

Like any good salesman, Conrad tailors his pitch to the customer, most of whom are simply chasing a good bargain: a large four-bedroom house with front and rear gardens for only two thirds of its market value. What's the catch, you ask? The last two families to occupy it died in brutal murder-suicides. This kind of customer, he understands: low on funds but reluctant to downsize, and more or less indifferent to the house's horrific past. It's the other kind of customer that makes him uneasy, even after a year on the job. Less common, but not rare, these people specifically seek properties desecrated by murders and perceived paranormal happenings.

Conrad knew with a single glance that his next customers were of the latter kind. The couple climbed out of their Mercedes, dressed head to toe in black. The woman wore a

gothic dress that started as a tight corset, and ended in a frilly skirt just above her knee-high boots, her counterpart in a long trench coat and – Jesus Christ – a top hat. Conrad had met some macabre-looking characters in his time at Haunted, but these two took the fucking cake. He straightened his tie and put on his best smile.

‘Hi there, here for the viewing?’ He would have eaten the man’s hat if they hadn’t been, but it was the only thing he could think of in the moment.

The man gave a sharp nod, and his wife said, ‘yes,’ so dreamily she might as well have sung it.

‘Great. My name’s Conrad. Pleasure to meet you both. He offered his hand to the man, who looked down at it for a moment before acquiescing with the weakest grip Conrad have ever felt.

He led them down the path, flanked by an overgrown garden that had once been tended to with much love and care before the incident. Or, he supposed, he should say incidents.

Surrounding the water fountain, there were half a dozen trees that Conrad presumed had once comprised a topiary, though they now only vaguely resembled animals, and a surrealist's impression of which, at that.

‘So, quite a sizeable garden, I’m sure you’d agree,’ he said, gesturing around him. ‘And there’s even more to the rear.’

The man gave a tight nod of approval, and his wife, for the first time, returned Conrad’s smile.

He stopped at the front door and fumbled for the right key. The second he tried turned the lock, and the door gave way.

A large entrance hall followed, leading to the property’s most iconic feature: its grand staircase. Most of the houses Conrad sold were rather generic, aside from the obvious caveats - apparently most murderers weren’t too selective about the kind of house they killed in - but this property fit the bill perfectly for a haunted house.

‘This is where he fell?’ the man asked, staring fixedly at the staircase.

‘I’m sorry?’ Conrad asked.

‘Mr Archer, who burned his wife, and them himself, alive.’

‘Well, I can see you’ve done your research,’ Conrad said.

‘But yes, that’s what I’ve been told.’

He didn’t like to think about the particulars, but the house’s history must have been the worst he’d come across to date. He shook the thought away, and smiled.

‘But, of course, the house has been fully re-decorated since.’

‘And the other murder was in... the master bedroom?’ the man asked, mounting the steps despite Conrad’s intentions to show them the ground floor first.

‘Yes, but that was over a year ago. As I said, the place has been thoroughly re-decorated.’

‘Which is the master?’ he asked.

Conrad overtook him on the stairs, and led them to the bedroom. ‘Yes, the wife cut her husband’s throat in his sleep, and then her own wrists. Although I’m sure you knew that, already.’ The man nodded.

‘Is this the same bed?’ the wife asked.

‘No, no. Both the bed and mattress have been replaced. In fact, all of the furniture would be removed before you move in, unless you wanted anything, in which case we would negotiate.’

‘Shame,’ the man muttered to his wife. He scanned the room again, before turning back to Conrad. ‘Might we have a minute alone, to ascertain the... atmosphere of the room?’

‘Of course,’ Conrad said. ‘I’ll be... downstairs. Take as long as you need.’

He left them in the bedroom, and made his way downstairs. He unzipped his notebook case and scanned the brief for what was probably the fiftieth time. The asking price was two hundred and twenty thousand, but he had the

authority to come down to two hundred if he had to. Sometimes he wished he could not mention the house's history at all, but with this couple, it seemed to be its main selling point; its low price was an added bonus. If they liked it, he was sure he could get two-twenty from them, and judging by the expensive Merc out front, money wasn't much of an issue.

There were a few noises from upstairs that might have been speech or laughter, and the floorboards creaked every now and then as though one of them were pacing. After five minutes, he wondered if they were fucking - it wasn't a huge stretch of the imagination to suppose that they got off at the thought that a murder had occurred in the same room – but they returned a moment later.

Come on, please, buy it, Conrad thought as they descended the steps, arm in arm.

‘So as I said, the property's currently on the market-’

‘It's not for us,’ the man said abruptly.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘The house isn’t for us. We’re sorry for wasting your time.’

‘I...’ he stammered for a second. ‘Of course. May I ask why? Perhaps I can clarify some things. I can probably move the price down to two hundred, you know.’

‘No, no. It’s nothing you can do. The price isn’t the issue. It’s just not right for us.’

‘Well, okay. Let me give you my card anyway. We have new properties all the time, always for considerably lower prices.’

At this, the woman grew excited. ‘Do you have any others on the market?’

‘We have one house in Doncaster. If you give me your phone number, I can give you a call as soon as anything comes through.’

‘No, that’s fine,’ the man said, taking his wife by the arm. ‘We’ll keep an eye on your website.’

‘Of course,’ Conrad said again, and opened the door for them.

He watched them reverse out of the drive and disappear down the road, wondering what had changed their minds so dramatically in the two minutes they’d spent in the master bedroom. He smoked a cigarette, leaning against his car, before getting inside. He drained the lukewarm remainder of his coffee, and scribbled down his notes on the viewing. He had no other viewings booked for the day, so all that remained was to phone his boss.

He dialled Michael’s number whilst admiring the house. It truly was a lovely house; he’d be grateful to ever own something so grand.

He needed to make the sale soon, to start paying the back-rent he owed; eating properly would be appreciated, too. He had three viewings booked for tomorrow, and the law of averages said he had a good shot at selling it.

‘Conrad. How are you doing?’

‘Good, thanks. Yourself?’

‘Ah, been a tedious day. Legal troubles with the orphanage in Edinburgh. But we’ll get it, and when we do, it’s gonna be a big seller, corporate probably. I’m thinking of putting you on it, if you’re up for that?’

‘Yes! Yeah, definitely. I’ve actually never been to Scotland. I’d love to.’

‘Brilliant. Now, tell me, how did today go?’

‘Not so great. The first family were never very open to it. They already found a property they liked, and didn’t think the history was good for their kids.’

‘Yeah, I got that impression when they rang yesterday. But what about the second couple? The Pearsons?’

‘No dice. They liked it at first but something changed their mind and they bailed.’

‘Something? You didn’t find out what?’

‘I...I tried, Michael, but they were dead-set. To tell you the truth, they were a bit strange, anyway. Dressed like something out of an Edgar Allan Poe story.’

‘Never read any.’

‘No, sure, but you get the sentiment.’

‘I get the sentiment that you’ve got a great property at a great price. So do what you do best, and sell it, Conrad.’

‘I will.’

‘Good. That’s what I like to hear. I’m gonna finish this paperwork and head home. Keep up the good work, Conrad.’

‘Cheers. Talk tomorrow.’

He drove back to the B&B that he’d called home for the past week and a bit. It was only a few minutes away, but by the time he got out of his car again, it had started to rain. He’d planned to walk into the village and eat at the pub; he didn’t really have the money for it, but there were only so many things you could get from a chip shop.

It was still early, so he ran a bath in the hope that by the time he'd finished, the rain would have stopped. He started to read the thriller he'd been enthralled in for the past few days, but closed it after a couple of chapters and lay back, listening to the sounds of the rain tapping off the roof above. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually had a bath - his current flat didn't have one - it must have been when he still lived with Melissa, but he couldn't recall the memory. He did, however, remember bathing Olivia after dinner, when he wasn't working late, that was. It was such a simple act, but one he'd give anything to revisit. She was growing up fast, and Conrad was missing her childhood. The worst part was that he only had himself to blame.

His whole life had come unsewn and stitch by stitch, he'd tried desperately to pull it back together. His actions had left their scars on all of them, and Lissa had moved on with another man, but he could still repair his relationship with Olivia. Pondering on the past would get him nowhere, he

decided. First he needed to make this sale and get back on his financial feet.

In the brief moments he'd let his thoughts run, the water had turned warm. It was funny how alluring the scalding water had seemed at first, bubbles frothing on its surface, and how quickly he now wanted to leave. There was a metaphor there somewhere, but he'd be damned if he could make it out.

He dried off and changed into jeans and a sweater. The rain had subsided, and by the time he stepped outside, it had all but stopped. Still the chill air was humid, and Conrad fastened his jacket as he walked.

The pub was the main attraction of the night, even at this early hour; its windows were the only ones lit in its close vicinity, which seemed to comprise the village centre, and a coterie of smokers was gathered outside. They were joined by one more as the pub door swung open, allowing the music prominence for the brief moment before it swung shut again. The newest member popped a cigarette in between his lips and

noded to the others, but as Conrad approached, followed him warily with his eyes.

Conrad forced a quick smile as he passed, and though he didn't look back, he doubted it was reciprocated. It was a stereotype that small villages didn't take too kindly to strangers, and in truth, Conrad hadn't been a welcome visitor in any. Perhaps word spread of his profession, but he doubted that was why, although it can't have improved people's opinion of him.

No, it wasn't just true of village people; it was true of all people. It was just more noticeable among smaller populations. People don't like change or difference; they make their bed in comfort and familiarity. Any disruption to this is met with disdain, as Conrad himself could attest. He was the pathogen to the otherwise healthy lifeblood of whichever town, village, or city to which he found himself resident for the few weeks it took to close a sale. And then it was on to the next place, and so the cycle repeated. One might think he'd

become accustomed to this cyclical lifestyle, but as soon as he left for the next location, the same sense of melancholy began to encroach again. He could keep it at bay for the time being, but he knew he needed somewhere to call home, and the shitty apartment he rented on the outskirts of London in between locations was certainly not it.

The barman greeted him with a smile: perhaps genuine, probably not. He liked to think he could fake the perfect smile himself. Salesmen, like everyone else, hid their real selves under a guise. They were just a little better at it.

‘What can I get you there?’

‘Do you have a menu?’ Conrad asked.

The barman looked around, before taking one from under the bar. He handed it to Conrad - laminated and slightly sticky – and gestured to the wall. ‘Specials are on the board.’

‘Thank you,’ Conrad said, and retreated a few steps. He scanned the menu, trying not to think about how much money

was left in his account, but his eyes drifted down the prices nonetheless.

