of a Golf cabriolet and he was worrying about a rugby match?

As he approached the lake, three ducks flapped angrily into the water. Where the hell was she? He trudged round a little further and called her name. A couple of geese took flight, startled by the sudden noise and disappeared under the grey clouds now looming ominously above. A drop of rain landed on his cheek followed by another. He started to shiver.

"Fuck!" he shouted across the empty park. "Fuck!"

He turned and started running back to the tower, his mind a jumble of unanswered questions: Had Kal jumped? Could he have been pushed? Where had Cindy come from and where was she now? The rain picked up and his pace increased. Despite the sodden trainers, he felt curiously light-footed as he sped across the damp earth and in no time at all, found himself back at William Morris. With the lift apparently stuck at the twelfth floor, he took the stairs. He and Brian often raced each other up the twelve flights after a session at the gym. They would usually run about five, walk a few and then sprint the rest, but this time Doug ran the whole way. He burst into the flat, his heart pounding like some demented jackhammer intent on escaping through his rib cage, while his lungs screamed out in pain, prompting another silent vow to stop smoking. On reaching his room, he noticed the door was ajar. Perhaps Cindy hadn't shut it properly as they'd left. A cursory glance around showed his things to be in order, or rather the same state of disorder as before. With rain and sweat pouring off his body in torrents, darkening the thin beige carpet tiles around his feet, he headed once more for the shower. Someone had now mopped up the vomit from the floor of the shower room, although the acrid smell still lingered. This time, no naked nymphomaniacs were waiting for him as he got out, so he dried and went for a drink of water.

In the kitchen, he found Brian busy frying scraps of bacon from a two-kilo economy pack of off-cuts. He glanced up as Doug entered, but looked away again sheepishly. "Want some?" he offered, as Doug filled a stolen pint glass with tap water. Doug had expected Brian to be hostile after Cindy's sudden change of allegiance, but if he was, it didn't show. Perhaps he didn't know.

"Yeah thanks! I've got some eggs if you like."

Brian tugged at the pack of bacon until a piece the size and shape of a door wedge emerged from the plastic and fell into the pan. He prodded it around distractedly. The two were silent for a good minute then Brian turned to him. "Why the hell would Kal top himself? Especially after such a cracking party like that."

"Fucked if I know."

"You don't think someone ..." Brian's voice trailed away as he turned to flip over the door wedge.

"I can't imagine anyone wanting to kill him, if that's what you're thinking." It had crossed Doug's mind too, but Kal was just too popular for anyone to bear that kind of grudge. Doug opened the fridge, rummaged amongst his flatmates' stale leftovers for a moment and removed two eggs from the back. Giving them a quick sniff, he cracked them simultaneously into Brian's pan. He and Brian seemed to eat as much as the other seven guys put together. He was constantly amazed at how little food they seemed to need, as indeed were they at the quantities he and Brian consumed. Doug washed a couple of plates from the festering pile on the draining board and set them on the table so Brian could empty the fatty contents of the pan.

"Best cure for a hangover!" said Brian, carefully easing his bulk into one of the plastic moulded chairs, testing its integrity before committing all his weight. "I heard you talking to Cindy in the kitchen this morning! - What do you reckon?"

Doug looked at Brian's face. He obviously didn't know. "Cracker!" Doug replied. "You two must have been banging all night."

"Like a barn door in a hurricane!" Brian said with a self-satisfied grin. "I do have a confession to make though."

You have a confession to make, thought Doug.

"Well, you see, last night at Kal's flat, I had just gone into the kitchen to grab a couple of beers, when in walks Cindy. I'm just staring at her 'cos she's so tasty, you know. Anyway she eyes me up and down, as though she recognises me, walks up and says, "You must be Doug!" like you're famous or something. I was about to say no, Doug's the drunken fart in the corner with a bottle of whiskey in his lap, but instead I say, 'Who wants to know?' With that she flings her arms around my neck and says, 'I've heard a lot about you.' Then she kisses me. After that we come back here and well, you can guess the rest!"

"You bastard! So she thought you were me!"

