

## Chapter 1

The first time Paul Abrams died was the strangest. For the first time in his life he was capable of being in two places at once. The hard surface of the pavement lay beneath his head. At the same time he was relaxed and floating, looking down on his body lying at the edge of the road. A growing cold crept over his skin, yet his bones were warm and fuzzy, like he'd had a shot of whisky. In the distance he could hear the sound of sirens.

Above him appeared the face of a divine woman. Hanging honeyed locks framed an almost porcelain visage.

The sound of the sirens encroached upon the vision in front of him. Lots of sirens.

He tried to push the sound away in order to concentrate on the beautiful apparition before him.

*What's happening?* He tried to ask, suddenly not sure how to move his lips, or if it even mattered anymore. Realisation dawned. The sirens were for him. It occurred to him for the first time that he was dying, but he was okay with this.

*So this is what it feels like?*

Ironically he scarcely felt anything at all. The vision swam in and out of focus, growing as fuzzy as his own thoughts before emerging again.

“Are you an Angel?”

A single crystal tear formed at the corner of the Angel's eyes. Then everything went dark.

The darkness seemed to last a long time, though he couldn't be sure, time didn't seem to work the same way here. The light returned and the Angel appeared above him again. Her lips were moving.

“Do you have a message for me?” Paul tried to ask.

He couldn't hear what she was trying to tell him. Before he could ask again things began to grow fuzzy and oblivion once more enveloped him.

A man's voice called from the abyss.

“Paul?”

He was sleepy. It was nice here. Peaceful.

“Paul? Can you hear me?”

Paul tried to respond but all he could hear was a distant muffled sound coming from somewhere far away, yet inside of him.

“Nnngung” was all that came out.

“We’re going to have to move him,” said the voice.

Paul felt himself floating. He was looking toward the sky. He could see clouds moving above and for a moment it seemed as if they’d shifted closer. A golden shaft of sunlight pierced through. The Angel was no longer to be seen, but he smiled all the same. At least he was heading in the right direction. He gave in to the feeling of quietly slipping away.

There was a sharp pinch in his left arm, like an angry insect had bitten him. A flood of cold rushed through his veins.

“We’re losing him.”

*Go away!* He tried to call out but the words refused to come. There was something in his mouth, blocking his tongue, stopping him from speaking.

“Paul we’re going to try something, there’s a chance this may hurt a bit.”

Paul ignored the voice. It was annoying, and it was growing distant now. He felt himself running. Not in the usual familiar painful sluggish way, but free and with ease. He couldn’t remember running like this since he was a child. He looked around and saw he was striding through a brightly colored open field.

“Clear.”

*Clear?* It seemed like an odd thing to say to someone running through a golden field of wheat. The breeze made the long blonde stalks nod and tugged at his hair, which seemed to have regrown to lengths it hadn’t seen for the last twenty years.

There was a clap of thunder in his ears and a searing pain ripped through his chest. For an instant he thought he’d been shot. Then everything went black.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

Paul woke to the smell of fresh brewed coffee.

“Wake up sleepyhead.” Gina stroked a hand across his forehead.

Paul glanced at the bedside table. Thin wisps of steam wafted from the mug sitting there.

“What time is it?” He shifted the cup from the front of the clock. “Oh God, I didn’t set the alarm!”

“Relax, you’ve got plenty of time. That’s what I’m here for. We can’t have you being late on your first day as Area President of Sales can we?” Gina pulled back the curtains to reveal a beautiful morning.

Paul calmed a little. “Thanks, you’re a gem.”

“I know. Now you get yourself ready while I organise the kids.”

Gina disappeared through the bedroom door and headed downstairs. Paul took a couple of sips of coffee, swung his legs from under the covers and headed for the shower. Hot water cascaded soothingly over his shoulders and quickly the upstairs bathroom filled with steam. Downstairs he could hear the sounds of breakfast. After he’d towelled dry, Paul returned to the bedroom, where Gina had laid out a pair of pressed pants and a crisp clean white shirt.

He dressed, pausing in front of the full length mirror before going downstairs.

*Which tie to wear? The purple or the gold?*

He held each in turn to his neck in front of the mirror.

*The gold, definitely.*

He tied a neat half Windsor, brushed the front of his shirt and re-checked how he looked.

*Like the new Area President of Sales.*

His time had come. Robert Tonks, the Regional Director himself, had made an appointment to see him in his office that morning. Paul knew it would be to congratulate him on being appointed to the new role. He took one last sip from the now lukewarm cup beside the bed and looked out the bedroom window to the view of the sun rising over the horizon. It was going to be a beautiful day. He was about to head to work to receive his new promotion

and downstairs his family were happily preparing breakfast. He savoured the moment, wishing he could somehow freeze this instant in time and enjoy the feeling forever. Life was good.

In a little over three hours all that would change.

\*\*\*

Downstairs Gina was busy at the sink rinsing spare cups and wiping down the bench. She pushed some toast down in the toaster as Paul entered the kitchen.

“Good morning Daddy.” Saffron sat at the table in her uniform ready for school.

“Good morning cupcake.”

“I saved you some juice.” She pushed a glass toward him.

“Thanks sweetie.”

On the opposite side of the table Alex sat, headphones on, crunching through a bowl of cereal to a faint metallic drumbeat.

“Good morning Alex,” Paul addressed his teenage son.

Alex looked from his bowl. “Dad.” He raised both eyebrows briefly before his focus returned to the cereal in front of him.

