

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

By Ryan A. M. Ennis

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book once again to my sweet love, Ciara Power. I would also like to thank friends who took the time to read whatever I had written:

Tristan Shiels and Zachary Westhelle Hartfiel and a great big “thank you!” to Craig Dowling for helping me out as a fellow writer.

I would also like to dedicate this book to my Grandad Ennis. Keep writing!

Part One

I

It was a clear cold December morning, and the alarm clocks rang throughout a once quiet home. George Eastwood opened his dark eyes to the irritating ringing sounds and slapped the top of the alarm therefore relieving his ears of the annoyance.

George's bedroom was a complete and utter mess; "Like a bomb had hit it" his mother would say. As he was at the age of seventeen, George was an ordinary teenager going to school (or not going to school in most cases) and loathing every moment of it. Thinking of course as a teenager that he knew it all he got himself into a considerable amount of trouble and took everything for granted.

He rubbed his eyelids in some attempt to wake up from his heavy sleeping as he plodded down the stairs to the sound of his mother's call for breakfast. His mother would always make breakfast, without fail, for the whole family (not that it was particularly a large family). George had an older –less rebellious– brother named Zachary. Their father was no longer present as he died when they were younger.

George would always be the last one to get out of bed, the last to sit at the table for breakfast, the last to leave for school (no matter how much his mother pushed him), and the last home from an *adventurous* night out.

The kitchen smelt of baked beans, boiled eggs and oven sausages which George looked forward to demolishing every morning. George had a normal relationship with his mother and brother but like most teenagers going through confusing times he took them both for granted, surprisingly even after his father died of a heart disease at the age of fifty. His mother feared for both of her sons' lives as the heart disease was in fact hereditary as most men on their father's side did not live to see sixty because of it. She tried

her best not to think about it much unless they had a recommended check-up appointment with the doctor.

George pulled out a chair from under the kitchen table, making a screeching sound as he dragged it slowly and made three more loud bangs as he hopped the chair closer to the table after sitting his backside down and clutching his hands underneath the chair. The plate was already placed directly in front of him covered in his favourite kind of breakfast. The boiled egg sat nicely on his plate ready for him to dip the delicious sausage into it. After doing so, the yoke of the egg dripped down onto the plate and also onto the table of course making a complete muddle of the kitchen. But naturally George did not say “thank you”, “please”, or even offer to clean up after. Gulping down his glass of orange juice, George stood up from the table and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his school shirt. He turned to leave the kitchen and mumbled a tired ‘See ya.’ and walked out the front door without a care or responsibility in the world.

His mother turned from the kitchen table ‘Bye George,’ she softly raised her voice ‘Be good.’

but George had already left without even locking the door behind him. Whether or not he was actually going to school this time, was a complete and utter mystery.

Zachary, as per usual, had left well before George had even got out of bed. Zachary was in his last year of school, one year ahead of George even though he stayed back a year for missing too many days round the same time as the loss of their father. "*Zachary is the good one*" some teachers would say amongst each other especially in the moments when George would get himself into trouble.

When George arrived at the school routinely late, he placed his thumb in a scanner to mark his attendance. A rather large man with the face like a walrus, a receding hairline, and always wearing a shirt and tie stops George in his tracks. It was the principal, Mr. Hiller, whom the students call "Hitler" behind his back.

'Late again George,' he snarled sarcastically.

'No sir.'

'Don't lie to me! I just saw you tag in and I *can* check the system.'

This was the recurring start to every day of school for George. It was just like a prison (like most schools for some reason) with its barbed wire fences surrounding the school grounds. Most students compare it to the fences enclosing the prison camp in the movie *The Great Escape* even though that would be an extreme exaggeration. The students all wore dull uniforms, grey for the juniors and navy for the seniors, and there was also a rather strict rule of no hats, scarves or gloves and having to wear a horrible compulsory school jacket which never kept you warm nor were you kept dry in the rain. Throughout the school corridors there were leaks and holes in the ceiling and the classrooms were very much in similar condition. Parts of the walls oozed a yellow type substance which no one dared to touch for fear of turning into a yellow blob monster of some kind or catching some sort of unknown illness. But of course that would be absurd. The health inspectors have visited that school many of times but nothing was ever said about the strange yellow substance. The toilets were also in a great heap. There was never any toilet paper or any hand

soap from the dispenser so if any student desperately needed to go they would try their best to save it for home or would try and make an early escape and forge a letter from their parents the next day. If this school was a prison it would have most certainly shut down but for some strange reason the education system was flawed (especially this school). Even if someone was desperate enough to use the horrifying school toilets chances were that there was a rule that restricted them from taking that *risk*. Students had to time their digestive system in order to be allowed to go and George despised this rule (like every other student) especially after that rather tasty breakfast his mother made for him and Zachary every morning.