‘I’ll take the scampi and chips, please,’ he told the barman.

‘Right you are. And what drink’ll that be?’

‘Oh, erm. I’ll just have a tap water if it’s free.’

‘Aye, they’re all free with a meal. Any soft drinks or these pints here, that is.’ He gestured to a line of taps in front of him.

Conrad opened his mouth to decline, but found himself nodding. ‘Okay, I’ll have a pint of... black sheep.’

‘Right you are,’ he said again. ‘And where’ll you be sitting?’

‘Erm.’ Conrad scanned the pub for an appropriately reclusive spot. ‘In the corner there.’

‘Right, that’ll be seven-sixty, please.’

Conrad withdrew his wallet and held out his card. The barman pushed the card reader towards him. He inserted his

card and keyed in his PIN, but the machine took a long pause before showing the message ‘Card Declined.’

‘Oh,’ Conrad said, searching his wallet for a ten-pound note. He realised his heartbeat had quickened somewhat as the man counted his change.

‘Don’t worry about that. Been meaning to get a new one for weeks now.’

The barman pulled his pint and Conrad thanked him before taking his seat in the corner.

The barman had said it was probably the card reader, but as Conrad ate, he couldn’t lay to rest the thought that his account might just be dry. The truth was he knew it was low, but he hadn’t checked in nearly a week. He’d thought he would have enough to see him through until he got paid from this sale, but he was far from certain.

He drank from his pint in between mouthfuls of scampi, never truly able to enjoy it for creeping thoughts of what it could lead to. He wished he had just gotten a Coke, but he’d

bought it now; he may as well enjoy it. It was only one drink, after all.

The pub become gradually more full, and before he had finished eating, a group of three men and a woman seated themselves by him. The man seated closest to Conrad gave him a quick nod and an ‘alright?’ before double taking. The greeting had been a common courtesy, but after realising Conrad was not a local, he’d grown interested. ‘Haven’t see you in here before.’

‘No,’ Conrad said. ‘I’m just passing through.’

‘Ah, right. You’re not from round here, are you? What brings you so far north?’ It was difficult to tell, but the man’s interest seemed casual – genuine - rather than the bitter suspicion he was often met with.

‘Work.’

‘Oh yeah? What do you do?’

‘I’m an estate agent. I’m marketing a property just-’

‘The Archer’s place,’ he said, nodding. ‘I see.’ He leaned in even closer, forgetting the company he shared, who were talking loudly amongst themselves, one of the men flirting rather conspicuously with the only female of the group. ‘What do you know about what happened there?’ he asked.

‘Well, strictly speaking, I’m only allowed to disclose information to potential buyers.’

‘So, let’s say I’m interested in buying the place.’

‘Are you?’

The man smiled. ‘Sure.’ He glanced at the inch of ale left in Conrad’s glass. ‘How about I buy you another drink, and you tell me a little about the property, how many rooms it has and such.’

Conrad let out a breath of laughter. ‘That’s fine, but okay. I’ll tell you a little.’

The man rose from his seat, waving away Conrad’s objections. ‘I get it cheap anyway. Steve’s family.’

Of course he is, Conrad thought, but made no further objections. He looked around the people, wondering how well they had all known the deceased couples. The Smiths had only lived here six months, but surely they must have conversed with some of these people. Certainly many would have known the Archers before them, who, as far as Conrad could tell, had lived here their entire lives.

He drummed his fingers on the table as he watched the man laughing with the barman. His one drink had turned into two in a matter of seconds. This was why he tried to avoid pubs. It was all too easy to fall back into old habits. He promised himself then that he would not buy another drink whilst he was here, hopefully ever. He would humour the man for as long as it took to drink his pint, and then leave.

The man returned with their drinks and seated himself across the table from Conrad. 'I'm James, by the way,' he said, offering his hand.

'Conrad.'

‘So, Conrad, is there much interest in the house?’ James asked, drinking the froth from his pint.

‘Quite a bit, yes. There often is with the low prices. As long as they don’t mind the obvious trade-off.’

‘Often? You’ve sold murder houses before?’

‘Actually, my company specialise in them.’

James raised his eyebrows and laughed. ‘Is that so? What are you called?’

‘Haunted.’

‘Haunted?’ A grin crept across his lips.

‘Yes. Haunted Limited.’

‘Wow, that’s...brilliant. And is it? The house that is’

‘Well I don’t believe in the supernatural myself. I’ve never seen anything that gave me reason to. But, believe it or not, there are people who like the idea that someone died in their house.’

‘Crazy.’

‘I had a couple for a viewing this morning that were. They were dressed all in gothic clothes.’

‘No shit?’

‘Yeah. They changed their minds at the last minute, though.’

‘Not creepy enough for them?’ James laughed.

‘Something like that,’ Conrad said, and then looked around as if expecting to see them or his boss standing right behind him. ‘Did you know the Smiths at all?’

‘Not really. Saw them around, but can’t recall ever speaking to them. I knew the Archers that owned it before them. Rich used to own the garage just down the road, a few properties around town, too. Drank with him a load of times, too. Canny lad. I couldn’t believe it when I heard. His wife was nice, as well. No one could have guessed what was gonna happen.’

‘They never argued or anything?’

‘Well, sure they argued, but who doesn’t? Nothing that’d make you think he’d do something like that. But the real question is.’ He leaned across the table once more. ‘What happened to the Smiths?’

‘You don’t know?’ Conrad asked.

‘I mean, everyone knows they died, but that’s all. Police wouldn’t say anything. Papers called it ‘a tragic accident’ or something. You must know, right? It’ll be in the files?’

Conrad thought for a second, and then nodded. ‘Legally, we have to disclose the details to buyers, should they ask.’

James stared at him expectantly for a moment. Conrad sighed and took a large swallow of ale.

‘It was a similar deal. The wife slit her husband’s throat in his sleep, before cutting her own wrists.’

‘Holy shit,’ James said, sitting back. ‘That’s fucked up, man. Two murder-suicides in the space of a year, in the same fucking house. That’s too much of a coincidence, right?’

Conrad shrugged. 'I don't know. My job's only to sell the house, and then move on to the next one.'

'I know, but you gotta admit that's strange. Especially with that boy going missing and all.'

'What boy?' Conrad asked. Now it was him leaning closer.

'You don't know? Well, I guess they've no reason to tell you.'

'Tell me.'

'Well,' James said. 'The lady next door. Her boy went missing about ten years ago now. No one knows what happened to him. One minute he was there, then he was gone. No sign of him since.'

'This is the smaller house, at the bottom of the property?'

'With the red door, aye. Still lives there. Not that anyone sees her these days. Only comes out her house to buy food, and doesn't stop to chat, then.'

‘Hm,’ Conrad said. Even he had to admit it was strange. A silence ensued, in which both of them drank generously from their pints.

‘I should really be getting back, lots of paperwork to do,’ Conrad said, despite the third of his pint remaining.

‘Nah, stay with us,’ he said, gesturing to his group of friends.

‘No, that’s quite alright. I really must be getting back. Thanks for the drink,’ he said, and left before the man could change his mind.

He walked back to the B&B, smoking his second-to-last cigarette, and scolding himself internally for the pints. He knew how easy it was to relapse; he’d done it himself after getting the job at Haunted, after Michael had granted him the chance no one else had. It had taken him months to get back his sobriety, and it had all started by underestimating the power of a single drink. Virtually harmless in itself, and with all the thoughts in his head of late, he felt he deserved some

reprieve. But in his heart, he knew it was never worth it; whatever he was escaping from for the short period of alleviation came back even stronger once he was sober.

He lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling for a time before reaching for his paperback. Gradually, the pages flowed from his right hand into his left, and by the time he looked over at the clock, yawning, it was past midnight. The novel had started to build up to its climax, and he was tempted to read into the night, but he had a viewing at nine tomorrow, and he couldn't afford to be tired and groggy for it. He set an alarm for seven-thirty, and settled down to sleep. Maybe tomorrow he'd get the sale. He'd check his account in between viewings, and if it really was empty, he'd figure it out. He still had a day at the B&B, and he could always ask his dad to borrow some money, hard as that would be. There was no point worrying about it now.

When he woke, the sun was seeping through the curtains. He turned the alarm clock to face him. It read 8:15.

‘Aw, fuck,’ he groaned. He tried to unlock his phone, but the screen stayed black. He followed the wire to the wall, where the switch was in the off position. He rolled his eyes, and climbed out of bed. He’d have to skip the shower, get dressed, and head straight to the property. He just hoped his customers hadn’t tried to call. Or worse still, his boss.

He pulled on his discount suit and sprayed himself generously with deodorant. He combed his hair back with gel: not perfectly, but it would have to do under the circumstances. He had just enough time to make a flask of coffee before leaving for the property. He set his phone to charge in the car, and looked over his notes for the property until the customers arrived.

At the sound of an engine, he looked up to see the car turning into the drive. Not an A-class Mercedes like the previous customers, but it still made Conrad’s decade-old Golf

look like a rusting piece of trash. He angled the rear-view to check his reflection, then got out the car and straightened his tie.

‘Hi there, here for the viewing?’ Conrad asked, adopting his best smile and sense of excitement. He approached the couple, who seemed relatively normal compared to last night’s vampires. ‘Conrad, pleasure to meet you.’

‘Daniel,’ the man said, shaking his hand. ‘And this is my wife, Laura.’

‘Pleasure,’ he said, shaking hers too. ‘We’ve got a beautiful property for you today. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you inside.’

They reflected his smiles like a mirror, and soon he wasn’t even faking them. They took in the garden with radiant awe; Laura in particular was still staring around as Conrad found the keys for the property. They both seemed taken by the living room and large kitchen, and as they ascended the

staircase, they talked of Daniel's potential use of the study for writing.

‘You’re a writer?’ Conrad asked with genuine enthusiasm. ‘What kind of things do you write?’

‘Oh, mostly academic journals – I used to lecture in psychology, see – but I’ve had a few short stories published.’

‘That’s great. I’ve tried to write a novel a few times, but something always pulls me away.’

‘Yes, it does take a lot of dedication,’ Daniel said with a knowing smile.

‘So this is the master bedroom,’ Conrad said, leading them inside. ‘Lots of in-built storage, and a sizeable en-suite just through here.’

Laura nodded enthusiastically, and uttered a ‘mmm’ as she stepped inside the en-suite. ‘Yes, it’s quite large, as en-suites go.’

Conrad smiled his assent, and waited for their eyes to return to him before moving on. More nods came in the spare bedroom, and not just perfunctory ones, if he was any judge.