Paul retrieved the mail from where Gina had left it beside his plate. It was term report time and there were two envelopes from school. He wedged a thumb under the flap of the first and drew out the report card from inside. It was Saffron’s, the routine collection of B’s and C’s.

“Daddy?” She said.

“Hmmm?”

“I’m proud of you.”

Paul skimmed through the usual comments about needing to apply herself more consistently. “Thank you sweetie. I’ve worked hard for this, but I like to think it’s for all of us.”

He opened the second report.

“Well take a look at this,” he waved the card in the air toward Gina. “Another ‘A’ for Alex.”

“What for this time?”

“Geography.” He tapped Alex from across the table. “I didn’t even know you were interested in geography?”

Alex removed his headphones. “What?”

“Geography.”

“What about it?”

“Nice work.” He gave his son a thumbs up sign.

“It’s okay, I guess.”

“It’s okay?” He turned to his daughter. “You could take leaf or two out of your brother’s book, instead of spending all your time on that Sky. Then maybe you could bring home a few good reports too.”

“It’s called Skype Dad. Anyway, I needed to talk to Alejandro.”

“You spend too much time talking to that Alejandro.”

“Whatever.”

Paul moved on to the next envelope.

“What the...?”

“Something wrong?” Gina slid two fresh pieces of toast in front of him.

“It’s just the power bill...seems pretty high. That’s the third one in as many months. I might ring them and get someone to check the meter. I can’t see why it would be this high.”

He tapped Alex from across the table.

Alex removed his headphones again. “What?”

“Power bill...maybe you shouldn’t be spending so much time in the shower in the mornings? What are you doing in there anyway? Actually scratch that, I don’t want to know.”

“Dad!” Protested Saffron. “That’s gross.”

“All I’m saying is I understand. You want to look good. It’s an awkward time when you’re a teenager and you’re all spotty and there’s girls,” he turned to his daughter, “or boys, to impress.”

“Too much information Dad,” said Saffron.

“I was your age once too you know.”

“In the Dreamtime,” muttered Alex.

“Don’t be cheeky.” He tousled the boy’s hair.

“Here,” said Gina, placing his briefcase next to him, diplomatically changing the conversation. “I’ve packed you favourite...salami on rye.”

“What would I do without you?”

“Starve to death probably. Speaking of looking good, you’re not going to wear that tie with that shirt are you?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It looks like you’re power dressing.”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to be doing?”

“Paul it’s not the nineties anymore. What you wear shows the world who you are.”

“Okay, I’ll change it.”

“You’d better get going. You don’t want to be late on the first day of your promotion.”

“That’s true.” He stood and went upstairs to change back to the purple tie still lying on the end of the bed. When he returned he gave his wife a kiss on the cheek.

“Wish me luck everyone.”

“Good luck Daddy,” said Saffron.

Alex offered a reluctant nod in his direction.

“Knock ‘em dead,” said Gina.

Paul looked at his family seated around the breakfast table. It was a picture perfect scene straight from a cereal commercial.

He headed out the front of the house and shut the door behind him. It was indeed a good day. He sucked in a deep breath of the fresh morning air and headed for the office.

\*\*\*

With Paul at work and the kids off to school the house was silent. Gina stared out of the window across the back garden as she idly wiped down the kitchen bench for the third time. The only other sound in the house slowly encroached upon her awareness. The metronomic tick-tock of the clock above the fridge. It was twenty past nine. She looked around the kitchen for something to do. It was spotless. The residual smell of cleaning products hung in the air. Underneath lingered something else. Not quite the same ammonia smell, but something pungent she didn’t recognise. She’d noticed it before coming from upstairs, but as yet she’d been unsuccessful in tracing its source. It could’ve been something in Alex’s room. Anything could’ve died in there. She made a mental note to venture up and clean it later.

She looked at the pristine face of the oven. Perhaps she'd bake a cake to celebrate Paul's promotion. At least it would give her something to do.

She opened the fridge and removed butter and some eggs. On the shelf inside the door a half-finished bottle of Chardonnay caught her attention. Above the fridge the little clock mocked her. It was half past nine. Not an option. She shut the fridge door and set about baking.

By the time the cake was in the oven it was nearly ten. She told herself she had to check the clock so she knew what time to take it out again, but she'd been trying to avoid it. What else was there to do? Her cell phone lay resting on the kitchen bench by the window. Maybe she'd phone Kevin?

*No, not on Paul's big day.*

It felt wrong. Besides, it was still early and Kevin would have his own business to be getting on with, without her interrupting. She vacuumed instead. It didn't need doing, but she did it anyway.

When she finished she checked the clock in the kitchen again. It was twenty past ten. Sometimes she was sure it deliberately moved its hands slower to torture her. It was going to be a long day, and it was only Monday. Even Ellen no longer bothered to screen a show on a Monday. Out of habit she checked her watch, the smaller accomplice to the clock in the kitchen, conspiring together to make her day hell.

Some days it didn't feel like she'd married Paul. She'd married this house, and along with it the isolation. Home detention, that's what this was. Maybe she should take the watch off and put it around her ankle? At least the cake was done now. She took it from the oven and placed it on a tray to cool. She looked at her cell phone. Maybe she should call Kevin? She could make it sound like she was just calling casually to see what he'd been up to in the weekend.

*Don't be such an idiot.*

She opened the fridge door. The half-finished bottle of Chardonnay was still there. She checked her watch again.

Ten to eleven.

Near enough.