Principal Hiller wasted no more of his own valued time and sent George on his way to class. George had already missed twenty minutes of an hour long History class which was taught by a quite attractive looking Ms. Best which of course the *lads* of the class talk amongst each other about. Of course they were all talk and would be quiet about it during class and Ms.

Best would never break the law and she loved her job with a happy passion.

As George walked in the door after knocking, disturbing the class, Ms. Best shook her head with disappointment but not surprised about how late he was again. He took his seat as fast as he could but Ms. Best called him to his feet once more.

‘George, what are you forgetting?’

‘The time...’ he mumbled.

Ms. Best rolled her eyes, ‘Maybe so, but also, you are forgetting to apologise for being late.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he rubbed his tired eyes. ‘Sorry I’m late Ms. Breast... BEST!’

The class then burst out with laughter to George’s honest slip of the tongue but many would presume that he had meant it due to his joker attitude and of course Ms. Best was one to think so. The class continued to laugh and George held his head down with regret and embarrassment waiting for Ms. Best to say something back to him.

‘Just sit down George...’ she sighed after quietening down the laughter.

‘Yes miss.’

George was calling himself stupid in his mind and his face reddened as he crouched into his chair, hoping for the table to swallow him whole and take him away from this hell. George was not even one of those *lads* that said sexist and immoral things about Ms. Best. She was actually one of his favourite teachers at an academic level. He was disgusted with himself for the mistake. His mind seemed to always be somewhere else. He was better than the way everyone saw him but he just could not help but say or do the wrong things. But of course, he would still give other teachers (that he was not fond of) smart, cheeky comments. It was clear that George hated school, it was clear that he was a joker, but he hid it well that something was always bothering him and looked as though he was just sullen most of the time. Teachers have always asked what his problem was and have had many meetings with his mother but teachers were not exactly the sort he would connect with.

It was the slowest twenty minutes George had ever felt, not counting the time he was five years old and he was waiting to see his father in the

hospital after a dramatic turn in his health. The teachers suspected it was the loss of his father that had caused him to act out but George said nothing. He did not trust anyone enough to open up to about anything. He did not even talk to his mother or brother about what he felt unless it's hunger or temperature.

When the bell rang from the speaker as the class ended, students packed up their belongings like they would never come back (but obviously they'll sit in the same seats the next day). George made his way out of the classroom trying to avoid eye contact with Ms. Best and another student laughed and punched his arm lightly and snickered 'Get in there man!' but George seemed to resent this humour. Maybe the troubles that George had been getting himself into was not the real him. The real George was very smart (too smart for his own good at times) but he was known as a class clown, trouble-maker and a no-show. George was acting out and it could have been a cry for attention but anyone that gave him the time of day, he took for granted and didn't appreciate. Whatever it

was that was troubling George was bound to come out eventually.

There was one person that George seemed close to and it was not who everyone thought was his best friend. It was a girl from his year; she was very intelligent and wore small glasses that she pushed up to the top of her nose quite regularly, which George thought was endearing. She was very angelic and quite soft spoken. But she also had a witty sense of humour about her which was fairly quirky in fact. Her name was Kim Powers.

George's supposed best friend was an extremely tall Paul Dunne which was known round the school as Dunney. He was most certainly not the brightest spark and not the best looking lad but he could be kind most of the time. Other times he's just trying to please the lads by simply acting the idiot. When George was hanging round with Dunney, he was bound to be sent to detention or given some other form of punishment. Everyone thought that they were best friends and maybe that was true to a certain extent, but George would not be the best guy to be friends with. He was inconsiderate, said what

he thought too much, and judged non-stop but Dunney was a follower and George was somewhat popular in school even though he wouldn't show most days.

