



The Glass

(FREE SAMPLE)

Does anyone know the damage we inflict upon our children?
Innocently or deliberately, ignorantly or purposefully, does anyone see anything more than
themselves in a mirror?

There is no horror except that which we create for ourselves.

CARL LONG

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Chapter One

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Phil
Sunday 5th October 2017 03:45

Morning matey rise and shine. Your luck is about to change. Get out of bed and be at mine in 15 mins. This is the one.

*

Article from *The Eastern Daily Chronicle online*
Tuesday 30th October 2017

LADY BRADLEY DEAD

Lady Helena Bradley, daughter of the disgraced seventh Lord of Finimore, Anthony Bradley, has died.

Found by a servant in her bed chamber at the reputedly haunted family home, Beck House, Lady Helena died alone, having lived as a virtual recluse for much of her life since the demise and subsequent suicide of her father in 1962. She left neither Will nor Trust behind and neither friend nor pet survived her. The cause of her death is not known, but the inquest is not expected to reveal any suspicious circumstances. As the last descendent of the Bradley line, it is a relatively mundane end to an infamous family where legend and folklore have rarely been far away.

Despite her apparent 'poverty', a sizeable Inheritance Tax bill is expected to result in the sale of all her lands and estates. The *Eastern Daily Chronicle* understands that a private investor will acquire the Bradley property and that it is their immediate intention to donate everything to the National Trust. Much of the contents of the house are to be sold at public auction. Ashton District Council have been given responsibility for the practicalities.

Her father, Lord Anthony Bradley, is remembered as the man responsible for the deaths of thirteen local children on the family's former, vast, estate in Sierra Leone.

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They almost missed the entrance way. Half-hidden by a high bank of bramble and bush that bordered the rest of the road were tall wrought iron gates rusted to near destruction. These gates opened into a half-mile drive that ran dead straight to Beck House. The drive was patchy and overgrown, surrounded by unkempt gardens and ruinous outhouses. As colour and shape faded from most things within the grounds, only a bland sense of chaos remained. Everywhere you looked there was disorder and neglect. It was clear that no custodian had held responsibility nor cared for the Bradley Estate in many years. Like the drive, the house was surrounded by grass half a metre tall. It was a scene that was revealed to Christopher and Phil piecemeal as they travelled down the main artery toward the heart of the Estate.

Beck House itself was an oblong stone building that had fallen into disrepair. Vines crawled up the building and burrowed into the masonry. Windows were broken, woodwork was rotten, and the walls were stained. The chimney stacks had crumbled and the paint on the walls cracked. Roof tiles were scattered on the ground surrounding the house where paved

pathways were once prominent. The house was ring-fenced from the grounds by a wide uneven road of dirt and gravel.

Upon their arrival at the front of Beck House, Phil exited the van and was greeted by a pale spectacled man in a black suit under a grey overcoat. Their conversation was short. Phil immediately returned to the van and directed Christopher round to the rear of the property. Equally little could be discerned of the grounds to the rear. Beyond the long grass lay a thousand acres of woodland, equally as unattended as the front gardens and now something of a wilderness. A thick, constant fog hung in the air, smothering the unprepared in a cold sweat. It gave the whole place something of a furtive countenance. Christopher looked at his phone. There was no signal or internet access.

Sitting on a bench positioned by the servant's entrance was a portly middle-aged man. His face was flushed and partially obscured by ragged grey hair and his breath hung around him much like the fog in the dewy morning cold. He was smoking a cigarette and drinking a mug of hot tea. He looked up upon hearing a vehicle halt on the gravel in front of him but stopped short of physically getting up. Phil stepped down from the van and approached him.

"Morning, John," said Phil.

John Turner looked into Phil's face. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Why would you? I'm sure you go to bed most evenings not expecting to see the morning."

Christopher had stepped out of the van during this exchange and stood next to Phil. He and John had not met before.

"I would have thought Mike would have called on, uh, *professionals* for work like this," John said.

Phil laughed. "You're kidding, aren't you? Mike pays his kids' pocket-money through an account in Dominica. I heard Ed turned the job down."

John gave a snort. "If he's ever turned down work down before, I'm the maiden of the river. Who's the statue?"

Phil turned to Christopher, who did not move.

"John, this is Chris Higson. He's a man with a van and a license to drive anything. Chris, it is my honour to introduce you to the 'Key Master' himself, John Turner."

Chris stared at Phil. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

John Turner choked with laughter on his tea.

"Don't be naïve. Put it this way, John has a very reputable face and he's here today, officially, to direct proceedings."

"As you say," Christopher said.

"Where do you want us to start?" Phil asked.

"Wherever you like," he said. "Your job is to empty out the personal possessions from the living quarters. The old dear was a bit peculiar toward the end. She only used the same two rooms. One servant. No visitors. There's stuff everywhere in those two rooms. The rest of the house is pretty much empty. There are some plans of the house around here somewhere if you want to check. Everything was sold years ago to settle accounts and give her something to live on. Shame really, good-looking place."

"Good," said Phil. "The less stuff there is for us to cart about, the better."

"You'd be here for months if this place was full." John's head drifted back down and resumed a gaze that went far off into the grounds, ahead of him. "The two trucks out front are for you two. If you want tea or coffee, stay out of the kitchen. There's no power. There's a van around the far side selling drinks," gesturing first behind himself to the servant's entrance, the kitchen, and then towards the side of the house Christopher and Phil had not driven round.

"You're a kind m...you're a good...cheers, John," said Phil.

John smiled. "My pleasure. Come and find me when you're done and we'll sort out the money. I presume cash is acceptable." He took a long drag on his cigarette and Christopher and Phil walked round to the far side of the house to acquire a cup of hot coffee.

The late Lady Bradley's living quarters within the house were as isolated in terms of signs of human habitation as Beck House was amongst its grounds, but Phil's fears that there was little left seemed hollow now. A cursory examination had indeed proven that only two rooms had anything left in them, but they were large rooms that were full of a startling variety of possessions. What Lady Bradley had not sold she had evidently hoarded. There were many books closeted behind glass cases. Ornamental figurines that would once have fetched a high price but were now mostly damaged sat on every available flat surface. A lot of the furniture was either rotted by woodworm or age and the artwork mostly of questionable taste and quality. Moth-eaten and dust-spoilt fabrics hung and lay about. Much of it would need to be restored, or perhaps at least an attempt made. The hardest part of the business for Christopher and Phil was categorising the many elements that comprised the whole.

Despite this, Christopher and Phil's work progressed well. Dust-masks protected them from the presence and odour of age in the house and by the time the sun was fully on display in the sky both rooms had been cleared. Pleased with such excellent progress, they felt it was time to pause to acquire more coffee.

The pair reclined on the same bench that had earlier been occupied by John Turner's bulk. To add extra comfort to his own break, Phil dragged a stone-pot plant across the concrete path, marking it, and put his feet up.

"How's the little one?" said Phil.

"I appreciate the pretence, but it's not necessary," said Christopher.

"Fair enough, but humour me...William still wetting the bed?" he asked.

"Not so much."

"The cat still peeing outside your bedroom door?"

"Not so much."

Phil drank another mouthful. "Does this mean you and Maria are back on happier ground?"

"Not really. But what would William know about it? He's seven. We don't argue in front of him, so why wouldn't it be fine?"

Phil threw his empty polystyrene cup over his shoulder. "Hedge your bets, mate. It's time to bail out of this one."

"If I walk, she gets the house. I'm not having that. Besides, I do love her."

"Whatever you say, mate." Phil stood up, belched, and turned to face Christopher who had drained the remainder of his own coffee cup which he set on the floor at his feet.

Christopher looked up at him. "Do you care?" he asked.

"I care how it affects you."

"That's sweet."

Phil smiled. "No. I have to put up with you, otherwise."

"What do you know about it anyway? You've not got a wife or kids."

"And for good reason," he happily said.

Phil's gaze drifted upwards toward the top of the building. He stared silently for several minutes. Christopher closed his eyes.

"Looks like there's an attic up there," Phil said.

"So?"

"There was no attic listed on the inventory."

"Again, so?"

"Well let's go have a look. There could be anything up there."

"You want more work to do?"

Phil smiled quickly. "No. But we might find something worth our while up there."

Christopher frowned. "I think I know what you mean."

"I'm just saying let's have a look. There's no harm in just looking."

Christopher shook his head. "I can't really be bothered."

"We'll just go up the stairs to the top floor and spend five minutes looking for an entrance off the hallway or something."

"That's why we're here today, isn't it? You wanted to see if there was anything valuable to loot, didn't you?"

"How very dare you."

Christopher sighed.

"Do you not need the money now?" Phil asked.

A person can always do with more money.

"Okay," Christopher said. He stood up and cast his own gaze upwards. "Let's go rape and pillage."

They returned into the house through the kitchen door, through service tunnels and several empty rooms, until they found themselves at the back of the main entrance area of Beck House. From the front of the building, the entrance way opened into a staircase that was grand in style and size. It was divided by a balustrade that forced an inhabitant to travel upwards towards either the northern or southern areas of the first-floor before the two halves met again on the second floor, forming a symbiosis that was completely absent from any other of the house's features. From there a single stairway lead to the third floor. Until this day, no-one had been up into this area of the house for many years. Each footprint on the thick carpet sent up a plume of dust that revealed a hidden pattern underneath and further disturbed the dust in the air.

As Christopher and Phil travelled deeper into the abandoned regions of the house, the thickness of both the air and the darkness increased despite the coming day. Visibility became as limited to the two men as it had been on their approach to the house earlier that morning. The silence was deafening.

Phil found what they were looking for. At the end of the hallway on the southern edge of the main house he found a small door leading to a narrow, stone, spiral stairway. It was the only way they could find that could take them further upwards.

The cramped and musky stairwell rose into total darkness.

"You first," Christopher said.

Phil looked uncomfortable but was not about to threaten his manhood with a display of weakness.

"No problem," he said, but his voice broke as he said it.

Christopher kept close to Phil, who removed a torch from his belt and powered up the stairs. Once in the stairwell, only the noise of their footsteps and the smothering feather touch of the cobwebs that hung in the air offered any sensory experience as they ascended into near utter blackness. Phil began to take his progress a little more cautiously after his second bump on the head. Had he not, he might have seriously hurt himself on the hatch.

A thick oaken wedge was heavily secured with iron bolts at both ends and lay flat above them like a ceiling. With an effort, and a few nicks to the fingers, Phil unlatched the bolts and broke the seal that had formed around the edges of the hatch with a few blows from the back-end of his torch. He forced the hatch open on its hinges and felt the weight of it push him back down. Bowing down, Phil squared his shoulders against the hatch and heaved with what strength he could muster until, finally, it fell backward under its own weight with a strike that shook the floor above them. A rush of pent-up air that had been trapped for an unknown count of years screamed past them, free at last, and almost knocked them down.

Christopher clambered up through the hatch after Phil until both men were stood up, staring into a void, their torch light scarcely puncturing holes in the fabric of the pitch black that enveloped them.

“Wow,” said Phil. His voice was feeble in the barely perceivable space around them. The pair stood in absolute silence, staring into the nothing.

“Ever get the impression you're somewhere you shouldn't be?” Christopher said.

Christopher felt something tickle his leg through the left leg of his jeans. A casual look down was followed by a frantic slap at a giant house spider the size of his hand. The liquefied contents of the monster's abdomen exploded under his hand, which he duly wiped clean on the other leg of his jeans.

Establishing a sure footing with the help of the light of his own torch, Phil gradually found his way to an edge of the space. “I'm sure I saw some sort of skylight on the roof. If this is what I think it is, then maybe...” He shone his torch upwards.

Both men were now brandishing their torches above them. Like the rest of the building, it was grand in size and ornate in design. While an overall picture was denied to them, it was obvious even in the dark that this space ran for most of the length of the main house. Phil found the first window.

“Here,” he called. Christopher carefully made his way across to him. “How do you open it?” asked Phil.

“There'll probably be a...ah!” Christopher found a two-metre long pole with a copper hoop attached to one end. He picked up the pole and, after a few increasingly aggravating attempts, managed to catch the loop around the hook at the top of the window and began to twist the pole anti-clockwise. They were showered in dust, dirt and filth, but slowly, and with a loud groan of reluctance, the blinds opened and light flooded into the room. The window itself could not be opened. The air still tasted rank.

The attic was a long rectangular space whose ceiling sloped from a central ridge right to the floor. Three other windows adorned the attic, another on the western side and two others symmetrically on the eastern side. Upon closer inspection, none of these would open at all.

The walls and floor were wood-panelled and plain, covered with dry rot or dead bees. In rows along the floor and clustered up along the walls, was a vast collection of furniture, toys, trinkets, clothing, boxes, household tools, cooking utensils, gardening equipment, ornaments, framed paintings, portraits and photographs and even some small agricultural equipment. Whether these items had respectively been discarded, preserved, broken, or just forgotten, Christopher and Phil could only guess.

“Jackpot!” said Phil, “There's going to be something up here worth a few quid, that's for damn sure!”

“Look, we've been up since four o'clock this morning...we're not really going to start cherry-picking through all of this junk?”

“Yeah, you're upset you can't be at home to have Maria complaining at you.”

Christopher shook his head. “We're going to be up here forever trying to find something valuable amongst all this.”

Phil kept smiling. “I'm telling you, none of this stuff is on the inventory. Technically it does not exist. You can't be done for stealing something that doesn't exist, you have to admit.”

“So it's stealing now?”

“No, I said it's *not* stealing.”

“I'm sure the law would see it that way.”

“And whose pressing charges?”

Christopher rolled his eyes. “Alright. Fine. You go down that side, I'll start this side.”

The sunlit areas of the attic were just as hard to see as the areas of the attic still in darkness. There was so much dust in the air that visibility was still limited to that which was close by. The two searched meticulously, with intermittent exclamations of surprise, frustration and laughter at what they found: brasses, silverware, candelabra and other tableware, boxes full of broken jewellery from Fabergé broaches to loose pearls, a corn husk doll dressed in a cloak of scarlet silks and a wee bonnet that was probably quite pretty at one time, dresses of fine embroidery (half-eaten by mice), empty oak and mahogany trunks, a Christmas tree. Christopher's interest grew as he looked through the items, but not being learned in antiques he felt ill-equipped to determine what was and was not valuable. He checked the paintings he found for names of artists he recognised. There were none.

"Chris, check it out!" called Phil, "This little thing will be worth a couple of hundred, I reckon."

Christopher paid no attention to what Phil was holding. "I'll take your word for it," he said, as much to himself as to Phil. Christopher's attention had been arrested by an oil painting that was propped up against the wall. The dust cover had slid from it and the portrait beneath lay exposed and unblemished.

Christopher's eye drank in every detail, utterly captivated for no reason he could understand or express.

Phil appeared behind him. "I don't see what's so special about this. Is it an original?" Phil asked.

The artist's signature had been partially obscured by water marks.

"How do I know? Can't Google anything can we? No signal is there?" Christopher stood up. Despite his ignorance, there was something about the painting that made him think it was valuable. A vague but uncanny sense of connection made an impression on Christopher at the sight of it.

Phil shook his head and smiled before he recommenced his own search. For opportunity's sake, Christopher continued to search also.

They had been in the attic for a further twenty minutes before Phil found something he was happy to take. Through his previous professional exploits, Phil had some knowledge of antiquities, specifically Chinese ceramics. Hidden and protected in an oak chest he had found a vase of this nature. He was now quite ready to leave.

Christopher's search had become far more laborious. He spent as much time looking for something smaller as he did considering how he would squeeze a two and a half metre wide oil painting into the van without anyone noticing, all the while trying to deny the chill he kept feeling snake down his back. He moved further down the attic and examined items that were increasingly distant from the window light. The torch light began to strain his eyes.