She pulled it from the shelf, reached into the cupboard for a glass and unscrewed the cap, listening to the familiar blub, blub, blub, as the golden liquid swirled into the bowl of the glass.

She returned to the lounge and flicked on TV to catch the last of *Good Morning*. Gina had missed the morning interview and the two hosts were sitting on the couch reviewing hand held vacuum cleaners. The camera switched to the male co-host, James, taking a badly timed sip of coffee.

*I bet that's not coffee he's drinking either*, she thought, taking a sip of the Chardonnay in her hand.

“It’s time for our guest chef to tell us what our recipe of the day is. Today we have Naida,” said James, making his way to the on-set kitchen. He didn’t notice the step up to the kitchen set and tripped.

“Mind the step.” Miranda, the female co-host said belatedly, returning an enthusiastic TV smile.

“What are you making for us today Naida?” Miranda asked.

“Today Miranda, I’ll be cooking steamed mussels with Skorthalia.”

“I think everyone in the studio knows Miranda enjoys a good mussel,” said James.

Gina was convinced he was staring at Naida’s boobs as he said it. The camera panned away.

Miranda glowered at her co-host. “Skorthalia?” She asked Naida.

“Yes, it’s a traditional Greek dipping sauce.”

“Can you *say* Skorthalia James?” Miranda taunted.

James was mid-sip from his cup. “Shtorkahlia,” he flustered. Fine flecks of spittle flew from the corners of his lips and settled across the food as he struggled to get his mouth around the word. Gina was convinced one had landed on Naida’s right breast.

Miranda tactfully shifted places and stood between them.

“Ahem...Skorthalia,” James corrected, getting it right the second time.

The camera panned away while a crewmember replaced the food on the bench with a finished meal.

“Here’s one I prepared earlier,” said Naida.

“Thank you so much.” Miranda smiled, showing all her teeth. “Well, that’s all we have time for today. Join us again tomorrow when we’ll be reviewing our author of the week’s latest self-help title...”

Gina switched off the TV and returned to her own kitchen. The phone still sat on the bench. She picked it up, found Kevin’s number then put it back down.

*What are you doing? You don’t want him to think you’re desperate.*

The thought was chased by another.

*I am desperate.*

She called the number, the tone ringing in her ear several times before a man's voice answered.

"Kevin Crilly, Walton Real Estate."

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi me."

*Oh God, what if he doesn't recognise me on the phone?* "Gina, I mean."

"I know. How're you doing?"

"Actually I've been pretty busy," she lied. "I was going to take a quick break, then I wondered if you were around and if you might want to...catch up?"

There was a bustling noise in the background, and what sounded like music, but Gina wasn't sure. It made Kevin hard to hear.

"Hang on a minute..."

"If you're busy I understand. I don't know why I thought..."

The background noise died away. Kevin had found somewhere quieter to talk.

"Not at all. Look, I've got an open at 12.30 in your area. I can swing by after that if you want, although I'm not really sure how long it might take."

Gina hesitated. The kids would be home by late afternoon.

"Unless you want to meet me there?" Kevin offered.

"Won't you be busy?"

"It's fine. It's a weekday. I've got one couple viewing by appointment, I doubt anyone else will be through. In fact, if you turned up they might think you're another buyer. It might put some pressure on them to make an offer."

"You're such an entrepreneur," said Gina. "Always thinking on your feet."

"So I'll see you just before 1.00?"

"Sure."

"Looking forward to it." He hung up.

Gina placed the phone down and went upstairs to change.

\*\*\*

"Do you have to sit next to me?" Alex said to his sister on the bus.

“There’s no other seats.”

“There was one down the front. You’re such a cling on.”

“Am not. Anyway that one was next to Kylie Butterworth, and she’s like, a total loser.”

“Then you’d have something in common.”

A group of girls got on and made their way to the rear, giggling as they bustled past. One of them brushed Saffron’s shoulder with her bag as they squeezed down the aisle.

“Sorry...Oh, Saff! O-M-G, did you hear about Helen Perkins?”

Saffron shook her head.

“Well you know how she likes Declan? They got like, totally busted making out & stuff on the back field at lunchtime, and they both got detention. Then she was in my Bio class at fifth period, and she was like totally scratching herself under the table with a pencil.”

“Totes gross.”

“Loser,” Alex mumbled.

“I feel sorry for her.” Saffron said, jabbing Alex in the ribs.

“I wasn’t talking about her.”

“Go to hell Alex.”

Alex looked at the gaggle of girls. “I think I’m already there.”

The bus stopped again and the girls were pushed further toward the back.

“That Alejandro’s a loser too,” Alex said eventually.

“You just think everyone who’s not you is a loser.”

“That’s because everyone who’s not me, is a loser.”

“You’re such a jerk.”

“I don’t know how you can think it’ll end in anything but tears. He lives in another country, how can you possibly think it’ll go anywhere?”

“You’re just jealous because you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Whatever, for once I think I agree with the old man, you waste way too much time with that loser.”

“It’s not like that, he’s way more mature than you are, and it is going somewhere. He has a plan, you’ll see.”

“Sure I will.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it.”

“Hey Abrams.” A boy in the seat behind leaned forward, breaking their conversation.  
“You got my gear?”

Alex glanced at his sister. “Not here, later.”

The boy gave him a nod and sat back in his seat.

“What was that about?” Asked Saffron.

“Nothing.”

“Didn’t sound like nothing?”

“Kyle left his gym gear behind. I picked it up for him, that’s all.”