"Up until this morning! When I woke up, she was sitting at my computer searching through my files. She said she was just checking her email, but I know she wasn't 'cos she had Windows Explorer up on the screen. Anyway, she switched it off - at the switch instead of shutting it down properly, which pissed me off, and then she went off to the kitchen to make some coffee. I think that's when she twigged I wasn't you and when she came back in, she got all bitter and twisted about it."

"Well in that case, I've got a slight confession to make too," Doug ventured hesitantly. "Shortly after that, I met her in the shower and - well - after she left your room she came straight round to mine."

"No shit!...You bastard!"

"We didn't get very far though. Just as things were getting interesting..."

"Kal!"

“Yeah that’s right. We went over there and I saw him!”

“Shit! Are you OK?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

The two friends finished their breakfast in silence, each trying to make sense of it all. Doug put his plate back on the pile and started for the door.

“Hell of a girl though!” said Brian.

Doug turned to look at him, grunted and went back to his room.

CHAPTER 3

Sitting at the large oak desk, Peter swivelled round on the high-backed leather chair to survey his work. With the floor clear of debris, books returned to shelves, and papers piled neatly, there seemed twice as much space as before. The large airy room, painted in a fresh creamy white, was fitted, on two of the walls, with dark-wood bookshelves from floor to ceiling, while a selection of watercolour landscapes adorned the remaining wall-space. It was the sort of study of which he had always dreamed. Over the desk, two sash windows looked out across the front garden towards the gate. When Martin and Isabelle had first moved in, the grounds had been little more than uneven lawns bordered by shrubs and annuals. In the ensuing years, these had been transformed into a symphony of constantly changing colour, texture and scent. The front was Peter's favourite. Now awash with the first colours of spring, it had a natural, almost wild feel to it, belying the years of soil preparation, planting and cultivation he knew to have gone before. It had been Isabelle's idea to create a cottage garden here, and she who had chosen most of the plants. Martin, with his natural sense of aesthetics had concentrated on the overall design, his pride and joy being the hardwood pergola, which, planted with several varieties of clematis and climbing rose, extended the length of the driveway and in the summer created a shaded, meandering, tunnel of perfume and colour. Peter thought of his own study in Bracknell. The seven-by-ten box room on the first floor, overlooking the neighbours' compost bins had always seemed adequate before, but compared to this, it was nothing short of a hovel. Martin had had it all: the successful career, fame - at least within the world of chamber music, the beautiful house in the country, and the stunningly attractive wife. It was a life straight from the pages of a Sunday colour supplement, yet in spite of it all, he had sat at this very desk and chosen death.

Determined to make more progress before lunch, Peter took the pile of papers and started sorting them into 'rubbish', 'to file', and 'action'. This worked fairly well, although choosing between 'to file' and 'rubbish' proved harder than anticipated, prompting the creation of a 'Probably Rubbish' group, to which he assigned an old cardboard box in the corner by the door. In the 'action' pile were numerous bills, some of which, reminders of reminders, threatened legal action, or discontinuation of service. It was clear his brother had not attended to any paper work for several months. With Martin's former income and Isabelle's family money, Peter doubted there would be any problem paying, and a glance at the latest bank statement confirmed this. He would later ask Isabelle for her chequebook, and write out all the cheques ready for her to sign. He would then draft a standard letter informing of Martin's death and requesting all further correspondence be addressed directly to her.

He leant back against the leather and looked around. He had hoped to find more of a pattern to his brother's obsession, but the remaining papers seemed to be pulled from the Internet almost at random. They appeared to cover every subject from religion and philosophy, to mathematics and astronomy. The sheer breadth was quite astounding, and judging by the date stamps, most had been printed within the last few months. "What on earth were you up to, little brother?" he muttered under his breath.

