

# **Ellie's Boy**

By Rio Youers

## 1. A penny saved...

... *is a penny earned*, as the old saying goes - and one of many sayings he had been brought up on. His mother used it. His father used it. His older brother moved into accountancy and he used it, as well. Now, Stanton 'Bucky' Buckland was using it. He was not a mean man, nor was he what you would call *tight* (at least not when you got to know him; a trip to New York City and spending eight thousand dollars on a pair of earrings as an anniversary present for his wife could hardly be considered ungenerous), but he *was* careful; he simply did not believe in spending money when he didn't have to. A penny saved, after all, was a penny earned.

Or so the old saying goes.

'Bucky?' She met his eyes via the mirror on her dresser, her own eyes too wide, made so by unsubtle rings of *Cover Girl* liner, while her fingers were busy working four thousand dollars' worth of earring into the lobe of her left ear. 'Why don't you just phone for a taxi? The car's not very well, you know that, and if we get a taxi we can *both* have a drink.'

'The car's fine,' Bucky replied quickly. He checked his own reflection in the full-length: smart, not too dressy - a simple shirt and tie combination. He considered a waistcoat, was, in fact, still considering as he continued: 'And if we get a taxi there that means we have to get a taxi back... which will probably be after midnight when the rates are doubled. You're talking in the region of

forty pounds in fairs alone. That's ridiculous money and I'm not paying it. *I* don't mind driving. We're driving.'

He decided a waistcoat would be appropriate, but nothing garish. Go for navy blue. Safe. You were always safe with navy blue: weddings or funerals, or dinner parties in honour of retiring colleagues – even if they are despicable old pricks you can hardly bear to be around.

'Bucky?'

'Yes, dear?'

'Not the navy blue; it's far too conservative. Try the beige.'

He shrugged, tried the beige, and found that Carolyn, as usual, was right on the mark. She nodded her approval as he performed a showy twirl before her, and then their attention was directed at the portable TV they had in their bedroom. The opening graphics of the local evening news were rolling, and the local news was *big* news (had actually made the nationals, which was not a common occurrence in their part of the country – made even more unusual by the fact that their tucked-away little town was at the heart of the incident). The body of a man had been discovered early this morning in Sunday Gardens, not yet identified because the extent of his injuries was so severe. He had, in fact, been mutilated, and the evidence gathered so far indicated that it was not a man responsible for the attack, but some kind of animal.

'Turn it up, Bucky.'

Bucky hit the remote.

The camera played out a teasing left-to-right sweep of Sunday Gardens, shot from the road because the gardens had been cordoned off as police combed for evidence. Both Bucky and Carolyn watched in rapt silence, and listened as the Detective Chief Inspector called in from Taunton to lead the investigation appealed for anyone who was in or around Sunday Gardens between midnight and dawn to step forward to aid with inquiries.

The item came to an end. Bucky pushed the stand-by button on the remote and turned to the only woman he had ever loved.

'You ready, dear?'

'Five minutes, darling,' she said.

‘I’ll wait downstairs.’

## 2. Bucky and Carolyn

It was not the amazing green depth of his eyes that had first attracted her, nor was it his manner: well spoken and thoughtful, warm without invading what she referred to as her ‘immediate space,’ which numerous men before Bucky had infiltrated (unwittingly) within a matter of moments - and sometimes with only their voices. He was handsome, though she had always been indifferent to the looks of a man, so it was not this quality that attracted her, either.

It was his hands.

The nursery slopes of Le Grand Bornard in the French Alps was the setting for their first romantic encounter, where they met and – as they later told friends – discovered that it needn’t take a lifetime to find true love...that one could find it, if one was so blessed, in but the beat of one’s heart. It was the winter of ’86 and Bucky had made the skiing trip with an old friend from King’s College London, who was there as one of many diamond-eyed, tan-skinned instructors. Carolyn had gone with her first husband, though she actually saw very little of him over the course of those two weeks; he was an experienced skier who spent his days not teaching Carolyn but negotiating the blinding descents of *La Piste Noir*. She was left with a group of seven other beginners on the nursery slopes, one of these being Bucky.

And of course, as beginners, they all spent as much time – if not more – on their asses as they did in an upright position. And it was on one of these occasions when Carolyn was down, and perhaps because he was closest, that Bucky pulled off a glove and offered to help her up.

‘Oh, thank you.’ But before taking his hand she just looked at it, for at that moment it struck her as the most wonderful, gentle-looking hand she had ever beheld, and she proceeded to imagine this stranger’s hand softly stroking the places on her face that made her smile, then massaging her shoulders so delicately until his touch, like warm satin, found the swell of her bare breasts and...

She blinked hard, flushing, then took his hand. ‘Thank you,’ she repeated as he helped her up, her voice trembling.

‘Pleasure.’ Bucky nodded, then asked: ‘Are you here alone?’ And before he had even finished asking this question he was regretting it, for it sounded too much like a come-on-line, which was far from his intention. He was merely curious, perhaps even a little concerned; everyone else in the group was there with either a friend or lover, and because of this her aloneness was glaring.

She bit her lower lip, gazing east, where the summits of the kingly Alps challenged the ether. ‘I suppose I am, really; my husband’s somewhere up there, performing his Franz Klammer routine, you know?’ She used her ski pole to point and the gesture was, Bucky thought, decidedly impatient. She looked back at him, smiling. ‘I wanted the Bahamas in July.’

Bucky nodded sympathetically before saying with utter seriousness: ‘You should really go off-season; the weather’s just as good, you know, and you’ll save yourself an absolute packet.’ He held out his hand again. ‘Stanton Buckland.’

‘Carolyn Moore.’ She took his wonderful hand in her own (gloved though her own hand was, she still felt a tingle, like a mild electrical current) and held onto it perhaps a little longer than she ought.

As the holiday progressed they spent more and more time together – Carolyn not finding it difficult to elude her husband – culminating in a moment of intimacy on their final night (certainly more intimate than her wedding vows would allow).

‘Are you going to forget about me, Bucky,’ Carolyn asked of him afterwards, pressing the palms of his beautiful hands against her glowing face, ‘when we return to England, and resume the lifestyles we knew before we knew each other?’

‘Do you want me to forget about you? Would that be easier?’

She kissed the side of his mouth, wrote down her telephone number, and told him that it was safe to call her any weekday evening. And she didn’t have to wait too long; on only her second evening back in England, Bucky called to tell her that he was coming to see her – whether her husband was there or not.

‘I’ll whisk you away,’ he said. ‘I’ll be your knight in shining armour.’

‘Do you think I need saving, Bucky?’ Her voice was excited, almost breathless at the other end of the line.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘But I do.’

Within a month Carolyn had left her husband – an expressionless, emotionless goose of a man who paid her about as much attention as he paid the family cat – and was living down in the West Country with Bucky. A year later - on Bucky’s thirty-second birthday, in fact - they were married. It was, for both of them, the most rewarding day of their lives.

‘That’s a damn fine woman you have there, Stanny,’ his father had said to him – empty punch glass in one hand, son’s shoulder pinched in the other – on the night of the wedding. ‘She’s strong and reliable. You can see that in her eyes. These are two of the finest qualities a woman can have, but she’ll only share them with you for as long as you give her everything. There’s more to being married than just placing a ring on someone’s finger; you’ve got to be all the man you can be...and more.’

These words settled in his mind, in his heart, unaltered by the haze of good cheer and alcohol. And every feeling he had for Carolyn he confirmed on their Honeymoon, whispering desires and promises as they strolled hand in hand along the white sands of Paradise Island in the Bahamas (off-season, of course), with the moonlight touching the fantastic darkness of the Atlantic as only the moonlight can. He told her that he would *always* be there, that they were timeless, and with such a love - such a gift - no harm could ever come into their world.

Carolyn had absolute faith in him.

And work was going well for Bucky. In 1980 he had graduated from King’s College London with a first in law, his academic performance in his final year not passing without notice; he was pursued by several firms, one of these being Harmon, Harmon & May - one of the South West’s leading law firms. They had financed Bucky’s year at law school, then took him in for his two years’ articles. Three years later, at around the time he was getting to know Carolyn, his successes with negligence actions had led him to become one of the most reputed tort lawyers in the South West. A year later – when they were married and at the very tender age of thirty-two – he was, according to the brothers Harmon over a vintage Bordeaux, being seriously considered for partnership. Quite an achievement, both heartily agreed, for such a short time with the firm.

A generous wage-increase allowed Bucky to provide quite comfortably for them both, but she –

finding her role as a proud, upstanding woman – was insistent upon doing her share, venturing out to seek not a job but an ‘interest with an income.’ This she soon found, teaching primary school in the town in which they lived.

And so life was good. It was, in fact, *perfect*, and Carolyn would often lie awake at night just looking at the man who had undoubtedly saved her from an existence of abject misery (which she could only see now given the light of such happiness). ‘*I’ll be your knight in shining armour*,’ he had said, and she would gently stroke his neatly clipped beard, smile, kiss his sleeping eyes.

‘I love you, Bucky.’

Remembering the way the moonlight lay on the ocean, his perfect hands touching her face as he told her that they were timeless. And yes...Carolyn had absolute faith in him, and over the years this faith did not wane at all. In fact, it only grew stronger.

Until, that was, the night of the dinner party... when they learned about Ellie’s boy, and when the magic of their world was quite literally torn to pieces.

### 3. The Dinner Party

An occasion in honour of Ardley Benjamin who, after twenty-four years of service with Harmon, Harmon & May, was doing everybody a favour by retiring.

For too many reasons to mention, Ardley was not a well-liked individual. He knew as much, he accepted as much, and it was widely believed that he *enjoyed* as much. In a firm consisting of eighty-seven lawyers, having only four of these – including Ardley himself – turn up at the retirement party could be considered a poor show. Sitting at their table at Marianne’s Bar & Bistro, everybody – again, including Ardley – was of the opinion that it was three lawyers too many.

The total number present was nine: the four lawyers (Ardley, Bucky, and the brothers Harmon – May had declined) and their respective partners. The ninth party member was Ardley’s father – an ancient weasel-faced man with skin the colour of old newspaper, who muttered barely a word during the meal. His presence at the table seemed somewhat irregular to begin with, but before the main course had been served the party had all but forgotten he was there. Ardley Benjamin Senior

simply sat there, his shrewd little eyes occasionally flicking up, glancing left and right, as if expecting someone to jump him at any time. Or *something*.

It was a distinctly old-fashioned affair, the women doing exactly what was expected of them: talking quietly amongst themselves, laughing in all the right places, and certainly not concerning themselves with the issues of their husbands' business (which was, they all secretly thought, dull in any case). For much of the evening the lawyers debated the legal implications of Britain's place in Europe. It was only over liquors that the conversation switched from the tiresome politics of law to a more indigenous issue, and one that all present could comment on – this being the discovery of the mutilated body in Sunday Gardens.

'Bloody frightful business, there,' Eddie Harmon snorted drunkenly. His wife rifled a demon-stare at him from across the table and he registered the warning in her eyes; in his insobriety his voice was just a trifle too loud. Did he really want to draw attention to himself like that awful Benjamin man? The expression he returned made the apology, and behind a humbled little smile he murmured: 'What on earth do you think could have happened to that poor chap?'

'Attacked by some sort of animal, by all accounts,' Bucky replied.

'But what sort of animal could...? I mean, he received a dash more than a mere flesh wound.'

'Oh *please*,' groaned Tessa Harmon, wife of John. 'I did have the braised veal.'

There was a tinkling of laughter, followed by a long but not uncomfortable silence. The conversation then resumed:

'It could have been one of those beastly little dogs. Oh, Eddie...what do you call them?'

'Pitbull *terrors*,' Eddie said.

'Yes...dreadful little creatures.'

'It could've been a bear.' Lucy Stubbs was Ardley Benjamin Junior's 'ornament' (he had introduced her as such and – amazingly – she didn't seem to mind at all). She had just turned twenty-four, was incredibly beautiful, but both Tessa and Sally Harmon would later agree that she seemed somewhat, well...*troubled*. Now eight pairs of eyes were fixed firmly upon her, each of them demanding an explanation.