The bus arrived at school and kids began piling out.

\*\*\*

Paul arrived in the city and strode from the steps of the station with a spring in his gait. Grey expressionless faces of commuters surrounded him. It was a beautiful morning, but dark clouds were forming on the horizon. He caught the first shiver of the cool change sweeping down the street as he walked the few blocks to the office.

Minutes later, he rounded the corner of the Bateson & Andrews building. By the time he exited the lift he was almost whistling. He draped his jacket over the back of his chair and sat at his desk.

“Good morning Paul,” Fiona, the office Administration Clerk, greeted him.

“Isn’t it just?”

Fiona frowned. “Mr. Tonks was here before, looking to see if you were in, said he was hoping to see you sooner rather than later.”

“Yes, I have an appointment with him. So he wants to break the news as soon as he can? Well, might as well just get on with the business, strike while the iron is hot, that’s always been my way of thinking too.”

Fiona shook her head.

“Why so glum? I know its Monday, but whatever it is might not happen, right?” Paul checked his watch. “Its five minutes early, but if you say he’s been looking for me already, I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

“Good luck.”

“Thank you Fiona, but it’s not about luck, it’s about preparation. The will to win is nothing without the will to prepare!”

“How can you be so...?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

\*\*\*

“Paul Abram’s. I’ve got a nine o’clock with Mr...Robert.”

“Yes I know.” Robert Tonks’ Executive Assistant looked up as Paul arrived. “I’ll let him know you’re here. You’re looking very chirpy,” she added. “If you don’t mind my saying.”

“Why would I mind?”

“Well under the circumstances. Not everyone has taken the news so well.”

That was fair enough Paul supposed. There were bound to be others jealous to have missed out, after all, he had on two previous occasions himself.

Robert Tonks emerged from his office. “Abrams, come in.”

“Please, why not just call me Paul?” Paul said, offering a hand.

Mr. Tonks appeared not to notice, already turning back into his office.

Paul followed him inside and his Executive Assistant closed the door behind them.

Robert Tonks was already seated behind the large oak desk that dominated the centre of the room. Over his shoulders Paul watched the clouds rolling in across the sky through the big glass windows. Paul sat in the chair opposite.

“As you’d be aware Abrams, these last months have been tough for the company. It’s a harsh landscape out there at the moment and we need to be seen by our shareholders to be responding to that environment if we are to remain competitive. Otherwise we’d all be out of a job eh?” He forced a laugh. An awkward silence ensued before he continued.

“Anyway, over the past few months this has meant some of our Area Managers have come under pressure to trim their budgets and still increase sales. But you know what I love about this company Abrams?”

“No,” Paul replied.

“They didn’t complain. They responded to that pressure. Pressure makes diamonds Abrams!”

Paul smiled politely.

“I know that means lately we’ve placed you in some situations that have been pretty unfair. I’d like to apologise for that.”

“Really, that’s not necessary.”

“I’m sure you’re aware why I’ve called you in this morning.”

“I think so.”

“I’ll get straight to the point. This has been an exceptionally difficult decision we’ve had to make, but we’ve decided the only way we can continue to absorb costs while maintaining sales is to merge the Northern and North Western sales teams.”

“The company is downsizing?”

“We prefer to think of it as a realignment of supply with demand. Your Area Manager Griffiths, has departed, leaving the role for your Area vacant.”

“Go on,” Paul leaned forward expectantly.

“So I’ve offered that role to Kara Moffatt from Northern.”

“What...?”

“As the current Vice President of Sales for North Western, I guess you’d be wondering what that leaves us to do with you.”

“Yes?” Paul again leaned forward eagerly. At least if the two Areas were being merged his role would also be expanding and with it, hopefully his salary.

“Kara already has her own Vice President, Larry Crawford. So we’ll no longer be requiring your services.”

“What?”

“We’re going to have to let you go.”

“What?”

“There’s a recession you know, times are tough and we all have to make sacrifices. I knew you’d understand.”

“But...?”

“You have until eleven to pack any personal items. Someone will meet you when you get back to your office to help you tidy up, say goodbye to your colleagues and see that you are escorted safely off the premises.”

Director Tonks extended a hand across the desk.

“Thank you for taking it so well Abra...Paul, and thank you for all you’ve done for the company.”

“But...”

“Thank you,” he repeated.

Paul stood, stared at the outstretched hand, wavered, then simply turned and left.

\*\*\*

Paul arrived at his desk to find a bald headed behemoth waiting with a large cardboard box. The man looked like a vending machine with a head on it.

“I’m George,” said Behemoth. “I’m here to help you pack.”

Fiona approached the low cubicle dividers.

“Paul, I’m really sorry.”

“You knew?”

“Most of us did. It’s not like you couldn’t see it coming after Doug left, but...” Fiona focused on something on her shoe, which had suddenly become important. She started to say something else, thought better of it, then decided to cut her losses and walk away.

“Anything else?” Behemoth tipped forward the contents of the cardboard box. A calculator, a few pens, a crystal paperweight Paul had bought two years ago on holiday in Thailand, and a photo of his wife and children smiling back at him from summer on the beach.

“No, that seems to be it.”

“Then I’ll take you downstairs.”

In the lobby he handed Paul the box and extended a giant hand.

Paul shook it limply. “Thank you, for at least keeping this dignified. I still can’t believe this is how today turned out. It can’t exactly be easy for you either right?”

“No,” said Behemoth, the massive hand still hanging in mid-air.

