

# KEEP THEM SAFE

by  
Sarah Bartrum



# Copyright

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*Thou shalt not covet*

# Chapter 1

It was the hair that did it. Flashed gold so bright that it left blue spots before Sid's eyes. A beacon against the drab cement walls; a distraction from the stench of urine. It shot straight through Sid's retina and lit up the dark corners of his brain, the parts that were better kept in shadow.

He was standing with his hands under the dryer when she flew past him. At first he thought he'd seen a vision, his heart leaping up to his head knocking him out and then falling back into his chest to bounce around his rib cage. It was him. It had to be; no one had hair like that, no one. The slam of the cubicle door told him it hadn't been a vision. That streak of shimmering sunshine had been real, it turned his hands watery, he could feel them getting hot and wet despite the warm air from the dryer. The back of his neck prickled. Behind him, there was a rustle of clothing and then the unmistakable tinkle as the child relieved herself. Of course it wasn't him - it had been a girl, there had been a blur of pink too as she whizzed past the urinals and into the toilet. It would never be Tommy, how could it?

His mother had called it liquid gold, and then with a darkening of her eyes "Midas touch". It wasn't until years later that Sid began to understand what she meant, but it wasn't Tommy who had the Midas touch, it never had been. He remembered running his fingers through that hair, ruffling his face into its softness. Just like my Tommy, he thought, as the vision and blue spots began to fade. But then he heard the shifting of feet and the flush of the toilet and the sweating started afresh.

She came out of the cubicle holding something yellow in her hand. She thrust it up at him.

"Axihent," she said with a small down-turn of her lips. "Din mean it," she added. "Mr Man, you dry them pleece."

Sid stared at her hair; there were soft curls just above her ears, the fringe curving in two different directions. He could feel goose pimples racing along his arms. He shifted his gaze down to meet hers. She had brown eyes; they were staring at him expectantly. Tommy had blue eyes not brown. She frowned and waved the object at him.

Sid automatically took it, his brain rapidly trying to catch up and decipher what she had said - even her words sounded familiar. That delightful childish tone. He looked at his hand; a pair of damp yellow pants moistened his fingers. He too frowned and then at last he shook himself into the present. This wasn't Tommy. He didn't know this girl, had never met her. He understood now what she wanted, and spread the pants out between his two hands holding them under the dryer. He had to press the button again to keep the hot air going. He kept his eyes resolutely on the pants; there was a motif on the front, a grey fat character next to a three-wheeled trike. Tommy had had Winnie the Pooh. Sid smiled to himself and couldn't help looking back at the girl, at the top of her head, the curls, the warm lustre.

"Jessica! Jessica! Where are you?" the voice was loud, angry.

Jessica let out a gasp, and departed as swiftly as she had arrived. One more flash as the sun struck her head and she was gone. Sid stood staring after her. Sudden pain in his left hand reminded him he was still holding the pants under the blasting hot air. He stuffed them into his pocket, suddenly nervous. A man approached the entrance; Sid had no choice but to march out.

Under the willow tree, a woman was bending down and pointing at Jessica, strong words rushing out of her mouth. Jessica's head was bent but she turned it towards him as he watched. Sid turned and headed in the opposite direction, not daring to look back, not wanting to be caught by that Midas touch, to be caressed by it, drugged by it. He could feel the sweat

drying on his forehead as the air swept past his face. He willed himself not to run, his sights locked on the black gates ahead. There was a flutter in his chest, the unravelling had begun.

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Joanie looked up from his desk at the clock on the wall, it wasn't quite straight but at least it was correct. Much like his whole office really, it was well equipped, clean, still new-looking but something about it all was slightly off. Like his desk, a smart modern curved woodchip veneer with a boxed shelf on one side. The computer screen in front was just too big so the edge ended up being hidden by the box shelf. Or the desk chair he was sitting in, comfortable, adjustable, but the arms on it prevented him getting close enough to the desk so instead he had to lean forwards to use the keyboard. Still he couldn't complain. It was a vast improvement on the old building, despite the lack of parking. The clock read 9:15; she was five minutes later than usual. But then he could see Kelly's auburn hair through the square window at the top of the door, followed by a smart knock.

"Come in." The door opened and Kelly appeared with two steaming mugs of coffee. "Ah, Detective Sergeant Mowbray, what a saviour."

"Here you go sir, anything exciting to start the week?" She perched on the corner of his desk, folding over the edge of a stack of pink forms.

"I wish." Joanie lifted his hands indicating the computer screen and the papers strewn across the wooden desk. "Not what I would call exciting. You know it does make me wonder why we have an administration team when my desk looks like this."

"That's what you get for being in such a senior position."

"Well from this senior position, may I remind you that you have your butt, Kelly, on my expensive, superior pink forms?" Joanie noted the smart black skirt fall neatly back into place as Kelly stood up again.

"Sorry sir." A smile played at the corner of her mouth.

"But you obviously have news." Joanie sat back and steepled his fingers, "how is the new boy?"

"You don't miss a thing do you? Well now, Constable Curtis, a little over-eager if you ask me, but it makes a nice change for my team. Some new blood will shake the senior citizens up a bit."

"I hope you don't talk about me in that tone, aren't I even older than the rest of your team?"

"Yes, but at least you don't keep harping on about what the police used to be able to do, and all this namby-pamby policing nowadays giving the dirty bastards more rights than we have."

"True, but if you're referring to Barry, which by that voice, I know you are, at least you've got a trustworthy experienced ally, despite his whinging."

"It's alright, I'm not complaining." Kelly put up her hands in defence. "He's a good copper. Besides what I really came here to say is when do you want to meet this new kid Curtis?"

Joanie checked his watch, "Give me another half an hour with this delightful senior person's junkbox of emails before you send him in."

Kelly nodded and left.

True to her word, exactly half an hour later, there was another knock at the door before it opened.

"DI Johnson?"

Joanie glanced up at the expectant face.

"Great, they've sent me someone who can't even read." Ignoring the confused look, Joanie continued ripping open the envelopes, from the morning post, that littered his desk.

"Sir?"

“Try reading the sign on the door again.” Joanie didn't bother to look up, instead he scrunched up envelopes after scanning the contents digesting any important information and disregarding the rest. He filed the papers onto various piles heaped across his desk ignoring the cascading red filing stack.