'They have bears over the border – in Dorset. Black bears, I think.' But there was a trembling in

her voice now; she didn't seem altogether sure, and Ardley's hand found hers across the table. Comforting, she thought. Patronising, thought everybody else. 'Oh yes,' she continued. 'I read in *Girl 2000* that a group of animal rights' activists set some free a couple of years ago. They've adapted and bred and...well, there may not be as many here as there are in Africa, but they *are* around.' She batted her long lashes. 'It said so in *Girl 2000*.'

No sound except for the elsewhere buzz of conversation, the *chink* of ice-cubes on glass. No response at all – very much what one would refer to as a deafening silence, this *certainly* uncomfortable, and it may well have continued had it not been broken by the ringing of Bucky's mobile phone, followed sharply by Carolyn's voice:

'Really, Stanton! How many times have I told you to turn that awful thing off while we're eating?'

He nodded apologetically and took the call, explaining before even greeting the caller that he was otherwise engaged, and would call back when it was more convenient.

'Sorry about that.' He slipped the phone back into the pocket of his waistcoat. 'Where were we?'

Nobody dared reintroduce the black bear conversation, but young Lucy – undeterred and eager to impress – proceeded with: 'It could have been the Beast of Bodmin.'

Ardley cringed, lowered his eyes, and patted her hand.

'I saw pictures of it in the newspapers,' she went on, the edge of excitement applied in both her voice and demeanour painfully trying to counteract the awkwardness of the silence. 'It was a large catlike creature, don't you remember? It prowled the Cornish countryside, killing deer and sheep and—'

'Thank you, darling,' Ardley said. But his eyes were saying much more, conveying a message that not even sweet Lucy could misinterpret. She fell silent, tugging at the corners of her napkin.

'Well, it would appear—'

'It would *appear* that none of you have a damn clue what breed of creature tore that poor man to pieces last night.'

The interrupting voice belonged to Ardley Benjamin Senior, so frail but curiously authoritative because of it. He nodded confidently, the time-bleached blue of his eyes shining, challenging John



Harmon – whom he had interrupted – who only closed his mouth and tried to smile. Here was a man, despite thirty-two years in and out of courtrooms, not used to being spoken over. And he didn't like it. Not at all.

'None of you know, and I doubt any of you would believe me if I told you.' The old man pushed himself up a little higher in his seat, taking them all in. His thin lips crept into the slightest of smiles. 'I've been sitting here for the past two and a half hours watching you high and mighty people roll your eyes, listening to your pretentious claptrap. And I've arrived at the conclusion that you've all got your heads shoved too far up your own arses to know what's *really* going on.'

Ardley Junior nearly choked on his Baileys, managing to claim the attention of the table. He coughed lightly. 'You'll have to excuse my father, everybody; I'm afraid the sherry coupled with his medi—'

'Put a sock in it, Junior,' the old man snapped, his finger pointing, steady. 'You'll do well to remember who I am.'

'But...'

'But nothing.' His pale brow was knitted into a network of creases, his eyebrows drawn into an angry V. 'I may be older than God but I've still got my marbles, and while I have you'll show me some respect.'

Ardley Junior nodded and lowered his eyes – a man of sixty with the sullen expression of a berated ten-year-old. The rest of the table sat in shocked silence, perfectly motionless. For most of the evening they had heard this old man mutter nothing more than the occasional 'thank you,' and most were guilty of forgetting he was even present. Now, however, he was the star of the show. He had created this thorny situation, and not one of them knew quite how to handle it.

'Now then,' he continued calmly, his crooked fingers forming strange steeples. 'You've all had your say, now I'm going to have mine.' He took a fair swig of sherry, eyes whirling, and gasped. 'Because, you see, I *know* what killed that man last night. Furthermore, I've known something like this was going to happen for a long time now.'

'Excuse me, Dad?' Ardley Junior broke in, looking over at his father with both hands raised in a suitably deferential gesture. 'This isn't going to be another of your fantastic yarns, is it? With all due

respect...'

'This is no yarn, son,' the old man replied earnestly, smiling just a little on the inside, for there were few things he enjoyed more than a good yarn; he considered himself to be the family's premier fireside storyteller (every family has one somewhere along the line), and over the years he had sent many of the Benjamin young to their beds with disquieting thoughts – and quite a few of the Benjamin old, come to that. *Tell us a story, Pops,*' they would ask of him, gathering in a semicircle around the rockers on his chair with the firelight flickering, alive in their brilliant young eyes. And he would always oblige. *'So then...it's a story you want. Well, I don't know any make-believe stories, but I could tell you about what happened to a close friend of mine. In fact, he didn't live too far away from here...'* He would find inspiration in their complete attention, take satisfaction from expressions identical through the twists and turns of the story; they would laugh together, squirm together, shift their gazes uncomfortably together. And although no two stories were ever the same, they would always end the same way: the story's evil element would never be caught, never be found. It was always still out there...*somewhere*.

There was once a time when Ardley Senior believed his lively imagination would see him off early – that the old noodle would simply collapse under the pressure one day and shut up shop for good. Now, however, he had come to believe that having such an active imagination was the main reason he had kept his marbles for so long. Perhaps he had mentally trained himself for the world's many peculiarities, of which the story he was about to tell his present company was just one.

'Now, I've nothing to gain from pulling your chains.' He unlinked his fingers and placed his palms flat on the table. 'Heaven knows I'm too bloody old for fairy tales, and this is a story that's wanted to be told for some seventy-odd years. And it *is* true. As God is my witness.'

'Well...do tell,' invited John Harmon with a sarcastic sneer.

'Oh, I will.' Ardley Senior gave his head one firm nod. His eyes narrowed when they met John's. 'And you people will only begin to believe me tomorrow...when they find another mutilated body.'

'Another?' Tessa Harmon snorted. Her eyelids fluttered and her lips twitched. Ardley Senior realised she was trying to smile. 'Well this should be an interesting story. Pray tell, Mr Benjamin...' she rested her chin on the bridge of her linked fingers. 'What makes you think that another body

will be discovered tomorrow?’

He tilted his head slightly to the left, regarding her with a sideways glance. ‘For the answer to that question, my dear, you need only turn around and look out of the window. Tell me what you see.’

She rolled her eyes as if to ridicule the suggestion, but turned anyway. When she spoke her tone was that of a kindergarten supervisor – speaking slowly and clearly so that every child would understand: ‘I see a man on a bicycle. I see streetlights, and a teenage boy pausing to light a cigarette. I see the buildings on the other side of the street...’

‘And what else?’ the old man croaked, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

‘The moon,’ Tessa Harmon said in little more than a whisper, and it seemed a cold shiver rolled through her. ‘I see a beautiful full moon.’

#### 4. ‘Tell us a story, Pops.’

‘Don’t you worry – I’ll keep it brief; I can tell by the way you’re all shifting in your chairs that you’re in no mood for a drawn-out saga. And when I’ve finished you’ll probably say goodnight, may even shake my hand before leaving, while all the time thinking that I’m the looniest old dud you’ve ever come across. But we’ll see, won’t we? Come tomorrow...we’ll see.’

They were all – with the exception of Ardley Junior and his young lady friend – regarding him with either bemused or contemptuous expressions. He didn’t know which he preferred, but he held their gazes as he began:

‘Ellie Layne was her name – a strange yet kind-hearted woman who’d known only a hard life. But she lived long, all the same...just her and her son in a house her father had spent ten years building in the woods up on Faraway Hill. Browsing through the local two weeks ago I noticed her name in the obituaries (you find yourself looking at that little section of the newspaper more and more as the years fall behind you). Old age took her away; she was pushing for the century and the machinery of her heart had run its course. Her obituary declared that her grace would be missed, a message sent in from all of her ‘friends at Our Lady Immaculate.’ Now, I go there most Sundays – something else you find yourself doing as time ticks on – and I can’t recall seeing Ellie there in the

past...well, must be ten or fifteen years. She had no close friends to speak of. It was just her and her son up in that house. Believe me, she dedicated her life to that boy of hers, spending all of her time looking after him – he had some learning difficulties, you see. But she wouldn't let him receive any special help other than her own care. In fact, she rarely let him out of her sight. Now, that may well appear odd to you, but she had her reasons.'

There was a pitcher of water at his end of the table. He picked it up and drew himself a glass, hands perfectly steady. He sipped slowly, choosing to neglect the remainder of his sherry while he continued:

'When I read that Ellie had passed away my first thought went to her son; who was up there looking after him now? This morning I got an answer to that question; I watched the news...saw the police cordons, the curious onlookers, and the camera-shot of Sunday Gardens, and I knew: there's nobody looking after him. Nobody at all.

'His name is Brian, and he'd be...I'd say close to eighty years old now, and in case you hadn't guessed it, it is him this story's about.'

He paused for a moment, looking at them all and noticing that – with all their condescension – their attention was now entirely focused on him. And much like the children their expressions were identical, this lending them very similar faces despite their very different features...like faces painted by one artist, who will use the same effect of colour and texture to create style and depth. In this pause – barely seven seconds – Ardley Senior's wisdom found more than he wanted; in their sudden openness he determined certain characteristics: he saw who had the foul temper, the kind heart, the cheating heart. He saw the woman with too many secrets, and the other who couldn't keep any.

*I'm just too old*, he thought, having to look away as he wondered if their contempt was justified. Then his discerning gaze flicked back to them, and on the very next breath he continued:

'It was just before autumn when Ellie fell pregnant with Brian – at that time when the leaves are just starting to turn and it seems Mother Nature is showing all her pride. I'm not exactly sure of the year; I was at that peculiar age for a boy, somewhere between getting grazes on your knees and small hairs on your testes. I'd guess at 1917 or '18, but it doesn't really matter. What does matter

is the fuss that Ellie's pregnancy caused. My mother used to gossip constantly about the doings, and then she'd look at me with a smile in her eyes – thought I had what she called 'sweet eyes' for Ellie. The truth was, nearly every red-blooded male in town had 'sweet eyes' for her; she was the prettiest girl for miles around, no doubt about it. Anyway, nobody knew who the father was and Ellie was keeping very tight-lipped about the whole affair, much to the ire of her father, who died of a stroke in the week before Brian was born. But there were rumours aplenty. This is a small town, as well you know, and word gets around fast. The cruellest and – typically – most accepted of these rumours was that she'd been raped by a band of gypsies. Others favoured a romantic stranger, who arrived in town as silent as the sunset, offering Ellie Layne one moment of passion before moving on. There was even talk of the circus master's son – a strapping lad who had an act in the show bending iron bars like they were made of rubber. The circus would come around regularly back then – once every two months, I'd say – as a kind of release from all the anxieties involved with being a nation at war.

'Anyway, Ellie gave birth to Brian and the whole fuss of who the father might be was brushed to one side – grudgingly so by my mother and the rest of the town's gossips – and rarely thought of again. Until one night some six or seven years later – the moon as clear and beautiful as she is tonight – when Ellie came rushing in to The Four Feathers. In quite a desperate state, she was, crying and pleading for help. Help with Brian.'

The old man exhaled heavily (not for effect, but it worked well) and took a moment to look around, observing that theirs was the only table still occupied. He had not noticed Marianne's other diners leaving. He strained his eyes up at the clock over the bar and saw that it was approaching eleven-thirty. He'd better quit roving and stick to the plot if he hoped to finish this story before they were asked to leave. Then his gaze moved to the window, to the cool light of the full November moon. How many times had that light shone in his eyes during the ninety-four years of his life? And how many times had he *not* thought of Ellie's boy?

Not for the first time that day, it occurred to Ardley Senior that he could have prevented last night's 'accident' from happening. If only he'd told somebody about Ellie's boy, or even ventured up to their house on Faraway Hill and taken care of business himself. But he hadn't. And why?