‘This would be great for your mother when she comes to stay, Daniel.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed, taking a lingering view out of the window.

Conrad liked when customers considered things like this; it indicated genuine interest. People could fake smiles and nods for ten minutes, but the silent ones were often the uninterested ones, although he’d learned to never pre-judge customers. He’d been surprised more than once.

‘This would be Liam’s room, I think,’ Laura said as Conrad showed them into the fourth and final bedroom.

‘Yes, must be twice as big as his bedroom now.’

‘You have children?’ Conrad ventured.

Daniel nodded. ‘Just the one.’

‘And what would he think about the house’s history?’ Conrad asked, trying a casual, jokey tone. It was probably the best way to bring up the inevitable subject.

‘Oh, he was excited, actually. He wanted to come view it with us – loves his Stephen King, you see? – but he has exams next week, so he needs to be studying. It’d be something to tell his friends, though,’ he laughed. ‘Although we’d probably best not tell extended family, my mother in particular. But it only happened in the one room, right? And clearly there’s no sign that anything ever happened.’

‘Actually there were two. But yes, of course the rooms have been completely stripped and re-decorated.’

‘Two?’ Daniel asked. ‘Where was the second?’

‘In the bathroom.’

‘The bathroom? Dare I ask what happened?’

‘Do you really want to know?’ Conrad asked.

The man looked at his wife, thought for a second, and then nodded. ‘Yes, go on then.’

‘The husband burned his wife in the bathtub, and then himself. Of course the bathroom was fully renovated.’ He didn’t push his luck by mentioning that the husband had run out of the bathroom and fallen down the stairs.

‘You’re not going to go all Jack Nicholson on us are you?’ Laura asked her husband.

‘No, but a cheap house and some peace and quiet would be hard to resist,’ he said, and she slapped his shoulder playfully.

‘Well, thank you very much for your time,’ Daniel said as Conrad saw them out. ‘We’re seeing a few other properties today, but we’ll give you a call tonight if we’re still interested.’

‘Great. You have my number? Well, I’ll give you my card, anyway.’

Daniel took the business card and smiled. ‘Haunted Limited. Very good.’

‘Well, good luck with the house hunting. Not too much, mind,’ he said, and they both laughed. He watched them walk to the car, nodding to himself. A good viewing, and they hadn’t seemed too fazed by the history, although he knew if they found other properties to their liking, it would easily swing their decision.

Shit, he’d been so excited by their reaction, he’d forgotten to play the fear of loss card: the classic ‘there’s lots of interest in this property’; maybe even ‘we’ve actually got another buyer interested, but if you act fast, I can get you to the top of the list.’ But they seemed to be intelligent people, so maybe its omission was for the best. There was no easier way to turn a buyer off than to insult their intelligence. It was like bad movie direction: once your audience remembers it’s all an act, you’ve lost them.

He returned to his car, and checked his schedule. He had a viewing at eleven, and another at three. He also had a fair amount of paperwork to do, but that could wait. He needed to

check his bank balance, and putting it off any longer would only exacerbate his anxiety. He fired up his Golf, and drove the couple of minutes into the village. He parked by the village shop, and walked up to the bank. He drummed his fingers on his thighs as he waited for the old woman to take her cash, and then pushed his card into the machine. He punched in his pin and waited for the machine to process his information, drumming his fingers on the cash point now. When the options menu appeared, he selected on-screen balance. After a short pause, the screen flashed, and there was his balance: a total of fifty pixels perhaps, forming a handful of numbers on a screen that somehow represented all of the money he had to his name. £6.73. He almost laughed, fought back a tear, and then hit cancel and took his card. In his wallet, he had a twenty note, a ten, and a handful of change.

If he was frugal with the thirty-odd pounds, he might be able to buy food for a few days until he sold the house; this morning's couple had seemed hopeful but far from a

guarantee. His main problem was accommodation. He had the room at the bed and breakfast for tonight - he was pretty sure of that - but what then? He'd have to ask to borrow some money from his father, or – God forbid – Melissa. She probably wouldn't take much persuasion, but he couldn't stand the impression it would paint of him, especially after his incessant promises that he was getting his life back on track. He'd rather sleep in his car for a week than experience the ensuing silence and tone of her voice when he asked her for money. He was supposed to be the one providing for his daughter, after all, but he hadn't paid anything this month. He'd call his dad tonight. At least he had another night in a warm bed before he had to think about it.

He drove back to the property, and after sitting in his Golf for a quarter of an hour, let himself into the house and sat down at the kitchen table to read over the remaining forms. He took his phone with him, too, which had over half its battery back, thank God. The kitchen, like the rest of the ground floor,

had a high ceiling, and with little in the way of furniture or decoration, his every sound reverberated around the empty room. Every time he turned a page of his document, he imagined a family of moths fluttering frantically around the ceiling. But other than that slight disconcertion, the house felt just like any other empty house waiting to be sold: hardly homely, but far from creepy.

When his next customers were over twenty minutes late, he started to search through his notes for their contact information. But before he could find it, their car pulled into the drive.

As soon as they laid eyes on the property, Conrad imagined they had fallen in love. Their enthusiasm was unrestrained as he showed them around the downstairs, and Conrad had to urge them on from the rear garden, they were so in awe.

When he'd led them back downstairs at the end of the viewing, he asked what they thought of the place.

‘Well,’ the husband said, looking sideways at his wife. ‘We love it.’ To this she nodded her assent. ‘And the price point! What’s the catch?’

‘Well, nothing aside from the obvious,’ Conrad said, with a casual laugh.

‘The obvious?’ the husband asked.

Conrad frowned. ‘Well, I am obliged to disclose that two murders occurred in the property over the last five years.’ Technically, in the last two, but it wasn’t strictly a lie. ‘Of course the property has been fully renovated since,’ he started to say, but he knew by the look on both of their faces that he’d lost them.

‘Oh, we weren’t aware of that,’ the husband said. Despite the name Haunted Limited, and the fact that their agents made the nature of the house clear to customers when booking viewings, this had happened more than once before.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Conrad said. ‘As I said, the house has been fully renovated and redecorated. It’s a small caveat for such a significant price difference.’

‘We’ll have to think about it,’ the husband said. The words every salesman dreads. ‘We really do love the house, but it’s a lot to consider. We’ll talk it over, and let you know after our other viewings.’

‘Of course. I might mention that such low price properties go quickly, and this house in particular has a lot of interest.’

‘Right,’ and after a short pause, ‘well, thank you for your time. We’ll be in touch.’

‘Of course. Thanks for coming,’ and they were on their way to their car.

Conrad sighed once they were out of sight. Fuck it. They had seemed so promising. Still, there was the earlier couple, and another viewing at three.

He tried to stay positive as he slaved away at his paperwork, but more than once he was tempted to hurl the stack of papers across the room. He returned to his car for quarter to three, a tightness present in his stomach that called for nourishment. He'd go to the village shop after the viewing and get something to eat. At least with all the paperwork and the phone calls out of the way, he could finish early. He'd finish the novel he was reading, maybe take a walk, and then call his father. Or perhaps he should do that first and get it over with.

He checked his watch: an anniversary present from Lissa, third, or fourth maybe. He hated how it sometimes opened the floodgates of memory, but you could never underestimate the effect of a nice watch in his line of work. They were a couple of minutes late, but that wasn't uncommon. He started to pace up and down the garden as the minutes ticked by, and when it was nearly twenty past, he decided to call. They didn't pick up on the first call – perhaps they were driving – but he tried them again a few minutes later and a woman answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi there, it’s Conrad from Haunted Limited. I was just enquiring about the viewing you have booked.’

‘Oh, shit. Yeah. We viewed a house this morning that we’ve decided to go through with.’ Thanks for letting me know, Conrad thought.

‘Oh, I see. Well, congratulations. I’ll leave you to it then.’

‘Thank you. Cheers.’

‘Bye,’ and they were gone.

He packed his things into his Golf and headed to the shop. It was overpriced, but probably cheaper than driving to the nearest town’s supermarket, once you factored in petrol. He took a loaf of bread, slices of ham and cheese, a multipack of crisps, and a pot noodle, which he could cook with the kettle in his room. The healthiest of diets, clearly.

He let himself in the front door of the B&B, carrying his battered briefcase and the bag of groceries.

‘Hi, Conrad,’ his landlady, Rebecca, said, coming in to the reception room. ‘Any luck with the house?’

‘Not yet, unfortunately.’

‘Ah I see. Will you be needing your room for a few more days then?’

‘Most likely. But I’ll see how tomorrow goes.’

She stared at him for a moment. ‘Well, you can pay on a night by night basis, if you’d like, but I can bring the price down if you book for several days.’

‘Don’t I have another night paid for?’ he replied.

‘I don’t believe so.’

‘Are you sure? I was under the impression I did.’

‘I’m sure that was last night, but if you follow me, I’ll check the books.’

‘Of course.’

He followed her to the small welcome desk, the familiar nauseas feeling that might have been hunger but wasn't teasing his stomach.

She licked a finger, and flipped through the pages. 'Here, you paid for three nights, the nights of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth.'

'Ah, my apologies. Clearly, I was mistaken.'

'Oh, that's quite alright, Sir. What would you like me to do about the room, then?' she said, putting on a better fake smile than he could've managed at that moment.

'Actually, I won't require the room tonight. Business calls,' he said with the hint of a laugh. 'But perhaps tomorrow. I'll come by then, if that's the case.'

'Of course. Well, I'll try and keep the same room for you. Would you like a hand with your bags at all?'

'That's very kind, thank you, but no, I'll manage just fine. I won't be long.'

As soon as he was alone inside his room – which wasn't his room any longer – Conrad ran both hands through his hair. Problems were like wolves, when one rears its majestic head, you know there are others lurking in the shadows; it's only a matter of time before they pounce. What was that saying, when it rains it pours? Well, Conrad could relate to that deeply in that moment, standing under a murky shower of bad luck.

He gathered his things into his bag, pausing in front of the dresser and debating whether to take the biscuits and teabags. He decided against it, and headed downstairs, awkwardly carrying his travel bag, briefcase, and grocery bag.

'Well, thank you for your hospitality. I'll maybe see you tomorrow,' Conrad said to the landlady.

'Not at all. Good luck with the sale.'

He sat behind the wheel of his Golf, his things piled on the backseat. There was a sleeping bag in the boot that he kept just in case, but he didn't plan on sleeping in the car. He started the

engine and pulled off. He'd been driving for over a minute before he realised where he was going. There had never been any question about it.