“Jo-HAN-son,” Joanie continued, “Detective Inspector Johanson. Stop standing in the doorway Curtis and get yourself a seat.”

“Sorry sir.” The officer closed the door. Joanie stared directly at Curtis as he stood uncertainly, a mug in one hand and a doughnut in the other. Joanie moved a couple of papers aside and pointed at the small rectangle of space on his desk.

“Thanks, it's someone's birthday,” he indicated the doughnut which was already shedding sugar crystals onto the veneer. Curtis pulled himself a chair from the corner and sat on the far side of the desk. The young man's Adam's apple wiggled as he swallowed nervously under Joanie's intent gaze.

“I assume Detective Sergeant Mowbray has shown you around.”

“Er yes, she's been very helpful, I haven't...”

Joanie waited, raising his eyebrows as Curtis paused.

“I haven't worked for a woman before.”

“I see.” Joanie studied the younger man's face, wondering if that might be a problem. “You could learn a lot from Detective Sergeant Mowbray, consider yourself lucky.”

“Yes sir.” Curtis looked down at the doughnut.

“Go ahead.” Joanie rocked back in his chair studying Curtis. His head a mass of unruly blond curls yet his face set square, the strong jawline moving rapidly to finish the doughnut.

Joanie made a steeple with his fingers, flexing them in and out of a prayer position.

“Could I ask you something sir?” Curtis began, leaving a shower of white on one of the piles of paper.

Joanie regarded the raised eyebrows and gave a short nod of his head.

“How come they call you Joanie?”

Joanie could see the wide blue eyes behind Curtis's last piece of doughnut. He leaned forwards, his face coming uncomfortably close to Curtis.

“I won't say this again Curtis. It's Detective Inspector JoHANson to you.” He pronounced each word with great precision. Curtis stopped chewing until Joanie sat back and began steeping his hands again.

“Sorry sir.”

Curtis sipped his coffee in silence.

“What do you know about me Curtis?” He fished out the penknife from his back pocket and began scraping beneath his nails. Small white flecks fell onto his shirtfront.

“Er how do you mean sir?”

“Just tell me what you think you know.”

“OK, well you're one of the best when it comes to detection, that's what the boys said even in my last unit.”

“I'm not interested in flattery Curtis,” Joanie's icy tone cut across.

Curtis coughed self-consciously, “You're head of the Public Protection Unit for the Eastern Unit, most commonly involved with sex crimes and family crime. Last year you were commended for your part in the Simpson case.” Curtis paused struggling to think.

Joanie stopped scraping and glanced at the certificate on the wall. The Chief Constable's commendation, and justly deserved too. However, most officers knew about it. He certainly wasn't impressed with Curtis's information so far.

“Umm, you're married,” he pointed at the ring on Joanie's left hand. “Over forty er..”

Joanie laughed, "That's it keep guessing." Curtis coloured slightly and said nothing. A dark look turned his angelic face into something far more earthy. So this blondie wasn't all innocence and light Joanie noticed. Rather like seeing a Barbie doll with its head on backwards. Joanie recognised how useful that look might be in their line of work. He nodded slowly. Carefully he flicked the penknife closed and replaced it in his back pocket. He struck forward abruptly, placing his hands firmly onto the desk.

"Constable Dan Curtis." He stated. "Born February 22nd 1975. Married to Bella three and a half years ago, honeymooned in the Dominican Republic. You have a son, second birthday last month." He barked these statements at Curtis without pause.

"Suspected joyriding when you were thirteen but never charged. Joined the police six years ago. Been working the beat for four, and missed promotion due to an unfortunate incident. Inquiry. And I believe your career has suffered since. You play football, not bad by all accounts, and you read Stephen King." Joanie sat back and studied the younger man. He looked shocked, pale around his blue eyes and a purple tinge to his lips. He was breathing hard.

"Relax," Joanie stood up, "I like to know who I'm working with, that's all." Joanie took two box files from one of the shelves by the door; dumped them in front of Curtis on the desk on top of his papers.

"Read these, and cross reference them on the computer," he commanded, "It will give you an idea what we do here." He checked his watch, "Give me a brief on the top three nutters you think we need to watch and why you think they should merit our time and effort. As you can see, today I'm a bloody secretary." Joanie spread his fingers at the multi-coloured paperwork and the screen saver bouncing across the blackness. He yanked his coat from the back of his chair, hung it on the hook by the door, rolled up his sleeves and walked through the doorway.

Out in the open-plan office Kelly was on the phone, she waved Joanie over. Making her excuses she dropped the receiver back in its cradle.

"What do you think?" she nodded back at Curtis who was sitting down at his desk with the files.

Joanie smiled. "More to the point, what do you think Detective Sergeant Mowbray, he's on your team."

"You've read his file, he might be trouble. Feels a bit stiff to me, but then it is his first day," she kept his gaze.

"Constable Curtis will reveal his colours given time, people always do."

Joanie returned Kelly's suspicious look, he knew he couldn't fob her off that easily, they'd known each other too long.

"But what's your gut reaction?" she persisted.

Joanie smiled and started to walk away patting his large stomach. "That eating the last doughnut was better for Curtis than me," he called back. But she was right; there was an edge in that cold look he'd given Joanie. The report from personnel hinted at some problems. It might be nothing. Perhaps he'd have to shave off the sharp corners of this newbie, "Time will tell," he said to himself as he went to check the empty doughnut tray.

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Sid strode purposefully across the park, ignoring a faint call from the woman. Out onto the street by the bus stop, he swung left along Barrack Road. The sleeves on his jumper stuck to his skin, the sun was already high and it weighed heavy on his body. The treasure in his pocket felt so enormous he was sure someone would notice. He had not received such a precious prize in a long time. At the traffic lights he waited impatiently for an old lady in a blue Micra. Across and up the snicket banked by high wooden fences. A black and white cat watched him coming down the narrow path and leapt deftly up and over into the nearest

garden. Sid met no one, his sweat-streaked face unnoticed and the agitated way his legs moved not quite in rhythm but more of a stumbling hurry. Finally he reached the doorway of No.10a Compton Drive and unlocked the door.