It was unclear whether or not George was even happy with this type of popularity. He was known for something that he was not, but it was his own fault that he had turned out this way. His brother also lost a father yet he did not act out this way, although everyone is different. George was very different.

He wondered sometimes if it was too late to change. Everyone expected him to be the class clown, the entertainment, the trouble-maker, and the late-comer and if he was to suddenly change would they respect him for it. Kim Powers would most certainly respect him for it which George would be delighted to hear. But he felt it difficult to change at times especially when he messed up like he did with Ms. Best.

George would talk to Kim more so than anyone else and he would not have to say funny or stupid things to keep her interested and that was what he loved most. Kim would question him for the things he would do but he would

never have anything to say except 'I don't know'. If he would connect with anyone it would be with Kim. Whoever George was when he got into trouble, Kim did not like, but when they were alone they were true best friends. But if he never changed that would soon be the end of their almost secret friendship (or maybe more than friendship).

When they were walking to the next class, Kim avoided George because of what he had said to Ms. Best whether it was an accident or not. George would not admit to anyone if it was and just carried on with his day (pretending it didn't happen).

'Kim,' George called quietly in the corridor as she walked ahead but continued to ignore him.

'Woody!' Dunney yelled out to George (it was his nickname, short for Eastwood) and Kim had left George's sights.

'Don't call me Woody!' he shook his head with frustration. 'What do ya want?'

'Goin' on the hop?' he suggested with a shrug of his shoulders.

George looked to the direction which Kim had headed and was where their next class was

being held and suddenly turned back to Dunney and whispered 'Why not?'

Dunney laughed out and they headed the opposite direction, leaving the school grounds without being caught and made their way to a field nearby.

The large field just outside the school was surrounded by trees which shielded them from the sight of the school and of those who would be known as rats or teacher's pets. One in particular to steer clear from was Brian Fields. He was a "class A" teacher's pet. He wore thick metal braces which gave him a hissing lisp that spat out at anyone he spoke to. He carried round his school journal all the time to make notes on what other students were doing wrong. He wouldn't have been able to sneak up on anyone though due to his unmistakable loud breathing from the back of his throat which at times seemed to be forced. Anyone could also spot him from a great distance as he had the brightest orange curly hair in the school. It was important to stay clear of Brian Fields' vision. Luckily George and Dunney made it to the field without any trouble.

There were shapes of flattened grass from the last group of teenagers who were skipping classes. The sound Dunney's bag made when he chucked it onto the ground was like something had broken up into many pieces inside but he clearly did not care as he threw himself on top of it just after.

'Here's Henno and Jay,' Dunney pointed at two more school mates hiding their faces in their hoodies (the tough guys that they were) that were heading over to join them.

'Hey lads,' Henno threw his bag next to George and lied down on the prickly grass. 'What's up?' he looked to George.

'Not much... just chillin.'

George could not stand to be round the company of Henno and Jay (which of course is not their actual names). James Hennessey and Jason McCarthy were their birth names but with the crowd that they hung round with came these shortened –less appealing– names, Henno and Jay. They were not the sort that you would want to have something against you so George stayed quiet and let them join them on the field.

‘Jay’s havin a gaff party next week if yiz wanna come,’ Henno said as he scratched his acne riddled face. ‘There’ll be loads of drink an’ birds!’

‘Yeah maybe...’ George reluctantly put just to shut Henno up.

‘Deadly!’ he began to take out a cigarette. ‘Do you have a light?’

Dunney rushed through his pockets and swiftly yanked out his lighter for Henno.

‘Cheers Dunney!’ He offered him a cigarette too and he joyfully accepted. Henno also turned to George and offered him one too.

There was a slight moment of silence which felt like an eternity to George as he tried to make his decision or at least search for the best way to say no. He really had no intention in ever smoking and never pictured himself as a smoker. The smell disgusted him immensely.

Before he knew it the words came out of his mouth. “No, I’m good.” He smiled and waved his hand politely.

‘Ahh come on!’ Henno laughed and rolled his eyes at Jay. ‘It’s not like its weed!’

George unwillingly submitted to the peer pressure caused by Henno and took the smoke from his hand. The lighter was passed to him as he sat the cigarette on his dry lips. With two flicks of his thumb the flame was lit and set the cigarette alight. George let out two crackling coughs for air after breathing in the horrid smoke. The small group of lads burst out with laughter, including Dunney (although he was obviously just laughing because Henno and Jay were).