Well, partly because he was afraid, but mostly because there was an undeniably different feeling stirring within him – a consuming curiosity that had developed in the later years of his life. Wasn't it true that he actually wanted something like this to happen, just to confirm that the world he knew was still a crazy place? Not in the thermonuclear, child-buggering, AIDS-infected way but in the good old-fashioned supernatural way. *Oh, yes*, he thought, and the voice in his mind was young and athletic and ready to run the four-minute-mile. *You can keep your designer drugs and your cyber-viruses; give me Hammer Horror, The Twilight Zone and Vincent Price in The Pit and the Pendulum.*

He closed his eyes. From the kitchen he could hear the clash-clattering of crockery and conversation indistinct with echo.

'Along with myself there were two other men who left The Four Feathers to help Ellie that night. I know their names but there's no point in telling you them; it's not important, and neither of them are alive today to confirm this story. Anyway, we set off like the wind itself...all the way up Faraway Hill and through the murk of the woods, none of us knowing what to expect. And then, just as we saw the lights of Ellie's house, we all stopped dead in our tracks. It was too dark for us to see one another's faces, but I know as sure as I'm sitting here now that they all wore the same expression: fear.'

'Why?' Carolyn asked eagerly. 'What was happening?'

'It wasn't so much what was happening as what we could *hear*.' He looked up at the full moon again, this certainly for effect...and they all followed his gaze. 'Howling,' he whispered. 'Not a child howling, but an animal.'

'A dog?' ventured Lucy.

Ardley Senior took a sip of water and held up one bunched hand. 'I'm getting to that, my dear,' he said. 'At that point Ellie moved ahead of us...nearly knocking me to the ground as she passed, and without turning back she cried for us to follow. And so we did.'

'The scene that confronted us at Ellie's house was...well, one of chaos, to say the least: the whole place had been turned upside down – there were torn clothes scattered all over, broken ornaments and furniture, and there were these god-awful claw-marks across the walls and down the doors –

just about everywhere, in fact. We turned to each other in a haze of wonder and horror, none of us speaking because that howling was so distracting. It was coming from somewhere in the house, and it seemed so desperate. I don't know how long we'd have stayed there had Ellie not urged us to follow her again, moving through the hallway and up the stairs. I can't speak for the other two, but the fear was rolling through me like smoke. I didn't want to turn back, though. Quite the opposite: I wanted to confront that howling creature. I suppose that fighter pilots – even boxers – must feel that same bolt of adrenaline before stepping up to do battle. So anyway, there we were, following Ellie, and we stopped outside the door to one of the upstairs bedrooms. 'He's in there,' Ellie said to us, and she looked so distraught that I just wanted to hold her. Instead I cocked an ear to the door, listening carefully, trying to hear the cries of a child. But all I could hear was howling and scratching. 'In there?' I said to Ellie. 'Brian's in there with...with *that*?' Ellie gave no reply, only lowered her eyes, and she appeared so frail and broken that I didn't think she had the energy to speak again. No sooner had the thought passed through my mind than I was proved wrong; one of the others suggested we go for weapons, and Ellie flared like a lioness, screaming: '*No! Don't you dare hurt my Brian! Just keep him from hurting himself!*' As you can imagine her outburst confused us, but we knew there was only one thing to do: we had to enter that room. We had to help Brian.

'What happened next was strange in itself, but made stranger in the way it happened. To begin with everything was in a kind of watery slow-motion. We pushed open the door and stepped into the room. I could feel every wicked beat of my heart, could feel the cool rills of sweat trickling down my back. Each step seemed to take forever. And there, crouching with its hackles raised on a mattress it had all but torn to shreds, was a wolf cub. It had stopped howling the moment we entered the room, giving us nothing short of its full attention while displaying a mouthful of glittering teeth. It was in that moment that something came to mind: I don't know if it was something I'd read or heard somewhere, or if it was just plain instinct taking over, but it suddenly occurred to me that I had to maintain eye-to-eye contact with the animal – that the moment I lowered my gaze it would attain superiority, thereby becoming more difficult to control. So we were in a face-off. I understood this and so did the cub.

'My colleagues, on the other hand, had no such insight.

‘One of them made a sudden move and that was when things moved from watery slow-motion into fast-forward. From here it all gets a little confused in my mind. I *do* remember the cub springing from the bed, bringing my friend down. I also remember its jaws snapping away mere inches from his face. But then...I don’t know. In a split second, it seemed, my other friend had a torn pillowcase wrapped around the cub’s throat and I had unlooped my belt, effectively using it as a muzzle. How I managed this – how I even *thought* of doing it – I’ll never know. But it was done, and once muzzled and leashed the wolf cub began to calm down. Ellie came into the room, whispering something, looking both relieved and distracted. She crouched and started to stroke the animal. My friends and I exchanged uncertain glances, and all at once the questions came: what was going on here? Where did the wolf cub come from? And most important of all, where was Brian?’

‘Ellie knew we were not leaving until she had given us answers, and so she complied – maybe for that reason but more likely because she thought she might need our help in future – telling us what some of you may already have guessed: that the wolf cub *was* Brian, that the light of the full moon had brought about his metamorphosis, and that come morning he would be a little boy once again.’

‘Oh, come on now.’ This voice was as keen in the smoky air as the crack of a whip. It felt like a slap. Ardley Senior cowered and looked toward it. Rather unsurprisingly it was Tessa Harmon who was glowering back at him, her tiny mouth and stony eyes making her look a little like Queen Victoria.

‘I feel I should point out to you, Mr Benjamin,’ she proceeded in the same cold tone, ‘that we are all adults here, not children. *Educated* adults.’ Those stony eyes flickered in young Lucy’s direction and she finished: ‘For the most part.’

The old man held up both hands. ‘I’m just telling you what happened, Mrs Harmon. Exactly how I remember it.’

‘But a werewolf...’ his son groaned, swishing the last of his Baileys in the bowl of his glass. His high cheekbones were flushed with rose, helping to colour an expression that would suggest regret in having invited his father this evening. ‘You have to admit, Dad...it does stretch the imagination, somewhat.’

‘I said before I started that you wouldn’t believe me.’



‘What I’d like to know...’ Lucy began, one index finger placed thoughtfully at her temple, ‘Was Brian a werewolf like the one in *An American Werewolf in London*, or was he more like Michael Jackson in *Thriller*?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Ardley Senior said.

It was at that point that the headwaiter approached the table and politely requested they finish their drinks, as the restaurant was about to close. Most of the party proceeded to do just this, but the old man held them all a moment longer.

‘Wait... wait, just hold on,’ he urged, one hand gesturing for them to slow down. ‘I’ve very nearly finished my story so you may just as well hear me out and enjoy those liquors the way they’re supposed to be enjoyed. No one is going to throw us out onto the street, not given the size of the bill they handed us.’

‘But what more can you possibly say?’ sighed Tessa, not looking at Ardley Senior but at the party individually, silently appealing for them to back her up, finish their liquors and vacate Marianne’s before this soft old codger could conclude his wild tale. But, amazingly, they did not seem to share her sentiment, did not even glance in her direction. Once again their attention was given to the old man. Tessa fairly gasped before scowling, sitting back in her seat with her arms tightly folded.

‘We may as well just hear him out, darling,’ John Harmon suggested tentatively. ‘We’ve come this far, after all.’

‘But—’

The old man cut her short, as sharp as a blade: ‘Sunrise came and my friends and I watched in disbelief as the wolf cub became Brian...just a scared little boy with tears in his eyes and bleeding fingertips. We knew two things then: that nobody could ever know of this phenomenon, and that we had to help Ellie in any way we could; it just wouldn’t do to have a wolf running wild with every full moon. So we all took that day off work, acquired some materials, and converted one of the downstairs rooms into a... well, a *cell*, for want of a better word. We stripped it bare, welded bars as thick as your wrists across the windows, and bolted several layers of steel plating to the door, both sides. On the outside we had three sliding iron bars to act as locks – top, middle and bottom –

each one three inches thick. We wanted to make certain that Brian, in his stronger animal form, would never break free. Once completed we gave Ellie her one instruction: just before the rise of every full moon – without exception – she was to lock Brian in this cell, no matter how he cried. She gave us her word that she would do this. And so she did.’

A yawn escaped Ardley Senior, he rubbed at both eyes with the heels of his hands; tiredness no longer crept up on him, it just happened. And it was a painful tiredness because sleep, he knew, was still a long way off. These days his bed was a place for contemplation rather than dreaming, and with all he’d seen and done during the course of his ninety-four years, maybe that was just as well.

The lights over the bar area flickered out one by one. The young waitress who had served their food and drink was putting her jacket on, saying goodbyes. The headwaiter looked over at their table, not even trying to disguise his frown.

‘It’s time to go,’ the old man sighed. He finished his sherry and stood. The others did likewise, and while standing he concluded his strange tale:

‘Over the next four or five years I would frequently visit Ellie, to see how she was getting along. And it all seemed fine – well, as fine as one could expect given the rather unusual circumstances. But she was managing. If I saw her in the street or at Our Lady Immaculate she would give a discreet little nod to tell me so. But last night saw the first full moon since Ellie passed away, and there was nobody up at that house on Faraway Hill to take care of Brian. This morning our town had a mutilated body in its favourite little park. Now, you can disbelieve my story, if you wish, but that gruesome discovery in Sunday Gardens is a fact you cannot disbelieve, no matter how much you may want to. And here’s another fact for you upstanding people: there’s a full moon out there again tonight. A beautiful full moon. And Ellie’s boy is out there. *Somewhere.*’

Ardley Senior licked his lips, his shrewd but tired eyes smiling, reflecting the face of the moon hanging in the cool November night.

‘I’d like to wish you all,’ he finished with a grin, ‘a very safe journey home.’

## 5. Just Call Car-razy Karl (24hrs)

There was a meditative silence in the car, calming, Bucky driving with one hand on the wheel and the other on Carolyn's thigh. She looked at him, and the moonlight captured and somehow enhanced the affection in her eyes. A smile touched his lips...only to fall away when he noticed the temperature gauge on the dashboard display rocketing into the red.

'What the...?'

They were on the brow of Faraway Hill – less than two miles from home – the headlights illuminating the narrow road winding this way and that before them. To their right the fields descended steeply, the occasional warm flicker of light from the south side of town. To their left the woods were dense and black, the trees gnarled and massive, growing so close together that even during the day they would be starved of light.

'I don't believe this,' groaned Bucky, and the car juddered, spluttered to a stop. Fine spirals of steam whirled up from beneath the bonnet.

Carolyn turned to him, her mouth a tight, hopeful smile, her sparkling brown eyes now shaded with uncertainty. 'Bucky, what...what is it?'

He looked at her, exasperated, and said as if he didn't quite believe it himself, 'We've broken down.'

She sighed and rolled her eyes before feigning laughter. 'On Faraway Hill? Oh, Bucky, you *are* dreadful!'

'I'm not joking, sweetness.'

'Of course you are.' Carolyn looked briefly out of the passenger window, into the darkness of the woods. She patted his leg twice, impatiently. 'Come on now, let's get on home; I'm so exhausted.'

'I only wish we could.'

'Stop it, Bucky; this isn't funny.'

He let out a long, whistling breath, and with a resigned nod indicated the temperature gauge – which was dropping fast now, then the steam still whirling from beneath the bonnet. In a moment of hope so fragile as to be fancied he tried the ignition, and got exactly what he expected: nothing at

all. 'No,' he agreed dejectedly. 'This isn't funny at all.'

'Well what's wrong?' inquired Carolyn, a certain eager edge to her voice; she no longer held any doubt her husband was being serious.

'I'm not exactly sure,' Bucky replied, his knowledge on the mechanics of the automobile being virtually non-existent. His father once shared with him a theory that there were only three types of man on this planet: those who were born to hold a pen, those who were born to hold a spanner, and those who were fortunate enough not to have to hold either. Needless to say, Bucky was a pen-man; he was incapable of carrying out even the most simple of manual tasks. For instance, he once – grudgingly – had to employ a man to fit a pine toilet roll holder and towel rail. 'I think perhaps...the radiator's...burst. I mean the car...you know it hasn't been right for a while; it's been losing water and—'

'So why didn't you do something about it before?' snapped Carolyn. 'If you had we wouldn't be in this situation.'