It was at the moment he was about to give up that Christopher saw someone else in the attic with them. He jumped and let out an involuntary shout.

Phil whipped his head and body round to face Christopher. "What is it?"

"There's someone down there!" Christopher pointed his finger down into the dark. "I saw someone move!"

Phil kept still. He stared into the darkness for a moment before he took a few, slow steps forward. He brandished his torch ahead of him like a club. Christopher could hear his own heart pounding into his chest.

Then Phil burst into laughter.

He threw a few choice names at Christopher as he strode confidently forward to the other person. With an easy swipe of his arm, he pulled down the remainder of a huge canvas sheet. A tsunami of dust swept at his legs and feet.

A Cheval Glass mirror that stood a meter and a half tall and almost half a metre wide was uncovered.

Phil laughed unreservedly at him. Christopher ignored him and took a deep breath.

It was made of mahogany. Simple and elegant. Two delicately carved feet propped up a thick base containing a drawer. The mirror pane itself was held in a bevelled-edge frame that came to a pointed arch at the top. The light emanating from Christopher and Phil's torches seemed to be absorbed by the mirror, reflecting none of their light back at them. Their own reflections, slightly visible in the daylight, seemed to be half-hidden by shadows.

"I've got an idea," said Christopher.

Phil turned his head expectantly.

"Maria would love this," Christopher explained.

Phil frowned.

"No, seriously. I think this will score me some serious brownie points."

"You think a mirror will save your marriage?"

"I think it will help mend some fences."

"And you're ditching the painting for it?"

Christopher thought for a moment. "No. I'm taking both."

"You do realise there's an element of subterfuge involved in any theft, don't you? It's going to be hard enough you sneaking out an eight foot oil painting, never mind an eight foot oil painting *and* a six foot mirror. Don't you think?"

"I thought it wasn't stealing if it doesn't exist?"

"It doesn't exist because no-one else knows about it..."

"They'll see us taking this stuff downstairs, won't they? That's our job. What they won't see is you and me loading it up into *my* van. Who's going to recognise any of this stuff?"

Phil rolled his eyes and clutched his vase to his chest. "Whatever, you're on your own with this one."

"You said yourself, this stuff isn't inventoried anywhere. Who's going to notice if we take one piece each or two, or all of it?" Christopher said pointing around at random.

Phil paused, looking about. His eyes lit up. He removed his phone from his pocket and proceeded to take photographs of some of the items with its camera. "That's a good point..."

"You are always having your cake and eating it..."

Phil continued with his search.

Christopher smiled at his reflection in the mirror. It wasn't returned. "...Now it's my turn."

*

Twitter post

Maria Higson

Date: Sunday 5th October 2017

Time: 11:18

In a warm bed watching TV with a hot cup of tea and enjoying a lay-in. Bliss.

#lovinglife #homesweethome

Chapter Two

Facebook post

Christopher Higson

Date: Sunday 5th October 2017

Time: 17:21

Its good to be home after a hard day surrounded by the people you love.

*

Christopher heard his son William call for him as soon as he closed the porch door. Christopher then opened the front door and stepped into the house. The cat had followed him in and ran straight past him up the staircase and disappeared around the corner at the top. Christopher turned away from the staircase and walked into the lounge.

Christopher and Maria Higson lived on a quiet cul-de-sac that lay almost hidden as it sloped down and away from a bend on a main road. Many cars pulling out of that cul-de-sac had been side-swiped by other motorists in complete ignorance that the junction even existed. It was surrounded by the grey wastelands of industry and a cost-effective snarl of social housing. The existence of the beautiful-looking row of detached and semi-detached houses was a testament to a time pre-dating the indifference of local government planning. Despite its surroundings, running down off the hill lay a small pocket of families and individuals who were able to enjoy both a relative ambient quiet and easy access to the conveniences of modern twenty-first-century urban living.

Their two-storey house was detached from the neighbours and had become increasingly shabby. The roof bled heat and was covered in pigeon droppings. Instead of insulating the roof three years ago when they could afford to, Christopher had a small porch built on the front of the house. Coats hung in there and shoes lay all over the floor. A year after, instead of upgrading the boiler to one that could reliably supply hot water, he had an extension built behind the garage creating a room linked to the garage and the lounge, a room the family referred to as the garage room. It served as little more than a utility room. It was meant to be a dining room. Christopher still hadn't installed a shower over the bathtub. Maria kept asking.

The building was four rooms, including the extension, on the bottom floor and three rooms on the top floor, with a staircase stuck on the side. Each one of these rooms was slightly too small for purpose, perhaps an architectural joke. The furnishings were a haphazard combination of the old and the very old, quality with the cheap and nasty, and decorative where it should have been functional and vice versa. All had been acquired by Christopher's opportunistic hands over the course of time. Nothing matched and nothing fitted together.

Short gardens at front and back, and rarely trod paths on either side, framed their home with both freedom and loneliness. The land dropped steeply making the house look almost as though it was ready to fall backwards, the rear garden running down the slope of the hill top-to-bottom into dark, impenetrable bushes overshadowed by tall trees. A line of concrete steps led nowhere, bisecting the back garden from back door to the wilderness at the bounds. A shed which contained the previous resident's gardening equipment was almost lost to sight, half-swallowed by the vegetation growing abundantly. It was now a squat for rats

and spiders. There was a pond amid a rockery in the corner by the shed somewhere, a stagnant pool of water that too often lead to the house being invaded by frogs during the summer months.

At the end of the cul-de-sac where Christopher had parked his van was a footpath in and out of a recreational piece of land known as the Chase. The Chase was split in two by a small tributary and bordered on the opposite site by an industrial park. If you walked the half-mile from one end to the other, you voyaged through a riddle of abandoned dens, BMX tracks and dog muck. It was rough uneven terrain that was partially wooded, nettled and brambled. Where it was not, footpaths had been beaten through. At one end of this footpath sat a pub amongst fields of terraced houses, while at the other end there was a small playing field that incorporated a children's playground. The whole place was perfect for walking dogs and adventurous kids. At night, the pathway that bridged Christopher's street and the Chase was obscured by two broken streetlights. They were the only two on the street not functioning, which is why local kids smoked there.

Christopher planned to surprise his wife with the mirror. He spent the long drive hoping the effort he had gone to would be recognised. Had either Maria or William seen or heard the van pull-up outside the house, the game would have been up, and Christopher would not have been able to get the items inside unnoticed. Fortunately, his was not the only white van on his street so he passed his own house in relative anonymity. He covered up the painting and stored it in the garage. Christopher believed that if Maria saw the painting she would want that too.

The mirror he set up ready for presentation in the garage room. Christopher then doubled back out and re-entered the house through the front door so as not to arouse his wife's suspicions nor alert his son to his presence. All of which had to be done silently. It had all been more trouble than he thought.

"Daddy, have you been at work all day again?" William asked. Christopher and Phil's search of the Beck House attic had severely delayed his arrival home.

"I have indeed, my boy," Christopher said, "but I've got something for you."

William's face lit up. He waited with bated breath, barely containing himself. Christopher produced a comic book from the large inside-pocket of his jacket.

It was only when it was almost too late, when Christopher was about to turn his van down and into the cul-de-sac, that he realised it was probably wise to bring his son a gift as well as his wife. That would keep the child happy too. Smart, he told himself.

William squeaked with pleasure and grabbed the comic. "Thank you, Daddy! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Christopher ruffled his son's head of short hair before the boy ran away to the sofa and buried himself in the comic.

Peppy had run straight back down the stairs and walked into the lounge. He leapt onto the sofa and sat next to William. He looked out into the room at Christopher and Maria.

Christopher turned to his wife and pointed at the cat. "Is the dressing room door shut, can he not get to his food?"

The message received tone chimed on Maria's phone. "You're late," she replied. She typed a response.

Message to: Jane

Message from: Maria

Sunday 5th October 2017 16:05

He's back x

“How are you?”

“You said you'd be home two hours ago.”

There was a moment of silence, punctuated only by another chime from her phone.

Message to: Maria

Message from: Jane

Sunday 5th October 2017 16:05

Tell him Peppy had his dinner so he'll have to have what's in the cat's bowl for his x

“Messaging your bestie?”

“Yes. Productive day with yours, was it?” Maria said, not raising her head from her phone, typing again. Her tone was at odds with itself. It was sarcastic but inquisitive, accusatory yet reasonable, angry but measured.

Message to: Jane

Message from: Maria

Sunday 5th October 2017 16:06

He's not going to apologise x

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh good.”

Are you even going to say sorry? He could see her think it.

“There's something I want to give you,” Christopher said.

Maria looked up at him. “You, your hands, or anything else, are not coming anywhere near me.”

Christopher smiled. “Follow me.”

“Stop telling me what to do,” she said.

“I've got you a present,” he said.

“I'm not interested in anything you've got,” she said. Another message.

Message to: Maria

Message from: Jane

Sunday 5th October 2017 16:06

Well I'm sorry x

“Yes, you are,” he said.

“No, I'm not,” she said.

“You will be,” he said.

“I won't be,” she said.

“It's a surprise,” Christopher's voice was beginning to rise.

“Not interested,” Maria's voice too became louder.

“You will be,” he said.
“I won’t be,” she said. Another message chimed.

Message to: Maria
Message from: Jane
Sunday 5th October 2017 16:06

You can talk to me if you need to x

Christopher sighed and raised his voice. “I’ve. Got. You. A. Fuc-”
“Language!” Maria interjected. Only now did she look up at Christopher. She would not have anyone curse in front of her son.
“Dear God! Please end the nonsense!” Christopher cried.
“Amen!”
“Why does it have to be like this?” he demanded.
Maria rounded for the fight. “It’s like *this* because *this* is how *you* make it!”
Christopher puffed out his chest. “So you’re saying this has nothing to do with *you*?”
“You think this is about *me*?”
“It has everything to do with you!”
“You think that I’m just going to roll over and let you do what you want, but you’re wrong. Why are you home late...again? Is there something going on?”
“I was working!” Christopher cried. He suspected that she had practised her speech.
“It’s me that works so that you don’t have to! Would you rather go back to work?”
“That’s not fair.”
“Oh, I’m terribly sorry. Do you think it’s fair for anyone else? You were saying something about this being of my making?”
“I could go back to work! You just won’t stay at home and be a parent.”
“I don’t want to be stuck in the house all day.”
“Neither do I.”
“So both of us go out to work and then we both get out of the house.”
“What, and waste most of our money paying for childcare?”
“Work part-time.”
“*You* work part-time.”
Both turned their head slowly to face William, who was already looking at them.
“William, will you give mummy and daddy five minutes, please?” Maria said. Her tone made it clear that it was not a request.
William left willingly. The cat stayed where he was.
William left the house through the kitchen and sat on the patio step just outside the closed backdoor. Both his parents’ voices continued to rise, meaning he could still hear them perfectly well.
“I can’t believe we’re having to go through this again,” Christopher bellowed.
“Why do you have to shout at me?” Maria whimpered.
“You make me so angry.”
“That’s rich coming from you.”
“If you’ve got something to say, just say it.”

Message to: Jane
Message from: Maria
Sunday 5th October 2017 16:06

Shouting at me. My fault again x

There was a pause before Maria answered, calmly. "I have nothing I want to say. You?"

Christopher pitched his reply at an equally calm tone and volume. "No. Nothing I haven't said a hundred times before."

Maria growled. "You can't help it, can you?" she said.

Both competitors caught their breath. Neither seemed to have the stamina for any more of this round.

Message to: Maria
Message from: Jane
Sunday 5th October 2017 16:07

Being selfish x

"Baby," was his cute name for her and his token gesture of submission, whether he was being genuine or not. It had worked before. "I got you something because I want to make you happy. It's in the garage room."

Message to: Jane
Message from: Maria
Sunday 5th October 2017 16:07

Well he'll find out i can be as stubborn as he can x

Maria's front did not drop, she held her position firm. Christopher swore. Maria glared. Christopher turned to walk away.

Every time Christopher brought her a gift home, Maria secretly hoped it would be a shower. "Is it for the bathroom?" she asked.

Christopher rolled his eyes. "Will you just follow me?" he pleaded, feeling tired. He needed a drink.

Maria dropped her guard and allowed herself to be led toward the garage room, the door to which was accessed via a very short passage that ran underneath the staircase.

Christopher stopped his wife at the closed, connecting door.

"Close your eyes," he told her.

"Stop playing games," she told him.

"Will. You. Just..."

Before he could finish, she had closed her eyes. Her phone chimed again.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her through the door with as much ceremony as he had used when throwing it open.

Maria was taken to the centre of the room, which was almost as big as the lounge. A single, shade-less light hung in the centre of the room with a weak phosphorescent glow that shone a dirty crimson light through Maria's closed eyelids. She didn't peek. She said it would only spoil her surprise, assuming it was one worth waiting for anyway.

"Open," Christopher said. Maria sighed and opened her eyes.

Maria gazed at her reflection. She marvelled at how good she looked and moved in closer. Her mouth was open with surprise, but her eyes were light and bright. They held a deep, vivid colour. She saw no blemishes on her skin and her hair looked invigorated. She didn't look tired. The lighting in the room, inadequate for almost anything else, was *perfect*.

"I love it." She turned around and kissed her husband.

Christopher smiled, relieved.

"Where did you get it from?" she asked.

It was time to lay it on thick. "From a stately home up north. For hundreds of years ladies of the aristocracy have looked at themselves in this mirror." Christopher knew this remark would butter her up. The idea that this mirror had served nobility in high places and had now been passed down to her would provide Maria with a rush of vainglorious sentiment that would completely distract her from her grievances.

Christopher was feeling generous, "It needs a clean. I'll sand it down and give it a varnish and polish it up. The back is a bit of a mess."

Maria gave him a short inquisitive glance before turning back to the mirror. She reached out a hand and slowly pivoted the glass on its axis. She stepped backwards as she drew the glass up higher and higher before letting go. Their reflection slowly rolled away as the ceiling came into quick view and was replaced by visions unreachable to them, the mirror having turned now a full one hundred and eighty degrees.

The back panel was covered in scratches and gouges. Dozens of names had been carved into the wood, covering it completely from top to bottom.

"Reminds me of what we used to do to the desks when I was at school," Maria said.

"Aye, that's what I thought," said Christopher.

"Well, no rush. The back will be facing the wall, anyway."

The pair stood apart, facing each other. It was a quiet moment, suddenly punctuated by a drop in Maria's brow and an intake of breath.

"Did you steal this?"

Christopher had hoped to avoid this conversation. "For you...baby..."

"Chris!" she cried.

"Look, we cheated *a little*. We did a house clearance today and found some stuff unaccounted for in an attic no-one apparently knew about. That's why I was late."

Christopher desperately tried to salvage his hard-earned brownie points.

"You were late home because you were on the thief?"

"For you."

"You stole this and you're not going to sell it?" She knew that Christopher would never do a job for free.

Christopher squirmed. "No, I'm not. And how is it stealing? You can't be done for stealing something that doesn't exist, can you?"

"You think the police will see it that way?"

"Who's pressing charges, you?"

Maria's eyes bored into his.

This is just like you.

He could see contempt in her face.

Everything is tainted.

"It's not stolen," he said.

“Don’t lie to me!” Maria spat. She spun the mirror around on its pivot with enough force that Christopher thought she would break the whole thing. She didn’t. It rolled and rolled until it finally settled, the mirror-pane facing them.

“Baby, look...we picked up two items to sell...and a third we’re not.”

Maria looked stern and hurt.