‘Ah go on have another go! Don’t be a little bitch.’ Jay grinned.

‘Shut up Jay!’ Henno punched his shoulder. ‘First one’s always like that... have another go.’

George was slightly surprised and then cautious that Henno had stood up for him like that. What was Henno up to? Maybe Henno actually liked him. George definitely didn’t like Henno but he was like a leech of some sort. Once Henno got a hold on you, you were going to have some trouble getting rid of him. If he did like George, then he would most likely ask him to do him a *favour*. Henno’s favours were of course never legal and usually someone ended

up hurt or in prison. No matter George's choice he would end up in trouble. If he was to refuse Henno's offer he would get the bad treatment, if he was to join Henno then a number of bad things could happen. This was all going through George's racing mind as he tried to make his decision. He did what he thought was easiest and took another puff of the cigarette with a smile and a nod to Henno.

'I told you he was sound!' Henno cheered to Jay.

'Cheers!' George inhaled another puff of the horrible tasting smoke but couldn't help but feel like Clint Eastwood in one of the old western movies with the cigarette hanging from his lips. He began to think that cigarettes weren't so bad after all (if you didn't pay attention to the smell, taste or how disgusting it looked).

George used to watch the Clint Eastwood westerns as a young child mainly because they had the same last name. It's unclear if there was any relation but he was pretty crazy about the movies. He used to watch them with his father whenever he had a day off work.

Smoking was the last thing he should have been doing especially with the hereditary heart disease.

‘Right, I’ll see yiz another time,’ Henno stood up to his feet as his knees clicked and cracked. ‘We’re gonna head.’

‘Alright, talk to ya again man,’ George waved his hand and they left so it was once again just him and Dunney sitting on the grass alone.

The brisk wind began to pick up and rain quickly followed. This was one of George’s few moments where he would agree to go back to school so they both rushed back, holding their bags above their heads in an attempt to keep them dry.

Most times all doors in the school would be locked to stop students just like them from skipping classes and to make it more awkward for those who were late. The doors opened for a few moments every hour or so (or whenever Principal Hiller felt like it). The doors would even lock at lunch time so that everyone that had went out for lunch would not be able to come back in until the doors had opened five minutes before the next class would start.

Luckily the doors were not locked which was very peculiar at this time. Maybe it was some sort of trap or just simply that the janitor forgot to lock it. They just wanted to get in from the drenching rain so they did not worry about it. But of course they bumped into the man himself, Principal Hiller. Standing tall, (even though he's not far from five feet) Hiller looked down his nose at them both, soaking wet from the rain. Dunney towered over Hiller but he avoided eye contact out of fear of being suspended or worse, thrown out of school. Hiller looked at their clothes drip and listened to the sound of their squelching shoes and took a deep breath before finally starting to yell. It wasn't clear most of what he was saying but every now and then George would bring his hand to his eyes to wipe away spit that had flown out of his mouth from the shouting at every word that had a "T" or "S" in it. Eventually, after the yelling, it became clear that Hiller had given them detention scheduled for next week. They got lucky this time.

Principal Hiller escorted them both back to class. There was absolute silence in the room due to the presence of Hiller and all that could be

heard was the squelching noise from their puddle-filled shoes.

‘Keep a sharp eye on these two,’ Hiller said with a robust tone in his voice to the teacher at the top of the classroom.

As soon as Hiller turned away and left the classroom every student immediately became relaxed and some talked amongst each other without a care in the world.

II

Another bell rang over the school intercom as the class ended and so did the school day. Students rushed out the door like animals set free out into the wilderness.

Kim Powers caught George's eyes in the crowd of students flowing out the door. He picked up speed and started to walk alongside her. At first Kim ignored him.

'Why do you keep acting like that?' She finally said, still not looking at him.

'Like what exactly?'

'Like an idiot,' she continued to march. 'And I know you're not.'

'What am I then?'

'I'm still trying to figure that out.'

'I wish I could be different... I wish I could be someone else at times.'

'You are someone else most of the time,' she said as they stopped walking. 'You're only YOU when it's just the two of us... that's the George I like.'

'I like when I'm with you.'

‘You just gotta open your eyes and wake up George... if not for your sake, for mine.’