He would stay in the murder house. This wasn't strictly allowed, but as long as his boss didn't find out – and there was no way he should – Conrad would be just fine. This also meant he didn't have to beg his father or ex-wife for money, or at least prolonged it. He could feed himself with the thirty-odd pounds he had for a few days, maybe a week if he stretched it out, but hopefully it wouldn't take that long to sell the house and receive his advance.

As he pulled into the property's driveway, he wondered why he hadn't done this earlier, and saved the couple of hundred pounds he'd spent on accommodation, some of which he would claim back as expenses, but it was still money he could've used to feed himself.

He reached back and took the grocery bag, from which he made himself a sandwich, all but the butter. He ate it

ravenously and was making himself a second when his phone rang. It was his boss.

‘Michael.’

‘Conrad, how are you doing?’

‘Yeah, good. Yourself?’

‘Yeah, great. We made the sale in Doncaster, just finalising the details. Tell me we can make that two, today.’

‘Not yet,’ Conrad said. ‘First customers were very positive. Second weren’t aware it was a murder house, and the third were a no-show.’

‘Ah, shit. Did you get through to them?’

‘Yes, they found a house this morning, which they went through with.’

‘I see. That’s not your fault, then. Do you have the second customer’s name? I’ll check who arranged the viewing.’

‘Erm,’ Conrad said, looking around for his briefcase, before remembering. ‘It was Richardson.’

‘Okay, cheers. I’ll follow that up. Also, I’m sending you the legal paperwork for the Edinburgh property, if you could make a start on that.’

‘Of course.’

‘Brilliant. How are you doing aside from work?’

‘Yeah, not bad. Been getting some dodgy looks around town, but I’m used to that by now.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Michael laughed. ‘I tend to keep my profession to myself on the rare occasions I’m on location. But work hard, and you’ll be in my position in a couple of years. I have a lot of faith in you, Conrad. You’re a good salesman.’

There was a short pause, after which Conrad said, ‘Thank you. I appreciate that. How about yourself?’

‘Good, good. Got parents evening tonight for the kids, so we’ll find out if they’re really as good as they make out. Spoilers: they rarely are. But I promised Sarah she can sleep over a friend’s house if I hear good things. She’ll probably try

and bribe her teachers, knowing that one. God knows she'd make a good lawyer.'

'Kids,' Conrad laughed, trying not to think of Olivia.

'Tell me about it. Anyway, I won't keep you. You have three or four viewings tomorrow, right?'

'Yeah, potentially four.'

'Great. Keep up the good work, man. We'll get the sale soon. Good commission on this one, too.'

'Yeah, we will.'

'That's the spirit. Well, enjoy your evening. Talk to you tomorrow, Conrad.'

'You too. See you.'

As he was finishing his sandwich, it occurred to Conrad that he should leave the car down the road, in order to minimise suspicion, so he took his bags inside, and then moved the car to the next residential street, before walking back to the house.

It was still early, and the sandwiches had hardly filled him up, but he had nothing better to do, so he drew the curtains and fell into the sofa. He fished out his paperback from his travel bag, and finished it in a couple of hours.

After pondering the novel's tense climax for a few minutes, he looked around the living room and thought, now what? There were screws and wires where a television once was, but no sign of any other entertainment. He hadn't brought any other books to read, and he didn't have the budget to go and pick another up in town. Maybe they would have some in the village shop; several he'd stayed in had book exchanges, although he was dubious of the village's collective literary interest.

He could go for a walk, but it was growing colder and darker. He considered making a start on the Edinburgh paperwork, then remembered he'd need to print it out first. For the first time in years probably, Conrad was genuinely bored.

It was like being a teenager again, but with constant financial worry.

He wanted to call Lissa - to talk to Olivia - but something stopped him from picking up the phone. Fuck it, Conrad thought, pulling out his sleeping bag and tossing it onto the sofa. He'd get an early night, and tackle tomorrow with the best of his strength. He hadn't brushed his teeth, but he didn't fancy braving the still house, so decided to wait until morning. Now that full dark had befallen them, and long shadows reached across the room, it had a completely different atmosphere. The eerie stillness was unnatural in a house this big: nothing supernatural, just uncomfortable.

He pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind as he climbed into his sleeping bag and tried to get comfortable on the sofa. There were beds upstairs, but he knew a worse discomfort would face him there.

He slept for a time – how long exactly, he couldn't be sure – and woke suddenly. Had he heard something in the

house or was the noise a remnant of his fleeting dreams? He sat up, staring into the darkness, but the house was still. It was only natural that he might have suggestive dreams whilst sleeping in a murder house – but wait, there it was again: a slow, scratching sound. He turned his head to where he thought the noise had come from, but as it continued, he scanned the room for its source.

Conrad threw his sleeping bag aside and sat up. He fumbled for the side lamp and switched it on. He didn't want to telegraph the fact that he was staying in the house – the woman in the bungalow might see the light if she looked at the window – but his heart was beating in his ears now, the hair on his arms standing on end. He crossed to the living room door and pulled it open. The door fell back on well-greased hinges and for a second, Conrad wished they had creaked like in horror movies; the perfect silence was unnatural, especially now that the scratching had stopped. He stood in the doorway, with no idea where the noise had come from. Perhaps it was

just the old house, although wasn't it usually pipes expanding that made noises? and there was no water running through them at the moment.

He stood there for over a minute, before sighing to himself and walking back. On his way to the sofa, he drew the curtains aside and looked out of the window. Perhaps the noise had come from outside, but there was nothing out there. Or was there? What was that shape in the distance? The longer Conrad stared, the surer he became that someone was standing at the edge of the garden. Not moving: simply standing there, head angled downward.

Then the figure turned to look at him.

Conrad stumbled backwards, the curtains falling back together. He perched himself on the edge of the sofa and laced his sweaty hands together. The room was no longer silent. There was a constant sound, and it took Conrad a moment to realise that it was his own laboured breaths. It felt like over ten minutes, but was probably only a fraction of that, before he

dared steal another glance out of the window. He half expected the figure to be staring back at him from the other side of the glass but there was no sign of it.

‘Fuck me,’ Conrad breathed, and reluctantly returned to the sofa.

He woke to his phone alarm after a long restless night, plagued by paranoid thoughts. Light shone through the beige living room curtains, exacerbating the headache he was suffering. Maybe he’d sleep in the car tonight, though he doubted he’d get a better night’s sleep in the tomb of his backseat.

He changed into his suit, wondering how many times he could wear the same shirt without washing it. He’d probably worn them all twice since he’d arrived, but he couldn’t be too sure. It had become a case of choosing the cleanest looking one and dousing it in deodorant. He took his phone off charge and pocketed it. He had a couple of messages to reply to, but

they could wait. Sating his hunger was his main priority. He made a couple of sandwiches in the kitchen, and filled his flask with tap water.

With his ceremonial morning routine seen to, Conrad phoned the customers about a potential fourth viewing, but they were no longer interested. That left three viewings today: one in a couple of hours, two in the afternoon. He had paperwork to start in the Edinburgh property Michael had assigned him to, but he needed to find a print shop first. He'd have to travel to town for that, which he'd have just enough time to do before his first viewing. On the walk down to his car, Conrad decided to say 'fuck it', and buy a coffee in town.

He bought the coffee, pausing before adding an extra spoon of sugar, and printed off his documents in the KwikPrint. He was already a third of the way through his food rations. The coffee was a bad idea, but he savoured every sip nonetheless, even the dregs. He made it back to the property with ten minutes to spare before the viewing, but as he got out

of his car to straighten his legs, he did a double-take. There was something on the front door. He walked closer and saw that there were words etched into the paint: **LEAVE NOW**. How had he not seen them when he'd left the house? He supposed he hadn't been paying attention, and hadn't looked back as he'd shut the door. Unless someone had done it while he'd been away? It was possible – but then his mind finally made the association with the sounds he'd heard last night. He hadn't imagined the figure; someone had been here in the night. Ghosts were only in horror movies and gothic literature, and even then they were usually metaphors for something greater.

The question of how the words had come to be there quickly fell second to the issue of the impending viewing. His customers would see it straight away. He had to cover it with something, but what? He could write 'Wet Paint' on the back of a piece of paper and post it over the words, but he didn't

have anything to fasten it with, and the paint hardly looked fresh.

Conrad growled a sustained ‘fuck,’ before opening the door. He had only minutes to spare and the only solution he could think of was to wedge the door open and stand in front of it as he led the customers in, or else direct their attention down the hallway and pray they didn’t see it. Neither were great solutions, but they were the best he had.

The couple arrived nearly on the dot, and he greeted them enthusiastically, all the while trying not to think about the message carved into the front door. With the door propped open, he could only hope they looked ahead when entering the house, and not sideways. He led them up the path, watching cautiously as they took in the garden.

‘It’s beautiful,’ they agreed, before turning back to Conrad. This was the moment of truth. I should’ve showed them the rear garden and led them in the back, he thought as he stepped through the doorway.

‘Lovely big entrance hall,’ he gestured, catching both their eyes. And then they were looking up at the staircase and he was safe. He breathed a sigh of relief, and led them into the living room.

If Conrad had to describe the couple’s opinion of the house, he wouldn’t have said ecstatic, but they seemed reservedly impressed. They were open about the house’s history – not as open as the Goths from the other day, mind – and he knew their positivity was not feigned. They wandered around the rear garden for a minute, holding hands. Conrad was about to lead them round to the front when the man asked if he could see the study again.

‘Of course,’ Conrad said, gesturing them inside. They looked around again, the man nodding to himself, before returning to the hallway. It would seem strange to lead them out the back again, as they were right next to the front door, and if they found out he’d tried to deceive them, he would lose

them instantly. After all, they were buying the house, but he was selling himself.

‘Well, I’ll see you out, then, if that’s all,’ Conrad said, and the man nodded. He held his breath and walked through the doorway as though it were a portal to some diabolical plane. He paused and turned when he realised the couple had fallen behind, and to his dread, found them both staring at the front door.

‘Oh,’ the woman said, looking to Conrad for explanation.

‘Ah, yes. Someone’s idea of a joke,’ he said. ‘Bloody kids.’

‘I see,’ she said, pulling her husband down the path. ‘Well thank you, we’ll have a think and let you know.’

‘Of course. Thank you. As I said there’s a lot of interest in the property, so the sooner the better.’

They nodded, but neither said anything more as they made for their car.