“For Christ’s sake, are you forgetting something? I brought this back for you! I thought of you! I took a hell of a risk for you! Is nothing good enough *for you?*” Any sense of success he had felt was entirely washed away by the tide of phoney morality flowing from his wife. Did it matter that money had not exchanged hands? Did it matter that Christopher did not have a receipt for the mirror? What he had done wasn’t *that* wrong, was it?

He shouted on. “Phil wanted to sell this, but I wouldn’t let him. I know how much you’ve wanted a tall mirror in the dressing room, so I wanted you to have it even if we could’ve made some money on it!”

Lies.

“None of the stuff in the attic where we found this was on the inventory so, to be honest, we left it all up there. No-one will miss it.” He took a calming breath and put his arms on her shoulders “So you see...we didn’t *really* steal anything.”

Maria looked at him thoughtfully. “You can be very sweet sometimes.”

Christopher hadn’t realised he had been holding his breath. Now it escaped. “Well, you make me want to do these things.” To seal the deal, he even offered to carry it upstairs for her there and then.

“I presume you want this in your dressing room?” Christopher was hoping she would say no. It suddenly seemed like an effort.

“Why don’t you do nice things like this more often?” she asked

Christopher involuntarily dropped his shoulders and shut his eyes.

“Yes, please,” she said. “Thank you.”

Christopher was turning to leave when Maria spoke again. “Shame really, thinking about it.”

“What now?” Christopher asked.

“Shame to think I won’t be using my old mirror to dress anymore.”

Christopher had an idea. “How about this...rather than getting rid of the old mirror, I’ll move it out of the dressing room and hang it on the wall on the upstairs landing, if you like.”

Maria smiled. “Yeah.”

The dressing room was actually the spare third bedroom. It was not as large as the double room she and Christopher occupied but larger than their son’s bedroom. Christopher had converted it for his wife, at her request, a few years ago. He had been very happy to do this as it concentrated all his wife’s cosmetics, shoes, clothing, and anything else she didn’t want him to know about into one place that he seldom visited. Maria had been using her old mirror, one she had owned since she was a girl, for as long as Christopher had known her. But recently she had made no secret of a desire for a full-length ‘dress’ mirror for the room. Such change in the dressing room was not uncommon. In the past, a veneer vanity chest had replaced a trestle table. A plain functional floor-standing lamp had been replaced by a standard lamp with a fabric shade of cyan blue that, while it didn’t match the gold-plated trunk of the lamp, did compliment the deep ruby-red paint that adorned the walls of the room. Of course, all these items at some point had to be moved up and down a flight of stairs. More work for Christopher.

Christopher turned his head toward the connecting door to the lounge to leave but stopped when he saw his son standing there.

“William?” he said.

Maria’s head turned to face the door.

“How long have you been standing there?” Christopher asked.

William looked at his toes.

“Will you be a good boy while Mummy and Daddy take this mirror upstairs?” he asked.

William didn’t answer, but left.

*

Message to: Maria

Message from: Jane

Sunday 5th October 2017 16:07

You have got to do what makes you happy. Whether he likes it or not.

*

Facebook post

Maria Higson

Date: Sunday 5th October 2017

Time: 20:07

What a lovely day. My husband came from work with a beautiful present for me before giving me a foot rub. Lucky girl!

Chapter Three

Facebook post

Christopher Higson

Date: Wednesday 8th October 2017

Time: 17:41

Beer and steak for dinner served by a beautiful woman. Admit your all jealous.

*

“Have you seen William?” asked Maria.

Christopher stood at the kitchen sink, where he washed dinner plates and stared out of the window. Directly behind him with her arms folded, under the arch connecting the lounge and the kitchen, stood Maria with her eyes on Christopher.

“He’s upstairs in his room, isn’t he?” Christopher said.

“He’s been spending a lot of his time upstairs recently. Normally he won’t leave me alone.”

A pause followed, broken only by the clink of ceramics and the clatter of stainless steel. Christopher stared at the half reflection in the window of himself and the kitchen behind him, his mind filling in the gaps in his vision. Outside was dark with night and out of focus. He noticed a fluorescent blue glow like flames out amongst the gloom. He leaned forward as he tried to concentrate on the ghostly flicker, bumping his head on the pane. Shifting his gaze slightly, he observed the blue flames move with him. In his peripheral vision, he found the source. He turned his gaze fully before he walked across to the still burning gas hob and turned it off.

“I found him in my dressing room earlier.”

“He wasn’t trying on your clothes, was he?” Christopher couldn’t help but laugh at his own joke.

“He was just sitting in front of the mirror.”

“That a problem? He’s not painting pictures with your lipstick on it or anything?”

Christopher placed another clean plate on the draining board.

“No. He wasn’t doing anything. He was just sitting in front of the mirror, cross-legged and silent, *staring* into it.”

Christopher carried on with his domestic duty. He hadn’t turned to face Maria. “I’ll tell him to stay out of there.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “He seemed content. Actually, I got loads done today. Even the cat wasn’t hanging around. Maybe it’s me.”

Christopher put the last of the washing up down to dry. He said, “If it becomes a problem for you, I’ll put a bolt on the top of the door.”

Maria shook her head. “No, I don’t think it’ll be worth it. He’ll grow out of it. A mirror must be fairly interesting to a seven-year-old...mustn’t it?”

“I don’t remember them being that interesting.”

With a last look at Christopher, Maria turned on her heels and headed for the stairwell. Christopher turned off the kitchen light and headed for the lounge. He planted himself on the sofa for a post-dinner nap.

Barely a moment passed before he heard the stairs creak again with Maria's footsteps as she came back down. Christopher's curiosity overcame his lethargy and he opened his eyes. "Where was he?" he asked.

"In his room," Maria answered with a note of concern. "He was curled up on his bed."

"This parenting lark's a stroll, isn't it? He's putting himself to bed. I like it."

Christopher was amused with himself again.

"Don't joke," she said. "He's awake."

"So?"

"He wasn't sleeping or doing anything. He's wide-awake and fully dressed, but in bed. He hasn't even got his night-light on."

"Was he upset, or crying, or something?" Christopher asked, interested now.

"No" she replied, confused. "He said he was fine and that he was just having a lie down."

It was unusual, Christopher could concede, perhaps even odd, but hardly worth worrying about.

Bottom line: when a seven-year-old has a problem, they tend to let you know about it. Right?

Suddenly, Maria said, "I didn't believe him."

Christopher adopted a firm tone. "If he says he's fine, he's fine. When I go up and say goodnight to him, I'll have a chat with him. *He's fine.*"

Christopher turned on the television with the remote control. He was beginning to feel the opportunity to sleep fade.

"Yeah, I suppose..."

Maria turned and stared at the television. She did not seem reassured, but she was apparently able to put it to the back of her mind. She sat down at the other end of the sofa and Christopher was happy to let her keep her thoughts on the subject, whatever they were. She didn't say anything more on them.

Christopher broke the silence between them, "So, what do you think of your new mirror?"

"I love it. I never see my acne in it. My diet is working, I seem to be getting my old figure back. I'm very happy."

Christopher reflected that a confident Maria boded well for everyone in the house. "That's good, baby. I'm pleased."

Christopher closed his eyes as fatigue slowly washed back over him. He enjoyed the faint slipping away that heralded sleep until Maria ruined it completely.

"Don't doze off just yet," she said.

"Why?" he asked rather too aggressively.

"Go and say goodnight to him now if you're going to have a sleep." Her voice was controlled and measured. It meant she would not be argued with. "You know as well as I do that if you fall asleep now it will be too late by the time you wake up again. He won't settle until you do."

She was right. "Okay."

"And everyone in this house knows what a misery you are if you get woken up from a nap."

Reluctantly, Christopher lifted himself off the sofa before making his way out of the room. He plodded slowly up the confines of the darkened stairwell. Like Christopher, the stairs groaned with every step.

Christopher reached the landing at the top of the stairs, a short hallway with enough room for three doors to lead from it: left, right and straight ahead. Two of the doors were

open. Christopher stepped straight ahead and snapped shut the door to Maria's dressing room then leaned around the half open door to his left.

William lay asleep in his bed, breathing slowly. He still wore the clothes he had been dressed in that day, but his father reasoned that there was no point in waking him now just to change him into his pyjamas. That could wait until he came wandering downstairs later in the evening, as he usually did. He was now under his duvet cover and seemed deep in a dream.

Then Christopher remembered that sleeping was exactly what he wanted to be doing.

Everything seemed fine, from the sleeping child in the bed to the toys all over the floor and drawings tacked to the walls. He turned and walked out of the room and made his way downstairs. When he walked back into the lounge, Maria's head snapped up.

"He's fine. He's asleep." Christopher said. Vindicated, he sat down and closed his eyes.

*

Message to: Jane

Message from: Maria

Thursday 9th October 2017 19:05

Same old... x

*

It was the evening of the following day, a Wednesday. On Wednesday nights, Christopher had to join Maria and William to visit Maria's parents. They were running late.

"Are you ready yet?" Christopher moaned to Maria as she casually walked into the lounge. She was walking back from the bathroom, via the kitchen.

"Yes, I am *now*. Have *you* got William downstairs?" Maria countered.

"No, not yet. Was there any point until you were ready to go?"

"Yes. Now that we're ready to go we have to wait for him."

"What's the difference as to who has to wait around for the other?"

Maria cursed under her breath. She stamped past Christopher, through the lounge and upstairs. Christopher sighed.

Maria charged her way upstairs, continuing to mutter obscenities as she went. She slapped the landing light on and strode into William's room.

"Come on, darling, time to g-" Maria fell silent, talking to an empty room.

"William?" she asked. She dismissed the idea that he was hiding, turned and left the room.

"William!"

Maria opened the door to her dressing room and saw William sitting in front of the mirror.

"William...honey...what are you doing?" She knelt beside him and put her arm around his shoulders.

William lifted his head and looked at his mother. "I've been talking to Jenny."

Maria was stunned into silence. Eventually, she stammered, "What?"

"She's a friend."

Something about Maria's face compelled William to tell her, "I'm not weird."

She had felt disconcerted by William's recent habit of staring into her mirror, and despite knowing that it was down to something relatively normal, an imaginary friend, she felt no reassurance.

"Where is she?" Maria asked.

William turned to face the mirror again. "She's gone for now."

Maria thought the best thing to do was embrace it. Certainly for the moment, as they were in a rush.

Maria ruffled his hair and kissed his forehead. "Are you ready to go to your Nan's now? I dare say she'll make you a bowl of custard after dinner," she said with a smile for him.

"Yeah, I'm ready," he said. William stood up and ambled out of the room without betraying a shred of emotion. He left his mother to kneel on the dressing room floor by the mirror, alone.

Christopher heard William plod down the stairs before he appeared in person in the door to the lounge.

"Are you ready to get this out of the way for another week?" Christopher asked, bored already.

"What do you mean?" William asked.

Christopher checked himself. "You'll understand when you're older."

"I don't understand."

"Exactly, but you will one day."

"What?"

"That there are some things in life that you just have to do."

"Like what?"

Christopher realised his mistake so cut the conversation short.

"Come on," Christopher said, "let's go to the van." He opened the front door. "Now we're waiting for your mother...again. Maria!"

Maria heard Christopher's voice echo up the stairwell, diminishing in power as it moved through the house. She turned and looked at herself in the mirror. She saw only the bemused expression she wore staring back at her.

*

Message to: Maria

Message from: Jane

Thursday 9th October 2017 19:07

Some leopards need to change their spots x

*

William loved visiting his Nan and Granddad. He was, as expected, dosed with an unhealthy portion of custard after dinner. Yet, towards the end of the evening, his father noticed that his son had stopped talking so much and even sat still for long periods. Christopher suspected that it was not because his son had overeat.

William always took his grandparents one of his drawings. This week's gift was gratefully received with all the plaudits due an artist of seven. His Nan immediately pinned up the drawing on a kitchen cupboard. The kitchen was the room in which William's grandparents spent most of their time and where the young family's visits were often spent. A portable television tucked into the corner on the counter provided atmosphere. Maria's parents rarely used their lounge, except at Christmas. Christopher passed some time each week asleep in one of the comfy chairs next to his father-in-law.

William's latest picture, of a young girl wearing a frown, stared down at them all evening. His Nan asked him why the young girl, with red hair down to her shoulders, looked so unhappy. William's reply was succinct.

“She always is.”

William had drawn another picture during the visit: his grandmother’s portrait. This was fine except, to her quiet dismay, William had included her hair curlers in the drawing.

It was just past nine o’clock when Christopher, Maria and William arrived home. Ordinarily, William would be fast asleep, strapped into his harness in the back of the van. This evening he was wide awake and rather sullen.

When Christopher opened the back of the van and unharnessed his son to let him out, William quietly stepped out of his chair and jumped down out of the van. His father usually lifted him down, but this evening he didn’t wait. He ambled down the path towards the house by himself. His mother had already gone in, leaving both doors open. William entered the house and made his way straight upstairs.

Just as Christopher had got into the house and thrown himself into an armchair, Maria walked back into the lounge from the kitchen, having headed straight to the bathroom upon her own entrance. She began to take her hair down, dropping hair clips onto a side table when she noticed William was not in the room with them.

“Where’s William?” she asked.

Christopher lifted his head, looking left and right. “I don’t know. He came in. I was the last in the door,” he said.

William is definitely in the house. Therefore, he is fine.

Maria strode out of the room and stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“William!” she called.

It was a few seconds before a call of response echoed down.

“Yes, Mummy?” his voice sounded distant.

Maria walked briskly upstairs. At the top of the stairs, she walked straight to her dressing room door. It was the only open door on the landing.

“William?”

William was sat in front of the mirror.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

William turned toward his mother. “I was just telling Jenny what Nan thought about her picture. And I was saying goodnight.”

“Oh,” Maria said.

“Mummy?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Where do you go when you die?”

That is a good question.

“Heaven, darling. You go to heaven.” Maria said.

“Everyone?” William asked.

William always wanted answers last thing at night. In truth, neither Maria nor Christopher ever felt like getting into this sort of conversation, regardless of the time of day. She considered how best to make her next answer conclusive.

“No, not everyone. Just good people,” she said finally.

“But I don’t understand,” William implored. “In that film Nan was watching, the man’s wife died but he met a new wife, and mummy for his son, and they lived happily ever after.”

William had won his mother’s attention. “And?”

“Well, what happens when they die?” William asked.

Maria smiled in uncomfortable bewilderment. “I don’t follow.”

William paused for a second before elaborating. “Well the little boy’s mummy died and went to Heaven, right?”

“Yes...” Maria said.

“When the little boy’s daddy and second mummy get old and die too, will all three of them live together in Heaven?” William looked at his mother expectantly.

This was not a subject Maria wanted to delve into right then. “I don’t know, my sweet. We’ll talk about that another time.”

“They were all good people.”

Maria raised a finger. “William, stop it.”

William’s gaze hadn’t dropped. “Some people kill themselves.”

Maria looked him straight in the eye. “That’s it. Bedtime.”

“Where do *they* go?”

“Bed!” Maria raised her voice. Acceding to her tone, William stood up and walked over to her. He wrapped his arms around her thighs, the highest point he could reach on his mother.

“I love you,” he said.

Maria removed his hands and dropped to one knee so that they were both face to face. “Is something the matter, honey?” she asked.

“No. I just love you.”

Maria smiled at him. “I love you too, sweetheart.” She hugged him tightly.

William ran out of the room just as Christopher walked in.

There was a pause.

“Now seems like a good time to put a stop to this weird habit of his,” Christopher said. Maria nodded.

Another pause.

Maria left the room and went to William. Christopher looked back at the mirror for a moment before following.

William was looking out from under his duvet, surrounded by comic books.

“You can’t get into bed with your clothes on, silly,” Christopher said.