Kim then suddenly moved on to another random topic of conversation to avoid awkwardness. They talked and laugh and joked to each other while they walked home. They were happy, they were themselves. As they came to a point on their walk home they parted ways and said their goodbyes. It was the usual routine for them both on an average school day. George would mess up, they would not see each other the whole day, and they walk home together (with Kim telling him where he went wrong that day), then parting ways and then the same thing the next day usually.

George had reached home within the next five minutes but just as he was walking up to the front door he noticed a strange black jeep with tinted windows. He suddenly felt like there were many eyes watching him, focusing only on him and he was surrounded. When he sped up to get through the front he then stopped to take another look but there did not seem to be any movement in the car. He quickly opened the door and locked it shut behind him. He paused

and took a deep breath as he then felt ridiculous. The paranoid thought that someone was watching him was quite preposterous. But George could not help but investigate yet again. He stuck his head against the glass of the window, trying his best not to make much movement, but there was no black jeep out there anymore. He then felt relieved at first but also began to wonder where the jeep had gone.

Zachary walked quietly into the house from school too. He nearly tripped over George's school bag that he had dumped on the hall floor but swiftly got his balance again before sliding the bag against the wall out of harm's way.

'Mam, I'm home,' Zachary called out as he walked through the hallway.

'I'll be down in a sec,' his mother hollered from upstairs.

George met Zachary in the hallway as he headed for the sitting area after a long walk home.

'Did you see that black jeep out there?'

'What you talkin' about?' Zachary asked as he stared in confusion.

'Forget about it.'

The stairs started to creak from the footsteps of their mother as she came down to greet them.

‘How was school?’

‘Fine,’ George lied of course.

‘Well I hope you are hungry because the dinner should be ready soon.’

‘I’m starvin’

‘Yeah I could eat a horse!’ Zachary laughed.

The dinner was enough to keep them all going for the whole day. There was nothing left on any of the plates. Every bit was engulfed and that was the way their mother liked it.

George placed his hand on his full stomach as he leaned back into the chair.

‘I’m headin’ out now,’ he said after a deep sigh.

‘Alright, well what time will you be home?’ His mother wondered while she began to clear the plates from the table except for Zachary’s plate, he cleared that himself.

‘I don’t know...’

‘Don’t be home too late.’

‘Would you just leave me alone?!’

‘Don’t get snappy! I just don’t want you out all hours of the night...’

'I can take care of me self,' he said while he began to leave the kitchen and head to his room.

George slammed his bedroom door behind him and began to change his clothes for heading out. But for some reason he would need extremely loud music to do this simple task. The loud speakers caused vibrations throughout the entire house. There were times that the neighbours would complain but luckily they weren't home at that moment. George's mother would bang on the door to get him to turn the music down but it was seldom that he would ever listen to her.

Finally, the loud music stopped but not for the consideration of others but because he was ready and then left the house to head out. He left without saying a word, not even a goodbye.

III

For once the rain had stayed away yet the cold was still quite bitter. George did not prepare for the weather as he dressed for style more so than warmth. He shivered and rubbed his hands together in a desperate attempt to keep warm. He tried his best to keep moving even if he just stomped his feet in the same spot again and again in a rhythmic display like a dance. He could see his breath rise in front of his numb face from the cold. That month of December was certainly a cold one and George was feeling the brunt of it at that moment. It felt like an eternity to George while he waited.

Finally, a car pulled up beside him. It was clearly a teenager's car. It was covered in dents, the colour was fading and the sound of the exhaust was rattling ever so stridently. Driving the wreck of a car was his best friend, Dunney. Dunney was leaning back relaxed into his seat with one arm resting on the open window. He grinned and nodded his chilled out head at George as he pulled up.

‘Get in will ya!’ He cheered to George as he stood in the freezing cold.

George had to brush away some rubbish, including empty cans, so that he could take a seat in the car. There was a smell and it wasn’t the typical car smell. It smelt like Dunney had been smoking something far from legal but George let it go. Dunney started to rev the car while they came to a halt at traffic lights. George started to panic a little bit as he didn’t want them to attract any guards because of the smell in the car.

‘Can I drive?’ George asked as he did not trust Dunney’s driving skills at that minute.

‘Yeah sure man, let me just pull in here.’