Sales are like entertainment; people's memories are influenced mostly by the ending. A movie could have the best acting and plot you've ever seen, but if its climax is shitty, you'll remember it as a shitty movie; conversely if a book is bland with two-dimensional characters but its last twenty pages hold an epic plot twist, you'll look back and think, 'yeah, that was a pretty good book.' That's why Conrad knew he wouldn't hear back from them as he watched them walk away, and if he did, it would be to say 'thanks but no thanks.' He should have got the door out of the way at the start, and then surprised them with the beauty of the property.

It would have to be the wet paint sign, then. The village shop must have some Selotape or Blu-Tack. He was halfway to his car, when he decided it would be best to ring Michael first to ask his opinion. His fingers brushed his lighter as he retrieved his phone, and after a second's consideration, he popped his last cigarette in between his lips and lit it.

'Hello?' Michael said after a long ring.

‘Yeah, it’s Conrad. I’ve got a little bit of an issue here.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Well, in the night, somebody carved a message into the front door of the property, and it scared the first customers off.’

‘A message? What did it say?’

‘Leave now.’

‘What the fuck? Have you called the police, Conrad?’

‘Well, no. I figured more bad publicity is the last thing we need, if anyone saw the cops up here.’

‘Thank God. Good call, Conrad.’

‘Thanks, but what do I do about it? I thought about covering it with a piece of paper, a wet paint sign or something, but I don’t know. That’s why I rang you.’

‘Erm.’ There was a long pause and then he said, ‘You’ll have to repaint it. Get a pot of similarly coloured paint and a brush. I trust you can manage to paint a door. Technically we

should ask the owners' family, but they won't care. Will you do that, Conrad?'

He thought about telling Michael that he didn't have the funds for paint out of his own pocket, but that would reflect badly on him. Instead he said, 'Of course. But the nearest town's a while off. I don't have time until after the other viewings.'

'Ah. Well give the first one a call, and check they're still coming. If so, I'll leave it up to you.'

'Sure, okay.'

'Great. Thanks, Conrad. I'll call you later.' There was a distant mutter of 'fucking hell' before the phone line went dead.

As instructed, Conrad called his next customers, who told him that they were on their way. That didn't leave him enough time to go to town, and paint the front door, so he would have to improvise for his next two viewings. When he'd suggested the wet paint sign, his boss had seemed to condone this

prospect, unofficially of course. But looking at the front door for longer than a second, it was clear it hadn't been painted recently. Perhaps there was something else he could write instead of wet paint, but he couldn't think of anything. He was sure something would come to him. In the mean time, he needed something to fasten the sign to the door, so he climbed into his Golf and made for the village shop.

The shop didn't sell anything to stick a sign up, but they did have some blue tack in the desk, of which the cashier gave him some for free, so long as he purchased something from the shop. Despite his profession, Conrad felt no desire to try and negotiate further, so, with an internal wince, he withdrew one of his last two ten pound notes, and bought a sandwich.

When he got back to the property, he settled on writing 'Hilltop House, For Sale, Haunted Ltd.' on the back of a spare piece of paper he found at the bottom of his briefcase, and secured it to the door with Blu-tack on all four corners. It was

an unusual sign, but hopefully one that would not arouse too much suspicion.

After an hour's slaving away at paperwork, which he did sat in the passenger's seat of his Golf so that he could listen to the radio, his customers arrived. It was raining by now – and the weather report suggested there would be light to heavy showers all day, perhaps even snow – so he hurried the couple and their two children inside without a glance at the front door. Perhaps they wouldn't have noticed even if the sign hadn't been there.

The two boys made constant proclamations that the house and its rooms were much bigger than theirs at home, although as soon as they were out of the rain, their mother leaned in and asked Conrad under her breath if he would not disclose the reason for the house's low price point in front of the children. Conrad, of course, obliged. The parents, on the other hand, seemed uncertain throughout the viewing, or else unreadable. When they were finished, the mother – Susan – asked if they

could talk a moment, and sent the children into the living room, where they could just be seen through the doorway.

‘So, how do you like the place?’ Conrad asked.

The couple looked at each other, and then Susan said, ‘we love it,’ to Conrad’s surprise. ‘But there is one issue we’ve faced with a couple other properties now.’

Conrad’s joy subsided as quickly as it had ignited.

‘We’ll be completely honest with you, our credit rating is pretty bad at the moment, so we can’t get a mortgage anywhere. We’ve sold our old house, and we’re currently living at my mother’s, which, as I’m sure you can imagine, gets rather chaotic, so we’re keen to move out as soon as possible.’

‘Of course,’ Conrad assented.

‘But after all the bills we owe, we can only afford one hundred and eighty. Is there any negotiation room on the price?’

Conrad frowned unconsciously, and then quickly wiped it. 'I can go down to two hundred at the absolute minimum. That's all I'm authorised to do.'

The couple looked at each other again for a moment, and then the husband said, 'What about your boss? Can't you call him and ask if there's anything he can do? We can maybe meet you in the middle at one-ninety,' and then to his wife, 'we could borrow money from your mother, couldn't we?'

'David, she really needs those savings, I'd hate to ask... but yes, she probably would lend it to us.'

They both looked to Conrad, awaiting his response.

'Okay. I can't promise anything, but I'll ring my boss and see what he says. And you'd be happy to sign paperwork today?'

The couple nodded without looking at each other.

'Okay, give me two minutes.'

He walked into the hallway, shooting the play-fighting boys a smile as he passed. He dialled Michael's number and

listened to the tone as he paced back and forth in the hallway. He could still hear the rain sweeping against the door and windows over the phone.

Michael's number went to voicemail, so Conrad hung up and dialled again. He must have been nearing the voicemail service again when Michael answered.

‘Conrad, I was just about to ring you. How’s it going?’

‘I’ve got a family here who want to take the property, but they can’t get a mortgage. They’re offering one-ninety in cash, and they can sign everything today, but that’s all they have.’

Michael let out a long, distorted breath. ‘And there’s no way you can bring them up to two hundred? You know as well as I do people will say anything to get a cheaper deal.’

‘I know, but no. I believe them.’

‘Hmm, okay. Let me think, let me think.’ There were sounds of a keyboard typing, and then Michael sighed again. ‘Nah, I can’t do it, Conrad. I’m sorry, but I’d discourage you from going to two hundred. At one-ninety, we’d be making

peanuts. It's just not feasible. If you can convince them to take two hundred, then go for it. If not, we'll have to wait for another offer.'

'Okay. I told them I'd ask, anyway.'

'That's fine. Good work, Conrad. Talk later.'

'I'm afraid the lowest I can possibly do is two-hundred,' he told the expectant expressions of the couple. The couple looked at each other before Susan said, 'We did discuss it, but we just can't go any higher. We'll have to settle for a smaller house. Thank you for your time and effort, anyway.'

'That's quite alright. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help,' he told them, knowing then for sure that they were not faking.

He led them outside into the rain, and shook their hands once more. Once they had driven off out of sight, he turned to face the front door. The sheet of paper was dotted with rain, and growing soggy in some places.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Conrad muttered. He’d had some shitty days recently, but today really took the cake; he’d barely slept last night, the front door had been vandalised, and now his attempt to conceal it was foiling. His fingers ached to hold a cigarette, but he barely had enough money for food, let alone cancer sticks. He’d just have to replace the sign before the next viewing, and then head into town to find some paint. To top things off, he’d been so close to making the sale. If only they’d had another ten to thirty grand. He knew he shouldn’t think like that, but it was nearly impossible not to focus on the negatives when there were virtually no positives.

It turned out he didn’t need to replace the sign; the rain came and went, but the sheet of paper, though weathered, remained intact. The woman came alone. Her husband, she explained, was a soldier. His father was ill and deteriorating quickly, so they’d decided to move closer to look after him, but her husband was stationed in the middle east for another four

months. She took photos and panning videos of most of the rooms to send back to her husband. She couldn't make a decision on her own, you see. She left with a smile on her face, nevertheless, leaving Conrad feeling relatively indifferent to the viewing.

He drove to town, listening to a radio drama, which, for a short while, actually made him forget all that was threatening his sanity. He found paint closest to the colour of the front door, but even the smallest pot set him back six quid, not to mention the other three for a brush. That left only coins in his wallet, and six pound-something in his bank, which he couldn't even withdraw as cash. He couldn't put off calling his father anymore, he decided. He'd have to ring him tonight, or else he would likely starve.

He got caught in the rush hour traffic on the way back, though it wasn't half as bad as London's. He decided he'd come back and buy a few books if his father did lend him some money, which he most likely would. It was hardly a

luxury at this point; mild escapism was the only thing keeping him sane, and he was already dreading another night with literally nothing in the way of entertainment.

It was still raining - though admittedly finely - when he got back to the property, so he opened the door inwards, laid down the newspaper he'd bought, and got painting.

At last, he closed the door, pleased with his accomplishment, and fell into the sofa. He sat staring out of the window, through which he'd seen last night's figure, before reaching for his phone and dialling his father.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Dad. It's me?'

'Who?'

'Conrad, Dad.'

'Oh, Con, my boy. How are you, son?'

'Yeah, not too bad. How about you? How's mum?'

'Oh, you know, coping. She keeps asking when you're going to come and see us.'

‘I know, Dad. Soon. I’m closing in on this sale, and then I promise I’ll come visit.’

‘And you’ll bring Olivia?’

‘We’ll see,’ Conrad thought, wondering if Lissa would allow that. There was a short pause, and then he added, ‘Listen, I hate to do this, but I need to borrow some money, only for a few weeks. As I said, I’m closing in on this sale, I just need something to keep me going until the money comes through.’

Another pause ensued, after which his father said, ‘I thought you were doing better now, Conrad.’

‘I am, Dad. Trust me, I’m doing everything I can to get back on my feet. This isn’t like before.’

‘Promise me?’

‘I promise.’

‘Okay. How much do you need?’

Conrad thought. The prospect of sleeping in his bed at the B&B every night was appealing, but that was money he’d

have to pay back, and he didn't actually know how long it would be until he sold the house. Still, he wasn't ecstatic about sleeping at the murder house.

'I don't know. Two - maybe three - hundred.'

'Okay. I'll send you five, but don't tell your mother. She'll only worry.'

'Thank you, Dad. I really appreciate it. It's only for a few weeks.'

'Don't mention it. You just make sure you're taking care of yourself.'

They talked for another twenty minutes, in which his father asked indirect questions that Conrad knew were all asking the same thing: was he drinking again? Once his father was well assured that he wasn't, conversation moved to trivialities: how the neighbours were settling in, or not, it seemed; what Conrad's distant relatives were up to; a documentary his father

had seen the other night, and why Conrad really shouldn't eat ready meals.