“Sorry?”

“Your access card.”

“Oh.” Paul reached into his pocket. “Here.”

“Thank you Sir.” With that Behemoth turned, lurched back into the elevator and disappeared.

Paul didn’t know what to do next. He stepped out the door and started to make his way back to the station. The thick clouds had rolled in. It was dark and the wind was getting cold. Halfway to the station it started to rain.

His pants were already soaked by the time he reached the partial shelter of the row of shop awnings. He would be completely drenched by the time he got home. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his cell phone. Maybe Gina could pick him up? He dialed the number and held the phone to his ear. There was no response. He looked at the screen.

NO SERVICE.

It was a company SIM and they'd cut it off already.

Paul laid the soggy cardboard box on the pavement and looked into the brooding clouds.

“Could you possibly make things any worse for me today?”

Then he saw the bus stop across the street. At least he still had change in his pocket. There was even a bus coming. He looked back at the dark sky.

“Thank you.”

He stepped off the pavement to cross to the bus shelter. He never even heard the car coming.

\*\*\*

### **Chapter 3**

The strangest thing was the way his senses somehow mixed together. The room had the distinct odour of ammonia and boiled cabbage, so intense he could feel it settling over his exposed skin like dust. He wanted to burrow further beneath the blankets. Except he couldn't. Firstly, because this was a hospital and the nursing staff had tucked the sheets down so tightly he could barely move...they weren't called hospital corners for nothing, and secondly, because this was a hospital and one of his legs was currently hanging somewhere above the bed in traction.

The Police had visited earlier. Not that much of what they'd had to say made sense. It wasn't that Paul couldn't hear the words that they had to say exactly, it was more that he could see them as well. Brightly colored hues spilled forth every time the detective asked him a question. It was terribly distracting. The doctor had given it an equally colorful name. Synaesthesia, where all the senses kind of overlap. Apparently it was a kind of natural defence mechanism, like how the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, just in case you have an accident on that side, except in this case his brain was substituting one sense for another. Like how blind people have really good hearing Paul supposed. Clever design brains. Amazing in fact. The doctor said that he could expect random bursts of these incidents for a few days before they'd eventually settle down. So they hoped. Maybe it was the drugs they had given him to suppress the literally blinding headaches. They were good drugs. Amazing in fact. Though none of this had really helped him answer any of the colorful questions the police had been asking. Paul remembered very little about the accident that had got him here while he tried his best to piece together a handful of randomly scattered facts from his shattered memory. He remembered he'd lost his job. It was starting to rain, or so he thought. There was something yellow. And of course he had seen a beautiful Angel, but he was hardly going to tell the police that, drugs or no drugs. At least the doctor had said that there would be no likely lasting brain injury. He seemed very young that doctor.

*How old would he have even been? Where's Gina? I wonder what she's been doing today?*

\*\*\*

Gina pulled alongside a smart two storey townhouse with a sign on the fence outside. An image of Kevin wearing a double breasted suit beamed professionally back at her through the passenger's side window.

She checked her makeup in the mirror, reached over to the glove compartment and sprayed another two puffs of perfume.

She got out of the car and approached the open front door. Inside a pile of glossy brochures lay open on the hallstand.

“Hello?”

Kevin emerged from the living room. “Hi.”

“Are they still here?” Gina whispered.

“Who?”

“The couple with the appointment to view”.

“Oh them, no they've been and gone.”

“How did it go? Did they seem interested?”

Kevin shrugged his shoulders. “Too early to tell.”

“It doesn't sound like you chased them very hard to close.”

“Its early stages. It's a big investment for people. You can't rush these things.”

“But aren't you...?”

“Trust me, they'll be back.”

“You are such a wheeler and dealer Kevin Crilly.”

“Why don't you come in and sit for a bit?”

The two of them wandered through to the lounge and sat on the couch.

Gina looked back to the open front door. “Are you expecting anyone else?”

“Probably not, it's a Monday daytime after all. I only opened because of the appointment. I was going to leave it for another half hour on the off chance, but to be honest I've got more interesting things to look at now.”

“Oh, if you want to get away...”

“That's not what I meant.” Kevin took her hand. “I've got more interesting things to look at right here.”

“Flatterer.”

“I mean it.” He leant closer to her on the couch.

Gina recoiled. “What if someone came in?”

“We can see to that.” He got up, folded the flag at the entrance and closed the door, then joined her again on the couch.

“Look around yourself if you want to. You might want to check out upstairs, for instance?” He pointed to the stairway leading up from the other side of the lounge.

“I don’t know...maybe my coming wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“It just doesn’t feel right, creeping around using someone else’s house like this.”

“Doesn’t it add to the excitement?”

“Why don’t you go upstairs?” She said hesitantly. “I’ll be up in a minute, I just want to...freshen up a little.”

Kevin disappeared up the stairway while Gina found the downstairs bathroom. She switched on the light, pulled a compact from her handbag and made a few adjustments before spraying herself with yet another burst of perfume. She peered in the mirror checking for imperfections. At her age this was taking longer and longer. Kevin would be wondering what she was doing.

*What am I doing?*

This was as good as it was going to get. She slid open the door and switched off the light.

“Are you still there?” Kevin called from upstairs.

“Sorry,” she replied climbing the stairs. “I’m coming.”

Halfway up, the phone in her handbag rang. She tried to ignore it, but the ringing continued insistently. She pulled it from her bag, the number displayed ‘Unknown’. Gina rejected the call and returned the phone to her bag. As she reached the landing at the top of the stairs it rang again.