Inside the hall he tore off his damp sweatshirt and hung it on a peg. He paused listening through the wall for his neighbours, nothing. He looked at the flight of stairs before him and slowly hauled himself up. It was only when he shut the door at the top of the stairs that he felt safe. The familiar smells of his flat relaxed him further. His T-shirt was damp under the arms but he ignored this and flicked on his computer. He needed to calm down, 'stay in control' as Dr Casey put it. He just had time to do a little browsing before work. As he sat down the bulge in his trouser pocket nudged his thigh. He tensed; slowly he withdrew the panties from his pocket and laid them on the desk next to his computer. His hand fluttered over them, touching the picture, stroking the cotton. He picked them up and held them close to his face. The stench of urine surprised him and he dropped them. His head swimming with that distinctive fug, the acid smell of fear, of failure. The trembling came from his chest and radiated outwards to his fingers. Shutting his eyes; Sid could feel Tommy's back pressed against him, he hugged him tight, whispered in his ear. The smell so strong, he didn't even know which of them had done it. They shook together, and Sid pressed his lips into Tommy's hair. They lay silent, listening, the smell, an almost living thing in the small space under the bed.

A loud thump came from downstairs. Sid's eyes flicked open, the neighbours were in. He picked up the pants and thrust them into the washing machine. Back at his desk the computer had booted up. Sid could see Jessica in his mind's eye, the top of her head, those gorgeous curls. He sighed, the hair, the innocence, the blue eyes. He knew his psychologist, Dr Casey, would not approve, but it was she that had inadvertently set him onto these websites.

"Perhaps you should find a group that has suffered in the same way, who share your feelings. If it's too much to go for a group session, there are lots of chat-rooms on the internet these days where you can anonymously seek support."

It had been one of the few sessions that had actually got him thinking. Finding people with the same feelings as he had. He'd upgraded his computer and got broadband, but it had still taken almost a month of surfing to find his first site. Now of course, he visited several, and they did help, she was right. They fed the craving and quieted the memories like nothing else.

He was interrupted by the bedside alarm clock bleeping irritably. "Fuck." Sid looked across at the clock beside his bed, 11:30am. A young boy stared at him from the computer screen, impassive to the beeping of the alarm. Sid stared back at the boy. No, not this one, but he needed to remember this website and the code word he'd been given in the chat room. Switching the alarm off he picked up the novel he'd been reading beside his bed, turned to page 100 and with a pencil wrote the code word in the margin. Back on his computer he glared at the web address, then took his pencil into the bathroom and awkwardly scrawled inside the toilet roll. Once he was satisfied, he cleared the saved files and closed down the computer.

He changed clothes and flung on a bright fluorescent jacket. He hated this uniform. On the one hand it made him utterly visible and on the other, anonymous within the huge supermarket car park. His shift started at midday and with it being Monday, he could expect it to be busy.

David was in the staffroom when Sid arrived. He nodded at the kid, and fetched himself a mug of tea. David beamed at him, his blond hair catching the sunlight from the window.

"Morning Sid."

“Alright?” He slid into a chair opposite David.

“Have a nice weekend?” David grinned in that vacant way of his.

Sid couldn't help but smile to himself. The funny thing was, it wouldn't matter what he said, David would still be smiling. He could tell him about the girl in the park that morning and David would keep on smiling and ask if they'd had a nice time together. Of course he wouldn't - tell him, that is. David was useful but you had to know how to play him. The boy had no concept of what a secret was. The bakery lads had taken advantage a couple of months back describing all kinds of sordid deeds that David might like to do with a woman. The problem was David then approached female customers asking them if they ever did those kinds of things. There were complaints of course and the bakery lot received official warnings. It wasn't difficult to find out who had been leading him along; all you had to do was ask David and with that big smile of his, he was happy to oblige.

They finished their tea and left the building together. At the entrance David jigged excitedly from foot to foot. Sid could count almost every tooth in that wide grin.

“OK, you take the front.” he conceded.

“Oh good, good, good. Thanks Sid.” David raced off to the nearest trolley-collecting point and began gathering the trolleys into a line. Sid headed across the black and white stripes and down the footway to the rear of the car park.

In many ways Sid was grateful for having David as his shift partner. He was simple and kind; he didn't delve into your social life and even when he did ask, it didn't really matter what you told him, anything would suffice just as long as it was believable. You didn't need to worry too much about the small details, David was unlikely to remember or notice inconsistencies. So long as Sid always treated David seriously there was never a problem; if he thought you were making fun of him, there would be trouble, and Sid liked to avoid trouble. He suspected the lad had been bullied mercilessly at school and perhaps that was why he now took great offence if he thought you were making fun of him. Like that time when that annoying woman wanted the trolley right at the end of a line that David had carefully put together.

“No not that one, the one at the end please.” A woman with a cigarette pointed.

“This one's a good one miss.” David tested the trolley rolling it up and down the ramp onto the walkway. Sid watched them as he trundled his own line of trolleys past.

“It's got a wonky wheel,” she insisted, “I want that one.”

David again thrust the trolley in his hands forwards and backwards. “No it hasn't,” and then suddenly his happy disposition was replaced by slit eyes and a deep frown.

“Are you taking the piss?”

The woman stepped back looking shocked.

“I most certainly am not.”

“I think you are.”

It was at that point that Sid had slid between them. The urge simply to watch and see if David would be angry enough to slug the bitch was almost overpowering but the consequences would not do Sid any favours. David couldn't hit the customers, he'd be out straight away and where would that leave Sid? With a new cunt that kept sticking his nose in Sid's business. No, Sid's ethos was to keep things always on an even keel. He took great pains to keep the equilibrium in his life. Dr Casey approved of keeping normality. It helped to contain the times when he stepped dangerously close to the edge.

“David could you help me with this lot? It's a bit awkward.” David's face changed instantly like clicking your fingers.

“Sure,” he beamed and immediately turned to help push the trolleys across to the entrance. The woman stood forgotten fuming at the faulty trolley.

David was like that; he would be Sid's best friend if Sid wanted him to be. At times David's naivety was like a drug pulling Sid in, whispering of the possibilities, of how he could use David's naive ability to his own use.