Tucked into the bookshelves on the wall to the right was a midi HI-FI system. Around this were hundreds of CDs and tapes, all stacked neatly and sorted alphabetically by composer. Peter was surprised by the orderliness, which seemed in stark contrast to the rest of the room. Perhaps a little music would help him think more clearly. He started searching for something familiar, then noticed a self-recorded cassette lying in

the open tape deck. Could this have been the music to which Martin had popped a bottle of tranquillisers and drained half a bottle of whiskey? He powered on the system and hit play. The tape turned silently in the machine. Peter looked around for the speakers, but there were none. *Of course!* Martin had always preferred listening through headphones, claiming the acoustics to be truer to the original performance. Scanning the room, he caught a glimpse of yellow foam between the desk and computer base unit, sat on the floor beneath. It was an old pair of Sennheisers, the lead from which was plugged into the audio output of the PC. *Interesting*, he thought, Martin must have been listening to digital audio files when he died. Peter hadn't touched the PC yet. Knowing Martin to be a bit of a technophobe, he assumed it had served as little more than a glorified typewriter, but the headphones were a surprise. He would check this out after lunch. Placing the foam pads over his ears, he jacked the cable into the midi system. On starting the tape, the pure, crystal clear voice of a choirboy filled his head. It was Allegri's Miserere, a piece once the exclusive domain of the Vatican, and for a while, considered so special, no copy was allowed to leave the Sistine chapel. The extract on the tape was the point at which the solo treble rises to a top "E", falls away, and then resolves the chord with a drawn-out turn. Peter leant back, shutting his eyes. He could feel goose bumps rising along his neck and spine. It was one of those magical moments discussed with Martin during their debate about music. The sound stopped abruptly, there was a slight pause, and then it jumped to Samuel Barber. He couldn't remember the name of the piece, only that it had been theme to the film, "The Elephant Man" centred on the sadly deformed real-life character of John Merrick. Again it was a passage which seemed to arouse something deep inside. After about twenty seconds, this also stopped, only to be followed by another equally evocative sample of some violin solo unknown to Peter.

For nearly forty minutes, the tape continued with snippets of music from a wide and varied repertoire of classical works, some familiar, others not, but all possessing that same *goose-bump* quality which Martin had claimed was the key to the soul. He had argued that moments of such extreme beauty, which, he added, were not limited to music, but extended to art as well as the natural world, provide a brief window through which we glimpse heaven itself. Peter had been characteristically dismissive of the idea, and assumed Martin had eventually dropped it, but perhaps not. The tape finally came to an end and Peter removed the headphones. The sound of voices could be heard down the hall and Peter's stomach was starting to rumble.

In the kitchen, Isabelle was seated at the table with a young man dressed in black shirt and dog-collar.

"Peter, you remember Roger, our curate? Roger, this is Peter, Martin's brother."

"Ah yes, the physicist," said the curate with a grin, "we never got to finish our chat. I hear you're tackling the den."

"Just clearing up mainly," replied Peter. He turned to Isabelle, "There are a few bits of correspondence we need to catch up on later."

"You mean bills to pay," said Isabelle, frowning. "Martin used to handle the paperwork, but I was afraid he might have let things slip over the last few months."

Peter didn't want to discuss this in front of Roger, but Isabelle looked anxious.

"It's nothing to worry about. I'll write the letters and fill in all the cheques for you to sign - it's nothing really - just a few small bills and the usual subscriptions for renewal."

Isabelle placed a hand on Peter's forearm as tears welled in her eyes. "Peter, you're such a strength. Thank you so much."

Peter touched her cheek with the back of his hand, then gently rubbed her shoulder. He wanted to wrap her

in his arms - to hug her tightly, but stopped himself. Roger, who suddenly seemed a little embarrassed at his own presence, had developed an interest in a row of copper-bottomed pans hanging on the far wall. Isabelle regained her composure and stepped over to the Aga.

"Well, I'd better be going," said Roger. "You must both be very busy."

"No, please. Why don't you stay for lunch?" offered Isabelle. "It's just chicken soup and fresh bread, but there's plenty here, and you'd be very welcome."

Roger turned towards Peter, obviously trying to gauge whether he supported the invitation. Peter would have preferred to be alone with Isabelle, but there was something intriguing about this young curate. Perhaps he could throw some light on Martin's final months. "Yes, why not?" he said. "We can finish what we started." Roger eyed the stove then looked at Isabelle. "Well if you're sure it's no trouble - it does smell wonderful."