He'd never exactly been close with his father – he'd always been a mummy's boy, in truth – but he found himself missing his company, even the little things that usually frustrated him. He knew he should visit his parents more often, but he was often busy, and there was the real reason; he hated seeing his mother in such a decrepit condition. It wasn't like there was much he could do for her anymore. She just existed - little more - like the wind in the trees. He used to talk to her about books they'd read, religion, and art movements, but now she could barely follow the television, and if she got too distracted, she'd grow confused and scared.

He eventually hung up, with his dad's promise that he would wire him the money immediately. It was usually pretty immediate, and Conrad considered eating down at the pub again, but he might be too tempted to have a drink. Instead, he left his Golf down the road, and walked to the chippy. It was

raining lightly on and off, and he could have driven, but he enjoyed the rain on his face and the creeping darkness. He didn't mind the cold either; he had a fleece under his jacket, and it reminded him that Christmas was coming, whatever that meant for him now. He decided he would sleep in the house tonight, and if there was any repeat of last night, he would take a room at the B&B.

He ordered sausage and chips with gravy, something he'd never encountered before coming up north, but had become quite accustomed to recently. As he was waiting, and half-watching the soap opera on the wall-mounted television, the woman who'd served him on his last two visits came over and leaned on the counter.

'How's the sale going?' she asked. Conrad hadn't disclosed the reason of his stay, only that he was here on business, but he figured it wasn't a difficult deduction to

make. That or she'd heard it through the grapevine; word travelled fast in small communities like this.

‘Oh, a couple of close calls, but no dice yet.’

‘Hmmm,’ she murmured with a hint of disapproval. ‘I don’t know why anyone would want to live in that ghastly house. After all that’s happened there.’

‘Actually, it’s quite a commodity to some,’ then at the look on her face, ‘but most are just attracted to the low price.’

‘Well, I tell you, they’d have to pay me to live in that place. Where you from, anyway? Not round here.’

‘Hounslow,’ Conrad replied, then added, ‘London.’

‘You’re a long way from home, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, well, properties of this nature aren’t too common. More common than you’d think, mind, but it does mean I have to travel quite a lot.’

‘Well, I don’t envy you,’ she said. ‘I’d hate being away from my bairns for more than a few days. Lived here my whole life, I have. Got any kids yourself?’

‘Yes, a daughter.’

‘I bet she’ll be missing her daddy.’ A younger man in white overalls placed a brown paper bag on the counter, and she handed it to Conrad. ‘There you go, Pet. Enjoy your night. Hopefully there won’t be many more stuck up here.’

Conrad thanked her, and left the shop. He ate a few chips on the walk back to his car, and ate in its warmth, listening to Radio 4.

He fell asleep for a time against the car window, and when he awoke, it was nearly full dark. He turned the car off, and walked up to the house in the nearing dusk. It was considerably colder now, and he could see his breath in front of him.

Conrad switched the lamp on in the living room, drew the curtains, and sunk into the sofa. Despite falling asleep inside the warm car with the radio playing, he felt wide awake now. Even with three layers, it was cold, and he had nothing to entertain himself with once again. The car would be warm,

and he could listen to the radio, but the trade-off was a cramped, uncomfortable bed that he knew he would have little sleep on. It was times like these that reminded him why he'd started drinking. He pulled his sleeping bag out and got (relatively) comfy, waiting for sleep and knowing that tomorrow would be a better day. At least he had some money now, though if he wasn't careful, that would go quickly, too.

He woke when the sun rose, to his relief, well-rested. He would drive to town, get a coffee and a pastry, and then a couple of novels from the bookshop. Probably, he'd try the charity shops first to see if they had any decent books, but if not, he was happy to pay a tenner or so to alleviate his crushing boredom. He considered buying a pack of fags, but decided against it, for now at least. He gathered his sleeping bag together and stuffed it into the cupboard. He slung his travel bag over his shoulder, and made to leave the house, but

froze in place in the hallway. The bag fell from his shoulder without his grip to support it, and hit the floor.

The same message that had been scratched into the front door was back, only this time in shining red letters on the wall: LEAVE NOW. On the floor beneath the message was the pot of paint he'd used on the front door. The lid was off, the brush sticking out of the top. He was sure he'd closed the paint and wiped the brush off.

Conrad looked around the hallway. Someone had been in during the night.

He hurried to the back door, and then checked all of the windows on both floors, but there was no sign that anyone had entered or exited the house.

'What the fuck?' he asked his echo, thoughts of the house's rumours circling his suspicions. If no one had been in or out, the only physical person that had been in the house...was him. A chill spread across his body as he questioned whether he'd done it. Two murder-suicides in a

row was a terrible coincidence - not to mention the missing boy - but what if it hadn't been? What if they'd been possessed by something evil, and that same thing had made him write the message? But what about the figure he'd seen, or had he just dreamed that? It was scary how much memory was obscured by time.

Suffice to say, he left the house without a second's consideration. What the fuck did he do now? This was more than a little scratching on the front door; this was harassment now: an attempt to sabotage the sale of the house. It was criminal, but he couldn't call the police, could he? He should call Michael, Conrad knew this, but for some reason his hand hesitated on its way to his phone. What if Michael told him to call the police, and they tested for fingerprints, and the only ones were his? What if he really had done it?

He was being stupid, too many horror novels and movies clouding his sense of reason. He drew his mobile and dialled his boss before he could change his mind.

‘Conrad, how are you doing?’

‘It’s happened again, Michael.’

A pause. ‘Shit. What now?’

‘I woke up and... came to the house, and there was the same message painted on the wall, from the paint I used for the door.’

‘What the fuck? Was the property locked?’

‘Yes, that’s the first thing I checked.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

‘And no signs of a break-in?’

‘Not that I could find.’

‘That’s strange, Conrad. Really strange. I’m not entirely sure what to do.’ Another pause. ‘When’s your next viewing?’

‘Two, I believe.’

‘Hmm. This needs to be reported to the police, Conrad, but don’t call them. Go down to the station and tell them in person. I don’t need any more rumours circulating.’

‘Okay, yeah.’

‘As for the viewings, fuck, I don’t know. I’ll have a think, and call you back. See what the police say, too. But don’t cancel them whatever you do. We can’t afford to lose any potential buyers.’

‘Okay, got it. I’m sorry about this.’

‘Not your fault, man. You’re doing great. Right, I’ve got to get off the line, I’ve got a call coming through. I’ll call you later, Conrad. Cheers.’

The line went dead, leaving Conrad standing there, staring blankly. It took him a few seconds to end the call. What the fuck did he do now? He should talk to the police – even his boss said so – but he didn’t even know where the station was, and asking directions might start more rumours he really didn’t need. What’s more, he’d have to admit he’d been sleeping in the property, or did he? He’d told his boss he’d found the messages when he’d arrived in the morning, but that wasn’t strictly true. Lying would mean omitting what might be

a crucial piece of evidence – the figure he saw – although that was nothing to go on, anyway, and he wasn't one hundred percent sure he'd even seen it. He would lie, then, but what if the police asked where he was currently staying? He could tell them he'd been at the bed and breakfast, not a lie as much as a grammatical obscurity. If they perused further, he'd admit he was skint and sleeping in his car.

Reluctantly, Conrad walked to his car and started the engine. He sat with it idling for a moment, when a thought occurred to him. He killed the engine, and got out again. He walked down the path to the bungalow at the bottom of the property. The woman, whom Conrad assumed lived alone, was on all-fours, digging away at a patch of garden. Her fenced-off garden was little more than a rockery in comparison to the main property, but it was well-tended, he had to admit.

Conrad cleared his throat. 'Excuse me, Ma'am.'

She looked round with a start, and scrambled to her feet. She had soil in her dishevelled hair, and sweat was beading on her face, despite the approaching winter.

‘You’re the estate agent, selling Richard and Sophia’s place.’ Her inflection suggested it was not a question, but for lack of a response, he said:

‘Yes. Conrad.’ He offered his hand, and, after peeling off her gardening glove, she took it.

‘Edith.’ She was scanning his suit with something like nostalgia in her eyes.

‘Pleasure. I was wondering, Edith, if you could tell me where the police station is?’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘The police? Whatever has happened?’

‘Oh, nothing like that. Just an incident of vandalism. Two, actually. I think someone’s trying to sabotage the sale of the house, and I have no idea what I’m going to do for the two o’clock viewing.’

‘Well, I’m sure it can wait five minutes, eh? Why don’t you come in for a cup of tea and a slice of cake? Just made it last night.’

‘Oh, no. That’s very kind, but I really must be-’

‘Nonsense. I insist.’ She took Conrad’s arm over the fence, and led him towards the gate. It was hard to refuse cake and a cuppa, so he acquiesced.

‘Awful what happened in that house, absolutely awful,’ she said, filling the kettle. ‘Have a seat, have a seat,’ she waved at Conrad.

He sat, and laid his wrists on the floral tablecloth that he could have sworn was the same design his grandmother had had when he was a child. In fact, the kitchen smelled similarly, too: a kind of mustiness mixed with perfume.

‘Is it strange, selling a house like that?’ she asked, turning around to face him.

‘Actually, they’re all I sell.’

Edith's eyebrows rose for a second and then she gave the tiniest of shrugs. 'I suppose someone's got to do it. I hope they're paying you well.'

Conrad responded only with a breath of laughter. He wished they were, too, but he couldn't complain, with all Michael had done for him.

She opened a cake tin on the side and cut them both a slice.

'There you go, dear.'

'Thank you,' Conrad said.

'Milk and sugar?'

'Yes, two sugars, please.'

'Coming up. So what kind of vandalism are we talking? I would've heard any windows smashing. My hearing's about the only thing that's still good after all this time.'

'There was a message carved into the front door. "Leave now." I found the same message painted on the wall in the

hallway just now. I checked the locks and no sign of a break-in.'

'Very strange. There's your tea, Pet,' she said setting it down before Conrad.

'Thank you.'

'You don't think... this is going to sound silly, but... you don't think something else did those things?' she asked. 'I mean, I've heard about strange things that people have seen near the house.'

Conrad drank his tea to stall his answer. 'I don't know. I've never really believed in anything like that. But I did see... a figure outside the house one night. At least I think I did.' He couldn't believe he was telling her this, but she seemed to entertain the possibility more than he ever had.

'A figure? What were you doing there at night?'

'Oh, well not night. I mean early evening.'

'I see,' she said, unconvinced, and then, 'Where are you from, Conrad?'

‘Hounslow.’