“I guess,” William replied.

Maria looked nervously at William and sat at the foot his bed.

“William, there’s something your father and I have been meaning to talk to you about,” she said, looking at Christopher.

William didn’t say anything. He just looked at them both.

Maria hesitated. The hiss of an intake of breath was as loud as any of the words that followed. Her eyes did not leave her son’s.

“It’s about why you keep going into Mummy’s dressing room and staring into her mirror.”

William’s shoulders sank and he dropped his head.

Maria quickly went on, still. “You’re not in trouble. We just want to know if everything is okay. You can tell us anything, you know.”

William looked up at his mother, anxious at the way she was looking at him. He thought for a moment before he answered.

“It’s so I can talk to Jenny.”

“Jenny. Y-your friend?” Maria asked, disturbed and failing to mask it.

“My friend.”

Christopher took a step forward and placed a hand on Maria’s shoulder. “Why do you need the mirror to do that?”

William shrugged. “The only time I see her is in the mirror.”

Christopher and Maria shared a bemused look with each other, then gave it to William. In addition to his own bashfulness, William adopted his parent’s unease as well.

It was Christopher who eventually spoke. “Well, you're going to have to stay away from your mother's mirror and the dressing room from now on. You realise what that means, don't you? You won't be able to see Jenny anymore.”

William gave a slight nod.

A snap split the air, and everyone jumped out of their skin.

Maria turned straight to Christopher, who walked out of the room towards the source of the sound.

It was quickly found. A pivot that supported the mirror on its axis had splintered. The mirror glass had fallen out of its socket and hit the base unit. Christopher examined the break and looked bemused.

“There’s no way it should have done that.” He stood on the spot and scratched his head.

Maria appeared at the door, William in tow.

“It’s okay. Everything is okay,” Christopher said.

Maria pointed at the mirror. “What happened?”

Christopher shrugged.

William backed away into his bedroom.

“Can you fix it?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

They found William back under his duvet. Maria, unsatisfied, simply resumed their conversation.

“Honey, you can tell us anything you want and you won’t get in trouble. We just want to know if there was anything you wanted to tell us-”

“Maria, stop getting on at him,” Christopher interjected, “the boy said he was alright. Everything okay, yes?”

William looked and nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“See? He’s fine. Leave him alone.”

Maria snapped her head round to face Christopher. “Don't tell me what to do.” When she turned and smiled at William it was only with her mouth. “We...I just wanted to make sure, darling.” Maria stood up and both she and Christopher hovered apart for a moment in silence.

Christopher spoke first. “You need to get you ready for bed, mate.”

“Yes, time for bed,” Maria said.

Christopher ruffled William’s hair. “Goodnight, mate. And don’t look so scared, there’s nothing in this house that can bring you to any harm.”

“Goodnight, daddy.”

Christopher stood and waited by the bedroom door.

Maria picked William’s pyjama's out from their drawer and waited for him to dress for bed. She switched on his night-light on the bedside table and kissed him on the forehead.

“Sweet dreams, honey,” she said as Christopher flicked off the main light.

The bedroom door clicked shut behind them.

Maria headed straight downstairs. Christopher went back into the dressing room, not as confident as he had pretended to be.

He looked straight at the mirror. “You’re going to be a problem, aren’t you?”

*

Message to: Jane

Message from: Maria

Thursday 9th October 2017 19:11

When we first met he seemed such a lovely guy. Was it real? Did I fall in love with the man or my imagination? x

Chapter Four

Wikipedia entry:

Imaginary friends (also known as **pretend friends** or **invisible friends**) are a psychological and social phenomenon where a friendship or other interpersonal relationship takes place in the imagination rather than the external physical reality.

*

Christopher had left for work before anyone else was awake. Maria was upstairs in her dressing room. William watched television downstairs in the lounge.

Maria gazed at her reflection in her newly repaired dress mirror as she brushed her hair, lit by the rich early morning autumn sunlight. Her reflection had radiant cocoa coloured hair, finally the colour she had been trying to dye it. She tried a weak smile and it beamed wide and beautiful back at her.

She sat cross-legged on the floor, almost ready for the day. Once she was done, she would still go to her old mirror, now hanging on the landing wall opposite her bedroom door. Even though she would be dressed and ready, she would scrutinise her appearance once more. While Christopher had known that Maria would want to keep both mirrors, he dismissed it as vanity rather than sentimentality. What is the difference between one mirror and another but its frame? "Some mirrors lie to you," she had once said to him.

Maria placed the hairbrush down by her side and searched around for her hair clips. They were nowhere to be seen.

She began to mutter to herself in frustration. "Where the hell are-"

She suddenly remembered. She had forgotten to take them out of the dresser drawer. Reluctantly, she stood up and took the short step to the dressing table and acquired her hair clips. She continued to mutter to herself irritably.

As she sat back down on the floor, her eyes fell on the drawer at the base of her dressing mirror. She laughed at her own silliness. A drawer like that could prove useful!

She reached out and gripped the drawer by the handle.

It did not budge.

Maria gave it a more forceful tug with the same result. It was with a further surge of irritation that she gave the drawer her hardest pull yet.

Maria felt the weight of the mirror shift in her hand and with it she realised the horrible danger she had put herself in. It wobbled and lurched forward. Top-heavy, it stood on the brink of toppling. Maria shrieked. She raised her hands to cover her face.

With a thump, the mirror slammed backwards under its own weight and finally settled on its feet, standing upright.

Maria waited, hidden behind her hands.

Eventually, she looked up and saw only her reflection. She caught her breath and sat there, stupefied and paralysed. The shock of the near miss washed over her with increasing waves of relief and anxiety.

She choked back a shaky laugh when she thought she heard a giggle behind her, but upon snap inspection found herself alone. William was non-responsive to a couple of half-hearted calls, so she reasoned that he must be out of earshot and, therefore, still downstairs.

Maria began to sob. The mirror stood resting innocently as if nothing had happened.

Slowly she raised herself up and got to her feet. Her hair would hang down for the day. She left the room and made her way downstairs.

It was time for her to take William to school.
Maria walked into the lounge. "Time to go, my darling."
William got up from the sofa and stood in front of his mother. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Maria feigned surprise. "Yes, honey, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"
William's eyes didn't leave the floor, but he looked tearful. "I heard you scream."
Maria smiled. "Mummy just got a fright is all." William didn't respond.
"Come on. Get your coat on," she added.
He looked up at his mother. "Are you hurt?"
"No, honey. Nothing happened."
William looked at his toes.
"Time for school," Maria said again.
William was quiet for a while, but then asked, "Can I take a toy with me?"
William hadn't taken a toy to with him since he had begun Infant School. "Will they let you?" Maria asked.

It did not seem to matter. William ran away, upstairs. Maria held her breath when she heard voices drift down the stairs. William returned seconds later, empty handed.

Maria remained silent for a second, listening, but all was quiet. She let her breath escape. "Who were you talking to?"

"No-one."

"Have you been in my dressing room again?"

Maria had never felt wary around her son before. William shook his head.

"Then where's your toy?"

"I changed my mind. Sorry."

*

That evening the family sat at their small kitchen table, enjoying the fish and chips meal that Christopher brought home. Every dinner time they forced themselves to sit at the cramped table in the kitchen. It was pushed into a corner of a room little able to accommodate a piece of furniture that size, even with a wing down. The three sat in a line along one half of the curved edge of the table-top, like a canteen. Each usually positioning themselves at the same seat every time too. Christopher sat furthest from the lounge, the place with the best view of the television. Next to him, in the middle, would be Maria. William sat at the end closest to the lounge, with his back to that room. The cat usually sat on the floor in-between Maria and William and begged for food.

"And then the whole thing almost fell on top of me!" Maria finished telling her story between mouthfuls.

Christopher rolled his eyes. "That was a near miss."

"Don't you *care*?" Maria asked, dropping her knife and fork with a clatter. The cat jumped at the noise and ran out of the room.

"Of course I do!" he replied. "But what did you think would happen?"

Maria sat and seethed in silence. She didn't eat another bite. William pushed his food around his plate and kept his head down. The smell of battered fish hung in the air, which gave the frosty atmosphere a heated and artificial humidity. The family that eats together stays together, a wise man once said.

After a short time, Christopher, who until then had not taken his eyes off Maria, spoke again.

He turned to William.

“Listen,” he said, “by the sound of it, it will be best if you stay away from your mother's dressing room for the time being. Sounds like a dangerous place to be.”

Maria's head snapped around in fury. If looks could kill.

“Bastard.”

William looked at his mother, then at his father, then back down to his dinner plate. This did not go unnoticed by his mother.

“You see what you did?” Maria said.

Christopher stood up from his chair, “Me?”

“You!” she said.

Maria stood up from her chair and stormed out of the room.

Christopher cradled his head in his hands. A moment's remorse took hold. It was a rare sensation. He didn't like it.

Christopher picked up a hot chip but put it straight back down before he too left the room. His appetite had abandoned him.

*

The days following Maria's close call heralded a procession of dank, autumnal mornings. The morning of the following Tuesday, Maria busied herself with housework in preparation for that evening's dinner guests. She always wanted her house to appear to be a tidy and ordered one. That the guests knew better was irrelevant.

Emily was the same age as William and the two were good friends. Jane lived on the other side of the street, closer to the entrance from the main road. The two met three years ago when Jane and Emily moved into the cul-de-sac after Jane's marriage to Emily's father ended. It was not uncommon for the two families to get together for little dinner parties, but Maria and Jane saw each other almost every day.

The presence of another person, even one as familiar to them as Jane, would make eating together a far more pleasant experience for both Christopher and Maria than it was the last time.

Maria had told Christopher and William the previous evening that she wanted the house to look immaculate in time for Jane's arrival. On the day, Christopher was out at work and, mercifully, William was occupied upstairs with his pencils drawing pictures. William usually ran around her feet, inadvertently hampering Maria's progress with any housework. His absence was again noted but not mourned.

An indefinable din from the television, switched on purely for background noise and company, was presently drowned out as Maria tracked up and down the lounge carpet with the vacuum cleaner.

The cold sweat of panic violently washed over Maria at the sound of a sudden and almighty smash from upstairs. Glass. She heard glass breaking. And falling. Even over the cacophony around her, it was loud.

“William!”

Maria panicked and ran upstairs. “William!”

“Mummy...”

She bounded up the stairs two at a time, slipping on one in her haste, and rounded the corner at the top of the stairs. She saw William standing in the doorway to her dressing room, facing her.

One arm was limp down his side, the other raised to his mouth so that he could bite his fingernails. Aside from the fact that he was looking his mother straight in the eye, he looked every part the child who knew he had been caught red-handed.

“What have you done?”

William raised his thumb to his mouth. Maria swatted it back.

“What happened?”

William was very close to tears. “Your mirror is broke.”

“Are you okay?”

Maria knelt before him and looked him up and down. She checked his hands, his arms and his head, but there were no signs of any cuts or injury. She kept looking. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Stay here,” she commanded, but she heard her voice tremble. She got to her feet and looked round the corner into her dressing room.

The mirror had fallen forwards from its standing position and lay half on its side. The top end of the frame was propped up against the opposite wall as it wavered on one leg. As the mirror had hit the wall, glass had shattered and fallen to the floor beneath it, spreading out wide across the carpet.

Maria was heartbroken. It had not been in her possession for two weeks.

William appeared at her side. “I’m sorry, Mummy. I didn't want to.” He began to cry.

“What do you mean?”

He sobbed harder than ever.

She hugged her son, not convinced he was as much to blame as he was saying he was. “Don’t be upset, but you must be more careful in future. You could have really hurt yourself on all that glass!”

William looked at his toes. Any ability he had to lie was overwhelmed. “I pushed it over.”

Maria was stunned. “You did what?”

“I had to break it.” William looked inconsolable now.

Maria lowered herself to William’s height and held him by the shoulders.

“You had t-? Why would you do something like that?” She tried to sound authoritative and adopt a stern expression, but it was lost on William whose sodden cheeks were now the colour of a dying peony. She found it difficult to maintain the stance. William was in complete despair. Nonetheless, Maria found his confession astonishing.

“That’s a very bad thing to do! You’ve broken my new mirror! Your father will have to clean up all this mess now!”

“I’m sorry, Mummy...”

“And so you should be!” She paused for dramatic effect. “I might have to make you miss your dinner and not see Emily tonight, I’m so cross with you.”

Maria knew she had to make William understand the severity of what he had done, and she needed a suitable punishment. It was hard, but she knew she had to do it.

William’s tears rained down. Maria crouched down so she was face-to-face with him. She tried her best to assume an unimpressed expression and kept still as William threw himself at her and hugged her tight. He buried his face in her neck.

“I only did it because Jenny told me to.”

Maria paused for a breath she did not take. “I-I beg your pardon?”

William stood back and wailed into his mother’s face. “Jenny wanted me to do it!”

“What? Why would Jenny want you to do that?” Maria demanded. There was no pretence now, Maria was angry.

“So that she could get out.”

“William, you're scaring me.”

“She doesn’t like being stuck in the mirror.”

Maria was reminded of the way the mirror had almost fallen on her the other day. “Well she’s going to have to be!” she roared. She stood up backed away from her son.

“It’s too late now,” William said.

“You’re damn right it is!” Maria fumed. “What did you think you were doing? Oh, I am so cross with you!”

Genuinely furious, Maria stared at William to allow him to repent on his wrong-doing a moment longer. She had never been so angry with him. William was kept at arm’s length.

Maria had an ace up her sleeve: “You wait until I tell your father about this,” she whispered.

A huge part of Maria hated herself for torturing him like this. William looked so full of contrition that he might just drop.

It was too much. Maria was utterly disarmed by his appearance.

“If...*if*...you come downstairs and sit quietly while Mummy finishes the housework, I’ll think about letting you have dinner and see Emily tonight,” she stammered. “Maybe!” she reiterated more forcefully.

William nodded.

“And I want no more talk of Jenny or imaginary friends in general, understand?”

“She’s not an imaginary friend.”

“I said no more!”

“She’s a ghost.”

The colour drained from Maria’s face. “Right. No playing with Emily tonight. Downstairs with me. Now.” She walked away from William and gestured him to follow. “Stay out of that room.”

“Yes, Mummy.” William stared at his toes.

*

The three grown-ups sat at the dinner table, which had been moved from the kitchen and now occupied the centre of the lounge for the occasion. The heavy white tablecloth, blotted with gravy, wine and coffee, was drifting close to one edge and threatening to fall, taking the contents of the table with it. A solitary candle stood unnoticed and unneeded on the table-top, its presence purely for decoration. Electric lights did a more than adequate job of lighting the room.

It was a horribly awkward situation for Jane to be placed in. While not an unfamiliar experience to her, it was always unpleasant. Maria and Christopher feigned a truce for the duration of their visitor’s stay and Jane pretended that she didn’t notice. Wine was served *aperitif*, during the meal, and *digestif*, as always. The food was okay, too much wine in the sauce. It is said, when cooking, that the most important ingredient is love. In many ways, the moral of the story on this occasion is more love, less alcohol.

Message to: Jane

Message from: Maria

Tuesday 14th October 2017 20:18

See what a great communicator he is? x

Message to: Maria

Message from: Jane

Tuesday 14th October 2017 20:18

xxx

Message to: Phil
Message from: Christopher
Tuesday 14th October 2017 20:19

Want to come over?

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Phil
Tuesday 14th October 2017 20:26



The two children had gone upstairs to play after the meal but no more than half an hour after they had, Emily returned downstairs, alone, looking solemn.

“What’s the matter, petal?” Jane asked her little girl when she appeared.

“My face hurts,” she said.