“Don’t answer it.” Kevin called from the bedroom.

“They’re only going to keep ringing. I won’t be a minute, I’ll get rid of them.”

She tapped the screen and lifted the handset to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Is that Gina Abrams?” asked an echoing voice.

“Yes, look this isn’t really a very conve...”

“This is Detective Sergeant Collins. I’m afraid there’s been an accident. We tried to call at your home but there was nobody there.”

“Oh my God, the kids, are they...?”

“It’s your husband, he’s been taken to the hospital.”

“Hospital?”

“Yes Mrs. Abrams. Where are you now? We can send a car and collect you if you’d like.”

Gina looked around the unfamiliar house. “No, don’t do that. I can find my own way.”

She hung up and stood at the top of the stairs trembling.

“Have they gone?” Kevin’s disembodied voice called again.

“I’m sorry, I have to go.”

“What?” Kevin emerged from the bedroom, tucking his shirt into his pants. He saw the pale expression on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s been an accident. Its Paul, he’s in the hospital. I have to go.”

“Oh.” Kevin looked more disappointed than compassionate. “I mean, I can drive you.”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“You’re in no fit state to drive. I’ll take you.”

“No,” Gina repeated firmly. “I’m okay. Besides, people might start to ask questions if I turn up with you.”

“Okay, but I’ll call you.”

Gina simply nodded. She descended the stairs again and left for the hospital.

\*\*\*

The hospital building was a dreary grey monolith that cast a gloomy shadow over the carpark in front of it. Gina sat nervously outside the ward reception. It was hot and stuffy.

*Why did they always make it so stifling in these places? Wouldn’t it make the conditions all the better for bacteria to breed?*

The thought of wards full of sick people all sharing germs made her skin crawl. Then there was that malodorous hospital smell that seemed to permeate everything. She could never have been a nurse, she decided.

Ordinarily the heat would’ve made her drowsy, but right now sleep was the farthest thing from her mind. It made the time pass more slowly than ever. There was a clock on the

wall above the nurses' station. It seemed like it hadn't moved the whole time she'd been waiting there. Maybe it was broken? She checked. The thin red line of the second hand slowly traced laps of the perimeter. Why did it feel like her whole life was spent watching clocks, waiting for something to happen? Except this time something had happened.

A young man in a pale blue gown and cap approached the nurses' desk. He leaned over the counter and said something to the duty nurse. She handed him a folder and he thumbed through the notes. Surely he was an orderly? He looked far too young to be an actual doctor, let alone a surgeon. The young man pulled out a pen, scribbled some notes in the folder then mumbled some more words to the duty nurse. She nodded in Gina's direction. He looked over his shoulder and walked over.

"Mrs. Abrams?"

"Yes."

"I'm Doctor Sims." He held out a hand. Gina looked at it hanging in mid-air. On TV doctors are always scrubbing their hands. You'd think they'd avoid the contact wouldn't you? She took it and shook it limply.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

Gina was still wondering how Doctor Sims could grow a beard, let alone cut someone open.

"We've transferred your husband out of ICU and into the surgical recovery ward."

"Uh-huh."

"That means he's stabilised. He's a very lucky man. A moment later and well...he's a very lucky man."

"He's going to be okay?"

"He's badly broken his right leg and a couple of ribs. He's also had some bleeding which we'd like to keep an eye on, but yes, he should recover. We'll keep him in for a few days to make sure the internal bleeding has stopped and there's no infection, but after that he should be able to go home."

"Thank God."

"He'll be off work for a few months at least and he won't be able to climb any stairs for quite some time. He'll need to be looked after."

"Can I see him?"

"Sure. He's sleeping now, but he should be able to talk for a while when he wakes up."

The doctor walked with her along the wide corridor until they were standing outside a curtained room.

“He’s in this one. You’ll have to excuse me, but I’ve got other patients to see.”

Gina watched as the young Doctor Sims returned to the nurses’ station, then she pulled back the curtain and entered the room.

Two beds sat alongside each other inside the ward. The near one was empty. Paul lay in the far bed by the window. His eyes were closed. Gina sat on the edge of the spare bed and looked at him helplessly. A myriad of tubes and wires emerged from him. There was a saline drip stuck in his arm. His right leg was held up with a kind of pulley and had a brace around it. There were two small red stains on the bandage around where steel rods went in above his knee. She tried looking away, but everywhere her eyes settled something else was either going into or coming out of him.

A small tube lay on the bed next to him. She watched little red specks slowly curl their way around the bendy loops of cord and into the container at the end, like beads on a child’s wire puzzle. She lowered her eyes, focussing away from Paul himself and at a patch of floor below the line of the bed. Even here her attention was caught by a hanging plastic bag, dangling from the bed frame like a wine bladder. There was a little rush of yellow fluid and the bag expanded outwards.

*Ugh.*

She tried somewhere else. Further up Paul had a little plastic thimble on his right hand. It reminded her of the finger guard she used for sewing. This was far more palatable, so she focussed on that, except it was hooked up to a monitor that’s continuous beeping was already sending her mad.

“Hi.”

She looked up. Paul was awake. He held up a hand weakly.

She took it and placed it lightly in hers. “Hi,” she replied.

“You wouldn’t believe the day I’ve had,” he croaked. The corners of his lips turned up into the slightest of smiles. He started to cough. The bed shook and the beeping machine sped up. He winced.