Peter was usually somewhat wary of entering into discussions with religious people. He objected to the way they often used science selectively to serve their purposes, only to reject it when it didn't. Although Martin had been a regular churchgoer, he had always respected Peter's scientifically grounded point of view, trying instead to reconcile this with his own unique and often spiritual outlook on the world. Roger, it appeared, was remarkably similar to Martin in this respect. Amid spoonfuls of chicken soup, it transpired that Roger, having graduated from Leicester, had actually started his career as a research chemist. Then, following a series of events including the deaths of his parents, had decided to change track and join the church. For Peter, this was a revelation. He had never known a true scientist be able to fully and wholeheartedly embrace the Christian faith, and longed to ask Roger how he lived with the inevitable conflicts that had eventually led him to abandon his own belief. The timing, however, was not right for such discussions, and he decided to defer asking about Martin until they could be alone. Roger, presumably sensing Peter's need for a more private chat, suggested a pint down the pub that evening, to which Peter readily agreed.

It took a couple of hours to clear the bills, write the reply letters, and address the envelopes, after which Isabelle suggested a walk to the post office. He had not mentioned the music tape yet, wondering how she might react. For Peter, discovering what might have triggered his brother's suicide was no longer just a matter of idle curiosity, but something he felt compelled to unravel. He was worried though that for Isabelle, the details of Martin's obsession might only compound her grief. As they closed the front gate and set off down the narrow country road towards the village, he decided on the direct approach. "Isabelle! I feel I need to know what Martin was up to these last few months."

She looked taken aback. "I've told you everything I know. I don't know what more..."

"No. I'm sorry, that's not what I meant. I know *you* don't have the answers, but maybe the papers in the study or the files on the computer can shed some light."

She sighed. "It won't change what happened."

"No... I know it won't bring him back, but for me it's important. It's something I have to do."

She stopped to watch a butterfly as it alighted on a hawthorn flower in the hedgerow. "Well, then do whatever you need to do," her voice slow and measured, almost devoid of emotion, "but as far as I'm concerned, it won't make any difference. He's dead." She gave a little Gallic shrug, "He's dead and now I need to move on."

Fair enough - if there *were* answers to be found, it seemed he would have to find them alone. After a few moments of awkward silence, he decided to change the subject. "Roger's an interesting fellow isn't he?" She chuckled. "He's exactly what this village needs. He's injected some life into our little church and he

makes it relevant to the kids too. Before he came, our congregation must have had an average age of about sixty-five. Now it's more like thirty-five."

"That's quite an achievement for the Church of England. How did he do that?"

"I don't know really, he just makes it more fun. He runs a youth group, which is very popular - and they have this rock band he invites to play in church from time to time - and his sermons are always short - poignant, but short. I tell you, he's like a breath of fresh air compared to old Dobson."

Reverend Dobson was the vicar of Littlewick. Peter remembered him from Martin and Isabelle's wedding, a cantankerous old codger as he recalled. From the outset, he had seemed reluctant to perform the ceremony, and then proceeded to give a sermon on infidelity and the perils of matrimony in modern society. Martin had been livid. It later came to light that Dobson's wife of thirty-two years had just run off with the butcher. "Yes I remember him from your wedding," said Peter. "So when does young Roger take his place?"

"Well that's the problem. He might not. In spite of all he's done here, not everyone likes him."

"You mean Dobson doesn't like him."

"He and some of the older members of the congregation. Some of them stopped coming after the electric guitars made their first appearance."

"Typical!"

"I don't know for sure, but I suspect he'll move away if he doesn't get the job soon."

"That would be a shame."

"I wouldn't think you'd care."

"Well, I may be an atheist, but I still have a certain fondness for the cultural trappings of the C of E - you know - the architecture, the music, the ceremony, the sense of community and so on."

"But you still think we'd be better off without it, don't you? Be honest!"

"Oh I don't know. Providing they stay out of education and government, I'm not too bothered really."

"And what if we go the way of America, with creationist theme parks and the teaching of Intelligent Design added to the school curriculum."