He watched him now, a young woman smiling at him as David handed out one of the special trolleys with a baby seat. He was a Day-Glo beacon of innocence that women were maternally drawn to. Sometimes, if Sid was lucky, he could stand nearby unnoticed. Of course David was a double-edged sword. On the one hand Sid could hide behind him, but he also filled him with hatred; the way people would come up and ask David for a trolley. He'd even seen a child happily hold David's hand to cross the striped pathway. They thought he was cute. Sid wasn't cute. He'd never been cute. At school the other kids had mocked his lanky hair and called him skeleton when he changed for PE. Sid had spent his whole life being avoided by beautiful people. Sid sometimes dreamed of taking over David's body, pushing out the dumb trusting brain and replacing it with his own sharp one. Imagining a child's soft hand in his own, to lift a child up and into the trolley, his large hands wrapped around the child's chest under their armpits. A life where children trusted and loved him unconditionally. Just like Tommy had.

There it was again, those memories, swimming like tadpoles just below the surface. Years ago, they'd been deeply buried in the mud at the bottom, but now it seemed they increasingly reached the surface. Was it an age thing, his memory playing tricks on him? Or maybe it was like Dr Casey said, that his past required resolution without which he wouldn't be able to 'move on' as she put it. These memories had started to grow legs, mature tadpoles popping their noses above the surface when he didn't expect it. Like this morning, that had been a fully-grown toad leaping out. He could feel his breath trembling again as he thought about the two of them under the bed. Sid scratched hard at the scars on his arms until they stung, and all he could think about was that pain.

He stopped and looked up, the trolleys were scattered across this end of the car park. Although it wasn't raining, the handles were damp from an earlier shower. Sid gathered himself and the trolleys together, increasing the length of his metallic line snaking its way across the tarmac. Sid saw a flash of David's teeth even from back here as he gave out a trolley to a woman holding a toddler's hand.

Sid took a deep breath. He would turn on the washing machine when he got home, but this simple thought made him pause as he considered the tiny item that would be swallowed up by the rest of his clothes, thrown around the drum, soaked, soaped and finally dried, and then what? He watched again, in his mind's eye, as Jessica darted out of the doorway. She had been knickerless. The thought made him tingle and a static shock from the handle of the trolley felt like the mental slap from Dr Casey. Fuck it. He didn't need her any more. He was fine, perfectly fine, nothing bad had happened. He wasn't doing anything wrong, and he certainly wasn't having a breakdown. With a frown he leant hard against the stack of trolleys and began pushing it back towards the entrance.

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Joanie was deep in the middle of filing a load of the pink forms when Kelly knocked again later that day.

"Yes."

"Something's come in," she pointed at Joanie's computer. Curtis hovered impatiently by her left shoulder, obviously pleased to get an interruption to his study.

Joanie wished he felt the same. Although he hated paperwork and the never-ending inbox, there were times when he delved into the mountain and things began to make sense and he was able to reduce it or at least pass it on to more deserving officers.

"Go ahead."

“Some woman claims a guy in the park stole her kid’s pants. Not much to go on I’m afraid, she seemed kind of embarrassed to report it.”

“Did she see him take the pants?”

“No.” Kelly shrugged. “In fact the statement doesn’t really point to any misdemeanour as such but I thought it was worth an interview at least. I’ll take the doll with me.”

“Fine,” Joanie sighed slapping his hands on the maze of papers. He looked up at Kelly with a shrug at the work.

She smiled back. He knew she could sympathise with admin, every police officer could. With her back to Curtis, who was still looking on with interest, she gave a questioning glance over her shoulder. Joanie caught exactly what she meant. It was a good idea. He desperately wanted to make more headway through this pile today. Curtis had surprised him, diligently reading the folders he’d been given and checking things on the computer. He’d worked quietly too, not asked loads of questions, which was what Joanie had expected.

“Curtis.”

“Yep.” Curtis straightened and stepped forward immediately.

“Alright, off you go.” He pointed his biro at Curtis. “You’re there to observe, take notes from the brilliant Detective Sergeant Mowbray, got it?”

Kelly grinned and led the way out of the office. The door swung shut and a yellow sheet blew off the desk onto the floor uncovering the phone that had lain hidden and forgotten for the last hour. Joanie tapped his pen on the desk, what was it he was going to check? He glanced at the clock on the wall. Of course.

He checked the computer and noted a familiar name. Picking up the phone, he rang the Detention Officer downstairs. “Morning Gary, anyone still in the housing block?”

“Just two, sir, Joseph Brown, he’s a new one, breaching the peace. And our Mr Charles.”

“Not again. Where did they pick him up this time?”

“Displaying in St Mary’s - the church that is, not the school, yesterday morning. But that’s not all, I’m afraid, he attacked some guy.”

“Attacked? That doesn’t sound like our Mr Charles.”

“No, that’s what I thought, but we’ve got several witnesses. However, I’m about to let him go; the victim has dropped the charges. He’s up with PC Short at the moment.”

“Can you hang on to Mr Charles for another ten minutes?”

“Sure.”

Joanie leapt up and strode across the room and through the main office. He bounded up the stairs two at a time. Just as he rounded the banister at the top, a blond-haired man came through the door and started down. Joanie caught a brief glimpse of a bruised eye. He turned and watched the man reach the landing below. Joanie watched the figure descend in deliberate steps but he couldn’t help thinking this man would rather be running down. Joanie thrust open the doors and cornered Short by the coffee machine.

“Was that him, with the black eye?”

“Mr Charles’s handiwork, you mean? Yep, must have given ‘im a pretty good thwack.” Short smiled. “Not bad for an old fella.”

“So why’s he not pressing charges?”

“Well, he said it didn’t seem fair,” Short shrugged.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Joanie could feel his anger rising, not so much at Short’s pathetic reply but at the snub of the witness.

“The guy reckoned Mr Charles must be a sad shit and suggested we get him help rather than locking him up.”

“Oh, did he?” Joanie wasn’t amused. Even though it was virtually a daily occurrence when members of the public told them what they ought to be doing, it seemed at odds with such an obvious physical assault.

“So you dropped the charges?” Joanie was standing too close; he could smell the other man’s coffee.

“Er, yeah, there didn’t seem much point, I mean, it’s not like Mr Charles has got a record for that sort of thing.”