'I didn't think it was that serious.'

'No, Bucky, you just couldn't bear the thought of having to pry your wallet open.'

There was, essentially, truth in her statement, so not only would a retort be trifling, Bucky knew it would also be downright foolish.

'Which is exactly the reason why you didn't want to get a taxi tonight,' she added bitterly. 'Oh, Bucky... *I despair!*'

'Exorbitant prices,' mumbled Bucky under his breath.

Carolyn, he noticed, was close to tears. She looked out of the passenger window again, looked hard, before turning back to him. She shook her head, her throat working as she nervously swallowed. 'So what do we do now?' Another look out of the window, almost as if she expected something to come bounding, snarling and drooling out of the woods.

'Carolyn?' he took one of her hands, then placed his fingers on her jaw and gently turned her head away from the window. 'Carolyn? Why are you so nervous? We've broken down, that's all.'

'Yes... on Faraway Hill.'

Bucky frowned. 'You don't actually believe any of the nonsense that old man told us tonight, do

you?’

She blinked, and a single tear spilled onto her flushed cheek. ‘Of course not. It’s just put me a little on edge. You know I don’t like scary stories.’

‘There are no werewolves, sweetness.’

‘I know that.’

‘I doubt there’s even a house in those woods. Actually,’ he laughed, ‘I doubt there was even a woman named Ellie Layne.’

Carolyn tried a smile but it pained Bucky to see her trying so hard.

‘Look,’ he said, kissing the tear away from her face, then reaching into the pocket of his waistcoat for his mobile phone. ‘As long as we’ve got this we’re not in trouble.’ He held it up for her to see. ‘The wonder of modern technology.’

‘Who are you going to call? Acclaim Taxis?’

‘Oh no,’ replied Bucky with a glint in his eye she couldn’t quite make out. ‘We can’t leave the car here overnight. If I remember rightly I have a card for a twenty-four-hour mechanic somewhere...’ He shuffled through the numerous cards and receipts in his wallet, his eyebrows drawn together (usually an indication that he was stumped; she sometimes saw this same expression when they were playing Scrabble – just before he started to make words up), and Carolyn noticed that his hands were trembling – only slightly, but enough to tell her that the old man’s story had unsettled him as well.

‘You’re trembling,’ she said. Bucky pretended not to hear. She didn’t repeat it.

‘Ah...here it is.’ He plucked a business card from his wallet and Carolyn snatched it from his hand. In the moonlight she was able to read the print:

MOT? BREAKDOWN? CRASH REPAIR?

Just Call Car-razy Karl (24hrs)

*CHEAP! CHEAP! CHEAP!*

(01823) 249969

‘*Car-razy Karl?*’ she read almost disbelievingly. ‘Oh, Bucky, let’s just get a bloody taxi.’

‘I’ve told you, we can’t leave the car.’

‘Forget the damn car!’

But Bucky was already dialling the number. Carolyn groaned, wiping a tear from her eye and looking again out of the passenger window.

Her heart almost stopped.

‘Bucky?’

‘Yes, dear?’

In a low, shaky voice: ‘There’s something out there.’ Even in the phantom light of the full moon Bucky could see the colour draining from her face. ‘I just saw...*movement* in the woods.’

‘Movement?’ Bucky croaked. ‘What sort of movement?’

‘Something...’ She scrutinised the darkness, her head suddenly filled with the manic sound of her heart slamming away. ‘Something *big*.’

‘Where?’ He leaned over to take a closer look, and as he did a voice spoke out of the earpiece of his mobile: Car-razy Karl had picked up – and on only the second ring. Bucky jerked in his seat and replied, his voice high, slightly panicky, explaining their situation, giving their whereabouts.

‘Faraway Hill, eh?’ the mechanic repeated.

‘Yes...and could you please hurry?’

‘Be as long as it takes.’

‘Which will be how long?’

‘As long as it takes to get there.’

Bucky sighed and cut the connection. ‘He’ll be about five minutes,’ he said to Carolyn – lying through his teeth and knowing she knew this, but praying to God she wouldn’t challenge him on it. She didn’t, thankfully; she was far more concerned with the woods, and what might be in them. Five minutes passed slowly...ten minutes. They waited, hand in hand, listening to every sound and alert to the slightest of flickers in the shadows thrown down by the moon.

‘Do you think we should call the police?’ Carolyn whispered. ‘Just to be on the safe side?’

Bucky scratched his head. ‘And tell them what exactly?’

‘Anything. Make something up. Just get them out here.’

‘That could be construed as wasting police time, sweetness,’ he stated dryly. ‘Are you aware that a mean judge on a bad day can give you six months in prison for that?’

Carolyn shook her head.

‘I don’t think that would sit too well with the chaps in the office.’

‘We could be in danger here, Bucky.’

‘I don’t think there’s any danger,’ Bucky said unconvincingly, mopping his brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

‘I saw something out there.’

‘That had to be your imagination. You’ve been spooked, and I can understand that. I’m a little on edge myself. But the mechanic will be here soon, the car will be fixed, and we’ll be on our way.’

‘He’s taking his time.’

‘I know.’ He pulled Carolyn a little closer – as much to ease his own discomfort – wishing for the first time that he had listened to her advice and left the car at home, phoned for a taxi, and to hell with that ‘*a penny saved*’ nonsense, if only for one night. If he had they’d both be at home now – some forty pounds out of pocket, granted, but both a little tipsy and perhaps both a little naked. Instead they were sitting in a cold, broken-down car on a dark, desolate road, waiting for a cowboy with a spanner for a six-shooter and a pickup truck for a horse. Not only that but he had a bloody werewolf running riot in his mind, his imagination – unlike his car – firing on all cylinders.

He shook his head slowly, silently chiding himself for letting the old man’s story work itself under his skin. It was ludicrous. Absolutely preposterous.

*But still, a cruel, snake-like voice in his mind persisted, like the old goat said, there was a man found mutilated in Sunday Gardens this morning. There is a strange, savage creature out there somewhere, you know...and here you are, trapped and helpless. Easy pickings, some might say.*

He squeezed his eyes shut, pushing away the scaly voice. When all he could hear were the sounds of the night and their own hard breathing, his eyes slowly peeped open. He looked at his watch, able to discern that it was just after one o’clock. Nearly twenty minutes had passed since

he'd called the mechanic. What in God's good name was keeping him?

'Oh, where *is* he?' Carolyn asked, echoing his thought.

And that was when they heard the sound – cold and shrill, rising high into the night. Unmistakable. Chilling.

'Bucky?' Carolyn sat bolt upright, her eyes wide and full of moonlight. 'Did you hear that?'

His heart was a still and silent block of ice in his chest. 'It was nothing,' he whispered.

But he knew – they *both* knew – it was much more than nothing.

It was a howl.

## 6. Reflecting Moonlight

It was only after a few moments of torment and indecision that Bucky noticed the lights in the rear-view mirror: two searching beams. In the next second the interior of the car was washed with clean light (he looked at Carolyn and could see the tear-tracks shining on her face) as Car-razy Karl's pickup truck came up behind them, flashed its hi-beams, and pulled slowly alongside before pulling to a stop in front. The driver's door opened and an unlaced leather working boot stepped out onto the road.

Carolyn's breathing came in uncontrolled gasps. Bucky gripped the steering wheel so hard he thought he was going to tear it from its column. He looked to his left, to his right, behind him and in front – wanting to scream, to shout to the mechanic to get back in his truck. Didn't he know there was a—

A knuckle rapped hard against the window. Questioning grey eyes looked down at him.

Bucky wound the window down. Only an inch.

'You the fella that called?' the mechanic asked.

'Y-yes.'

'Are you feeling all right?'

'I'm fine,' Bucky lied. He looked at his reflection in the rear-view mirror and saw why the mechanic had asked this question; he hardly recognised the face staring back at him, perspiring, so



pale, twenty years older – although he couldn't remember being this afraid since he was a young boy and the train he'd been riding on had broken down in the middle of the House of Terrors. He had pissed in his pants then, and thought he might well do the same now. He looked to his left and right again, especially to his left. Into the woods.

Nothing but darkness.

'I'm fine,' he said again.

The mechanic nodded, patting the wing. 'Do you want to pop the bonnet, let me take a look?'

Bucky did so, feeling sweat sting his eyes. Carolyn's hand jump into his lap and gripped like a clamp. As the mechanic sauntered round to the front of the car another of his father's little pearls of wisdom came to mind: Howard Buckland had once said that a baseball cap is oftentimes a useful way to assess a man's intelligence: if he wore one at all you could safely eliminate 25% of his mental capacity. If he turned it around backwards you could double that. Car-razy Karl, however, was wearing a baseball cap, and was wearing it *sideways*. This must have been so far down his father's gauge for intellect that it failed to reckon in the theorem.

*Dear God*, thought Bucky. *Can I actually trust this man?*

The face below the baseball cap was heavily stubbled, his eyes dull and deep-set. He also had a ponytail, for God's sake And could it be? Yes! An *earring*! The man was fifty years old if he was a day.

Was there really any hope for them?

He disappeared behind the raised bonnet. Bucky took a deep breath and raised Carolyn's hand to his lips. He said nothing, but tried to apologise with his eyes – for everything leading up to having to call this substandard mechanic out to them. With her silent response he could tell she was trying to be understanding. She simply squeezed his hand and turned her tear-streaked face back to the window. Bucky sighed and lowered his eyes.

'Have you been losing a lot of water?'

He was trying not to think about here and now – trying to indulge in the bliss of reverie – when this question pulled him from its brink.

'Excuse me?'

‘Water?’ Karl’s face peered from round the side of the bonnet. ‘Have you found yourself having to top up more often lately?’

‘Yes,’ Bucky nodded, ‘I have, actually.’

‘Any difficulty firing it up?’

‘Firing...?’ Bucky was gesturing for him to be more specific.

Karl frowned. ‘You know, when you put the key in the ignition, turn it, start the engine...’

‘Oh, *firing* it up.’ Bucky ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Yes, it’s...well it’s been struggling for some time now.’ He felt Carolyn glower at him, and thought that if he turned to face her now he might be turned to stone. He kept his eyes on the mechanic. ‘I was hoping it wasn’t too serious a problem.’

‘Yeah, you were hoping.’ Karl dropped the bonnet, flicked off his torch, and strolled over to Bucky’s window. ‘Looks to me like you’ve blown the head-gasket.’

‘The head-gasket,’ Bucky repeated. It didn’t *sound* too serious. ‘Can it be fixed?’

‘Yeah.’ Karl scratched the stubble on the underside of his jaw, one eye squinted. ‘But not here and not now. I’ll have to tow it back to the garage and take care of it tomorrow.’

‘A tow?’ Bucky said. He didn’t like the sound of that. ‘Garage? How much is all this likely to cost?’

The mechanic shrugged. ‘Hard to say until the job’s done.’

‘But in the neighbourhood of...?’

‘Well...’ The lines of the mechanic’s face deepened as the brain beneath the baseball cap took on the demand of arithmetic. ‘Roughly speaking, I wouldn’t have thought you’d get much change out of three hundred bar.’

‘*Three hun—*’ Bucky swallowed hard, quite unable to repeat the figure. ‘But your card says *cheap! cheap! cheap!*’

‘Alternatively, I could leave you here.’

‘No!’ Carolyn exclaimed desperately. ‘Oh no, we’ll pay it. No problem.’ She looked at her husband and her eyes were catlike slits, daring – just *daring* – him to contradict her.

‘His card says *cheap! cheap! cheap!*’ was all Bucky could think of to say.

The mechanic was close to the window, his breath frosting the glass. 'Sorted? Good!' He revealed uneven teeth in a wide, contented grin, and Bucky thought that – sideways baseball cap or not – he had underestimated the man. This realisation was almost as painful as having to pay for his services.