Gina felt like wincing herself.

“I think I can guess. You can tell me about it later, the important thing is you’re going to be okay.” She offered an attempt at a smile herself.

An awkward silence would have ensued, except the room was filled with the constant bleep of the monitor and the occasional whirr of the epidural machine.

“How did your interview go today?” The words seemed to fall straight from her mouth and onto the floor, where they writhed about painfully.

Paul lifted his hand from hers a few inches and yawned it from side to side. “So-so.”

“Oh.”

“I got fired.”

“You what?”

Paul laughed, the laughter descending into another painful coughing fit, before settling again.

“Pretty funny huh?”

“Pretty funny?”

Gina looked at the epidural machine.

*Those drugs must be good.*

“We can talk about it when I get home.”

“That’s all very well Paul, but how are we going to...?”

“Daddy!” Saffron burst into the room. “Oh my God, are you okay? I mean, are you going to be alright? I was sooo worried when they told me at school, and...” She buried her face on her father’s chest and hugged him.

Paul drew a sharp intake of breath. “Careful there cupcake.”

Saffron lifted her face. She had tears in her eyes. “Sorry Daddy. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve had better days.”

The epidural machine whirred again. Paul unclenched his jaw. “They think I’m going to be fine, it’s just going to take a little time, that’s all.”

Saffron sniffed. She wiped her eyes and looked around the room. “Where’s Alex?”

“He’s not with you?” asked Gina.

“Nope, I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“What if he doesn’t know?” Gina took out her cell phone and tried calling her son. There was no answer. “What if he gets home and finds there’s no one there?”

“I’m sure it will work out,” said Paul. “He’ll get here when he gets here, besides I don’t think you should be doing that here.” He pointed to a small sign next to his bed.

*PLEASE REFRAIN FROM THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES OR OTHER HANDHELD ELECTRONIC DEVICES WHILE IN THE WARDS, AS THESE COULD INTERFERE WITH MEDICAL EQUIPMENT.*

“Oh.” Gina returned the phone to her handbag.

“Well, at least you got your new job today,” Saffron smiled.

“Saffy please,” said Gina. “Don’t...”

There was a knock on the frame of the entrance to the room. Two men in suits stood in the doorway.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Abrams?”

“Yes?”

“I’m Detective Sergeant Collins, and this is my colleague DC Lines. We spoke on the phone earlier.”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid that because your husband was involved in a hit and run incident we will need a few minutes alone with him to ask some more questions.”

“A hit and run?” asked Saffron.

“I’m afraid so,” said the Detective. “We could come back later, if this isn’t a good time?”

“My husband’s just lost his job and has been involved in a hit and run accident, how could this not be a good time?”

“Daddy? You lost your...?”

“Not now Saffron! Sorry Detective it’s just, it hasn’t exactly been the best of days.”

“I understand,” the Detective replied. “If you don’t mind waiting at the nurses’ station. I suspect we’ll only need a few more minutes of your husband’s time.”

“Paul?” She said, “Are you okay for...?”

“Relax. I’m a bit sore, but it’ll be fine. I can’t remember the last time I had so much attention.”

“Okay, we’ll be back soon.”

Gina took Saffron’s hand and the two of them left the room.

\*\*\*

Standing in the corridor Gina drew her phone back from her handbag. “I’d better try your brother again.”

“No need,” said Saffron, “Look.”

Alex was leaning over the reception desk talking to one of the nurses. Gina and Saffron rushed down the hallway to meet him.

“Alex!”

Alex stopped talking to the young nurse manning the reception and turned their way. “Mom? Saff? What are you...?”

“Where the hell have you been? We’ve been trying to get hold of you. Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

“I forgot to charge it.”

“It doesn’t matter, you’re here now. How did you find out about your father?”

Alex looked puzzled. “Uh...the school,” he said hesitantly. “Anyway, like you say, the important thing is I’m here now, right?”

“I suppose so. So what were you doing hanging around down here?”

“Umm, hello? Figuring out exactly where Dad was.”

“Hey, where’d you get those?” Saffron pointed to Alex’s feet. He was sporting a new pair of trainers. “Are those Morgan LeBeau’s?”

“What if they are?”

“But where did you...?”

The two policemen emerged from Paul’s ward.

“Mrs. Abram’s, we’re done for now. You and your family can see your husband again.”

“Thank you officer.”

The three of them returned up the hallway. As they left the reception Gina turned to see Alex giving the pretty young nurse a wink.

*Christ, even at a time like this he’s got enough wits about him to try and pick up, and here of all places.*

She smiled quietly to herself.

*He’s so suave. Nothing like his father.*

\*\*\*

“Look who we found.” Gina announced.

Paul twisted his head sideways to see them standing inside the doorway.

“He was only trying to chat up one of the pretty young nurses at reception.” Said Gina.

“That’s my boy,” Paul croaked.

Alex looked shocked. “What the hell happened to you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“What are we going to do?” Gina asked.

“You heard the doctor, in a few months I’ll be fine.”

“I meant financially. We’ve got no money coming in Paul.”

“We’ll get by.”

“What do you mean ‘we’ll get by’? How?”

“We’ve got enough saved to last a couple of months if we’re careful. And I’ve got some annual leave saved up. Things might get a bit tight for a while, but we’ll manage. Hopefully by then I should be back on my feet again and can start looking for another job.”

“What if you’re not? You’ve been with that firm for over twenty years. Who’s going to hire you at your age?”