Joanie backed off. Short was right. Although they could still use Purple-eye as a hostile witness, there didn’t really seem much point. Mr Charles wasn’t a danger to people; at least, he hadn’t been up to now.

Joanie let Short go past and got himself a coffee and then, with second thoughts, he got another one and went down to the cells.

“Here.” Joanie walked into the interview room and proffered the plastic cup.

“Joanie! What a nice surprise.” Mr Charles accepted the coffee.

They sat together in companionable silence sipping their respective drinks.

“Gary said I could go, but when he said you’d like a word, well, I couldn’t turn down an old friend could I?” Mr Charles gave him a shy look.

Joanie had to smile; of course, Mr Charles wouldn’t have been given any choice.

“How’s the lovely Sammy?” Mr Charles continued.

“She’s fine, just fine,” which reminded him, he ought to ring her tonight, she was about to take her finals and she’d appreciate a call.

Funny, here was Mr Charles, such a sweet old man in all respects except when it came to hanging his willy out in public places. Sammy had been seventeen when she’d first seen Mr Charles in the high street, had thought him hilarious in his classic raincoat. But he’d never been known to be violent, quite the opposite in fact.

“Listen,” Joanie looked directly at Mr Charles’ face. “About this incident yesterday,” Joanie shrugged as if to show he needed an explanation.

“I’m sorry.” Mr Charles looked genuinely upset; his white moustache drooped down at the corners. “There was nobody in the park, you see, and the high street was full of yobbos. Can’t see why everybody shops on Sundays nowadays anyway.” He wiped a drop of coffee from the edge of his lip. “It was one of those impulsive moments going in the church. I haven’t been in a church for years. Are you religious, Joanie?”

“No, no, not really, I used to go as a kid. Carry on.”

“Well, it was just all a bit peculiar really. Getting Mr John Thomas out in the church and all that, and that man, well, he was in the way, sort of. It was all wrong, all wrong.” Mr Charles began to wring his hands, shaking them at the empty coffee cup.

Joanie let his hand rest gently on one of the fluttering limbs. “But why did you hit him?”

“I won’t do it again, don’t know why, got angry at God or something, I don’t know, it just was all wrong, all wrong. I won’t do it in there again, I promise Joanie, really I do.” Tears rolled down Mr Charles’ face, wetting his moustache that made it droop even further. It was almost comical watching Mr Charles if it wasn’t so sad. Joanie patted his hand; this was the gentle soul he was used to.

“OK, sure, but you know it’s illegal to do it anywhere, Mr Charles. We will be charging you for the indecent exposure. Aren’t you still on probation from last time? You can’t keep flashing anywhere you please.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry.”

“And what exactly is this?” Joanie held up a strange contraption of leather straps and buckles Gary had given him at the desk.

“Ooh good, can I have it back? It’s a lovely device, I sent off for it from the Netherlands.” He sniffed and wiped his eyes. Leaning forward, he whispered confidentially. “It holds it up, you see. It gets more difficult at my age, you must know, Joanie, you’re not so young.”

Joanie blinked but otherwise remained impassive, ignoring the slight against his virility.

“I could show you if you like.” Mr Charles picked up the straps, his eyes alight with amusement.

Joanie snatched it back and stood up.

“Forget it. This is confiscated. Don’t let me see you back here, Mr Charles. Much as we like you, we don’t want another visit OK?”

“Sure, Joanie.”

Joanie opened the door to leave.

“Hey,” Mr Charles stood up. “Make sure you say hi to Sammy for me.”

Joanie shook his head and left.

## Chapter 2

The sky had begun to darken when Sid finished his shift. The evening air had a balmy feel to it, as if the sun hadn't quite let go of its hold on the sky. Sid scribbled quickly on his time sheet and left the building at a trot. Hurrying along the main street, he swung into a lit doorway and ordered fish and chips. Sid snatched the offered bag of grease and headed home. Upstairs he opened the bundle on the small desk by the window. With his hands he stuffed the food into his wet mouth. Fat smeared his lips, which he wiped away with the back of his hand. When he finished he scrunched up the paper and chucked it towards the bin, it missed. Throwing off his clothes, he opened the cubicle door of the shower in the corner of his tiny bathroom and stepped into the hot dribble of water. The shower gel was almost finished but he eked it out with some extra water. It was important to be clean. Dripping on the bare floor, Sid pushed his wet hair aside searching for his towel. It was bunched up on the floor beside his bed. He grabbed it and rubbed vigorously at his white skin. It left him red and blotchy. Next he threw all his clothes in the washing machine, ignoring the yellow item at the bottom; he grabbed a few more from the laundry basket and switched it on. No one could call him dirty now; not since school had he had people complain about him being the smelly kid, the dirty kid, skanky lanky. He didn't care what Dr Casey had said about that, it was better to be clean than smelly and if that meant washing his penis ten times in the shower then so be it. What did Dr Casey know anyway? All she had was a slimy cunt.

After dressing again, he went to his desk, pausing only briefly, Dr Casey's voice wittering on in his head about other hobbies and keeping his time focused. He stopped her. If she'd seen Jessica's hair, she would have understood and known how important it was. Sid licked his lips and began reviewing the pictures on the screen. At times his hand clenched tightly on the mouse, at others he had to turn away reminding himself why he was doing this, his member hot and hard straining against his trousers. Sid bit his lip. The scars on his arms tightening white, the urge to scratch them, to break them was undeniable but he kept his right hand on the mouse and his left on the keyboard.

At eleven Sid stopped, the picture on the screen had not changed for the last ten minutes, beads of sweat stood out prominently on Sid's forehead and his penis ached. He turned from the computer and threw himself onto the bed, his right hand moving rapidly as he sobbed into the pillow.

Afterwards he felt purged, light headed and bright. He hung the wet washing around the room taking the yellow panties into the bathroom where he placed them delicately on the tiny radiator behind the door. Back at his desk, Sid moved the keyboard and mouse to one side, the screen was already dark. And out of the drawer he withdrew his drawing materials; lining them up carefully onto the flat surface. A pencil, sharpened to a fine point, his rubber, a clean sheet of paper, a second pencil, this one darker, softer. A sense of calm settled over him as he picked up the pencil and began to draw. Dr Casey approved of his drawing, a 'healthy hobby' she called it, but then she'd never seen his work.