"Okay - don't get me started. Yes, that would be a disaster. Bloody religious nutters over there are jeopardising the academic future of a nation!" Peter felt the combative juices stirring, then caught Isabelle's sly grin. He chuckled. "You nearly had me going, there!"

"Sorry, I just love how worked up you atheists can get about religion sometimes."

"Under normal circumstances, perhaps, but today, with the rare gift of your company, the sun warming my back, and this beautiful countryside bursting with the promise of spring, I doubt even an entire flock of young-earth creationists could dampen my spirits."

As they continued in happy silence, his mind returned to the extracts of music to which he had listened before lunch. Stopping alongside a gap in the hedgerow, he gazed out across the gently undulating hills fading into the distant haze of the afternoon. A large bird of prey, perhaps a kestrel, circled high above a small clump of trees in the next meadow. For a moment, Peter imagined himself as the bird, his sharp eyes scanning the patchwork quilt of fields below for its next meal. As Allegri's Miserere replayed in his head, he was soaring like the treble voice and for a brief instant, everything in Peter's world made sense.

"Are you okay?" Isabelle's sweet voice bringing him gently back down to earth.

"It's just so peaceful here. I keep comparing it to the South East, and Bracknell in particular. A few trees in between the houses, and a handful of strategically placed parks with artificial lakes, and you try to kid

yourself you're in rural England. It's not until you get out here that you realise just how much you're missing, living out your busy little life in a tiny, overcrowded, over polluted corner of the country."

"Why don't you and Abigail move out here?"

Peter thought for a moment. It was his previous job as a full-time design engineer that had taken them to Bracknell, but as a contractor, there was no longer anything actually tying him to one place. Admittedly, most of his contracts were for companies along the M4 corridor, but most of his work now was done from home.

"It's very tempting, but I'm not sure Abi would go for it. As a born and bred Londoner, she already regards Bracknell as out in the boonies."

Isabelle laughed, perhaps at the word 'boonies' or perhaps at the thought of someone preferring Bracknell to Littlewick. "Well, I suppose it's not everyone's cup of tea." There was something endlessly endearing about hearing such a typically English expression pronounced with a French accent. She turned and saw the way Peter was looking at her, an enquiring smile enveloping her face. "What?" she said playfully.

Peter smiled back at her, gently shaking his head and continued walking.

Littlewick village consisted of a post office, newsagent, florist, bakery and greengrocer. There had also been a butcher's shop of course, but he and the vicar's wife had understandably moved away after their romance became public. About a mile further up the road was a garage-cum-petrol-station-cum-convenience-store, but that was it. The nearest supermarket was a good ten miles away and so the row of little village shops did quite a reasonable trade. They also, as Peter soon found, traded well in village gossip. As he and Isabelle approached the steps to the Post Office, he overheard an elderly lady, her voice raised in apparent compensation for mutual deafness, bellowing to another only two feet away. "...very sad occasion. Lovely music though."

"Word has it, the brother stayed there all last night!"

"What, her brother?"

"No, his! All alone in that big house they were. It isn't right if you ask m..."

They stopped as they saw Isabelle enter and forced smiles in her general direction. When they saw Peter they exchanged conspiratorial glances and turned to face the counter. This was the downside of living in a small community, Peter realised - no anonymity. Everyone had to know everyone else's business and when they didn't, someone would invariably make it up. Isabelle appeared either not to have heard the exchange, or was choosing to ignore it. While she waited in line behind the two old ladies, Peter slipped out and into the florist next door. He had noticed that the shop was an agent for Interflora, and arranged for a large bouquet to be delivered to Abigail the following day. He then bought a bunch of red and yellow daffodils for Isabelle. As he came out, the old ladies, who were just tottering down the steps of the post office, immediately clocked the flowers, their eyebrows rising in disapproval.

"Afternoon ladies!" said Peter, his voice loud and deliberate and carrying all the condescension he could muster. The ladies grunted in unison and jostled off down the street, their identical wheeled tartan shopping trolleys trailing like reluctant poodles. A few seconds later, Isabelle emerged smiling. Peter whipped the flowers from behind his back and presented them with a theatrical bow. She blushed.