'You'll have to ride in the truck with me while your car's being towed.' He cocked an oily thumb toward it. 'Door's unlocked. I'll get things hooked up here and we'll be on our way.' After noting their sudden expressions of concern, he added, 'Don't worry, the seats are clean.'

For the next fifteen or twenty seconds neither of them could move. They sat staring at the moon, which stared back like the face of a jolly old man...a jolly old man who is concealing something quite sinister behind the mirth in his eyes. Bucky hated it. He remembered how this very same moon had once been the light of such romance, how it had lifted the darkness of the ocean as he held his new wife in his arms. It had been a symbol of the promises he made, as much a part of the night as their love-making soon after – the waves breaking around them, cooling their entwined bodies as two-hundred yards away a beach-band performed a calypso-inspired rendition of 'More than a Woman.' Looking down as Carolyn moved her tight body beneath him – all the rhythm of the island – with the moonlight in her eyes.

Looking over at her now...that same moonlight.

His blood ran cold and in his mind he heard that howl again (just recalling it made his skin crawl), and the jolly old man in the moon winked, speaking to him with the same scaly voice he had heard earlier:

*Just thought I'd let you know that he's waiting – Ellie's boy – waiting out there in the darkness, his jaws dripping and his hunger massive. And the very moment you and your pretty little wife step out of that car he's going to be upon you. You won't have time to get away. I'll tell you now, Bucko... you won't even have time to scream.*

'Let's go, Bucky.'

*Yeah, Bucky...let's go.*

He turned to Carolyn, but she had already opened the passenger door and stepped out into the night.

## 7. Ellie's Boy

It was a distance of no more than ten yards between their car and the cab of Car-razy Karl's truck, though to have to walk it at that time it felt so much longer. They snatched at each other's hands and took it step by step, their bodies slightly curled with trepidation, their gazes shifting in wary twitches, flinching at the merest of sounds or movements. Bucky was quite aware of the mechanic staring at them, his top lip turned up and his dull eyes washed with bemusement – reminding him of the eyes of day trippers as they watch Hare-kishnas chant and hop their way through Piccadilly Circus.

*This chap is convinced we're crackers, he thought. But then, he didn't hear that ghastly howl, and he doesn't know about Ellie's boy.*

The last two yards were the longest of all. He reached out to open the cab door, and kept reaching...and *reaching*...then at last they were there. Carolyn climbed up first with Bucky just a tick behind. He slammed the door and locked it.

'There, nothing to worry about at all.' He caught his breath, his lips twitching at the edges in a sorry imitation of a smile.

Carolyn lowered her face into her hands, shaking her head. 'Oh, what an awful evening,' she declared. 'What an *awful* evening.'

And in the next second they were hugging each other, their hearts pounding in unison like wild animals running together, then kissing – Carolyn with her hands tied in Bucky's hair – long, desperate kisses, quite unromantic, in that foreign setting amongst the smell of oil and graft.

'I just want to go home,' Carolyn sighed.

Bucky took her face in his hand. He kissed her chin, the side of her mouth, her eyes. 'You know,' he whispered, 'we're going to laugh about this in the morning.'

'Oh, darling,' she said. 'I hope so.' She lowered her head to his shoulder and closed her eyes, Bucky's finger tracing in delicate curves the places where her tears had fallen. With his left hand he deftly popped the top button of his shirt and loosened his tie – and while doing so happened to

glance into the pickup truck's side mirror. There he caught a flash of movement – a mere glimpse of something *silvery* – so fleeting that he wasn't actually sure he had seen anything at all.

Until, that was, he heard the sounds – a thick and throaty snarling, growling...followed by the mechanic screaming:

*'In Mary's name no...no, sweet God in Heaven help...help me, for Christ's sake HELP ME!'*

Amongst his screams were chomping sounds, wet *tearing* sounds, the occasional gruff bark, and a kind of thirsty whuffling. Bucky – frantic – turned to look out of the cab's rear window but could see nothing through its protective covering of wire mesh, his view obscured further by the sturdy winch set up beyond this.

*'...Somebody...help me...'*

Carolyn had her hands clapped over her ears, her face drawn into a Halloween mask of horror, almost comic in its severity. In such a state Bucky didn't even try to reach her – he knew only that he had to get them out of there, and right away, working under the instruction of an almost impossibly lucid voice in his mind, though throughout he was streaked with the most complete fear. He double-checked the doors were locked, his and the driver's side (which was not, but he reached over Carolyn and pushed the button). The voice next suggested he check the ignition for the mechanic's keys – and he prayed they were there...prayed there was but a shred of mercy to be found in this everlasting night.

Unfortunately, mercy was not forthcoming. The mechanic must have taken the keys with him.

*'Weeping Jesus, HELP ME!'*

...The mechanic, with his earring and his baseball cap, to whom life had no doubt been unkind, and mercy even more defined.

Bucky wiped hot runnels of sweat from his throat, thin tears of panic from the corners of his eyes. *Come on, Stanton – crank that grey matter! Think, man!* But, he realised with dismay, his plan of escape had been entirely dependent on the mechanic's keys. He was without a clue, that lucid voice becoming a mental shrug: *Don't look to me for answers, friend – they don't prepare you for this sort of thing at law school.*

While outside those hungry chomping sounds never ceased, and the mechanic kept screaming...and screaming...screaming...*screaming*. And it was only after an age that there rang silence – such an age his agony would have been immense.

‘Bucky?’ Her voice was barely recognisable, so shattered by the emotion of true fear (hitherto unknown to him; it was as far from feeling ‘afraid’ as the heavens are endless, and, he surmised in those dreadful seconds, the sole reason he had not known of it before was that people just did not live to tell of it). She was trying to pat him on the shoulder but was missing by three or four inches, and he doubted she even realised this. Even so, her emotion notwithstanding, she came up with the answer – their way out, their ticket to safety: ‘Bucky...don’t you think *now* would be a good time to call the police?’

Of course, his mobile phone! It was so obvious it had escaped him completely. ‘Yes, darling,’ he breathed, reaching for the pocket of his waistcoat, only to find it empty. A new wave of fear rolled through him. He checked the other pocket, and this too was empty.

‘No. Oh no...’

‘Bucky?’

‘No...no...*no!*’

‘You didn’t leave the mobile in the car, did you?’

‘I know this is a nightmare. This *has* to be a nightmare, and I’m going to wake up soon. Yes...I’m going to wake up in my warm bed in my luxury five-bedroom detached—’

‘Please tell me you didn’t leave it in the car, Bucky.’

He didn’t look at her. He couldn’t. With his hair standing in erratic tufts and jags he simply uttered, ‘I’m sorry, honey.’ And, despairingly, he ran his gaze over the dashboard in the hope of finding a CB radio (didn’t all grease-monkeys use CB radios, these days?). But there was nothing – only a dark slot where a stereo used to be. ‘I’m so sorry.’ Aware that he was grinning as he said this...a disproportionate, demented grin he could not remove, not even when he tried – and he *did* try – to push it from his face with his fingers.

They saw it then for the first time (it? him? *whatever!*) – the werewolf, proving the old man’s story to be anything but wild imagination. It moved around to the front of the pickup truck, walking

on all fours with its great claws clicking on the tarmac, a huge creature with mangled grey fur, eyes slightly squinted in the headlights. And though its teeth were black and mostly rotted in its gums they were razor-like still, slick with the mechanic's blood. Between them it carried his baseball cap – a tattered, dripping thing. It stopped in the centre of the road, dropped the cap between its paws, and threw itself up onto its muscular hind-legs – its silhouette cast against the backdrop of the moon as it howled. The sound was haunting, like the cry of a child, but more than this...it was still *hungry*.

Bucky and Carolyn could only cling to each other – her jaw hanging in an O of disbelief, him still grinning. Within the werewolf's terrible cry their frenetic thoughts were almost identical, their basis being that this creature was going to kill them both. And with their emotion now so intense they were left nerveless; Bucky's lips formed the words to The Lord's Prayer but no sound came out, while Carolyn saw her mind as some complex geometrical shape made of crystal, its myriad sides shattering in turn, rendering its shape crude and unbalanced.

Ellie's boy dropped down on all fours. Its craving eyes blazed and yet more rotten old teeth were exposed in a ghastly snarl.

Then it attacked.

It came fast at the truck – jaws already smacking, its large pointed ears lying flat against its skull – slamming its full weight into the grille. There was a monstrous *crunch* and the truck rocked ominously on its springs, not even settling before the werewolf charged again, then again – this third causing one headlight to blow and the bonnet to crumple, crash against the windscreen, and crash back down again. An eight-inch crack, curved like a smile, appeared in the glass.

It stepped back into view as the truck's motion settled, shaking its heavy head, eyes blinking groggily. They cleared even as Bucky and Carolyn watched – became clear and alert once again. A huge tongue flopped from the side of its mouth, flexed, and with the rounded movement of a wave licked its lips before hiding again behind those great black teeth...and for one suffering moment it only stood there – looking over the dimensions of the vehicle with a deliberative expression – before approaching slowly, tail swishing, inclined toward the passenger side. Then it growled, the muscles beneath its unkempt coat rippling as it came again...ramming the passenger door with such

conviction that the tyres on that side left the road. The door crunched inward, the panelling popping loose as Bucky and Carolyn shrieked and hastened across the seat to the driver's side. Up on its hind-legs again, Ellie's boy looked in at them, strings of drool depending from its jaws and one massive paw – the claws alone the size of knife blades – tapping mockingly on the glass. Its nostrils flared and a whuff of hungry breath temporarily clouded the gleam in its eyes. It dropped from view, the sound of its claws clacking on the road and then – *thwam!* – it rammed the door again. This time Bucky thought the truck was going to topple over on its side, and he prepared himself for the hard fall backwards. But it never came. Perhaps it would have been better if it had because the passenger window had exploded under the impact and there was the wolf, with its head pushed through the hole where Triplex safety glass had been only seconds before, trying to wriggle its immense body through with its teeth snap-snapping air so close to him he could smell the unfortunate mechanic on its breath. He did not scream – he *couldn't*, and neither could Carolyn. They squeezed as close to the driver's door as they possibly could (Bucky kicking his legs in a futile effort at defence), sure that this terrible creature was only moments away from being in the cab with them, all set to make a main course out of him and a dessert out of her.

But that was not what happened.

Ellie's boy, deciding the broken window was far too small for it to wriggle through, extracted its head and padded back round to the front of the truck. It then let out another long and hungry howl before turning its gaze to a moon the colour of bone and moving away...back into the woods, into the darkness.

Just like that, it was gone.

Silence, until at length Carolyn began to sob...whining, broken breaths, her hands tied in the straggles of her hair.

'Gone,' Bucky said with the voice of a child. 'It's gone.' He looked at the bloodstained baseball cap in the middle of the road, unable to comprehend how they had escaped being torn apart like its owner had been, but knowing the danger was far from over; the werewolf had gone but there were still five hours left until dawn. It could come back.

*So what are you going to do, Bucko?* that jolly old bastard in the moon asked him. His voice



was not scaly now, it was just plain wicked. It was the voice of a Hollywood bad guy. *Now, I'm no authority on these matters, but I'd say you're stuck up the shittiest of creeks here and furthermore, the boat's sinking; you haven't got your mobile phone – that wonderful little lifesaver – and you haven't got the keys to fire this baby up and truck on back to the homestead. So it seems to me you're going to have to sit and wait for one of two things: someone to come driving along in their warm, safe car (someone who just might overlook the mutilated mechanic spread all over the road to pick up two wild-eyed strangers), or failing that you're going to have to wait until sunrise – which is still some way off, may I remind you – and should Ellie's boy return before then...well, how long do you think it will take for it to claw its way in there with you? I say not very long at all. How about you, Bucky my friend – how long do you think?*

He turned to Carolyn, gently taking her hands from her hair before placing his own on either side of her face, feeling her colour, her fear. Tears cascaded and crashed into the webbing between his thumb and forefingers. They ran in cool, twisting rivers to his wrists, and for one moment he was transfixed by their silvery tracks. For just one moment, with his heart slowing to a more regular beat – its rhythm felt in every nerve ending, and within it the sudden understanding of what he had to do. There was no questioning it; it was *compulsion*, and of the like he had felt only once before in his life – and that was when he had returned from his skiing holiday in Le Grand Bornard, and had telephoned the woman whose face he now held in his hands, telling her that he was coming to visit her – whether her husband was there or not. And in doing so he had changed their lives forever.