‘Ah, you’re far from home, aren’t you?’

Conrad opened his mouth to say, ‘you’re not the first person to have told me that’ but a dull pain attacked his head, and his vision blurred slightly for a second. Edith was still saying something but half of the words didn’t make it through the filter of his current condition. He hadn’t had any alcohol in two days, so then why did he feel suddenly drunk, or at least the worse aspects of being drunk? He’d never heard of it before, but perhaps alcohol was like some hallucinogens, whose effects could persist for months after taking them. He had drunk a *lot* in recent years, after all.

‘You alright there, Love?’ Edith asked. Conrad tried to open his mouth to reply – just what, he didn’t know – but found he couldn’t. His jaw was completely numb as though he’d just come out of the dentist. And then it hit him, and he instantly questioned why it had taken him so long to realise it.

He’d been drugged.

He tried to speak again but it was futile. His limbs were shutting off, too; he could barely move his arms, and spit was dripping down his chin.

What the fuck, Conrad thought. What the fuck, what the fuck, what the-

‘There, there, dear,’ Edith said, placing a hand on his forehead. ‘You’ll be out soon. Best sleep you’ll ever have, so make sure they’re sweet dreams.’

She laughed to herself, then took up her fork and ate a mouthful of cake.

His heart was racing in his chest. Was that the drugs? What the fuck was happening?

With no control now over the distribution of his weight, Conrad sagged to the right, slipped sideways off the chair, and hit his head hard. His vision darkened yet further, and then...

...the next thing he knew he was surfacing, like a train emerging from a dark tunnel. Only it was still dark, at least it

was outside, he saw through the window above his head. The kitchen was dimly lit, and Edith sat at the table with a paperback in her hands: *his* paperback. He tried to raise his head, which he noticed she'd placed a pillow underneath, and let out a grunt. She looked down at him, and smiled. She closed the book, slipped on a pair of leather gloves, and reached for the shotgun on the table. She aimed it at him with the same slow smile.

‘The feeling will return gradually. You’ll be able to walk in about... let me see, fifteen minutes. Don’t think about running, though,’ she said, waving the shotgun slightly. ‘You won’t get far. That’s my own brew, you know.’ She laughed to herself, and reached for her book again. She read a few pages, still keeping the shotgun aimed in Conrad’s direction.

As Edith had said, his arms started to tingle, and then his legs, as the feeling returned. His whole body still felt rather numb but after ten minutes or so, he was able to sit up.

Edith glanced up from her book every few seconds - Conrad wondered how she could even follow the narrative - and finally folded it.

‘You stay just there, Pet. That’s it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Conrad managed through laboured breaths.

‘Oh, my dear, you’re a smart boy. Use your imagination.’

‘You killed them. All of them.’

‘Well yes,’ she laughed. ‘The question is why, and here - if you get it right, I’ll let you live. Actually, that’s a lie, but I’ll make it less painful, how’s that?’

Conrad looked around the kitchen: the kitchen of a killer, just like any old lady’s. He could play her game - buy himself some time - but there was no way she’d let him walk away. He needed to find a way out, maybe get the gun off her. Before he had a chance to respond, she rose, aiming the gun directly at him.

‘Get up. Come on. I haven’t got all night.’ She took a sports bag from the floor, and stepped towards him.

He placed his hands on the cool tile floor and managed to push himself to a kneel. Using the counter, he slowly pulled himself to his feet. Edith was a small woman, and he towered above her, but she seemed unabated by his stature. She held the gun, after all.

‘Man, I’m going to enjoy this,’ she said, more to herself than Conrad. As if returning to earthly dimensions, she shook the gun at him again. ‘Go.’ She gestured towards the door.

Reluctantly, Conrad walked, holding the kitchen counter all the way. Where was she taking him? If she was going to kill him, why would she do it in the open? Less cleaning up, sure, but also more chance of someone seeing. At least he could cling to that hope, although it dawned on him that she’d killed before: several times, actually.

‘Open the door,’ she said, and Conrad reached for the latch, nearly falling under his own weight. He steadied himself

and managed to swing the door open. Dare he make a break for it? He could barely walk, let alone run, but what other chance did he have? No, that was stupid; he wouldn't make it three steps before a spread of ball bearings took his legs out. His best chance, he thought, was to fake his docility – pretend that his body was still weak whereas, in reality, it grew stronger – and then strike when she was least expecting it.

‘To the house.’ She gestured up the path with her gun. ‘And I know you’ve been sleeping there. The figure you saw was me, and in case you hadn’t figured it out, I left those messages.’

‘Why?’ Conrad asked, slowing to a stop, but she pushed the shotgun into his back. It was freezing outside, but the fading effect of Edith’s drugs meant he could barely feel it.

‘I’m doing your job for you. You’re supposed to work out why.’

‘You don’t want anyone to buy the house.’

‘Well, aren’t you fucking smart? But why?’

‘Why don’t you just fucking tell me?’ Conrad almost shouted, hoping to draw attention if anyone happened to pass by.

Edith raised her eyebrows. ‘Shut...up, and walk. See, no one ever suspects the things that lie right before their eyes. I’m just a little old lady. I’d never hurt a fly.’ She laughed. ‘Oh, if only they knew how it actually felt. Why do you think there are so many serial killers out there? I wish you could feel how good it is, but sadly for you, that liberty lies with me tonight.’

‘So you killed them because you enjoyed it? That’s it?’

‘Nothing’s ever that simple, Pet, though that’s a large part of it, I must admit.’

‘You killed them so you could have the house, however that works,’ Conrad said with some conviction.

She laughed again, sending shivers across Conrad’s arms and legs. ‘The Smiths, yes. They were the most recent tenants. You see, once I’d seen to Richard and his whore of a wife, and after what happened to my son, there were rumours about the

house being haunted. No one wanted to buy it, and it lay empty for a time. Then the Smiths came along and fucked up my hard work. But once I'd seen to them, too, which I just couldn't resist – they were arrogant cunts, anyway – no one wanted the property. It lay empty for months, and I was starting to negotiate with the council about a lower price. I had some savings, though not enough for what you're asking. But then you bastards came along with your whole haunted house novelty, and I will not let this house go again.'

'Why do you want it so badly?' Conrad asked. He surprised himself how genuinely intrigued he was under the gravity of the situation. He let his foot slip out from underneath him, and fell to all-fours. He felt as though he could walk reasonably freely now, but he was determined not to let Edith know this.

'Get up, for fuck's sake,' she said, giving him a nudge with her shotgun. Conrad considered making a grab for it, but rose slowly to his feet.

‘It’s a long story... My father died when I was young, and my mother raised me as best she could, but she never had much. We lived in the shadow of that house my entire life. Oh, Leonard Archer was very hospitable, inviting us over so he could rub our inferiority in our faces for a few hours each month, and I played with Richard often, but I was under no illusion that I was the same as him.

‘Then, one day, I was hanging out with Richard in his garden. I fancied him, you know, stupid little girl I was, enticed by his fancy clothes and posh accent. We kissed, and he started touching me. The kiss I wanted, but I was only fourteen, and told him I didn’t want to do anything else. But he didn’t listen. He took me behind the bushes and raped me. No one believed me. I was never even sure my own mother did. He was a handsome, charismatic boy that the whole town loved, and I was the quiet girl who wrote crappy poems, and mended her own clothes. He said I led him on, and lied about

it, that I'd wanted it. Girls at school laughed at me, called me a slut and a whore.

'His father sent him away to a posh boarding school, hardly a punishment. What little relief I felt at him leaving was soon quashed by the baby in my belly. He must have known it was his, though he never spoke to me about it. The rare occasions when we did speak, he acted as though nothing had ever happened. Sam disappearing was awfully convenient for him and his new French whore when they moved into his father's house.'

They'd arrived at the front door now, and Edith gestured with her gun for him to stand aside. She took a set of keys from her pocket and opened the door, never taking the gun off him. That's how she got into the house, Conrad thought. That's how she painted the wall, probably how she got in to kill the family; she had spare keys all this time, and no one had thought to change the locks.

'Get inside.'

Conrad stumbled over the threshold and fell to his knees again. Edith followed him inside and closed the door. She switched on the hallway lights, illuminating the chandelier and wall-mounted bulbs shaped like candles along the walls.

‘Your son didn’t go missing, did he?’ Conrad asked.

Edith smiled a wide, brown-toothed smile that chilled him to the bones. ‘There we go.’

‘You’re fucking sick,’ Conrad growled. She reared back and punched him in the mouth: a hard punch, unencumbered by age or arthritis.

He fell back down, and spat blood onto the floor.

‘What the fuck do you know? Everything about him reminded me what his father did to me. I tried to love him, I fucking tried, but when I stared into his eyes, all I saw was his dad.’

‘That wasn’t his fault,’ Conrad shouted back.

‘No, but I couldn’t live like that. One day I snapped. He was watching TV, laughing the same stupid nasally laugh that

his father had, so I slipped a tea-towel around his neck and pulled until he couldn't laugh again. Now it's your turn, so walk,' she said, pointing. 'Up the stairs.'

Conrad spat onto the floor again, and Edith raised her eyebrows, waving the shotgun.

'Are you going to shoot me?' he laughed. 'You don't think a shotgun blast to the back might arouse some suspicion?'

Edith laughed, too. 'Oh, this is only ceremonial. You're going to kill yourself, Conrad. It'll be quick, and relatively painless, I'll grant you that much. Otherwise, I can make your death so painful, you'll beg me to kill your family just to let you die. Now go.'

Conrad mounted the steps. He could make a break for it when he reached the top, pull a chest of drawers in front of the door, and jump from the window. It was so high, though, he would surely break his legs. And where would that leave him? The only advantage he had now was that Edith thought he was

marginally weaker than he really was. And for what? He would die like a dog all the same. What would his daughter think when she found out he'd killed himself? Or Lissa, or his parents? Everyone he ever knew would sigh in pity at the thought, but secretly scorn his weakness.

‘Stand there,’ Edith said, gesturing to the corner of bannister beside the staircase. He did, looking down at the hallway beneath him, the staircase to his left. He heard the zip of her bag, and turned to see her retrieve a length of rope tied at the end in a slipknot. She looped one end of the noose around the bannister, and handed the other to him in a gloved hand.

‘Put it on,’ she said. Conrad took it, feeling its weight. He took a deep breath and turned back to face the bannister. There was only one hope for him now, and it was dwindling by the second.

‘Fuck you,’ he said, and jumped.