"Thank you! But really, you shouldn't have."

"I know," replied Peter with a grin, and then blushed himself, suddenly realising how inappropriate the gesture was under the circumstances.

Back at The Fields, Peter returned to the den feeling refreshed and pleasantly contented after the stroll. Sitting at the desk with a satisfied glow, he powered on the computer. Pulling up *My Recent Documents* from the *Start* menu, he scanned the list of files last accessed by Martin. At the top was a video file. He clicked on it. *File not found!* The next few were MP3 audio files. He tried the first. The media player opened, but there was no sound. Once again Peter had forgotten the headphones. He plugged the Sennheisers back into the PC and clicked *play*. At once there was a curious sequence of rapidly ascending and descending chords, somewhat reminiscent of bell chimes, but more melodic. Peter shut his eyes as a strange feeling of weightlessness enveloped him. It felt as though he was floating and although his eyes registered nothing but the ruddy opacity of his eyelids, there was a definite sensation of rising. Then it was gone, and he was once again staring at the computer screen. For several minutes he sat there trying to understand what had just happened to him, and then he tried it again. The sensation reminded him of the moment earlier that afternoon watching the Kestrel soar above the fields, but there was something else, a feeling he couldn't identify. He tried some of the other files. They were all about the same length, and had a more or less similar effect, each time sending Peter off into a little trance. The sensations were stronger with some than with others. He was intrigued. Somehow Martin had distilled the essence of those magical moments in music and, while the resulting sounds didn't seem to conform to any recognisable musical structure, they were curiously addictive. He tried to analyse his feelings. He felt incredibly calm and relaxed. His mind was clear and focused, his breathing slow and easy. Placing two fingers on his neck to measure his pulse, he counted forty-eight. No, he must have missed some beats. He was in good shape, but had never known it that low, even at rest. All in all, he felt wonderful. It was rather like the feeling after making love, totally relaxed, and yet he felt as if something inside him had changed. He closed his eyes and almost immediately slid into a profound sleep.

Once again he was out on the road with Isabelle by the gap in the hedge. This time, there was a stile, over which Isabelle was climbing, giggling like a young child. "Come on!" she said, holding out her hand. As he took it, the soft warmth of her touch rushed up his arm in waves and her dark brown eyes bore into his own with knowing desire. Vaulting the stile, he took her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers and pulling her down into the long grass where they rolled and kissed and laughed. Eventually, she lay still, on her back, and he sat up to appreciate the full beauty of woman beside him. A few wisps of luxurious black hair had strayed across her cheek. As he leant over her to brush them aside, her expression transformed from one of love to one of horror. Her eyes seemed focused on something behind him. He swung around and there, standing above them, silhouetted against the sun, was a man whose height and shape were instantly recognisable. "I know everything!" said Martin.

Peter woke with a jolt and looked around, dazed and confused. He was still seated at Martin's desk. How long had he been asleep? Couldn't have been more than a few minutes. What a vivid dream! He shut down the computer and drowsily got up to find Isabelle. Allegri's *Miserere* was wafting down the staircase at the end of the hall. He softly called her name, but to no reply. Hesitantly, he tiptoed up the stairs. The door to the master bedroom was ajar and through the gap he could see her long black hair cascading over the edge of the pillow. He eased open the door. She lay on her side under a single white sheet clasped just below her chin, her face bearing the angelic expression of a child, blissfully unaware of the troubles and anxieties of those around. The thin sheet, hugging the contours of her naked body, rose and fell with each soft breath. Her form was all curves and perfectly proportioned, her right nipple pushing gently at the fabric. He found himself walking slowly towards the bed, leaning over and then kissing her softly on the forehead. She

murmured something unintelligible while her eyes remained closed. His hand reached out, gently taking hold of the sheet and drawing it slowly down her body. Presently, the corners of her mouth rose into a smile and her eyes opened dreamily. This can't be happening, he thought to himself as more and more of her perfect body, *almost too perfect*, was revealed.