*'Bucky...what...? Oh, Bucky...'*

He kissed one of her tears away before it had even toppled from the subtle curve of her eyelash. *Compulsion*, and fuelling this was his father's advice on the night of his wedding. Though his eyes were whirling in squiffy circles – and despite all the usual bunkum and nonsensical theories he was wont to come out with – they were the truest words he had ever spoken, and by far the most important: *There's more to being married than just placing a ring on someone's finger; you've got to be all the man you can be...and more.'*

*'...all the man you can be...'*

### *Compulsion*

Bucky kissed Carolyn full on the mouth, parting her lips with his. Some part of him understood – deep down – that this was possibly the last kiss they would ever share. When he pulled away from her, her mouth was still open, her tear-struck eyes searching his.

‘I’m going to get the mobile,’ he said.

At first her response was only silence, but as Bucky moved away from her toward that battered passenger door she made a little yelping sound and grabbed frantically at his arm.

‘Tell me you’re joking.’

‘It’s the only hope we’ve got.’ He eased her fingers from the fabric of his shirt. ‘There’s a chance that monster won’t return, but if it does then it’s because it’s still hungry...and I don’t think it will leave next time without settling its appetite. It’ll rip this truck apart to get to us, Carolyn. We wouldn’t stand a chance. Now, if I get the mobile I can call the police. Then we’ll be safe.’

‘But it could be out there now...*waiting*.’

‘There’s no other choice. I don’t want to go, believe me.’ He shrugged, thought of his father saying ‘*all the man you can be*’ and repeated in a low voice: ‘There’s no other choice.’

He pulled the catch to open the passenger door, but where it had been battered so badly the catch was now useless. It didn’t matter too much, and the mechanic wasn’t going to lose any sleep over it. Bucky gave the door a firm push – there was a slight scraping sound, a *clunk!* – and it popped open. In the silence these sounds were just a little too loud for comfort, and he found himself wondering if the hearing of a wolf was as keen as its sense of smell. He decided it probably was (*My...what big ears you have, Grandma!*), then had to shut the ensuing thoughts from his mind if he hoped to keep compulsion from becoming convulsion. He turned to Carolyn, and was about to tell her not to worry – he’d be back, when she slid across to the passenger seat and announced:

‘I’m coming with you.’

Bucky pulled the door up, shaking his head and thinking that pretty soon the force driving him here would dissipate and he would have to look to something else to get him going – something like courage – and he wasn’t sure he had the disposition for that.

‘Please, darling,’ he began, his hands delicately gesturing and as imploring as his voice. ‘Stay here; it’s so much safer, at least for now...and I only have to make it *to* the car. I can phone the police from there.’

‘But I don’t want to be left on my own.’

A tight, sympathetic smile from Bucky – the kind of smile that has the lips turned down at the edges – and did she have any idea how much it *hurt* him to see her this way? His anguish ran parallel to his terror. ‘I’ll come back...if I feel it’s safe enough.’ He ran his finger over the perfect shape of her lips, down her chin, down her throat to the place where he had so often kissed her in the beautiful secret world of their love-making. ‘Don’t worry, sweetness...you’re not going to lose me.’

With these words he was gone, pushing the dented door up behind him. Bucky Buckland – all the man he could be...and more.

Carolyn – helpless to stop him and knowing this – reached out, her fingers dancing in the air, her husband’s name sighed on every breath.

*Bucky...*

He stood in the moonlight, awash with its glow – a pale, ghostly figure dressed for dinner (but *whose* dinner?) suddenly hit by the cold certainty of what he was doing. He looked all around him before taking that first step back to his car, hearing a vague rustle here and a dry snapping there, his eyes jerking in their sockets in the direction of every sound. He began to creep along, walking on the tips of his toes with his shoulders hunched and his arms held out at his sides for balance...and it was only after a few such steps that the splashing under his toes struck him as odd. Puddles? But the night had been dry, if a little on the chilly side. A storybook November evening, in fact. So why on earth were there puddles on...?

He looked down to see that he had been tiptoeing through a spreading pool of Car-razy Karl’s blood. His breath caught in his throat and for a moment he froze.

The road between him and his car was a river.

*Not good, Bucky. Not good at all!*

He took another two or three tiptoe steps and peered around the back of the truck, now able to

see what remained of the mechanic. There was the shell of his torso, without limbs or a head, the ribcage split open at the sternum and the contents of the stomach scooped out. Four feet away he could see one blood-spattered leather working boot standing in the road with a leg – torn off just south of the knee – still inside it. There was part of an arm still dressed in part of a sleeve. Bucky took another step and his shoe came down in something *squishy* – what it was or from what part of the mechanic’s body it had been stripped Bucky did not care to know. There was a steaming loop of small intestine hanging from the bumper of his car, and there – *Jesus please us!* – lying next to the winch in the back of his own truck was Car-razy Karl’s severed head, a savage rake of claw-marks dividing his face in even strips. His ponytail had curled under, matted in the stump of his neck, while his eyelids seemed to have been peeled away from his eyeballs. They stared at Bucky in shock and disbelief (in much the same way Bucky had stared at him when he had estimated the cost of his services). His mouth was locked in a scream, revealing those uneven teeth, and without the baseball cap Bucky could see that the mechanic was bald. He was *bald* but had grown the hair at the back into a ponytail. On some level – not even worthy of explanation or understanding – Bucky thought this the most disturbing detail of all.

Car-razy Karl’s gold earring gleamed, more like a diamond in the moonlight.

*I’m not seeing this. Any of it...I’m just not—*

It was all too much for this clean-living lawyer. He swayed like a man at sea, needing the support of the truck just to stay on his feet. The sautéed potatoes in which he’d indulged as a side order threatened to reappear, but he swallowed hard and screwed his eyes shut.

Then he heard a sound from the woods, maybe only a breeze rippling through the leaves but to Bucky it sounded like a snarl. He whirled on his feet, a faint cry escaping him as he searched the darkness amongst the trees – waiting for that awful creature to appear. When it did not he waited to hear it snarl again, and on hearing nothing but the spooky hush of the hour he uttered a timid laugh, breathed deeply, and the man in the moon spoke up:

*Just a breeze in the trees, Bucko. That’s all.*

‘I know.’

*Little jumpy, aren’t you?*

‘Understandable, I think.’ It occurred to Bucky that this was not the time to be conversing with that glowing phantom face in the sky. He looked at his car – four or five yards away – and from where he was standing could see his mobile phone right there, nestled in the angle where the dashboard met the windscreen. He simply had to walk over, open the door, reach in, and get it.

‘Not a problem,’ he whispered.

He started forward, not on tiptoe now but with determined strides. When he reached the passenger door he pulled the catch carefully in an effort to open the door as silently as possible. This done with a degree of success, he reached in and grabbed the mobile.

His decision to take it back to the pickup and call the police from there was not preceded by any mental debate, nor was there much in the way of conscious thought behind it. The only thing that ran through his mind was the sure knowledge that he didn’t want to leave Carolyn alone; he had assured her he would return if he felt it safe to do so, and while it was not exactly Disneyland out here, he was confident he could make it back to her in one piece.

With the Motorola gripped in his right hand, Bucky started back to the truck, his heart taking to an exhilarated beat now that the end of this nightmare was in sight. He was only a breath away from the truck’s crumpled passenger door when he heard another sound from the woods, but having come to within touching distance of safety, Bucky had rather foolishly allowed his heedfulness to slide. He looked in at Carolyn, who was huddled in a ball against the driver’s door. When she saw him her beauty shone through all the tear-tracks and smeared make-up: relief beyond words.

Bucky smiled – his own relief intense and bracing – and held up the mobile. ‘Got it,’ he said.

Ellie’s boy came out of nowhere.

It was just a blur – a flash of something huge and grey, a swipe of claws and Bucky was gone. The werewolf was on top of him, pinning him to the ground with one mighty paw while it first sniffed him out, then sank those terrible teeth in through the top of his skull. This all happened so fast that Bucky felt no pain, no pain at all – though he did try to scream, managing a kind of hiss before the part of his brain which allowed him to scream was punctured and shut down for good. His left hand (his right still held the mobile) clutched convulsively at the knotted fur on the creature’s neck, feeling a tightening of muscles beneath as it lifted him from the ground, then tossed him into the road in

front of the truck. He flopped over bonelessly – dying already – and within a second Ellie's boy was upon him again. One brutal swoop with its claw tore his chest open. Its jaws came snapping down, tearing at his throat, pulling away and snapping down again. Bucky died staring up at the moon, and if he'd had the capacity for dying thoughts then his first would have been that that jolly old man had fallen silent at last.

And then of course...Carolyn: the nature in the garden of his soul. In the tower of his world she had been the height for which he had reached. Twelve and a half years, and a thousand slow dances, a million acts of love ranging from a kiss in the morning to orgasms which had left them shaking yet feeling they could fly. Twelve and a half blissful years...and Carolyn watched now – helpless – as it came to an end, as it was all torn to pieces in front of her.

*'BUCKY!'*

This could not be happening. *This was not happening!* Such fierce denial; it was too much to take, and the reality of the situation only occurred to her after some length of time – interminable, crushing moments later – when the monster paused and looked over its shoulder at her. *You're next*, its silver eyes promised, its jaws still working – cracking down on the bone which had once connected Bucky's knee-bone to his hip-bone. *Oh yes...you're next.*

Carolyn felt the darkness rushing up to claim her and was about to submit to it – happy to do so – when something caught her eye and demanded her attention. There...on the damaged bonnet just beyond the pickup's windscreen – within reach – was Bucky's mobile phone. It must have been thrown clear in the attack, and she might have thought that Bucky – in one last desperate act of valour – had thrown it there himself, but for the fact that his severed right hand was still attached to it.

Her only hope, and it was within reach. It would mean having to lean out of the window to grab it, and the thought of having to pry Bucky's hand free filled her with such grief she thought she just might go mad. And the werewolf, it was so quick; once it sensed her movement it would be upon her. The question was, could she be quicker?

Her only hope, and so *close*.

Carolyn knew she had no choice but to try.

The creature had turned back to what remained of Bucky – its leathery tongue licking its lips between mouthfuls – and Carolyn saw this as her chance. She moved with an agility she should never have been capable of in the face of such horror, reaching out through the window and grabbing Bucky's hand which in turn grabbed the mobile phone. And indeed the werewolf *did* sense her movement, and it was quick – much quicker than she; it could easily have leapt and snapped her arm clean off, but instead it charged at the passenger door again. Carolyn scrambled back against the driver's door and immediately worked to free Bucky's severed hand from the phone (oh, his hands...so tender and strong and beautiful. And she remembered how *this very one* had reached down to help her up as she sat in the snow on the nursery slopes – how she had become attracted to it and the man it belonged to even before she had seen his face).

*Oh, Bucky...darling...*

But try as she might, she was simply unable to loosen the grip of his fingers. She pulled and twisted, but the hand held fast.

The werewolf hit the passenger door again, managing to hammer it loose on its hinges. One more attack and it would be in, leaving Carolyn with no choice but to dial for the police with Bucky's hand still clasping the phone. This she tried, but with the truck swaying on its springs – not to mention her own trembling – her finger couldn't find the right buttons. While outside Ellie's boy was backing up – head down – all set to charge again. Carolyn could see this – not even the tears stinging her eyes could hide it – and she fought to steady her hand. She looked down at the little black phone, silently pleading, and managed to press the POWER button, then the first 9...the second. As her finger came down on the third 9 Ellie's boy rammed the door – *thwam!* – and it flew open, almost tearing itself from its hinges. Bucky's thumb was covering the OK button. Carolyn didn't even try to pry it away; she just pressed down on top of it and her call was sent.