Jane examined Emily’s face closely in the muted mood lighting. She had a small rash on her cheek. “Darling, what have you done to yourself?”

The marks were small, but red. Some looked quite nasty and were bleeding slightly, more like small scratches than a rash.

“Have you been scratching, sweetie?” Jane asked.

“What happened?” Maria asked.

“She hit me.”

“William hit you?” Jane gasped.

“No, *she* hit me!” corrected Emily.

“Who’s she?” demanded Jane.

“Jenny,” Emily spat, but then she suddenly turned red and trembled as though she thought she’d gone too far. As Maria and Jane were focussed on the damaged portion of Emily’s face, Christopher was the only one to notice its overall deep red flush after she spoke.

Jane turned to Maria, expectantly.

Maria reddened with embarrassment. “William seems to have adopted an imaginary friend recently. Well, I say imaginary friend. He says she’s a ghost.”

“Jenny?”

“Jenny. She arrived pretty much the same time as the mirror got here.”

“The new dress mirror?” Jane asked.

“Well, not *new*...” Maria said. Christopher sighed but Maria ignored him. “But yes, that’s the one.”

“William only sees this Jenny in the mirror,” Maria went on. “Earlier this afternoon, Jenny told William to push the heavy six-foot mahogany dress mirror over. He not only thought this was a good idea, but he succeeded in doing it.”

Jane’s jaw hit the table and stayed there as Maria continued. “The mess is still up there. I thought that the mirror being broken might have been the end of this Jenny business, but apparently not.”

“How does an imaginary friend, or ghost or whatever, hit someone?”

Maria shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s something wrong with that boy,” Christopher whispered.

Jane turned back to her daughter. “What were you doing?”

“Playing,” Emily said.
“With what, sandpaper?” Christopher said. He laughed.
Maria left the table and headed toward the bathroom.

Message to: Jane
Message from: Maria
Tuesday 14th October 2017 20:40

Sympathetic too huh? x

She returned with the first aid kit. Jane pawed at her daughter’s face unhelpfully. Emily looked worried.

Jane stopped fussing over her daughter and Emily took a seat at the table. Jane looked from Maria, to Christopher, and back to Maria. “Oh, sweetie...your new mirror...”

“I know,” Maria sighed. She turned her head to Christopher. “Get William down here.”

“It wasn’t ‘new,’ remember?” Christopher reminded them. He stood and shouted up the stairs, then returned to his seat.

Jane looked at them both. “I guess William’s in for seven years bad luck now.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Maria said.

“Did he say why this imaginary friend, or ghost, told him to break the mirror?”

“Yes, he did. What was it he said...” Maria took a moment to remember his exact words, “That’s it! He did it “so that she could get out.””

“You’re *kidding*?” Jane asked.

It was quite an extraordinary tale.

Maria shrugged.

“It’s an old story,” Jane said, “blaming the imaginary friend. I think it’s a common one with kids who have them.”

“Did you have an imaginary friend?” Maria asked Jane.

“No. Did you?”

“No.”

“I still don’t understand how he managed it. That’s a heavy piece of furniture,” Christopher said.

“I was as shocked as you are. It’s really not like him, is it?” Maria said to Jane.

“I was so pleased when I got home and found out. That’s something else I have to do in my spare time,” Christopher said.

“It’s such a pity, really. When Chris first brought the mirror home, we saw a load of names scratched into the back like a school desk...”

Jane nodded.

“Well, I had a closer look at them the other day. I think they’re couples, maybe. Names of couples.”

Blank stares prompted her to reiterate, “A lot of the names on the back panel are coupled together.”

“Yeah, we get that. What’s your point?” Christopher said.

“I mean, I think it’s romantic,” Maria said. Jane smiled.

Christopher looks at Maria. *The part where I went to all that effort to get it for you and surprise you with it doesn’t count as romantic, I guess.*

“Now it’s ruined,” she concluded.

Maria turned to Christopher. "Perhaps we should have carved our names onto the back of the mirror. You know, become part of the history," she said and battered her eyelids. Christopher laughed with her.

"Anyone we know?" Jane asked.

Maria looked confused.

Jane explained. "The names on the back of the mirror. Anyone we know?"

"No-one I know," Maria shook her head. "Where is William?" she asked Christopher.

That little incident aside, the whole evening had gone better than anticipated. For Christopher and Maria, the wine had made their problems of the last few days fade. Side by side they lay in bed in silence at an interesting day's conclusion, lost in their respective thoughts. The bed sat in the centre of the room against the outside wall, flanked on each side by a bedside table and an accompanying lamp on each. At that moment, the lamps provided the only illumination in the master bedroom, the largest room in the house. They wore broad shades of peach with bulbs of melon orange that lit the room with a dim but warm light that illuminated no further than the bottom edges of the bed. The far corners of the room were shrouded in shadow.

Maria broke the silence and arrested Christopher from his thoughts.

"Are you sure you don't mind clearing up the glass in the morning?"

"I suppose not."

Christopher leaned across to his bedside light and switched it off. Turning to Maria, he kissed her softly on the nose.

"I'm sorry about the other night, honey," Maria said.

"That's okay."

Christopher read it in her face. *You're supposed to say it back as well.*

"I'm sorry, too."

He bid her goodnight. After a pause, Maria reached over and turned her own lamp off and settled down for the evening.

Maria woke with the impression that she had not been asleep long. She was used to being woken during the night by her son. It was not uncommon for William to climb into bed with them on occasion if he woke in the night.

Maria did not open her eyes. She felt no alarm at the body sliding up into the bed between them.

Christopher didn't wake. He didn't even stir. William always cuddled up to his Mum.

He's so quiet. His touch is barely felt.

Christopher felt that it was a habit that Maria should not encourage, and one William should drop at his age.

Maria liked it. She loved it.

You couldn't hear the covers moving.

She felt for his hand as he reached for hers, his coarse fingers still just half the size of hers.

Maria rolled onto her side to hold her boy until the soft cadence of his breath had signified his return to sleep. He felt safe. She knows he is safe. It made her feel safe.

Maria gently stroked his hair. His long, silky hair.

Long hair.

Maria let out an involuntary cry of disgust and fright. She yanked her hand away and kicked out, feeling the weight of the duvet fly out of her way. She felt a horrible prickly pain that peaked and then was gone as she opened her eyes. She sat up and tried to push aside whatever was lying next to her, but there was nothing. She turned on her bedside light, confirming that there was nobody there except Christopher.

Christopher woke with a start. “What the hell’s going on?”

He studied her appearance. Her complexion was pallid, her perspiration thick on her skin and her entire body trembled. Her eyes were fixed on his.

“What is it, bad dream?” he asked. He put his hand on her shoulder. For a moment she didn’t say anything, she just stared ahead.

Then she noticed the sharp sensation of soreness on one of her hands. She looked into her palm. It was red with the blood of a dozen scratches. Christopher grabbed her hand.

“What’s going on?” he asked again.

“Didn’t you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“There was something in the bed with us.”

Christopher looked puzzled. “What, like a spider?”

“No. Somebody.”

“So not *something* then...Are you sure it wasn’t William?”

“Of course I’m sure!” she shouted back.

Christopher lumbered out of bed and looked around. The bedroom door was ajar as it usually was in case William woke up in the night and wanted to come in. He went out of the bedroom to check on William, who was sound asleep in his own bed with a comic book open on top of him. Christopher detoured to Maria’s dressing room and grabbed some cotton off her dressing table.

“William’s in his own bed. He hasn’t moved.”

Maria still looked distressed.

Christopher rolled his eyes. “Maria, it’s okay. Look...”

Christopher turned on the main bedroom light before brusquely and systematically searching the room. He presented the spaces in the room sufficiently big enough to conceal a person in the darkness before he highlighted the fact that they were empty. He threw open the wardrobe doors, dragged aside a curtain revealing a small but full cupboard space: nothing. He strode to the window and pulled back the curtains. They always had the window open slightly to allow the room to breathe. He thrust the window open fully and looked out. All he saw was night’s veil laying over the roof-tops above and ahead of him, visible only by the grace of the moonlight. Beneath him, the steep drop of the black, damp-proof-painted wall down to terra firma.

“There’s nothing and no-one here. It must have been a dream,” he said.

Maria held herself tightly. To Christopher, her demeanour reminded him of William during thunderstorms. He got into bed next to her and put his arm across her.

“Honey, it was just a bad dream,” he said. Maria continued to stare ahead.

Christopher sighed. “Didn’t your parents ever tell you when you were a kid? When you see the monster at the end of the bed, you don’t hide under the covers and cry. You get out of bed, walk quietly up to it, stare into its eyes and say “boo.””

*

Extract from an article from the *Features* section of *The Daily Press Online*
Tuesday 14th October 2017

ORIGINS – 7 YEARS' BAD LUCK?

Superstitions surrounding the mirror may have first arisen from the time when humans first saw their reflections in pools of water...if their belief was that they were gazing upon their own soul, it is an easy leap of the imagination to understand where such superstitions arose...a myth of the mirror is that they are an ancient device of the Gods with magic powers.

To break a mirror would be to destroy those powers. Thus, the soul would be broken also, ripped from the body, resulting in misfortune to the one caught in its gaze.

Chapter Five

Facebook post

Jane Brenner

Date: Wednesday 15th October 2017

Time: 10:03

Thank you **Maria Higson** and **Christopher Higson** for a lovely evening and dinner last night. Beautiful food, great company. Hope we can do it again soon!x

*

The following morning, Christopher was unloading some rolls of cord carpet from his van. He had promised to store them in his garage for Phil. Rolls of black, midnight indigo, violet and red. Colours that apparently nobody had wanted. There was never room for a vehicle of any kind in the garage, not even a bicycle. The contents varied enormously week by week depending on what Phil couldn't sell. Christopher was financially compensated for the loss of his garage space. The painting Christopher had taken from Beck House was still in there. It had been necessary to keep hold of it for a short time until a particular dealer was available, according to Phil.

Once the demanding task of unloading the van was completed, Christopher collected the aged but sturdy-looking, and very big, vacuum cleaner from the garage. He failed to find his thick pair of gardening gloves, ideal for picking up a lot of broken glass. This particularly annoyed him. He wondered how many times he had asked Maria to leave things where she found them.

Christopher carried the bulk of the vacuum cleaner into the house and up the stairs to the dressing room, ready for the clear-up.

Christopher's first reaction was to think that Maria had really over-estimated the amount of damage done.

Typical over-reaction.

In fact, it looked as though the mirror itself was intact and the broken glass on the floor was the remains of a large glass vase full of artificial flowers that had been knocked from a side table. Pleased that a job he hadn't particularly been looking forward to was looking like it would be a far easier one than expected, Christopher carefully tipped the mirror back up onto its legs. Once again, it stood elegant and tall. The mirror had hit the wall hard enough to carve out a dent in the brickwork that scattered chunks and shards of brick across most of the room, giving the beige carpet a rusty hue. But where the wall was battle-scarred, the mirror-frame was unblemished. None of the detail on the frame had been affected beyond the maladies it had arrived in the house already with. Structurally, it felt as though it was stronger than ever. Christopher's repair work had passed a pretty robust test. Now it stood there innocently, looking as though nothing had happened.

Gingerly, Christopher began to pick up the larger chunks of glass from the carpet before he took the vacuum cleaner to the smaller shards and dust. It took a long time. The carpet hairs were long, thick and flattened. Whenever he thought he had finished, brick dust disturbed by the process from elsewhere had re-coloured the floor. Any exposed linen and clothes were marked and needed to be washed. The furniture had to be wiped down. The air in the room needed a change. Something would just have to hang over the hole in the wall.

When Maria arrived home later that afternoon with William, Christopher was lounging in front of the television and staring ahead with his eyes glazed. He was eating a sandwich that threatened to spill chunks of chicken and relish over him at any second.

Maria entered the porch, removed her jacket and kicked off her shoes. She picked up her shopping bags and let William into the house ahead of her.

She walked into the lounge, preceded by William.

“Hi,” she said.

Christopher responded but his greeting was mumbled by a mouth full of food. Maria took one look at Christopher’s sandwich and frowned.

“So, what are *you* having for lunch?” she asked him.

“I thought I might finish off the rest of the chicken.”

“But daddy, I wanted chicken,” William said.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Why am I surprised?” Maria said.

“How was I supposed to know?”

“Why do you have to eat everything?” she hissed.

“I haven’t. I said there’s som-”

Maria’s head dropped with her shoulders. Christopher didn’t bother with the end of his sentence.

Why is she so easily upset?

Maria stomped past Christopher and through to the kitchen, depositing her shopping bags on the counter top.

“Don’t worry, darling,” she said to her son who followed her, “I’ve bought you some more.”

There was a stony silence. Conflict and unresolved tension hung in the air like smog. Christopher didn’t wait to break it.

“Oh, by the way, *baby*”

“What?”

In his best jovial manner, Christopher sought to placate Maria with good news. He looked at the rest of his sandwich wistfully and put it down.

“I have something to tell you. Both of you, actually.”

“Yeah, we got that. What?”

“Your mirror is not broken.”

Maria appeared back in the lounge, leaning with one hand against the archway connecting the two rooms.

“What?”

William appeared, mostly concealed behind his mother’s legs. “William, stop getting under my feet!” she said, looking down at him and fidgeting.

Christopher looked at them both, confused. He did not understand their reaction. “The mirror’s not broken. It’s fine.”

“But – but I saw it.”

“The vase on the nightstand against the wall opposite the mirror was smashed. That must be where the glass on the floor came from.”

This revelation was greeted with silence and a confused expression by Maria.

“This is *good* news,” Christopher said.

“But...there was a lot of glass...”

Christopher waited for them to snap out of it. They didn’t.

Christopher clapped his hands together. Maria started, but still looked worried.

“I’ve cleared the room up. There’s no glass anywhere,” Christopher said.

“But I’d of noticed if it was the vase...” Maria whispered.

“Am I in trouble?” William asked.

“You're lucky, my man. The damage isn't as bad as we thought, just a big hole in the wall,” his father replied. He adopted an animated and child-like manner he hoped would reassure, but added, “But for God's sake, don't do it again.”

William shook his head. “No. I won't.” He reached for his mother's hand and looked at his toes.

“I suppose this means this Jenny didn't get out after all,” Christopher smiled at William. “By the way,” Christopher added, speaking to both of William and Maria, “did I leave my gardening gloves lying around?”

To Christopher's frustration, Maria spent the rest of the day in a complete daze. She didn't hear him when he spoke to her and thought he had spoken to her when he had not. She thumbed at her phone absently and seemed to see not where she was going nor what she was doing. The angry tinkle of breaking glass from the kitchen transpired to be a wine glass Maria dropped. Christopher found a tea bag in his cup of coffee.

Christopher left her to it.

William on the other hand acted like a prisoner in his bedroom. He was not seen in the dressing room again that day nor did he make any further mention of his imaginary friend.

At the end of that unsettling day for Maria, she and Christopher sat in the lounge watching a movie. William had come downstairs for his dinner but had wandered back upstairs straight after, to his parent's relief. A few delicate footsteps were heard on the stairs during the evening, but no-one appeared through the door downstairs.

A few drinks distracted them from the day's events. The lounge was warm and shadowy, lit only by the television and the street lights outside. Christopher and Maria sat slouched on the sofa with their feet up, nestled next to each other. Outwardly, both looked happy in each other's company. Christopher even felt compelled to say so.

“I just want to say, honey, that sitting here with you like this right now makes me feel very happy.”

“Ah, that's really sweet. Thank you,” Maria kissed her husband.

An ad break interrupted the movie. Maria tried to focus on the clock hidden in darkness on the wall in front of them. She couldn't see where its hands were creeping to. She gave up and looked at her phone, but the backlight dazzled her.