"Come on in, the water's fine," she said, in an unfamiliar American drawl, but at the same moment, he became aware of another shape on the far side of the bed. With mounting dread, he continued to pull away the remaining sheet, part of him silently screaming to turn and run, yet compelled by some invisible force to continue. Even before it was revealed, Peter knew what the shape was. As the cotton came away, there appeared the greying dark hair, wan forehead and finally the staring dead eyes of his brother. "Go home," said the dead man, "before it's too late!"

He jolted, and once again Peter found himself sitting at the desk in Martin's den. This too had been a dream, but hadn't he awoken already? That must have been part of the same dream. His heart was racing. The PC screen now showed a screen-saver. Powering it down for what seemed like the second time that afternoon, he swiftly left the room. In the kitchen, he pulled a beer from the fridge and sat at the table, shaken. How could he tell he was no longer dreaming? Ridiculous, he thought, of course he wasn't. But that was just it, the whole experience had been so vivid. He looked around the kitchen. Everything seemed to be real enough. He studied the label on the bottle of beer in his hand. He had read somewhere that if you look at writing during a dream, turn away and then look back, the words invariably change into something else. "*Premium lager, brewed in the traditional way since 1885,*" it read. He turned away, then looked back. It was the same. Of course he was awake. He felt suddenly very foolish and quickly knocked back the remains of the bottle, letting out a satisfied gasp. Opening the fridge to retrieve a second beer, he noticed two salmon fillets lying on a plate and decided to prepare dinner. Peter was far from talented as a cook, but without really thinking, located some potatoes, cream, garlic and a few other ingredients, and somehow transformed these into a convincing attempt at pommes dauphinoise. To accompany the salmon, he prepared a white wine sauce with a little Cabernet Sauvignon, that had already been opened, topped and tailed a handful of mange-touts and washed up. He hardly ever cooked at home, but as surprisingly appetising aromas filled the kitchen, he now wondered why not.

An hour or so later, Isabelle poked her head round the door, still looking sleepy. "Something smells good!" she said. "What a lovely surprise."

"Well, yes I rather surprised myself actually." He couldn't remember the last time he had made a white-wine sauce - or pommes dauphinoise for that matter - but somehow he had put it together without a second thought. "But I suppose we should reserve judgement until we've tasted it."

Isabelle laughed. "You know, I don't usually sleep in the afternoon, but after that little walk we had, I couldn't resist a quick siesta." She glanced at him, smiling. "I dreamt about you actually."

Peter blushed, remembering his own rather disturbing ones. Seeing his reaction, she blushed also. "No, don't worry, it was nothing like that. It was a bit weird actually. You were standing in a darkened room, looking around as though searching for something. I tried to turn on the lights for you, but they didn't work. I asked you what you were looking for, but you just stood there like you hadn't heard me. Then I wondered if it really was you. You seemed to be changing into someone else. As I continued watching, I realised this someone else was Martin. Then I woke up." She stopped and started setting the table. "Funny things, dreams. Do you think they mean anything?"

"No I don't," said Peter emphatically. "I believe they're the result of the semi-conscious mind trying to make sense of random thoughts."

"But where do those thoughts come from?"

"Well, except under general anaesthetic, or in certain vegetative states, the brain always has some activity. Clusters of neurons fire continually across different parts of the brain, and what we refer to as conscious thought might merely be the result of whichever cluster reaches a critical size at any given point in time."

"So our very essence is now reduced to some sort of random electrical storms in the brain? I can't believe that."

"Well it's only one of the many theories for how consciousness arises, but they all – at least all the scientifically respectable ones – can still be reduced to the brain's electrical activity. I mean, what's the alternative? We know the brain is where it all happens, since when it gets damaged or affected by drugs, our thoughts, feelings – even personalities - change also."

"So, you don't believe in a soul?"

"If there is such a thing, then it's somewhere in the brain."

"But then it would die when the body dies." Isabelle looked simultaneously shocked and saddened. Peter immediately regretted his insensitivity.

"No... well... that's what I happen to believe," he said, trying to undo the damage. "I suppose there are still questions that haven't been answered by science, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

"Do you really think that one day science will provide all the answers?"