\*

The light was on in the hall when Joanie got home. He hung his jacket in the cupboard. Pausing in the hall mirror, he looked at his face. A dark shadow across his chin and a couple of saddlebags under his eyes. He used his forefingers to smooth them away but as soon as his fingers left his face, they settled back like old friends. Then it occurred to Joanie that something was different, he checked his watch; it was five past six. Normal time. Then he sniffed the air expectantly and listened. There was a gentle clink but nothing more. No smells of cooking or the clang of pan lids that he was used to. Joanie walked down the hall and pushed open the door into the kitchen. Margret was stood leaning over the kitchen table. In

front of her was a vase of carnations, a large piece of paper with some tentative brush strokes and a jar of murky water.

“What are you doing?” Joanie cocked his head around his wife’s shoulder and could make out the green stems and the start of a flower.

“What does it look like?” Margret kissed his cheek as he dropped his chin onto her shoulder.

“I see. Any dinner?”

There was an almost imperceptible sigh that Joanie felt under his chin rather than heard.

“You can have salad, there’s some ham in the fridge.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No,” Margret was staring at the pink marks she had made on the paper. She swirled the brush in the jam jar, “I’m not hungry.”

“Oh.” Joanie decided it was probably best not to pursue this further and busied himself putting a plate of cold ham, lettuce, tomato and cucumber together. He pulled out a strange looking pot.

“What’s this?”

Margret barely glanced at him, “I think you can read.”

Joanie took the lid off, sniffed, stuck his finger in and licked it, bit strange he thought. He put it back and instead he went in search of something more traditional; finding a fresh loaf in the bread bin, he carved off a thick slice.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything?”

“No I’m fine.” Margret added a couple more pink strokes and stood back closing one eye.

“Don’t sit there!” she shouted.

“What?” Joanie had pushed the paint palette aside to give just enough room for his plate at the table.

“I don’t want all your crumbs and mess getting on my painting. Take it into the lounge can’t you?”

Joanie stiffened seeing how quickly this might degenerate into an argument. They seemed to be getting more common these days, flaring out of nowhere and leaving him feeling weak and confused. He picked up his plate and left the kitchen. In the lounge he found the coffee table was clear with not a magazine or newspaper in sight, now where had she put those? Instead he picked up the telephone handset from the windowsill.

“Hello pumpkin,” Joanie spoke into the receiver clasped to his ear.

“Hi Dad, what’s up?”

“Nothing much, thought I’d see how your studying’s going. Had your first exam yet?”

“No, this Friday. Jemma’s been helping me with the genetics module.”

“Genetics? Isn’t that for medical degrees?”

“It’s all part of biology, not my favourite part that’s for sure, but I’m getting there. Dad... are you eating?”

“Mmmm,” Joanie swallowed his mouthful and cleared his throat. “Your mother banished me from the kitchen. I think she might have given up cooking.”

“What? She loves cooking, what have you done this time?”

Joanie paused for a second, this was a fair question, there had been times in the past when Margret had stopped doing certain chores, like washing the clothes when he’d accidentally sprayed them, hanging on the washing line, with garden fertiliser. Another time she had refused to vacuum for three weeks when Samantha and four of her friends walked mud through the entire house.

“She’s painting,” Joanie replied popping a cherry tomato into his mouth.

“Mum doesn’t paint. Why on earth would she be redecorating the kitchen?”

Joanie nearly spat the tomato across the room. “No, no,” even the very idea of Margret taking up any of the ‘man’s’ jobs around the house was farcical. “She’s painting a bunch of flowers in a bowl.”

Joanie could hear his daughter’s giggles down the phone, and once she’d started he couldn’t help but spray some breadcrumbs back onto his plate and snuffle into his hanky.

“Sammy stop it, she’s in the kitchen. You’ll get me into trouble and then I won’t be allowed to eat for a month.”

“Dad, look, I’ve got to go, I’m meeting Matt at eight. You could always try those meals for one from Tesco’s.”

“Thanks for that. Oh, and do you remember a Mr Charles?”

“Who?” her voice sounded faint for a moment and Joanie wondered if he’d lost her attention already.

“You know, the flasher, when you were seventeen.”

“Oh him. God is he still around?” he heard her giggle into the phone. “He was the one with that little pink woolly thing on his dick.” She hooted with laughter down the phone. “It’s about time you put him away somewhere Dad for his own sake.” It was good to hear her laugh; he missed it round the house.

“Got to go Dad, see ya.” She hung up and Joanie forked up the remains on his plate.

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Sid was on the early shift next day, sweating under a cloudless sky as the tarmac baked beneath his feet. It was almost time to stop; he scanned the car park but couldn’t see David anywhere. Then he spotted the manager standing at the entrance frowning, with his hands on his hips. Sid followed his line of sight and spotted David who’d stripped his top off standing bare-chested probably in response to several semi-naked customers that had gone into the store. No wonder Sid hadn’t spotted him, he rushed across.

“Put your shirt on,” he hissed grabbing the T-shirt from David’s belt where he’d tucked it into the back of trousers.

“What’s up Sid?”

“Put your shirt on now!” Sid thrust the T-shirt at David.

“But it’s too hot.” David sulked pulling it down over his head.

Just then the manager arrived.

Sid put a protective hand on David’s shoulder. “It’s fine, everything’s fine, it’s his first hot day,” gabbled Sid.

The manager looked from Sid to David and back again. Without a word, he nodded his head and turned back to the store.

“What did he want Sid?”

“It’s alright. You mustn’t take your shirt off David, you’re at work, remember?”

“But everybody else has”

“Those are the customers. You have to look decent.” Sid paused trying to decide how to explain. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“OK.” David smiled. “Thanks for being my friend Sid.”

Sid realised he still had hold of David’s shoulder. He gave it a little squeeze and then dropped his hand. A funny feeling tickled his chest. Was that the feeling of friendship? Did Sid the loner actually have a friend? Sid looked at David’s innocent beam. He wasn’t sure he was ready for that.

“Time’s up, let’s get this back.” Sid nodded at David’s stack of trolleys and together they pushed it into the lines by the entrance.

“Will you have ice-cream today?” David bobbed along beside him as they made their way down the vegetables.