“We should put William to bed.”

“I suppose you're right.”

There was no avoiding their need to get up and move so both parents stood up and sauntered out of the room. They started up the stairs. Maria led the way.

It happened very quickly.

With a cry of pain, Maria stopped dead on the landing at the top of the stairs and fell to the floor. Christopher tried to catch her as she collapsed.

“My foot, my foot...”

Maria fell back against her husband's legs which prevented her from tumbling down the stairs. She wept while she cradled her injured foot with both hands. Christopher clutched the banister for balance.

“I've cut my foot, I've cut my foot...”

She put a hand out against the wall to steady herself but pain compelled her to immediately replace it over the injury. As Maria drew her hand away, she left a bloody hand print on the wall.

The sight made her hyperventilate. Christopher almost lost his balance.

They managed to steady themselves. With patience and encouragement from her husband, Maria calmed and removed her hand from her wound again.

Both of Maria's hands were now stained crimson and her sock was sodden with blood.

She looked at Christopher with a sorry face that cried black tears of runny mascara. Christopher smiled at her and kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

“It hurts...”

Christopher gently lifted his wife up and carried her away from the precipice of the stairs. He carefully lowered her down onto the landing floor upstairs and made sure she was comfortable before he examined her wound.

Maria’s sock had a centimetre-long hole cut into it, a nasty looking gash clearly visible through the tear. Christopher removed the sock as delicately as he could, but Maria winced and another tear rolled down her cheek. Christopher apologised sincerely. It was a deep cut, bleeding liberally.

Christopher had no First Aid training and was not confident that he would be able to tie a sterile dressing pad without it falling off. He darted back downstairs and returned within seconds holding their small first-aid bag, from which he removed an anti-septic wipe, a plaster and a bandage. Delicately, but nervously, he attended to the wound as well as he could.

A glimmer of a smile danced across Maria’s face. “Thank you,” she said.

“For what? Why are you smiling?” Christopher smiled back at her.

“You’re trembling.”

“You’re smiling because I’m trembling?”

“I’m smiling because you’re worried.”

Christopher glanced back down at the pool of blood at his feet.

“I am worried. You’ve really hurt yourself.”

Maria said nothing.

“You might need a stitch in that. What did you cut your foot on?”

“I don’t know,” Maria looked about her.

Christopher found the object responsible.

A small prism of broken glass, the size of a marble, sat baldly in the middle of the top step of the stairs amongst a small scattering of other smaller fragments. The culprit was red with Maria’s blood and twinkled in the light. It looked oddly pretty, like a ruby. Christopher picked it up to examine it closely before taking a photo with his phone.

“What are you doing?” Maria asked, hissing with pain.

“It’s a lump of glass.”

“From the broken vase?”

Christopher stood staring. “I guess so.”

Maria swapped her pain for anger. “I thought you’d said you’d cleared everything up?”

“I thought I had.”

Maria looked at him with apprehension. “I found a few small pieces in the bed this morning.”

Christopher subconsciously became aware that someone else was there with them. He looked behind him and saw William standing in his bedroom doorway, half obscured as he held shyly onto the panels either side of the door.

“Hello mate,” Christopher said.

Maria looked up. “Hi, honey. It’s okay, mummy’s just cut her foot.”

William stared at the bloody mess on the floor.

“Do you know how this glass got here, mate?” Christopher held up the piece, careful not to accuse.

After a pause, William shook his head.

Christopher was satisfied of his innocence. Christopher knew William would never intentionally hurt either of them, but thought the boy look troubled never-the-less.

Christopher threw the shard back onto the floor and turned back to his wife's afflicted foot. "Perhaps I should take you to A&E."

Maria shook her head and waved her hands. "No. You clear it up. It'll be fine."

There was a lot of blood. Christopher re-dressed the wound.

Once completed, he turned back to his son, who had not moved.

"You had better say goodnight to your mummy here. Then I'll tuck you in."

Maria winced as she pulled her foot away from Christopher. He had not done an effective job with either dressing.

Christopher picked the shard back up and reached across to place it on the small window sill in the stairwell, safely out of the way. William walked forward and embraced his mother tightly.

"Careful, honey," she winced as she tried to hug him back. She had to shy him away.

"Night," William said.

William turned his back to them and left for his bedroom. The door clicked shut behind him.

Christopher turned back to Maria. "I'll be back in a minute." With that, he left his wife lying in the hallway and followed his son.

William had climbed straight into bed and pulled his duvet up and over himself completely. Christopher sat beside him at the head of the bed. Gradually, William's eyes appeared over the top of the duvet.

"Have you had a nice day today?"

William nodded.

"Enjoy your shopping trip in the city with your mother?"

William nodded.

"Well rather you than me, mate. I hate shopping," he laughed.

William raised a meagre smile.

Christopher ruffled his son's hair. "Goodnight." He stood up and walked towards the still open bedroom door.

"Is she going to be okay?" William asked.

"She's going to be fine. It's just a cut on her foot, is all. There was a bit of blood, I know, but it's okay now. Were you scared?"

William nodded.

"Don't be."

Christopher turned to leave.

"If Mummy left, would you stay with me?"

Christopher stopped in his tracks, still in the room. His head drooped before rising again, hackles involuntarily rising also. He closed the bedroom door with more zeal than he realised.

"Did your mother say something?"

William looked awkward. "I just wondered."

"Why would you wonder that?"

"We don't make each other happy." The faint sound of sobbing could be heard from the other side of the wall.

"Of course we do. Every couple argues."

William looked at his toes.

"Look, mate. You don't need to worry."

"Jenny's parents used to argue a lot."

Christopher frowned. "I thought we told you never to talk about *that*?"

"Sorry. I won't mention her again."

"Stop worrying so much."

William's bedroom darkened as Christopher flicked the switch on William's night light.

“You wouldn’t understand anyway, you’re too young. Your mother says goodnight. She obviously can't come in herself tonight.”

William nodded and Christopher left the room. “Goodnight, mate.”

“Goodnight, dad.”

Maria was still sitting in the middle of the landing floor. She looked pale and vulnerable. He stood there for a moment, just staring at her. William's mention of Jenny had angered him more than he realised, but it dissipated as abruptly as it had swelled at the sight of the pitiful creature on the landing floor.

Every couple argues.

“Don’t be such a wimp.”

“Heroes don’t talk like that,” she replied.

“Come on.” He stepped forward. “Up you get.”

Christopher leaned in and offered Maria an arm. She propped herself up on her good leg and pulled herself up onto her feet. She let out a small cry of pain. Maria looked into Christopher’s eyes.

“What are we going to do?” she asked in earnest.

Christopher presumed that she had heard his conversation with William.

“I don’t know.”

A sigh at the thought of the long road ahead escaped from both of them in turn.

“So...” Maria said, “Are you going to heroically carry me downstairs in your arms?”

Christopher smiled at Maria and kissed her on the forehead. “Sort of.”

He ducked his head under one of her arms and hoisted her up over his shoulder. With shrieks of surprise and murmurs of disapproval, mixed with amusement, Christopher carried Maria down the stairs. “Kind of reminds me of our first night in this house, except we’re going the other way,” he said.

*

Facebook post

Philip Martin *likes* Pinterest's photo:

Date: Wednesday 15th October 2017

Time: 19:55

“The visible spectrum is the portion of the electromagnetic spectrum that is detectable to the human eye. The red fades to black in a liminal space between light and the complete absence of. In the dark, it is so easy to miss the little red flags.”

Chapter Six

Facebook post

Christopher Higson

Date: Thursday 16th October 2017

Time: 10:46

I look at my wife and sometimes and think wow your one lucky woman



*

On the day following the injury, it had been necessary to make a hospital trip after all. Maria had been out of bed for barely ten minutes that morning when she realised the wound on her foot had re-opened and was bleeding through her sock and onto her slipper. It needed stitches and she wanted Christopher to be there with her.

Christopher was already at the front door about to leave for work when Maria called for him. He plodded through the downstairs rooms of the house in search for her, finding her in the bathroom in the empty bathtub. There was a lot of blood and she looked frightened. Christopher tried to talk her into making do with redressing it so he could leave for work, but she was adamant she wanted to go to the A&E department right there and then.

The problem this created for Christopher was one of transportation. He wanted to leave for work. Even if Maria owned a car, she could not drive with one foot. Her best friend Jane did not have a car and, therefore, was unable to assist with transport. The taxi firms would not take either of them anywhere anymore as they both had vomited in the back of their cars once too often. The bus would take an age.

Christopher felt that this had the potential to be a nightmare. He didn't think that Maria's injury would be given high-priority status at any hospital. If she kept off her foot, kept it raised and applied pressure, it stopped bleeding. He might lose a whole day at work as a result. He felt that his only hope was that when he and Maria arrived at A&E they would find the department experiencing a quiet morning.

They found the roads en route to the hospital to be almost empty, a fact Christopher found both pleasing and infuriating in equal measure. Maria would get to the hospital sooner, but he could have been working and utilising the empty roads.

Christopher turned onto the hospital ring-road, a huge circular artery that both fed and bled the hospital. Christopher rounded various buildings until the A&E car park came into his view. The car park was full.

Bitter thoughts chased around Christopher's mind. *It's a hospital. Car parks are always full. I think some of the cars are ornamental.*

Christopher became worried that he could be driving around for hours looking for a space big enough to park his van. Maria was happy to be patient. Christopher begged her to let him drop her off at the door to book herself in. Maria consented, got out of the van and limped her way in. There was no place to leave the van and join her right there and then, nor was there a member of staff to be called to her assistance. Christopher sympathised, but surely Maria must realise that there was nothing he could do.

When Christopher re-joined her thirty minutes later, he found her sitting at the back of the waiting room.

Maria was sandwiched between two men on a row of uncomfortably close seats. Both men looked to Christopher as though they were in their mid-twenties. One of the men was dazed and sweaty. He wore just a football shirt, boxer shorts and shoes. The other man was pale with pain, a leg propped up on a magazine bench in the middle of the aisle. Maria also had her injured foot propped up on the same table. Christopher found an empty seat opposite her, one of the few available.

“Where did you park the van?” Maria said.

“Don’t ask,” Christopher said.

Christopher looked at the magazines. Nothing he wanted to read, of course. “Did they say how long the wait time was?”

Maria looked down at her foot. “It could be three hours.”

Christopher cursed loud enough for those around him to hear. At that moment, an elderly lady hobbled over in their direction from the reception desk looking for a seat. Christopher’s sudden outburst visibly frightened her. He felt obnoxious and guilty at the expression on her face.

“I’m really sorry,” he said. “Waiting times.”

The lady nodded, apparently satisfied. Christopher stood up and offered her his seat. The lady smiled warmly at Christopher and took it. She was joined shortly after by a younger woman who stood by, silently.

Christopher stood and leaned against the nearest wall. It was the only space he could find where he was not in somebody’s way. For an hour he stood on the spot, shifting his weight from one knee to the other and from the ball of one foot to the other.

The first seat to become available was next to Maria. A nurse with a wheelchair came to collect the guy with his leg on the table and wheeled him away. Christopher sat down.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he said.

“I’m fine, thank you for asking,” Maria said.

They both sat quiet for a moment.

Christopher pulled his phone from his jacket pocket.

Message to: Maria

Message from: Christopher

Thursday 16th October 2017 09:44

Would you like a glass of water

Message to: Christopher

Message from: Maria

Thursday 16th October 2017 09:44

No thank u

Maria turned suddenly to Christopher and put her free hand on his knee.

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Maria
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:44

Ive just remembered. Theres something ive been meaning to ask you

Message to: Maria
Message from: Christopher
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:44

Go on...

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Maria
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

I want you to promise me something

Christopher braced himself.

Message to: Maria
Message from: Christopher
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

Go on...

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Maria
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

I want you to promise to be there to help me with William's birthday party next week

Christopher's tilted his head slightly and sardonically, sighing audibly.

Message to: Maria
Message from: Christopher
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

And how am I supposed to do that from the road

Message to: Christopher
Message from: Maria
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

I want you to take the day off

Message to: Maria
Message from: Christopher
Thursday 16th October 2017 09:45

Why dont I take the whole week off

Maria didn't respond. She replaced her phone in her pocket.

"Baby, his party's for two hours in the afternoon. Why is it you think I'm able to keep taking all this time off work? I'm losing a day already today."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Maria said.

"Oh grow up."

"You grow up."

Christopher and Maria looked at one another silently for a few seconds before they both burst into giggles. They smiled at one another.

"Can you take a half day?" Maria said.

Christopher nodded.

"I also need you to collect William's birthday present."

"Anything else?"

Maria said nothing.

"When am I to collect this present?" Christopher said.

"Tuesday."

"Tuesday, the day of the party, his birthday?"

"You know what kids are like, he *has* to have this particular thing. It's been out of stock everywhere for ages, but I ordered one online months ago and they told me that they wouldn't be getting anymore until then. I even called them yesterday to confirm, the delivery is scheduled to arrive on Tuesday. We have one reserved. You have to go to one of their shops to collect it."

"Why didn't you order it to be delivered to the house?"

"It was cheaper."

"Okay, but what a hassle."

"I thought you'd appreciate me not spending the money!"

Christopher waited. When he was confident that he was not going to be asked to do anything more, he said "Of course, baby. Of course. Afternoon off it is."

Christopher and Maria watched quietly as someone caused a ruckus at the front desk. The person in question was upset that their child was not being seen immediately.

"Some people really do make a rod for their own backs, don't they?" Christopher said to Maria quietly.

"I was just thinking that," Maria replied.

Husband and wife looked at one another and chuckled again.

"Did you see the bloody paw prints upstairs yesterday? I think Peppy has hurt himself like I have," Maria said.

“No, I didn't.” Christopher leaned in closer to his wife to whisper. “What do you suppose the guy in his underwear next to you is in here for?”

Maria grinned. “I think he's here with that girl next to him. Neither of them has said a word to each other since they got here.”

“What's his story, unfortunate night? Nice of her to stick around this long.”

Maria glanced at the two subjects and, for the sake of discretion, everywhere else afterwards. “I think she's his sister.”

Christopher found it hard not to laugh. He looked away but his eyes immediately found another target for mirth. “What about him?”

Christopher nodded to an old man, face half-hidden with swelling and bruising. The old man wore his Sunday-best, but its day had long passed. He stared at the woman in front of him.

“I don't think he's in here for the bruising. I think the woman who was sitting here before me caught him looking down her shirt and hit him with her handbag. He came in here for something else, with somebody else wherever they are,” Maria whispered.

Christopher laughed out loud, which drew some resentful gazes. “You made that up.”

The atmosphere in the department soon settled back to that of rumbling resentment and ungratified entitlement. A nurse came and fetched away the sweaty guy in his underwear next to Maria. He looked dazed as he hobbled off with his girlfriend/sister. The seat was subsequently occupied by a young woman who was vomiting into a plastic bag.

“Do you want to do something tonight?” Christopher said.

“My mother always said you weren't the romantic type,” Maria said.

“It's not a come on. I mean, shall we go out and do something. Watch a film or eat something...I don't know. Whatever we do, let's just do it somewhere other than at home.”

“What about William?”

“Let's dump him at your mother's and make a night of it.”

Maria's eyes lit up. “That sounds wonderful.”

She beamed at her husband before she laid her head down on his shoulder and nuzzled into his neck, content. “We haven't had a night out, you and I, for ages. It will be really nice.”

“Yes, baby.”