He looked into her beautiful brown eyes, now fixed on him anxiously, as though awaiting the verdict of a murder trial. He suddenly felt uneasy as though a great weight of responsibility had been placed on his shoulders. "I honestly have no idea, Isabelle. I like to think so. In a way, I suppose you could say that the dead live on in the minds of the living – as memories, but I see no good reason to suspect that they continue in any other sense - some metaphysical realm of the soul for example. I think I'd like to believe in heaven, and in life after death." He paused. "It's just that for me, the two sides don't seem to square up."

"I think that's why I was never any good at science; it always seemed to contradict my Catholic upbringing. Perhaps it's something you should discuss with Roger."

Peter was relieved at the opportunity to change the subject. "Oh yes, that's right, I said I'd meet him at the Fox and Hounds at eight. Shall we try out this culinary masterpiece of mine then?"

The salmon was exquisite and Isabelle seemed visibly impressed. Between them they finished off the wine and chatted about everything and nothing. Adhering to the old adage, Peter would try to avoid the topics of religion and politics from now on.

After dinner and with some trepidation, he phoned Abigail.

"I'm sorry about this morning," she said immediately, "it wasn't fair of me to blame you like that - especially right after Martin's funeral - I feel terrible."

Peter felt a surge of relief. "I'm sorry too. How is Kate now?"

"Oh much better. They had a school outing to a farm today, and she's been going on about wanting a pony ever since I picked her up."

"Well that's a relief - unless of course, you agreed," he added jokingly.

"No – well - not really."

"Abigail?"

"Well, I said that we couldn't have one here, but that maybe one day we might move to a big house in the

country, one with some land, and then we'd see."

"Are you serious? I thought you hated the countryside."

"No. Well - maybe once, but it's different now we have the children. It's not healthy for them here anymore. You always hated suburbia, and for the money we could get for this place, we could get something much bigger farther out."

Peter couldn't believe his ears. "That's wonderful. I don't know what to say. I never imagined you felt this way."

"Well don't say anything. Let's talk about it when you get back. When is that likely to be by the way?"

"I don't know - I mean I haven't really decided. I'm sorting out Martin's den and helping Isabelle with the paperwork."

There was silence - then "How is Isabelle?"

"Oh fine. At least - she's as well as can be expected under the circumstances. I thought that while your mother was there, I might stay on for a few days - try to answer some questions - you know - about Martin."

There was a pause and Peter at once felt uneasy. "Abigail?"

"No - don't worry, that's fine. Take your time. I'm sure she's very grateful for your help."

Peter tried to determine whether there had been a tinge of sarcasm in Abigail's voice, perhaps not. "I'm sure it'll only take a few days."

"It's fine, really!" She sounded marginally more sincere now. "Look, I'm just a bit tired and I need to get the kids into bed. I'll call you tomorrow."

After they'd hung up, Peter replayed the conversation in his mind, trying to discern any hidden meaning between the words. If there had been any jealousy of Isabelle, she had never before let it show, and he was pretty sure he had never given away the fantasies secretly harboured over the years. Even if she did have suspicions, surely she knew he would never act on them - especially under these circumstances. But at the same time, his mind jumped back to the dreams of that afternoon, and he wondered if perhaps he was in love with Isabelle. But was it love or lust? After twelve years of marriage, how would he know the difference? He still loved his wife, didn't he? There were aspects of Abigail's character he had always found hard to come to terms with. When on form, she could be delightful, then at the drop of a hat, she could transform into someone quite different altogether. This other person was moody, uncompromising, and for the most part sad and frustrated with life. For many years, Peter had felt at least partly responsible for these turns, assuming that in some way he must have failed her, and letting himself be tormented by thoughts of what he might do differently. Eventually however, he had come to accept it for what it was - an aspect of her personality. If he wanted the charming and bubbly character with whom he had fallen in love, then he would have to accept this other, somewhat darker side as well. Of Isabelle, he would just have to be content with fantasies. To do any more would be a cruel betrayal of those he loved.