“Gina honey, that’s not my focus right now.” Paul was distracted by the deep red color of Gina’s handbag which for some reason now reminded him of the smell of burnt popcorn. He cringed as he turned over to face her better.

“Sorry, but is it okay for me to be a little worried about this stuff? Somebody in this family has to be,” she added under her breath.

“That’s fine, but right now I’m tired and I’m sure you could do with getting a little rest at home yourselves. It’s been a tough day.”

Gina looked at the kids. Saffron was still trying not to cry. Alex kept taking furtive glances over his shoulder through the entrance toward the nurses’ station.

“Maybe you’re right. I think I just need some time to absorb everything that’s happened.”

As they stood to leave, Paul said to Gina “You’d better phone my Dad. I don’t think he’s been told by anyone.”

“If you think it’s worth it,” Gina sighed.

“I know he doesn’t always comprehend everything, but he deserves to at least be told.”

“Okay, I’ve got it.”

“You’ll call him?”

“Yes!”

“Thanks.”

\*\*\*

Gina stood alone in the kitchen staring into the darkness outside. The kids had gone to bed early and the house was quiet. Her mind grappled with everything that had happened during the day. She looked at the clock above the fridge. It was nearly ten. She'd promised Paul she would call his dad, but she'd been putting it off. Maybe it was too late now? She didn't want to give the old man a heart attack calling this late and getting him out of bed. Perhaps it would be better to wait until the morning? Her conscience nagged her. She'd promised Paul she'd do it. Get it out of the way. Old people don't sleep anyway. Tonight she wasn't sure she would herself. She picked up the phone and dialled the number before she could turn it over any more in her mind.

“Hello?”

The response sounded drowsy.

*I knew it. I've woken him up. Maybe he was just confused? Who wouldn't be, someone ringing at this time of night, when no one else rang you at the best of times during the day?*

“Hello?” The old man's voice repeated.

“Mick?”

“No, this is Mick. Who is that?”

“It's Gina. I'm really sorry to call so late...”

“Gina?” There was a long pause before the old man seemed to register. “What's wrong?”

“I have some bad news I'm afraid. It's Paul. He's been in an accident.”

There was silence from the other end of the phone.

“Mick? Are you okay?”

“So he died without ever knowing...”

“Oh God! No, he's not dead, he's in the hospital.”

“Hospital... what happened?”

“He's been in a car accident, that's all. He'll need some time to recuperate but he'll be fine. He just wanted me to give you a call and let you know.”

“I see. I mean, thank goodness for that. Thank you for letting me know Gina.”

Now that she'd let the old man know what had happened Gina wasn't sure what to say next. “Mick?”

“Yes?”

“What did you mean, he died without ever knowing? Without ever knowing what?”

“Oh nothing. It's not important. I think I was getting confused with something on TV. You know what it's like when you get to my age...actually I don't suppose you do, do you?”

Gina hesitated. “Yes, of course.”

“I can pop in and visit you tomorrow.”

“No Mick, you don't have to do that. I'm fine. It's Paul that's in hospital”.

“Paul? What's he doing in hospital? Is he sick?”

“He's had an accident Mick, remember?”

“No, should I? Was I in the accident too?”

“No, look don't worry about it.”

“Okay Gina, I won't worry. I'll go and see Paul tomorrow.”

“Okay, you do that. Look Mick, I'm sorry but I've got to go.” She didn't really want to lie to the old man, but otherwise she'd still be on the phone in the morning. “I've got a lot to sort out.”

“Of course,” Mick said. “So do I, I have to visit Paul in the morning. He's been in an accident you know.”

“Yes Mick, I know.”

She hung up the phone and paced slowly around the kitchen. She opened the fridge. The bottle of Chardonnay in the door was almost finished. She poured the remnants into a glass then went to the pantry to retrieve a new bottle. It was warm, but it would do. She took a sip, then picked up the phone again. It rang several times in her ear.

“Kevin Crilly.”

“Kevin, it's me.”

“G? How are you? How's Paul?”

“He's okay. As well as can be expected anyway.”

“That must be a relief for you.”

“I suppose so.”

“So what happened?”

Gina told Kevin about the accident, what had happened at the hospital and about Paul losing his job.

“Poor guy,” said Kevin. “Nobody deserves that.”

“Kevin, what are we going to do?”

“Don’t stress about the money, it’ll sort itself out. I’m sure he’ll be able to get insurance because of the accident.”

“I didn’t mean the money.”

“Then what?”

“He’s going to be at home for months.”

“So?”

“What are *we* going to do? He’s lost his job. He’s going to need to be looked after. I can hardly leave him like this now, can I?”

“Oh, I see.”

There was some noise in the background. Gina thought she heard a woman talking.

“Where are you?”

“I had to work late at the office. There’s a new development coming up. This could be the big one G.”

Gina could still hear the woman talking in the background and she thought she could make out music.

“Is your office always this busy at half past ten on a Monday night?”

“What? Oh...no, I stopped in at the bar on the way home and I decided to get a meal there. I mean here. I was just about to leave when you called.”

Gina felt her cheeks flush. Of course. Kevin often worked late getting ready for potential clients. Little wonder he was a man going places. Unlike Paul. She sighed out loud, before remembering Kevin was still on the line.

“Look Gina, don’t worry. I’ve got another open tomorrow. Why don’t you meet me there and we can talk. It’ll be okay.” He gave her the address. “Look, G, I’ve got to go,” he said, “See you tomorrow okay?”

\*\*\*