Ellie's boy clambered up into the cab of the truck with her, barely able to squeeze its great body in. It studied her for a moment, curiously, its head tilting from one side to the other. It then roared, which faded into another howl: a lamenting cry, and as this faded into silence an operator on the other end of the line picked up and Carolyn started screaming – screaming that her husband had been torn apart and she needed *help!* The operator told her to calm down, to speak slowly and

clearly. Carolyn managed to give her location, and the last word she screamed before Ellie's boy closed in on her was: '*Werewolf!*'

## 8. Cops

The incident response vehicle arrived on the scene eight minutes after the emergency three nines call was made. Two officers were present: WPC Melissa Corn and PC Gregory Rigg. The latter – only two months on the force and barely old enough to shave more than three times a week – pulled the car up just behind the Bucklands' '92 model Vauxhall Cavalier.

'What the hell happened here?' His words were choked, comprehensible only to him.

'Close the road and set up cordons,' Corn said to him, her eyes not leaving the carnage on the road before her. 'Do it now. Do it quick. I'm going to case the scene and radio HQ.'

'What could've done this?'

Corn heard his question but did not reply; they didn't have the time and she didn't know anyway. She stepped out of the vehicle, unclipped her radio and flicked on her torch. Eyes unblinking, she scanned the nightmare scene. 'South One this is Blue Tango. Request immediate assistance. Repeat: request immediate assistance.' She walked round to the front of the pickup truck, carefully choosing her steps, shaking her head with disbelief. In her years on the force she had seen some terrible things, but surely nothing quite like this. PC Rigg was pulling cones and tape from the boot of the IRV. Corn looked back at him, briefly, then stepped toward the beaten passenger door of the truck. She still had her finger on the radio's button. 'We have at least two Caucasian males here, both...very dead. South One...did you say that a female made the distress call?'

*'That's an affirmative, Blue Tango.'*

'Well...' WPC Corn shone her flashlight into the cab of the truck. It was empty. Except, that was, for something on the seat. 'There's no sign of the female at the moment, South One. But I think I've found the phone she used to make the three nines. It has...Oh, Jesus...it has a severed hand attached to it, and judging by the size I'd say it was male.' She paused, waited for a response from HQ, but after getting nothing but static continued: 'I'll check the immediate vicinity, of course,



but for now all I can see is two – maybe three mutilated bodies.’ She looked at the pieces, the blood all around her. ‘It’s difficult to be exact.’

*‘Sending assistance now, Blue Tango. Hold tight.’*

‘Appreciated, South One. And you’d better get CID and SOCO’s out here as well – I think they’re going to enjoy this one.’

Detective Chief Inspector Simon Bawler, leading the investigation, was there before PC Rigg had finished setting out the cordons. He stopped his car on the official side of the police roadblock and walked with slow, almost exaggerated steps over to WPC Corn. She was wiping her eyes with her left hand, her right clasping a notepad. Bawler recognised her expression – it was hardly new to him; he had seen it a thousand times on the faces of men and women who had arrived at a gruesome scene such as this before the worst of it could be bagged and labelled – before it could be hosed away. She was tough, he could see that, but he understood that nothing could prepare you for something like this. Nothing. Even experience – that reliable old dog – was like a rope you had been cut away from, and he knew if he was to look into a mirror at that moment he would see his own face wearing that same hanging expression.

And sympathy? Well... what *could* you say?

‘Two dead?’

‘Yes, Sir.’ She nodded and looked up at him. In this blending of lights her eyes held an accentuated warmth, seeming more than a little out of place within the austere angles distress had carved into her face. Her lips were white petals, barely moving as she spoke. ‘I’ve...counted the pieces.’

Bawler nodded.

‘I’ve also run the plates through the computer,’ Corn continued. ‘Including the truck – even though a name and number are painted on the door; I wanted to be sure.’ She looked down at her notepad, sighed and read out: ‘Car-razy Karl: Karl Edward Miles – he’s a mechanic from Taunton. The Cavalier is licensed to a Stanton Buckland, a solicitor from here in town. I’d say it was his wife who made the three nines...an educated guess based on the fact that most mechanics don’t drag their wives out on the job with them at one o’clock in the morning.’

‘Or at any other time,’ Bawler added.

A smile from WPC Corn, but there was no emotion in it. ‘I’d say she’s somewhere in those woods.’ She pointed. ‘Dead or alive, or maybe somewhere in between.’

Bawler rubbed a palm up one side of his unshaven face, looking into the blackness of the woods with a shake of the head. ‘We’ll get the ‘pieces’ picked up here, then we can inform their nearest and dearest as necessary.’ He shook his head. ‘That’s always a fun job.’

‘Isn’t it just,’ Corn agreed dryly.

‘CID and SOCO’s will be here shortly, and we’ll get a search-team out here within the hour. They’ll comb every inch of those woods – and if the woman *is* in there they’ll find her. One way or another...they’ll find her.’

A search-team was indeed there within the hour, along with police dog units and Home Office pathologists. They were sent for immediately after Detective Superintendent Leonard Conrad of the CID had gone over the scene with two other CID officers and SOCO’s (scenes of crime officers), made up in part by a team of forensic scene examiners.

‘I want an eye in the sky as well!’ Conrad barked his orders to his Detective Sergeant, who relayed them accordingly – and with equal vigour. ‘Make sure whatever they send is equipped with Sunrays and *tics*.’

‘Got it.’

‘Good!’ Conrad turned to Bawler. ‘I don’t know what breed of creature we’re looking for here, but we’re going to find it!’

Bawler nodded, looked up at the full moon, and said rather tentatively: ‘The woman who made the three nines...it is believed she said something about a werewolf.’

His superior smirked, which was condescending more than good-humoured, Bawler realised. ‘She also said that her husband had been torn apart, which I think would be enough to make anyone delirious.’

‘All the same, Sir, it does reinforce the belief that we’re not looking for a human attacker here.’

‘You only have to look around you to see that.’ Conrad pointed into the road behind him, where one of the forensic examiners was taking a photograph of the mechanic’s severed arm.

‘Yes, Sir.’ Bawler wiped his brow. ‘All I’m saying, Sir, is that I don’t think we should send any of our boys into those woods before we get an ARV out here.’

‘I agree,’ Conrad stated. He had a happy face – smile lines and dimples – but two angry little eyes. ‘Get onto the Assistant Chief Constable and *make* him authorise some heavy-duty fire power. Not just an ARV...let’s get a tactical firearms team out here as well; we don’t want to be kicking ourselves in the arse later for something we didn’t do now.’

A succession of rapid-fire flashes as yet more cameras captured the awfulness of the scene on film, from a seemingly endless array of angles.

Bawler snapped up his radio and within seconds was wired through to the Assistant Chief Constable, who gave his permission to dispatch both an armed response vehicle and a tactical firearms team without a second thought. No less than thirty officers – most armed with the standard Browning 9mm, the rest with the Heckler and Koch USP – arrived ready for action in record time.

And so it was that only two hours after the Bucklands’ car had broken down, that mostly unused road bordering the woods on Faraway Hill was alive with activity. A line of parked vehicles snaked away from the scene on either side. Too many busy bodies – pathologists, forensics, uniformed police – went about their duties with a quiet professionalism, while in the sky a helicopter covered the wide area of the woods, equipped – as standard but demanded nonetheless by Detective Superintendent Conrad – with powerful headlights known as Sunrays and *tics*: thermal imaging cameras, which sent pictures back to a screen on board the helicopter. This equipment told the officers in the air that the woods were silent and empty. There appeared to be no life at all – no movement, no owls taking flight from the sudden commotion, no deer fleeing from the aggressive cone of light penetrating the darkness.

The woods were dark and dead...almost as if the wildlife were afraid to go anywhere near it. It was empty.

Except, of course, for the house.

## 9. The House in the Woods

The armed police approached it in arrowhead formation, their progress guided by the police helicopter until the lights of the house appeared as flickering stars between the trees. Even then the chopper stayed with them – just in case its nighthawk equipment spied any rogue movement heading their way. They didn't know what they were looking for, and they weren't about to take any chances.

Back at the scene CID and SOCO's had turned the computer over and found the following: the house in the woods was addressed simply as: Layne, Faraway Hill. It belonged to one Eleanor Layne who lived there with her retarded son Brian. But here was the kicker: Eleanor Layne had died on November 1<sup>st</sup> – nearly three weeks ago, leaving Brian there alone.

'Could *he* have done this?' PC Rigg asked WPC Corn. They were on duty together at the west side of the roadblock. So far they'd had to turn away two cars and a young reporter from the *Western Gazette* – who'd picked up the buzz on his scanner and had hastened up from Taunton for the scoop. As he was ushered away he'd given his obligatory '*the public has every right to know what's going on*' spill, and was assured that the press would get their chance. And there were still a handful of national reporters in town following the discovery of the body in Sunday Gardens. The fact that none of these had yet smelled the blood and come scurrying up here was frankly amazing. But they would. Even fresh-faced Gregory Rigg (a rookie-cop, according to his American fiancée) understood that they would.

WPC Corn looked at him. 'Just because he's a retard doesn't mean he's a psychopath,' she said. 'And I can't see him being *too* unstable, otherwise they'd have taken him away when the old lady died.'

'Yeah, but...'

'And no man could have done this tonight. Those bodies back there...' She blinked hard and let out a long, tired breath. 'No, that was no man; there were claw-marks all over the body parts, Greg. *Claw-marks!*'

PC Rigg looked away from her, into the woods. Every now and then he would catch the flicker of torchlight as it switched from left to right. 'I still think they'll find something in that house,' he said.

‘The woman,’ Corn agreed. ‘She ran blindly from the attack, saw the lights of the house and went there. I feel sure of it.’

And so did everyone else...but every one of the thirty armed officers – as they circled the house in the woods, fingers on their triggers – were hoping to catch and shoot dead the creature that had caused all this horror. And every one of them wanted to be the one to pull the trigger, wanted to be the hero.

They closed in, positioned themselves. The house was bathed in light – from above and from the torches the policemen carried. The Tactics Advisor on the scene was all set to move his men in at the back when there came a shrill female cry from inside the house. Instead he grabbed his radio and screamed: ‘*GO, GO, GO,*’ and in an organised rush the armed police stormed the house.

They went through the front door, through the back, through a sliding side door, and through the windows. Ellie’s boy – hunkered low in a corner of an upstairs bedroom beside a delirious, uninjured Carolyn Buckland – let out a long, rising howl of fear and confusion. Its jaws snapped together hard. Its silver eyes gleamed in the murk of the room.

By this time four policemen, all armed with the Browning 9mm, were making their way up the stairs with trained pose and system. As the creature’s howl died away the policeman at the lead – Sergeant Charles Hampton – unclipped his radio and said to the Tactics Advisor: ‘Upstairs, Sir. Whatever it is, it’s upstairs.’

‘*Hold your position,*’ a harsh voice loaded with static blustered back. ‘*It isn’t going anywhere. We’ll back you up and bait it out.*’

‘Yes, Sir.’

But Ellie’s boy had other ideas. Threatened, frightened, and furious, it turned to Carolyn, licked her face, then bounded over the bed and crept out onto the landing. Its long ears twitched, sensitive to every sound – every creaky floorboard, every breath, and every heartbeat. And the *smells*: fear was almost a taste in the air, there was the rusty scent of adrenaline, the salty reek of sweat. Ellie’s boy could smell strange fabrics, lotions, soaps...even the acid in the batteries of their torches, and the oil that helped maintain the action of their weapons.

And the flowing of blood. Above all else it could smell the sweet flowing of blood. *So* sweet, and

in this animal form impossible to resist.

Ellie's boy licked its lips. In the cloudy midst of its thoughts – powered by a retarded human brain and animal instincts – it knew that this was the end. At last, this was the end.

But first...one more.

Just one more.