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“I’ll have ice-cream on Saturday, when me and Roddy go to the arcade in Bournemouth.”

Sid nodded; it seemed to be a monthly event for David, meeting up with his friend in Bournemouth.

“We’re going to play the racing car game, and the money slides thing, you know where it knocks the coins off. Roddy won two pounds last time and he said it’s my turn to win this time. Do you think I will?”

Sid looked at David’s wide hopeful face. “Maybe.”

“I’m playing football this afternoon. I’ve got me some football friends.”

This was new; Sid glanced at David out of the corner of his eye.

“Do you know the football field?”

“No.” Sid shoved open the swing doors at the end by the cheese stack.

“Down by the river, near the back of the church.” David jiggered about excitedly. Sid tried not to let himself get irritated by this overgrown child.

“Do you want to come? I’m sure they’d let you play too. It’s the boys that live on my street, they’re fun, and they let me be goalie. Will you come?”

Sid collected his things from the locker. “No.” he said.

“They’re really nice; they don’t take the piss or anything.” David kept trying.

“I don’t play football,” Sid watched David’s face fall, “but I’m sure you’ll have fun.”

As he strode back down the aisle past the potatoes, he stopped and remembered the shower gel. He selected a green tube and grabbed some more milk on his way.

It was only when Sid was back in his flat changing out of his uniform that he thought about what David had said. Playing football; with children. Now where did he say it was? Sid stared out of the window; the sky had gathered a few fluffs of cotton but remained otherwise blue. Sid tried to picture the path by the river. It had been a while since he’d walked that way, and maybe he’d take a look. Dr Casey came into his head, warning him to avoid situations of temptation. But it was hot, the flat stifling even with the windows open, he was just going for a walk that was all. He pulled on a T-shirt and a sweatshirt, he knew he’d be too hot, but he hated to let people see his arms. In fact he hated anybody seeing any part of him, which was why he kept his dark hair long and never, wore shorts. Being beautiful with brown skin was for other people, not him. Pale and sickly, his skin white and often flaky where the edges of his socks rubbed his ankles. Too many taunts at school had taught him to stay covered. It made him more invisible. Imagine if he went out today with bare arms. The whiteness of his skin would reflect the sun so brightly that people would stop in the street and stare. They’d probably even start pointing their bony self-righteous fingers at him. They’d start talking about him and shouting rude things at him. Sid clenched his fists, fucking people and their fucking ideas, always trying to fuck him up. He could hear them screaming in his head, “Fucking pervert, fucking whitey, take it up the arse do you?” Sid stood trembling, his arms wrapped around his head. For a second he wasn’t sure where he was, a red haze had filled him so that when he looked up and saw his reflection in the cracked mirror it was a surprise to see he was at home. Breathing deeply he went over to the chest of drawers and put his hands on the little clothes. The new pants lay on top, pride of place. He stood quite still, concentrating on each breath allowing the feel of the children’s clothes and the exquisite pleasure of where they’d come from to calm his mind.

He found the river path easily enough and turned towards the church. A little further along a mowed field opened up on the left with a single white goal post. There were no children playing but two mothers had laid down a rug and were sitting with a baby between

them and another in its pram. Sid wished he had a dog. If you had a dog, people expected you to be wandering along and pausing now and then. You could go in and out of parks as often as you wished. Sid had tried with a Jack Russell puppy. It had been brilliant at first, luring children over and giving him a great excuse to hang around the playground. But at home, it peed on his towel on the floor and the neighbours complained about it barking while he was at work. White hairs stuck to his clothes and Sid discovered he didn't actually like stroking it; skin was so much smoother than the short coarse fur. One weekend Sid decided to go to Norfolk, he couldn't take the dog so he left it behind. It chewed up the bedspread and was lying ill and panting on the floor when he got back. The next day people in the park wanted to know what was wrong with it and kept coming up to him to ask questions. Sid was quite particular about smells, and the little Jack Russell just didn't smell right. The kitchen rubbish bin was one thing, but damp dog and doggy poo under the bed was quite another. Then the landlord sent a rude letter about him not being allowed to have pets. After one particularly annoying evening when the dog had impatiently fussed at his feet and caused him to waste two sheets of drawing paper, he took it to the industrial estate and bashed its head with a brick.

Sid continued along the path, averting his eyes from the women. A little way ahead a bench stood looking over the river encouraging you to "Rest with George and Mary 1997". Sid did so and wondered what time the kids might be about. A couple of ducks swam over to him and hopped out waiting on the riverbank. Sid ignored them and closed his eyes for a minute. The sun was hot on his eyelids, making blooms of gold and red across his eyeballs.

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When Joanie arrived the following morning, the office was already stuffy. He cranked open the window. The double-glazing moved slowly on the complicated fixings, opening only 3 inches at most, a safety feature to prevent him hurling himself out the window. Not that he had any intention of doing so, at least not down onto the bike park below. Joanie noted there were two bicycles in a rack made for twenty. Another ingenious improvement that didn't quite fit; very few were brave enough to cycle in to work given the surrounding dual carriageway and commuter roads. Another valuable parking space lost. Temperature controlled using the latest state-of-the-art thermo-something or other they'd been told. Joanie believed there was some expensive system that magnified the outside temperature and brought it inside. Thus in winter, his office was a fridge, and now that spring had arrived, it would soon be time to wear his swimming trunks at work. Joanie leaned a little harder on the window hoping to force it open a little more.

"Morning sir," Curtis bumped his way into the room and put a mug down on Joanie's desk. "Kelly told me how you like it."

Joanie looked at the mug calculating the hue, he looked up at Curtis. "More milk next time."

The muscles in Curtis' jaw clenched. "Yes sir."

Joanie merely nodded. "I don't suppose she could have supplied you with a fan too could she? Prop open the door will you?"

Curtis wedged a Styrofoam cup from the bin under the door letting in the general hubbub of the main office. Phones trilled and voices wavered up and down.

"Tell me," Joanie sat himself at the desk, "how did you get on yesterday?"

"OK, there was nothing much the woman could say."

"Not that." Joanie pointed with his mug to Curtis' desk beyond the door. "I've already read the report Kelly entered about the interview yesterday." Joanie picked up a sheet of paper from the desk. "You were creating a report for me Curtis about the cases you thought seemed important."