*

Christopher did not make it back to work that day. Maria was far too happy to notice any of the irritation shown by Christopher because of it. She bounced around in the passenger seat of the van on the way home like William used to if he thought you were taking him to the seaside. That Maria failed to notice Christopher's irritation, irritated him. That the police occupied nearly both lanes of the dual carriageway having arrested a suspect at the scene of an accident, obstructing their way home, irritated him. That every single traffic light turned red the second Christopher approached them was an irritant to him. That, once again, someone had parked in front of his house, aggravated his irritations to the degree that even Maria's bubble burst. She looked at him with unease.

“What is it?” she asked.

Christopher pulled the van into the only empty space, down by the Chase, and turned the engine off. “I'm sorry, baby. It's the small minutia that gets on my nerves and it just seems to be everything all the time, at the minute.”

Maria's crestfallen face turned away while her hands unfastened her seatbelt.

Sensing her disappointment, Christopher quickly threw out a baited line before Maria could exit the van. “I'm really looking forward to tonight though.” He meant it.

“Do you mean it?” Maria asked. The shine in her smile was back.

“We can make tonight a new start.”

Maria nodded before they both got out of the van and held hands as they made the short walk home together.

*

Date night did not happen for another three days. Christopher and Maria had come to a loose consensus that they would go to a restaurant. It was a Sunday, so both enjoyed taking their time getting ready for the evening.

Christopher watched television in the lounge and William played hide and seek all over the house. Maria had enjoyed a long bath and then time to slowly dry. She was now sat on the floor on the upstairs landing, wrapped in bath towels and sat on another so that she was not sitting on her blood stains that still clung to the carpet. Music emanated from her mobile phone lying next to her as she brushed her hair and applied make-up in front of her old mirror.

The things that mirror had seen. The memories that had been and gone in front of it. Maria had been fourteen years-old when it was gifted to her. She had, partially, grown up in front of it, related to her physical self for most of her adult life through it and in some part defined herself on the basis of what she saw in that mirror. Pertaining to Christopher, Maria had prepared for her first date with him in front of it. She was standing next to it the first time she told him that she loved him. She had prepared for their wedding in front of it and steeled herself in it before telling him that she was pregnant with William. It had been present for the entirety of their relationship, their son’s life, three house moves and twenty-two Christmases. That mirror contained a lot of history. She wondered why she had been so happy to replace it.

Making a quick visit into her bedroom to deposit some clothes in the laundry basket, Maria noticed a conspicuous lump under the bed covers. It seemed like a poor hiding place to Maria, but then if the only person doing any seeking is imaginary...

“William, you don’t play in mummy and daddy’s bedroom. You know that,” Maria said.

Maria went downstairs to get a glass of water. In the lounge, Christopher’s eyes flicked to his wife. He smiled. Maria smiled back but kept walking.

“Where’s William?” Christopher asked.

“He’s hiding.”

“Hiding?”

“Well...playing hide and seek, I presume. In our bedroom,” she called now from the kitchen.

“Okay.”

“I told him to get out.”

“Okay.”

Maria walked back from the kitchen, through the lounge and to the garage room. Christopher’s eyes followed her the whole time. She saw him looking. “I’m just getting some clothes from the dryer!”

A commercial break prompted Christopher to get up and head for the kitchen. As he stepped into the kitchen, William walked out of the bathroom.

“Hello, mate,” Christopher said.

“Hi,” William said.

“I thought your mother said you were hiding?”

“I’m seeking.”

“Oh. Well, carry on.”

William left, running upstairs. Christopher helped himself to a mouthful of milk straight from the bottle in the fridge.

Shortly after Christopher had sat back down in the lounge, Maria reappeared in the room smiling. She did a very sultry walk past him on her way back upstairs. He heard her laugh once she was out of sight.

Precisely at the moment the advertisements on television ceased, Maria's voice called down the stairs to Christopher: "Darling, I left my glass of water in the garage room...could you bring it up for me, please? Thanks. Love you."

Christopher huffed and he puffed but he did as he was asked.

As he reached the top of the flight of stairs he was surprised to see Maria not in the dressing room before her new, much-desired and hard-fought-for dress-mirror, but sprawled across the middle of the landing floor in front of her old mirror surrounded by bottles and cotton and brushes and clips. This, quietly, annoyed him a little. So did the song currently emitting from her phone. She heard him coming and turned her head to greet him with a smile as he reached the landing floor.

"Is everything okay?" he asked. He handed his wife her drink.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Christopher looked at the mirror, unable to see his own reflection from where he was standing. No need to rock the boat. If she said she was okay, she was okay.

Just leave it. "Just checking."

Maria resumed her grooming.

"You're beautiful to me, whatever you do," he said.

"Thank you," Maria beamed.

Maria jumped as their bedroom door, behind her, opened with a creak. William's head appeared around the door.

"William, I thought I told you to stay out of my bedroom?" Maria said.

William did not answer. He slid through the gap he had made in the door and hastened into his own bedroom.

"Are you looking forward to your birthday party?" Maria called, still facing the mirror.

The sound of glass shattering captured their attention. It was a noise like a tumbler meeting the floor after a short fall. Christopher and Maria shared a glance and Christopher darted into William's bedroom. The noise had come from his room, he was sure.

Nothing. From the little nightstand with its drawers open to the single wardrobe in a similar state of mess. From the unmade single bed to the toys littering the floor. All appeared to be in order. William stood there looking like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Christopher checked the dressing room too. Nothing there either. "It must have come from outside."

William reappeared in the hallway.

"Did you hear that?" Christopher asked.

William looked aghast. Christopher suspected William's apprehension was due to his previous glass-breaking misdemeanour and subsequently what happened to his mother.

"Don't worry, mate. There's no broken glass in here. There is absolutely no danger." Christopher even felt a sense of reassurance himself.

William nodded.

"Do you know what it was?"

William shrugged.

Maria also shrugged before continuing with her make-up. "So, are you looking forward to your birthday party?"

William's looked at his toes.

“Something up?” Christopher asked.

William looked at his dad. He was not smiling.

The kid is far too timid. He'll grow out of it.

“No, Daddy. Yes, I'm looking forward to my party,” he said.

“How many friends have you got coming round tomorrow?” Maria stepped in.

“Seven,” said William.

“Seven kids? Dear God, save me” Christopher said. When William didn't offer a smile, Christopher pointed out that he was joking, just in case Maria got the wrong idea. “Is that all of your little friends?” Christopher asked.

William looked at the floor.

Maria turned her head to William. “Is there somebody you want to come that isn't, honey?”

William looked nervous. Christopher was suddenly struck with the idea that he knew who William was thinking of. “William. What have I told you twice now?”

William looked at his mum.

Maria smiled in uncomfortable surprise. “Is it that you want your ghost-friend to come, honey?”

William looked at his dad.

“That doesn't answer my question, honey.”

A long pause for something that seemed innocuous to Christopher and Maria followed before William nodded his head.

Maria looked at him. “Well, I must say I'm surprised, she doesn't seem like a nice person to me. I don't think she should be invited.”

“Like it matters. Stop talking about her like she exists. You're just making it worse,” Christopher said.

William shifted uncomfortably in his skin and then looked up at his father.

“Daddy, can we go to Nanny's now?”

“Not just yet, mate,” Christopher shook his head. “We'll be going in about an hour though, so have anything you want to take ready, okay?”

William turned and ran into his room. The thud of the toy box lid dropping down could be heard seconds later. He reappeared on the landing, empty-handed, arms down by his side.

“I'm looking forward to your birthday party, honey,” Maria smiled. “And so is your father.”

*

Christopher's first job on Monday was not until relatively late in the morning, and with William at school, he and Maria had some time alone together.

“Right. I'm going out to get William a birthday cake and some party bag bits. Can I have some money?” she asked.

Christopher rolled his eyes and dug deep. He handed her some notes. “Get two cakes. That way, I'll definitely get a slice.”

Maria went into the porch for her coat. “Don't forget his birthday party is tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“I need you to blow up some balloons later tonight.”

“Yes.”

“And you have to pick up his present tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Maria quietly stepped back toward the lounge and stopped in the doorway. “You will be here tomorrow, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

Only Maria’s lips moved when she smiled in return. “It’s just...I don’t want to sound like a nag...”

But you will. “Yes, I told you I would be here.”

“It’s just that...it’s really important to me. I want your help with the party tomorrow.”

Christopher raised his voice for emphasis. “Yes, and I said I would help.”

“I know.”

“I’m collecting his present, aren’t I?” This turn of conversation seemed all too familiar to Christopher.

“Yes, and I’m grateful for that, it’s just...” Maria stumbled for words.

Christopher pressed. “What is it just? What more do you want from me?”

Maria held Christopher with a firm stare. “I want your word that you’ll be here to help with your son’s birthday party.”

“You got my word that I would when you first asked me. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Maria’s gaze held. “I just want you to know how important it is to me.”

Christopher got up from his seat, placed himself in front of Maria and clasped her by the shoulders. “I hear you. Hear *me*: I will be there.”

“You promise?”

Christopher promised.

*

Facebook post

Maria Higson

Date: Monday 20th October 2017

Time: 09:51

Cant wait for my boys birthday party tomorrow with cake and balloons and loads of presents and his friends and family. What a perfect day for my little boy! Growing up so fast!



#blessed #family

Chapter Seven

Facebook post

Christopher Higson

Date: Tuesday 21st October 2017

Time: 08:49

Where does the time go?? Happy birthday to my boy who is eight today! Have a special day my man hope you get spoilt rotten! My beautiful wife has lots of surprises ready for you! Our beautiful home is party ready for you and your little friends later today. It's gonna be lots of fun...



*

A plastic banner adorned the windowpane of the porch door, flanked limply by a balloon tacked up by a pin on either side. More balloons, some in tatters, littered the lounge floor. A paper cloth lay on the kitchen table with cling-film-covered plates of biscuits, sandwiches, and sausage rolls to anchor it down. A second plastic banner hung above the connecting arch between the lounge and the kitchen on the lounge side. Several presents lay fell on the sofa, wrappings still in place but ragged and torn.

William ran into the house, heading straight for the lounge. He almost tripped on a balloon.

“Happy birthday!” Maria cried as she followed her son into the lounge.

William looked ecstatic. He saw the presents and ran to make a grab for them. When he saw the scored edges to the paper and the state of some of the balloons he looked confused, but his eyes quickly dilated with realisation and a worried expression replaced his initial sense of ecstasy. He looked at his mother who mistook his apprehension for disappointment.

Maria picked up one of the presents to examine it closer, one Maria knew to be from her mother. It was clear that there was no damage to the gift underneath, just the wrapping paper. Strips of it both small and long hung like tassels. The edges that were not frayed were torn completely. She then observed the fragments of balloon skin around her feet.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Maria said. “I asked your father to have all of this ready and looking nice and neat for you before he left earlier. I don’t understand what-”

The doorbell rang.

Maria looked at William. “Quick, go upstairs and put your costume on!”

William did as he was told. Maria put the gift down and went to the door.

It was Jane and Emily, the latter being dressed in a white gown with blood all around her mouth and down her front. Unorthodox for a birthday party, but it was almost Halloween.

“We the first here I guess?” Jane asked.

“Yeah. We’re only just in ourselves. William decided he was going to be the last one out of school today. It was another fifteen minutes after you left before he appeared.”

Maria and Jane made their way through the house to the kitchen. Emily hung around in the lounge.

“Emily,” Maria called, “William’s upstairs if you want to go find him.”

Emily sat down on the sofa next to the gifts. "That's okay, thanks. I'll wait."

Maria passed Jane a mystified look, who shrugged her shoulders.

Maria busied herself making refreshments. "Emily, would you like a drink?"

"Anyway," Jane said, "is something up? You didn't look too happy when you opened the door."

The kettle grumbled as it began to heat. Maria shook her head. "I didn't expect Chris to be here right from the start, but I thought he could've at least blown some balloons up properly. Have you seen the state of them?" Maria gestured wildly, knocking a wine glass from draining board onto the floor with a smash.

Maria hid her face behind her hands.

"What's wrong, honey?" Jane asked.

Maria replied with a quiet voice that was anything but serene. "The presents are a mess. It looks like he's rubbed them down with sandpaper. Half the balloons are burst on the floor. The banners look pathetic hanging there on their own. It all just looks tacky and awful."

Jane retrieved Maria's dustpan and brush and cleared away the broken wine glass.

"You haven't heard from him?" Jane asked.

"No. I had a call from a number I don't know, so I didn't answer it. I don't answer calls from numbers I don't know. I'll message him."

Message to: Christopher

Message from: Maria

Tuesday 21st October 2017 15:45

Where are you?

William walked into the lounge, dressed as Frankenstein's monster.

"Hi, honey!" called Maria. "Would you like a drink?"

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" called William, who promptly vanished. A moment later, he returned with a diminutive monk.

Steadily, the other children continued to arrive. Not all took a Halloween-inspired approach. One girl dressed as Matilda.

When a girl named Lucy arrived dressed as a vampire, her mother, Alison, stayed to help as planned. Alison was a familiar face to both Maria and Jane from the schoolyard. Alison was happy to help.

Christopher would arrive home at any second and then there would be four adults to the eight children expected. Maria had arranged games, fun, competitions, lunch, cake and party bags. A magician was coming to finish the party off with a show. Maria intended for Christopher to play a big part in the day.

Once Christopher was home, William could be presented with his main gift. The one William had talked about for ages. The one his little friends with birthdays earlier in the year already had.

"Where are the gifts for the party games?" asked Jane.

"In the cupboard in my bedroom. They're on a high shelf."

"I know where you mean."

"Thanks again for coming, Ali," Maria said.

“No problem,” Alison beamed and waved her hand. She then withdrew from the kitchen like Jane had a second before her, but she to the lounge to engage the children. All eight children were now present, and the time was ripe for the fun to commence.

There was a delay starting.

Jane returned empty handed. She approached Maria, “I found the presents okay. Four of them, yes?”

“Yes.”

Jane looked apologetic. “They’ve all been unwrapped.”

Maria’s face sunk. “Unwrapped?”

Jane was nodding. “All four of them. They’re sitting open on the floor with the paper in tatters.”

Maria looked about the kitchen and finally at the floor. Exhaling, she looked up into the lounge. “William!” she called.

Frankenstein’s monster skipped over to his mother, only his bright eyes visible through his face mask.

“Yes, mummy?”

“William, did you unwrap some presents in mummy’s bedroom cupboard?”

William cowered at Maria's tone of voice and the sight of the assembled adults looming over him. He glanced back into the lounge.

“They were on the top shelf in the cupboard with the curtain, was it you?” she said.

William’s eyes didn’t know where to settle.

Maria sighed and let out a moan of frustration. “Why did you do it?”

William kept quiet and looked heartbroken.

Maria moaned again, inspired by the change in the expression of her son’s eyes. “I’m sorry, honey. This is your party and I don’t want you to be upset, but those presents were prizes for games we’re now going to play.”

Tears began to well in William's eyes.

“Oh no! Don’t cry!” Maria grabbed William in for a hug and held him tight. “It’s okay, honey. We can re-wrap them again. Everyone will just have to wait before we can start, okay?”

“I’ll take the kids out some sandwiches,” and Ali burst into action.

Jane went to a kitchen drawer where she knew Maria kept sticky-tape and scissors. “I’ll re-wrap the party prizes,” Jane said before she left the room.

“You see? All sorted.” She held him out at arm’s length and smiled. William smiled quickly back. “Would you like a sausage roll, honey?”

William shook his head.

“Your father will have your present with him when he gets here. That’ll be good, won’t it?”

William nodded.

Maria grabbed at straws, anything to placate her son. “Will Jenny be joining us today?”

After a pause, William said. “I’m not allowed to talk about her.”

Maria sat back and looked at William quietly for a second, then ran her fingers through his hair. “Off you go. Go have fun.”

William hid his face under the mask again, turned on his heels and left.