In one fluid movement Ellie's boy had cleared the hand-rail on the landing and was there on the stairs, facing four armed policemen – none of whom had time to pull off a single shot before it attacked. Like a breathing nightmare it leapt upon Sergeant Charles Hampton, ripping out his throat before he knew what was happening. A corpse in a sergeant's uniform, still holding a gun and a radio, tumbled down the stairway. The second policeman down stumbled back in shock, lost his footing and fell down the stairs himself. Although this rather nasty fall broke his arm in two places, it actually saved his life; the monster's claws snatched at the air where he had been standing only a split second before.

Now the other two policemen took aim and opened fire. The reports rang throughout the house, drowning every other sound – the creature's howls of pain and its wounded snarls. Every bullet struck home, again and again...tearing through Ellie's boy, opening huge holes in its muscular left side, removing chunks of flesh and bone from its face. One bullet took its ear clean off, but not one of them could stop it from coming forward.

Slowly now...*slowly*...

The two policemen backtracked down the stairs, then they were backed-up against the hallway wall, firing ceaselessly – completely unaware of the officers rushing from elsewhere in the house to assist. Ellie's boy pressed on, then lunged again, no more than a phantom glimpse of red and grey. Its knife-blade claws whipped through 180 degrees and disembowelled the nearest of the armed officers. His name was Stephen Paul, and he looked down to see what used to be in his stomach now heaped between his shoes. It was the last thing he would ever see, and he was the last man Ellie's boy would ever kill.

The bullets seemed to come from everywhere...a press of men hustling to the foot of the stairs and unloading their weapons as they came. Ellie's boy could take no more. It reared up on its hind

legs and howled one last time – the most painful, stricken sound any of them had ever heard. And still the bullets continued to fly – so *many* bullets, pounding one after the other into the creature, ripping it apart until there were more *click-clicks* than *bang-bangs*. And eventually it fell in a bullet-riddled heap. The entire house seemed to tremble as Ellie's boy slammed to the ground.

Twitching...sighing...at long last dying.

The officers held their fire. They held their fire and stood with their weapons smoking as Ellie's boy stuttered out its final breaths. And as it did its sheer size became smaller, *weaker*. The officers watched – staggered – as the knotted grey fur covering the monster's body seemed to dissolve before their eyes, and its bones crumpled, contracted – until what was lying at the foot of the stairs was not a monster at all, but a naked old man torn apart by gunfire.

A naked old man with silver in his eyes, and even as he died the silver in his eyes never faded.

Yet more amazing than this – every man agreed – was the smile of absolute contentment on Brian Layne's face.

## 10. A Letter to Bucky

Do you remember Anne-Marie Isaac, that pretty blind lady who is married to the pianist from St Mary's? Of course you do. I remember how you coloured when she once traced the shape of your face with her sensitive fingers, and declared you a desperately handsome man! I remember that like I remember everything else: very clearly. And my, *how* you coloured. Oh, Bucky... I miss you so.

Anne-Marie attended your funeral service, and in consoling me afterwards told me that The Lord was shining His guiding light into my house. 'Come to church with me this Sunday, Carolyn,' she suggested softly. 'Let God in to share your pain in this dark hour, when you most need a hand to hold.'

I looked into her blind eyes, and all I could smell was flowers...so many flowers, Bucky. You were so well loved. I told her, desperate for direction, that I would be there. And so I was. I sat in St Mary's as delicate crystals of early December snow shimmered and skimmed across the stained-glass windows. I sat there looking every bit like the recent widow that I am, with tears streaming down my face, *endlessly* streaming, hearing

nothing but syllables strung loosely together – without emotion or inflection – as Reverend Gainsborough delivered his sermon. And as Johnny Isaac rolled up his sleeves and hit the first bum-notes of ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ I just had to leave. I apologised to Anne-Marie and dashed down the aisle as they all sang about the beauty of the world. But she had been right; I *did* need a hand to hold. But not the hand of God – it was *your* hand, Bucky...your gentle loving hand I needed, and need still.

And these pills I am taking...I don’t think I need them, either. ‘Spirit-lifters,’ the kindly Dr Young calls them. I call them trash, and morning, noon and night I swallow them down. They don’t so much lift the spirit as render you blind – as blind as Anne-Marie Isaac; the world still ticks on around you, you know. All the pain and the hurt and the suffering. Nothing changes. You just fail to see it for a while, that’s all. It’s a little like being under a general anaesthetic: you are cut, you bleed, you feel nothing. At least until the anaesthetic wears off.

Oh, what miracles a man is capable of with but one sharp signature on a prescription.

Dr Young has also referred me to a therapist. I have had my one and only session with a man who makes clicking noises with his jaw when he listens to you. He nods frequently – *too* frequently, I think, and he scribbles in his notebook throughout. But I watched the end of his pen as he scribbled, and could see that it didn’t travel *across* the page – it moved up and down. It made diagonals and loops. He was *doodling*! The man was doodling as I told him how my heart feels like glass not shattered but *crushed* to dust, how my world was once a mountain but is now a vacuous cavern dark with despair. His jaw went *clickety-clack* and he doodled and said things like, ‘*without despair no emotion would exist,*’ and ‘*your passion alone will see you through this ordeal.*’

I am never going back there. Not ever.

Nor will I be going back to the dubiously named widows’ circle ‘Amity.’ What a disaster that had been! Nine women – of whom I was the youngest by far – sitting in a small room sipping tea, exchanging with vague whim the idiosyncrasies of their late husbands. Occasionally they would light upon some humorous reminiscence or other. Agony, believe me, not ‘Amity.’ I sat there for an hour, trying not to weep, listening to more syllables strung loosely together. At length I scrambled enough courage to venture with the occasion of our meeting. When I had finished they were all smiling and some had precious little tears standing in their eyes. I stood, threw my empty cup against the wall so that it smashed into a hundred pieces and screamed at them: ‘*Do you want to hear another story? Do you? How about a really scary one?*’ I charged out then, as I had charged out of



the church. Which was just as well, for it had been on the tip of my tongue to tell them how you were taken from me, to tell them *everything!*

But I have been warned about that, of course.

While I was still in hospital I received a visit from a man who never introduced himself. He said only that he was from the Home Office, as if that was introduction enough. He had bought me flowers and grapes, he poured me a glass of water and sat on the edge of my bed as might a relative or close friend. This strange man wasted very little of his time on pleasantries; I had barely wet my lips with the water before he got down to business...his reason for coming. He told me that both you and the mechanic had been attacked by a Rottweiler, the very same vicious animal that had killed George Willis – the man they had found in Sunday Gardens.

'A Rottweiler!' I challenged, aghast.

He nodded, but the nod was not a reply – more an instruction, or an *order*, if you prefer. He was telling me that this was the story I would go along with, and if I wanted to sing about anything else – if I were to go to the newspapers with what I knew to be true, for instance – then I would soon be doing my singing where the walls are padded and the coats buckle up at the back. He didn't exactly come right out and say this, but he didn't need to; I got it all from that one simple nod.

Covered up, Bucky...it's all been covered up. I imagine the police at the scene have been sworn to secrecy, taken some oath of confidentiality like bank-clerks or doctors – or perhaps more like the faceless who move within the Secret Service. And it fills me with a tremendous guilt and sadness to think that the relatives of the other victims have been given the vicious Rottweiler story as well. They believe that story to be true, you see, whereas I know otherwise.

What a strange world we live in when truths are sometimes considered too dangerous to know.

And the tabloids...how they *adored* the Rottweiler story. They carried it for days, and even now are printing stories of various 'vicious breeds' biting postmen and joggers and old men on their bicycles. They had those inane little phone-in polls where they asked the question: *Should all dangerous breeds be outlawed?* (How utterly senseless these polls are, determining little but the fathomless levels of simplicity in those who partake.) The 'vicious breed' became the subject of too many television documentaries and afternoon talk shows, and as a matter of course put up for debate in the House of Commons.

The press came to our door (I cannot think of it as *my* door, Bucky. Not at all), and well-wishers by the dozen. I turned them all away with hardly a word. The telephone rang constantly. One of the calls was from Sally Harmon.

'Was it, Carolyn?' she asked.

'Was it *what*?' I said, but of course I knew.

'Ellie's boy?' she whispered after a trying pause, to which my reply was only silence. Another of the calls held no voice, only a strained breathing. I think it was the old man – Ardley Benjamin Senior, though of that I'll never be sure.

Throughout all of this I existed as something once human, once feeling, but now unfeeling of everything but the pain. I pottered here and there, and as I have written I tried to ease this pain with various pursuits. But nothing could help me regain the substance I lost on the night I lost you.

And I think of this night often. I close my eyes and feel the shudder of the car as it overheated and died on us – and how I thought you were teasing. I think of your singular stubbornness in refusing to call for a taxi, and the rush of anger I feel is parried always when I think of your bravery in going back to get the mobile...

But most of all I think of Ellie's boy, how it had grabbed the back of my evening dress between its jaws and dragged me kicking and screaming from the mechanic's truck...through the woods, over rough ground and twisting roots to the house it had shared with its mother. And why? Why had it not killed me?

In my solitude, in the endless hours of my mourning I have had time for deliberation, and although I can be certain of nothing, I feel sure the reason I was spared is that Ellie's boy needed a mother. He – the man – was alone and frightened, and it – the wolf – was unable to control its bloodlust.

Brian Layne – Ellie's only boy – needed a mother.

Is there another explanation? I don't think so; I was there, and believe me, I have gone through the possibilities.

And so now Christmas without you nears – only a week away, and as I write this letter I can hear the carol singers outside: 'Away in a Manger,' and done beautifully, too. I have decided to spend Christmas with your parents. This may be hard but it has to be better than being alone. And I *am* getting stronger. I feel I am finding myself now...direction finally realised in the middle of last week when I was picking my way through a light lunch. The radio was on but I wasn't really listening – not until the DJ played 'More than a Woman' by

Tavares. And as that disco sound began I pushed myself away from the table and slowly stood, a brilliant smile making my whole body – my whole *soul* – shine for the first time in so very long. I thought of you, of everything about you...and how we made love on the beach on Paradise Island. I heard you whisper in my ear as if you were standing right there beside me, felt your arms around me, your perfect hands touching me. Then I turned the radio up as loud as it would go, broke into the living room and danced. I danced with my arms thrown out, laughing with my hair flying gold. I danced on the coffee table and I danced on the arm of the sofa. I took the photograph of you I keep on top of the bookcase and danced with it held to my breast. And as the music faded I felt a little, not *all* but a little, of my pain fade with it.

I stood there in the middle of the living room clasping your photo to my breast for a further twenty minutes, realising that there's not only a then and a now...there's also a tomorrow.

What would the doodling therapist make of that? What would he say if I told him I had danced with your photo to the groovy seventies sound of disco soul? And what on earth would he make of this letter?

I think I know the answer to this – qualified to judge him from our one session. Yes...he would listen (*clickety-clack*), then smile sympathetically and say something like: '*I understand this must be painful for you, Carolyn, but you really must let go.*'

Just let go. Right...it's so easy. *Au revoir*, baby – it was fun.

But what he would never understand is that I don't *want* to let go. Not ever. I want your memory with me, tomorrow and always – and as long as I've got the strength of body to dance with your photo to the sound of disco soul, I will.

Oh yes, darling...I will.

The carol singers are drawing closer. Their voices are getting louder and are losing none of their sweetness, I am happy to write. I will go out now and listen to them for a while. I will put money in their collection tin and then take myself up to bed. And sleep is bliss...as it has always been bliss for me since you died, for I *always* dream of you.

I dream of you – I see the green of your eyes and I can kiss them. I reach out to you and can *feel* you beneath my touch. You hold me and your heart beats, alive and strong. And in these dreams we are as excited as children, running with breathless wonder into a limitless world. In these dreams the stars revolve and burn around us, and the very air sighs as we embrace. In these dreams we have then and now, and of course we

have tomorrow. In these dreams we are naked, we are passion, we are one.

And in these dreams. . . we are perfectly wild.

I love you, Bucky.

Forever yours,

Carolyn.

**THE END**