"Sure." Curtis looked worried.

“Do you need more time?” Joanie watched him. Curtis shuffled his feet, shook his head and stepped out of the door to grab some papers.

“Er.” Curtis returned with a sheet of hand-written scrawls and pulled a chair closer. “Ok,” he began.

Joanie leaned back and listened. He watched the way Curtis moved his mouth, how often his eyes came to rest on Joanie and on the paper. The boy stopped often, running his finger down the page looking for something. A thin line of sweat twinkled from his smooth upper lip. Joanie said nothing, occasionally nodding and sipping his coffee. Despite the hesitancy, Curtis spoke clearly and Joanie was pleased with the analysis so far.

“Is that it?” Joanie finally asked after a long silence.

“Er, yeah, it’s as far as I’ve got,” Curtis stared back.

“What about John Duncombe, Peter Nevis and Marisa Rovira?”

“I haven’t got to those cases yet.” At least he was honest Joanie mused.

He took the sheet of paper from Curtis and scanned it. The handwriting was almost illegible, the words leaning down across the page, cutting across the lines and sometimes running into each other.

“Can you read this?”

Curtis laughed nervously, “not always.”

Standing up, Joanie turned his back on Curtis and scanned the bookshelf on the wall behind the desk. He ran his finger along the titles then pulled one out and tossed it at Curtis.

“What’s this?” Curtis turned it over in his hands.

“Speed reading,” Joanie explained. “I need you to be fast but effective. What you’ve told me is passable, your reasoning shows promise although you might wish to review what you’ve written about the Bob Grindhead case. However, the biggest nut of the lot of them is Peter Nevis, and you haven’t even glanced at that case yet.”

Curtis lowered his gaze.

“Another thing,” Joanie tossed the sheet of paper back at him. “Learn to type. This isn’t going to get you anywhere, you’d have to rewrite it for anyone else to understand and that amounts to double time on the same piece of work. Short’s team have got a CD Rom that’ll teach you to type. See if you can borrow it.” Joanie could see he’d said enough. Curtis was looking pink and moody.

“Finish the other cases, read up yesterday’s interview on the computer and any spare moments you have, improve your skills,” Joanie pointed at the book still in Curtis’ hands. “I don’t need someone who can just get by.”

“Sir.”

Curtis glared at him and sloped back to his desk. He banged the book down and opened one of the files. Joanie hadn’t expected thanks but he knew how difficult it had been for himself and if the kid could learn the easy skills first, it would make a huge difference. There were many skills that Joanie thought should be included in basic training. Most of the fine-tuning he had taught himself. Body language was invaluable, and things like speed reading and typing just made the whole ogre of files, forms and computer work that much faster. It was a technique he’d learned when Sammy was little. The only way to get home and spend any time with her, was if he could get his work done faster so he could finish on time. That had prompted him into all kinds of self-improvement. Unfortunately rather than enable him to have more time, instead it made him a better copper and thus more in demand.

Joanie took a deep breath and ran through his latest report; he had a meeting with the chief at ten.

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On the small grassy field three young boys were playing football. Sid’s eyes widened with glee as he came back along the river path. The two women had already packed up and

were walking ahead of him back towards town. The boys appeared to be alone, roughly aged eight to twelve he reckoned. There was nowhere to stop, no bench and Sid wasn't foolish enough to sit on the grass to watch. Instead he continued slowly past the field, glancing slyly left until the hedge grew up again. Once behind it, Sid paused and looked up and down the river path. The mothers were disappearing around the bend and there was no one coming from either direction. Sid shuffled about a bit until with a slight crouch he was able to get a clear view at the boys.

The youngest boy wrestled his T-shirt off and flung it on the ground beside the goal post. His young body was swift and shiny with sweat. Small pointed nipples leapt across the field, danced circles in the air and rolled across the ground. Sid breathed deeply stroking his hand down his thigh; he glanced briefly left and right but stayed where he was. The ball was kicked high; it rose into the air over the goal post, bounced and rolled towards the river.

"Go and get it!" one of the boys yelled. The semi-naked boy chased after it, dashing down the field towards the water. Sid kept very still watching the lightly tanned skin glisten in the sunlight. Already damp under his arms from the heat of the day, Sid felt his collar moisten and drips form across his brow. The ball rolled right onto the path and Sid could see the beautiful child coming closer. The urge to reach out and touch made Sid tremble. He could see his hand running down the boy's spine, slippery with sweat and then drawing it to his lips to lick the salty wetness.

"Sid!"

Sid was bumped roughly into the path of the boy who looked up surprised and then smiled at the person behind Sid.

"Hey Kieren," David had hold of Sid's arm; he thrust him towards the boy. "This is my friend Sid."

Sid felt himself propelled forwards. He tried to smile at the boy who gave him a funny look in return. Grabbing the ball he ran back into the field.

"Have you come to play Sid? Come on." David still had a firm grip on Sid's arm and made to drag him up the field.

"No. Get off." Sid could feel himself trembling no longer with pleasure but something far worse.

David looked confused and backed off. The boy named Kieren booted the ball to his friends and called back at David, "Come on, you're goalie."

David switched his attention, grinned broadly and trotted up the field. Sid stood breathing hard, his hands were locked at his sides, he was staring at the river, which seemed to be changing colour, glowing pink at the edges as if a mist of red fog was blurring his vision. A dog sniffed at his trousers and Sid struck out with a foot, the dog yelped and disappeared.

A hand materialised out of the fog and punched Sid full in the chest; he toppled backwards and sat down hard on the grassy edge of the field.

"Fucking bastard, that'll teach you to kick my dog. Are you drunk or something?"

Sid shook his head blinking furiously; he could feel tears rolling down his cheeks. He wiped them away feverishly which seemed to help get rid of the red fog. With more blinking he could detect a man in jeans and bare back walking away down the path, a small white terrier trotting along by his feet. Distant jingling wafted down to his ears and he looked across the field to see David and the boys disappearing through the top gate towards the sound of an ice-cream van. Sid stood up and rubbed his chest. There was no one else in sight. The discarded T-shirt lay in a crumpled heap by the goal post. Sid hurried across the field, snatched it up into his fist and set off towards the gateway where the boys had disappeared.