Maria busied herself with pouring eight glasses of juice and three cups of coffee. Ali returned with an empty plate of sandwiches and busied herself with the preparation of more. Jane too was soon back downstairs with four party prizes, re-wrapped in newspaper.

“You’ve run out of wrapping paper.”

“Fine, whatever,” Maria sighed. “Thanks for doing it and so quickly.”

The kids were making a restless noise in the lounge. Ali was ready with more sandwiches and Jane had moved all the presents into the garage room. The lounge was now ready for the games. Once Maria had distributed drinks out to the party guests, she acquired a wireless speaker from the garage room. The appropriate track was ready to play on her phone. By the time this was set-up in the lounge, all the children had been fed and watered and were raring to go.

Christopher had not yet arrived.

All the children were assembled in a circle on the lounge floor. On either end of the sofa and in the armchair sat the adults. On the sofa closest to the front door clutching her phone was Maria, anticipating the arrival of the child's party entertainer booked by Christopher. A silence had fallen over the circle.

And so the games, and the drama, began.

Despite a successful test the day before, the wireless speaker was now reluctant to connect to any device. Pushing on in good spirit, pass-the-parcel was played to the noise from the television instead.

It was clear the games would need to come thick and fast. In between games, control seemed to get away from the adults. The kids charged about and played wildly. It was during the second round of musical bumps that the first injury occurred.

When a girl dressed as a butterfly bumped down, she recoiled back up immediately again with a wail. Her right hand instinctively gripped her backside. When she drew her hand away, she winced. When she saw the blood on her hand, she cried.

The three adults leapt from their seats and swooped down on the girl as she continued wailing in the middle of the floor. It took a few minutes to calm her down enough to remove her to the bathroom.

Jane remained in the lounge. "Nobody move!"

None of the other children spoke. Several glanced nervously at each other. William looked mortified. The butterfly had apparently cut herself on something as she hit the ground, so Jane was now on her hands and knees searching the floor around where the girl bumped down. She found it.

Maria and Alison returned from the bathroom with a sullen-looking butterfly who gingerly deposited herself on the sofa.

Jane lead Maria and Ali back into the relative privacy of the kitchen. "Here, look what I found."

Jane carefully held in the palm of her hand a sharp fragment of glass the size of a peppercorn. Maria collected it from her and held it out in her own.

"I found a few more too. I think I got them all." Jane said.

"I just wanted a beautiful day for William. I'm not going to get it, am I?"

Jane's expression melted and she hugged her friend to reassure her. "Oh, honey..."

"Nothing is going right..."

Jane and Alison continued to be nothing but sympathetic. For Maria, there was another major problem with the party.

"Where is he?" Maria demanded to know.

Jane and Alison did everything except move or speak.

A slap and a loud shriek rang through from the lounge. It was crisply followed by more irrepressible cries.

"Oh God, what now..."

As Maria, Jane and Alison entered the lounge, all the children were silent bar the one voice in song. The adults were presented with two factions: William was stood alone near the injured party who cradled her right upper arm, screaming. The other children, including the butterfly, had huddled in the corner of the lounge by the sofa, as far away from William and

the crying girl as they could. All eyes uniformly turned at the arrival of the three adults. The girl who was hurt now picked herself up and ran over towards the bigger group of children. She looked back toward William, but not for long. Maria stepped forward.

The little girl, dressed as a beetle, checked her step before she moved towards Maria and offered her arm. Maria knelt down and saw that on the beetle's arm were some superficial, yet nasty-looking, grazes tracking downwards that in places drew beads of blood.

"Are you okay, honey? What happened?" Maria asked.

"She hit me!" the beetle cried.

Maria looked about her company. Alison was in quiet conversation with some the other children by the sofa.

"Who hit you? Hit you with what?" Maria asked.

"*She* slapped me." The beetle turned round and pointed with her good arm toward William but immediately dropped it, looking puzzled.

"I'm sorry, honey. It sounded like you said 'she'" Maria said.

"It really hurts!" the beetle wailed.

"I'm sorry, honey, who did you say hit you again?" Maria asked.

"I don't know her name! She's here somewhere!" she cried.

Jane appeared at Maria's shoulder with the little first aid bag from the bathroom and undertook appropriate treatment. The beetle stopped crying, but her eyes scanned the room. Only then did Maria notice that all the children, excluding William, were doing the same.

Jane took the beetle by the hand and led her to the kitchen, where she was duly supplied with cake. Alison was being far too cheery to sell the emotion convincingly. Her efforts just came across as insincere. She was beginning to act more and more like a child in an adult costume. Maria looked about. Everyone else was quiet.

"Who hit her?" Maria asked the seven blank faces.

Maria turned on William. "William, what happened?"

William looked at his toes.

"Come on guys," Alison addressed the children. "This is a party and we're here to have fun for William's birthday! Let's play nicely together, okay?"

Maria stood back up and felt her legs begin to tremble. She put her hand to her temple and breathed deeply.

"Would anyone like a drink?" Alison said.

Jane went and fetched everybody's shoes, just in case more broken glass was hiding amongst the carpet fibres.

"How about a game?" Alison called. In return she was treated with some smiles as counterfeit as her own. "I'm going to get us some chairs," she added.

Message to: Christopher

Message from: Maria

Tuesday 21st October 2017 16:03

Where are you?!



The kids were soon running about again. Jane put the television back on to accompany the noise of the playful mob.

Plastic plates and food were removed from the floor and, amongst the remaining biscuit crumbs and party glitter, eight musical chairs were hastily arranged. It was a bit of a

squeeze in a lounge of that size, but it was done. Maria presented another party prize ready for the taking. Jane and Alison sat ready to supervise. The whole preparation was wonderfully distracting for the adults.

The television was turned off.

“You all know the rules,” Maria stated once everyone was settled. “If you’re out, go and sit on the sofa with Ali and wait for a new game.”

The children hovered, primed and staring at the chairs.

The music began and the children began to stalk the circle of chairs. None of them took their eyes off the target.

The party was back on.

It was only three stops into the game when a boy/demon tumbled from his chair at the music's pause. Simultaneously, the neighbouring two children jumped out of their seats. There were gasps, shrieks and the violent clash of furniture as chair's were knocked over. One of the kids jumped straight onto the sofa, landing on Alison.

The boy/demon turned round from the floor and looked shell-shocked.

Maria saw the boy fall, but nothing more. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“Someone pushed me!”

Maria stared down the scattered party. “Right, that's it!” she bellowed. “If you all can't play nicely together then we'll stop the party right *now*.” Many faces seemed to perk up at the idea. “Now who pushed him?”

Nobody answered. Apart from the boy/demon who remained in a heap on the floor, the other six party guests had by now scrambled up off of the floor and were either on the sofa with Alison or on the armchair with Jane. The five empty chairs left abandoned in the middle of the room were the focal point for all eyes in the room except Maria's.

“What's happened?” Maria asked. She looked from Jane to Alison and back and forth, but neither had an answer. The boy/demon looked down and over at his shoulder and saw some rips in his costume. He looked up at Maria expectantly.

Alison stammered something unhelpful. “I-I didn't see anything. I just saw-”

Maria squared on the boy/demon. “Who pushed you?”

The boy/demon opened his arms out to Maria. She looked at him blankly for a second and then leant in for the hug.

Emily was with Jane, who began to whisper in her daughter's ear.

When the boy/demon had finally let go of her, Maria sought out her own child. She saw him walking into the lounge back from the stairwell.

“Where have you been?” Maria demanded.

“I-I didn't go anywhere...” William said.

“What have you done?”

William looked stricken. “Mummy, I haven't done anything...”

Maria turned on the boy/demon. “Did William push you?”

The boy/demon shook his head.

Nobody wanted to play musical chairs anymore, so the doorbell's timing was impeccable.

“Chris?” speculated Jane.

“More likely the magician,” cynicism dripped from Maria's whispered voice.

Maria opened the front door. On the other side appeared a magician.

“Good day to you madam!” he cried in complete disregard of the expression on Maria's face. “My name is Ivan Bubbles. I was booked by a gentleman going by the name of Mr Christopher Higson.”

Maria stuttered. “Yes. I'm sorry, I...it's been a difficult afternoon. I'm very glad you're here.”

Ivan Bubbles smiled his party smile. “Fear not, good lady. I’ve been in the business for twenty years. I know how to pick them up.”

“Mr Higson is not here...yet. I am his wife.” Maria stepped back to allow Ivan the Magician into her house. As he passed Maria on his way inside, she took a step outside and allowed her eyes the momentary opportunity to wander up and down the street. Her husband was most definitely not here yet.

Message to: Christopher

Message from: Maria

Tuesday 21st October 2017 16:31

I don't know where the hell you are but if your not in this house in the next five minutes I am going to kill you.

The chairs had been quickly removed to the garage room and the children were sat scattered about the sofa and armchair watching the television. Jane was sat with them but sprung to her feet as soon as she saw Maria re-enter the lounge. Alison walked into the room at that moment carrying plastic plates of ham, chicken, cocktail sausages, buttered bread and crisps. All the children sat contentedly as they filled their faces and watched a film about courageous cartoon mice, except William who turned to look at his mother. Maria walked straight through to the kitchen where she was joined by the other two adults. Ivan Bubbles remained concealed in the hallway. He was taking a moment to prepare for his entrance.

“That’s everyone fed,” Alison informed Maria.

Maria looked at a plate full of food on the counter. “Whose is this then?”

“Oh,” Alison said. “I must have miscounted how many little ones we had. I’ll go check.”

“Was that the magician?” Jane asked.

“Yes. He’s getting his stuff together,” Maria said.

“Okay, well if he needs time to prepare, I’ll just keep them on the sofa and chairs with the film a few more minutes and then he has the whole floor to work with when he’s ready.”

“Thanks. I’ll go back out to him,” Maria said.

But Maria didn't leave.

“You alright?” Jane asked.

“He’s still not here.”

Jane looked sorry.

“He will be,” Maria said. “He promised.”

Jane looked even sorrier and went to do as she had said. Maria found Ivan at the bottom of the stairs holding his case full of tricks.

“Good to go,” he said.

“I’ll introduce you,” Maria said and disappeared behind the lounge door.

Jane was sat on the armchair with a couple of the kids. The rest were on the sofa with Alison. Everyone had their feet up away from the floor, despite wearing their shoes.

Maria addressed the party guests with a pleasant voice. To a timid and wary applause, Ivan Bubbles walked onto the stage.

Any lingering anxiety amongst the children disappeared within seconds of Ivan's act beginning. All of them squeaked and squealed with delight. They laughed as he pulled reams of ticker tape out of his mouth and his nose, they wowed at his balloon animals and his sleight of hand. They cooed as he pulled furry little bunnies out of his hat and they chuckled when he made his watch disappear and couldn't find it again.

For his pièce de résistance, Ivan presented a large jar full of jelly beans whose contents he made vanish before everyone's eyes. He huddled close amongst the children assembled on the floor, who found sweet after sweet in their own pockets. He found them behind their ears and pulled them out of thin air. The children loved the show and had Ivan hemmed in on all sides, rabid for more jelly beans that were happily provided and in bountiful supply. The kids ate and jostled, were over-excited and rapacious as they chomped at Ivan's heels. Soon Ivan just handed out the sweets and they were lapped up.

Someone started pushing.

Someone fell over and jumped back into the fray.

Something in the air changed. Ivan's face flushed with alarm and the three women jumped to their feet. Ivan had completely lost control.

A scream blew the whole scene apart and everybody froze except the butterfly. She saw the blood pouring out from her collar and bawled with such frenzy that her eyes rolled back into her head, her knees crumpled and she hit the deck on the spot.

Maria, Jane and Alison screamed in unison and chased towards her limp body.

"Oh God, Oh God..." Maria uttered.

"Get back!" Jane shouted to the other kids. They did not need to be told. They were standing as far back as they could. Ivan Bubbles trembled in the corner by the lounge door, before bolting out the front door. Alison closed her eyes and mumbled inaudibly and intelligibly. Jane had kept the first aid kit in the kitchen on the counter after the second time they had needed it. The beetle brought it to Jane, who fumbled with the contents.

"Do you know what to do?" Jane asked.

"Uh, we...we p-put pressure on the...the..."

Alison was already on the phone.

"Ambulance...please..."

"She's bleeding everywhere! Oh God!" Maria put her hands to her face and recoiled in abjection. Her hands were covered in blood. So too, now, was her face.

Jane grabbed a hand-full of whatever dressing she found first from the bag and pushed down on the wound with it. The wound was a gash two inches long and straight like a knife-wound. The blood flowed.

"God, its deep...it-it needs stitching..." Jane cried.

"Please hurry! Thank you-" Alison dialled another number and spoke just as frantically as she had to the paramedics.

"You're not supposed to hang up!" Maria shouted.

The dressing in Jane's hands was saturated and useless. Maria grabbed a fresh fistful and swapped with Jane, who ran to the kitchen bin.

Alison saw the contents of Jane's hands and dropped the phone. She ran to the remaining children and tightly hugged as many of them at once as she could. "She's going to be okay. She's going to be okay. Don't worry. She's going to be okay."

The butterfly was now wide awake again and deeply distressed, her face ashen. Maria held her, a butterfly with a broken wing.

A young child bleeding profusely evoked a swift response from the emergency services. Paramedics arrived at the house within four minutes and the child's mother arrived within five. The paramedics were given space to do their work while the butterfly's mother ran circles around them in a panic, routinely rounding on Maria and questioning her abilities as a mother and as a human being. Maria took all the abuse silently. Standing, but with a cohort on each side of her for support. They were in the kitchen, staring on.

The butterfly's mother seemed happy enough to leave her daughter's side after a while and stormed over towards Maria in the kitchen for a more personal confrontation.

"What the hell has been going on here today?"

“I’m sorry, no-one knows what-” Maria offered.

“She’s cut to ribbons! Where were you when this happened?”

Maria wilted in the wind. “W-w we were in the r-room...”

“There’s glass all over the floor! Half the children are injured, my daughter’s blood is all over the place and the other children are practically running out of here! Look!”

It was not easy to see if the children were running screaming from the house or if they were trying to frighten something away. First the children began to shout and point. One of them ran forwards with a furious face. The courage of the one inspired the others and collectively they swarmed in the direction of the lounge door. The paramedics were startled and distracted. One was knocked from her feet as they were over-crowded by the children. The administration of any care was unintentionally halted. Footsteps bounded up the stairs accompanied by the sound of tears. The children’s shouting and jostling died down only to be replaced by the shouting and jostling of the paramedics, the butterfly's mother, Maria and Jane in their attempt to restore order.

“What kind of house is this?” The butterfly's mother spat as the mêlée dispersed.

“I’ll go upstairs and check it out,” Jane said, leaving for the upstairs floor.

Maria struggled to cope and was now one crutch down.

The butterfly's mother parted with one last gift. “You haven’t heard the last of this! I will be talking to the police you can be sure!”

The butterfly was carried out by the paramedics, followed by her mother. As soon as the porch door snapped shut behind them, Maria let out a howl. Alison stared about the faces of the remaining party guests. Two factions had developed again: William and everybody else. Jane returned downstairs.

“There’s no-one up there.” Jane counted the number of children in the room. “Eight minus one, seven, yes. No, we’re all down here.”

Mercifully, the other parents soon arrived to collect their children. One by one they filed out the door, party bags left behind. Alison left with Lucy leaving only Maria, Jane, William and Emily in the lounge.

There was blood almost everywhere.

“Would you like a hand clearing up?” Jane asked.

Emily looked at her mother. “Mummy, I want to go home.”

Maria looked about at the abattoir surrounding her.

“Where is Chris?” she cried. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she fell to the floor.