The ground slammed up to meet him, and his legs buckled. His body took the rest of the impact, and for the smallest fraction of time, it felt as though his feet and back were in contact with the floor at the same time. But then he was scrambling to his feet, and the front door was only a few feet away. He didn't make it two steps before a deafening bang, and another excruciating pain forced him forwards onto his face. The pain was initially a huge spread across his back, but quickly shrank into several individual epicentres.

It took Conrad several seconds to catch his breath, and get to his feet again. Edith's footsteps began to descend the staircase; she was old, but when he pulled the door open and stole a glance over his shoulder, she was over halfway down the stairs. He stumbled – genuinely, now – down the path, his lower back, and leg screaming with pain. He had three, maybe four bullets in him, one right on his tailbone.

He groaned, despite struggling to breathe, and checked behind him. Edith was closer than he'd expected; she stood in the doorway, taking aim with her shotgun.

Conrad dived forward as the second gunshot resounded. He heard the plastic shells hit the floor with perfect clarity, and looked back as he scrambled to his feet. Edith was pushing another two rounds into the double-barrel shotgun.

Now was his chance.

Conrad pumped his legs harder, the pain, if possible, even more agonising. He could feel the blood dripping down his back and legs now, too. He was too afraid to look back, bracing himself for another shotgun blast, but it never came. Soon he was limp-running down the driveway. The road was only feet away, and then he was on it, stumbling along the white line. He looked back up the path to the house, but there were no streetlights for a fair distance and he couldn't make anything out. He walked as fast as he could, breathing heavily,

for maybe half a minute, before he heard a noise. A car was approaching, and fast, judging by the engine tone.

Conrad turned to see the headlights, but they were underneath him somewhere, and then he was staring up at them, but they were blurry, and fading quickly. Before he could even search for the energy to stay conscious, he slipped into the darkness.

Conrad was beginning to think he'd missed her when Olivia appeared through the gates, her pigtails swaying as she walked. She was enthralled in conversation with another girl, whom he assumed must be Molly; Olivia had talked about her incessantly when he'd still lived with her and Lissa. It was torture to see her so plainly with his own eyes, yet be completely unable to speak to her, to hold her, even to be acknowledged by her.

He reached into his inside pocket and took a deep swig from his hipflask.

Lissa stood at the edge of the playground, equally deep in conversation with one of the other mums. She clearly had no idea he was there; she'd never noticed him before, though he'd received some sceptical looks from a few parents. He'd given up the suits and smart-casual clothes she was accustomed to seeing him in a long time ago. She would never have recognised the loose trousers and old jacket he wore now, not to mention the unkempt hair and beard. There were dozens of parents, standing around on their phones or gossiping to each other; he was just another stranger in the crowd.

Olivia and her friend greeted their mums, and continued talking for a time, before making their way down the playground to the road. They stopped by the other woman's car and parted ways with a quick hug from the mums and an emphatic wave from the girls. And then Lissa and Olivia were alone, heading away from the school. A sense of panic crept

into Conrad's chest, and he got to his feet, taking another swig from his flask.

He started to follow them, careful to keep a good distance. Plenty of parents and children were flocking away from the school now - others lingering for a few more minutes of conversation - but he didn't want to draw attention to himself either way. They were holding hands now; he balled his hands into fists, whilst holding back tears. He shouldn't despair at their affection, but seeing it from behind his self-imposed prison was like watching a gluttonous king ravaging a feast as starvation slowly tears the flesh from your bones. He took another long swig and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Lissa was crossing the road now, but she'd dropped Olivia's hand, who was bent over, retrieving something from the ground. Lissa held out her hand for Olivia, who hopped down from the pavement and started walking towards her, just as the reverse lights glowed on the car in front. It pulled

slowly backwards, and Lissa yelled something, but it was too late. Olivia was reaching for Lissa's hand when the car hit her.

She fell back - or rather, was forced back - sprawling in the road behind her. Lissa screamed, slamming her hands on the back window of the car, and it came to a halt. Conrad didn't see clearly how the next few seconds played out, because he was running full-pelt towards the scene. By the time he reached them, Lissa had Olivia in her arms, who was sobbing loudly. The driver of the car stood awkwardly in front of them, stammering about how he didn't see her, and Lissa should have been watching her.

He never saw the punch coming.

His head snapped back, as though a wire had jerked it, and his hands went up to his nose. That was when Conrad's second punch connected with the side of his jaw and the man fell sideways, his ribs hitting the curb. He cried out, but Conrad was not ready to step down. He wanted to kick the

man with all the force he could muster, cause him as much pain and damage as he possibly could.

What made him hesitate was the look in Lissa and Olivia's eyes when he met theirs: Lissa's wide and full of fear, as though Conrad were not a man but a giant wolf who would sooner tear their throats out than embrace them as his family; and Olivia's, confused and indifferent. She'd stopped crying momentarily to located the source of the ruckus. For a second, she didn't recognise Conrad: a feeling that surpassed all of the sadness and desperation he'd felt at not being able to see her combined.

His own daughter hadn't recognised him. And why should she when she was watching him attack another man with all the determination of a killer?

That was when he froze.

'Con?' Lissa asked, initially confused, but realisation came, and with it, disgust. 'What the fuck are you doing?'

He stared blankly at her for a moment, his ears ringing loudly, and then down to the man clutching his sides, blood spattering the pavement from his nose.

And then he ran. He ran as fast as he could, knowing full well that he would never be able to outrun what he'd done.

He'd been sitting in his parents' front room, watching one of his mother's soap operas and eating cold sausage and mash when the police came for him. He knew it was only a matter of time before his parents found out what he'd done, but he just couldn't find the words to tell them. The look of confusion in their eyes as he'd opened the door would stay with him forever.

The couple of hours of questioning were a blur he would never quite crystallise in his mind, but he remembered the slam of the metal cell door with all the clarity in the world. He'd lain back on the bunk, covered his face in his hands, and sobbed until he was sick.

A nurse stood over him. She watched his face for a moment, and then looked towards the door.

‘Dylan, he’s awake,’ she called.

A doctor appeared at his side, too, who smiled. ‘How are you feeling, Conrad?’

His whole body ached, and when he tried to move, pain flared up in more than one place. ‘Like I’ve been hit by a car.’

‘Do you remember much about what happened?’

‘She was going to kill me. The crazy bitch shot me. I was running, and then a car hit me.’

‘Yes, the police do want to speak with you when you’re feeling up to it, but only when you’re ready.’

‘No, I want to. I’m ready.’

‘Of course, and your friend Michael’s here.’

‘He is?’ Conrad followed the Doctor’s gaze to the door, where Michael forced a smile through the window. ‘Can I see him?’

‘Of course, but keep it short. You’ve been through a lot of trauma, and you’ll need to rest. Especially after the police.’

‘Okay.’

The doctor waved Michael in, who came over to Conrad’s bedside.

‘I’m so sorry, man. How are you feeling?’

‘I’ve been better, but grateful to be alive.’

‘What the fuck happened, man? You went off the radar after our phone call, and I thought maybe something had happened. So I called the local police, and when they couldn’t find you, I got in the car and drove up myself. I was driving around, looking frantically when I ran into you... literally.’

‘It was you that hit me?’

‘I’m so sorry, Conrad.’

Conrad laughed. ‘You probably saved my life. Don’t be sorry.’

‘What were you doing in the middle of the road, anyway?’

‘Running for my life. It was her. Edith. The woman in the bungalow. She killed her son, and the two families. She tried to kill me, too.’

‘Fuck, man. I didn’t see anyone else. You need to tell the police now.’

‘I will. I’ll tell them everything. You can send them in now.’

Michael stayed in a hotel overnight, and came to see him in the morning. For this, Conrad would be forever grateful. He wasn’t just his boss; Conrad could genuinely call the man a friend. He brought Conrad’s things from his car – he had special permission to enter what was now a crime scene – and brought him a couple of books and his own iPod. With his phone returned to him, Conrad received regular phone calls from the police - when he wasn’t resting, that was - detailing their search for Edith, who had disappeared after last night’s events. They called him that evening to say she was in custody

– she'd been spotted trying to flee to Wales where she'd grown up – and it was only a matter of hours before it was on the local, and soon after, national news.

'I'm going to have to go home,' Michael told him the next morning. 'Our phone's been ringing off the hook. You won't believe the publicity this has given us, and now that forensics are done with the house, we're free to conduct viewings again. I'm sending Darren up tomorrow, but you'll receive most of the commission. I'll come visit when I can.'

But Conrad was out within the week, by which time a couple had already signed off on the property, paying above the asking price due to the high demand. Like people always said, the best advertising is free advertising, and that's just what they'd gotten with the copious local and national news spots. A house haunted by decades of mystery had finally had its veil lifted, and the mass murderer that tainted its name brought to justice.

When he arrived back in Hounslow, his first priority was to visit Lissa and Olivia, and then his parents. He'd spoken to both parties on the phone and assured them that he was okay, and recovering slowly. He still had to walk with crutches, and he had to pop a couple of pain killers every few hours, but he was worlds better than when he'd first woken up in hospital.

Conrad took a deep breath and knocked. There were voices inside, and then the small glass window at the top of the door glowed with light. Footsteps preceded the lock clicking and the door falling away.

'Hi,' Lissa said, but before he had a chance to reply, Olivia pushed past her, yelling 'Daddy' and throwing her arms around Conrad. He groaned as the pain surpassed the numbing properties of his medication, and Lissa yelled for her to be careful, but Conrad hugged her back all the same.

The pain would fade – and did quickly – but it was moments like this that would stay with him forever.

When they parted, and he saw Lissa's smile, he had a bittersweet rush of realisation. Firstly, he knew for sure that Lissa did not love him like she once had; that door was closed for good. She smiled at him like an old friend, happy for his happiness, but with no desire to share it. The other thing he saw was in that same smile; he saw that she had forgiven him for everything he'd put them through, and his chest grew warmer in response, or perhaps that was just his meds.

'Come on, honey,' she laughed. 'Let Daddy come inside. It's getting cold.'

'It is, Christmas will be here before we know it,' he said.

'Hey, speaking of Christmas, Olivia would love you to spend it with us. I've already invited Terry over, but it's okay if you don't want him to be here with us.'

'No, that's fine. That'd be nice. He's a nice guy. I'm happy for you.'

'Thanks, Conrad. Come on in, let me get you a cuppa for Christ's sake.'

He stepped over the threshold and Olivia took his hand instantly, pulling him into the living room.

‘Daddy, come see what I made for you at school.’

Despite the pain he felt in most of his body, Conrad smiled.

‘I can’t wait.