When the car pulled over, George hopped out of the car and switched places with Dunney. He sat in the driver seat and gingerly started moving the car forward. George would not be an experienced driver. He had not even started the theory test but would drive Dunney’s car whenever he got the chance.

Just as George turned the wheel out towards the road he noticed something in the rear view mirror parked up at the side of the path. It was

the black jeep with tinted windows. He began to wonder why the jeep was also in that estate. Was the jeep following him? If that was so, then what would the reason be? In the panic of the thoughts flowing through his mind he picked up speed. George was driving so fast (Dunney just cheered on) that he was not paying attention. He drove through the traffic lights at a crossing and a van ploughed into the side of the car causing it to flip and spin. Fragments of debris had scattered all over the road until the vehicles had finally come to a rest. Both wreckages lay out on the road silently.

Part Two

I

George struggled to open his eyes and they slowly focused while he lied in a bright room. He was in a hospital bed with all sorts of tubes tangled round him. He could hear his mother talking outside with one of the doctors. It was quite muffled but all George could make out was the words “lucky”, “ashamed” and “drugs”.

His mother entered the room and stared at him with a disgusted look.

‘You awake?’ She said shamefully.

‘Yeah... Ma, what happened?’

‘You crashed,’ she stood with disapproval.
‘How could you!?’

‘I didn’t mean it...’

‘You don’t even ask about your friend either!’

‘What happened to Dunney!?’

‘He’s fine just like you... but not so much for the van driver. He broke his legs. You are in so much trouble now George and I’m not going to help you out of it. This is all your fault.’

‘But I...’

‘There were drugs in Dunney’s system too, lucky he wasn’t driving or he’d be put away. Now I have to pay that van driver’s hospital bills, it’s the least I can do along with paying your fine and bail. Maybe I should let them lock you up...’

‘No please...’

‘Things will change George, when are you going to wake up?’

‘I’m sorry...’

‘It’s too late for that now.’

It was all happening so fast for George and he was confused mostly of his mother’s reaction. A lot didn’t make sense but it was happening and it was all happening to him. Luckily enough George walked out of the hospital. Round him were many fatally wounded or sick and some patients were missing limbs but George walked out with a few bruises and scrapes. He could not help but feel guilty and also ashamed. He

wondered what he had done to deserve such luck. The corridor felt long and the exit seemed to get further and further the faster he walked. He could sense all the eyes of the patients stare at him as he passed by. The faster he tried to move the slower he went. The walls began to cave in on him and he could not breathe. He shut his eyes with the terror and fell to his knees.

‘Get up,’ his mother said and he slowly opened his eyes to find that they had reached the exit.

He stood up on his shaky legs and brushed off himself before making his way to the car.

The drive home was strange. There was absolute silence in the car. Not one word from his mother. When he looked out the window nothing was clear. Everything seemed to move so fast that it turned into straight lines of different colours.

‘Can you slow down Ma?’ He lightly begged his mother but she did not answer or even show any reaction.

It was almost like the car came to a sudden stop when they had reached home and it quivered George’s mind slightly. He held the

palm of his hands over his eyes and moved them in a twisting motion until the feeling had gone.

Finally, as he got in the house his mother locked the front door behind them.

‘The only time you’re going out is for school,’ she said firmly.

His mother marched up the staircase like a high ranking officer in the army making sure her feet thumped every single step. The sound of the bangs rang George’s bewildered ears ever so slightly. George began to feel a sharp and sudden stiffening pain in his right arm. It nagged at him for just a moment and stopped as quickly as it started. He stretched out his arm and flexed his fingers in and out of a fist with confusion of the pain.

George got to an old cracked family mirror in the hallway so he stopped to quickly survey his face for scars from the crash but he was nearly unmarked. The only difference was that he was much paler than before. His eyes seemed much darker and his hair looked blacker next to his milky white skin. His brother, Zachary, slipped past him almost ashamedly and into the sitting area. George followed.

'You not goin' to ask how I am?' George asked Zachary as he took a seat.

No answer.

'Zach!' He moved in front of his line of vision.

'You're obviously fine... It was your own fault anyway,' Zachary said still not looking at him.

'What's that supposed to mean!?'

'When are you goin' to grow up George?' He yelled just before charging out of the room away from George so shocked and left stood there staring into space.

George was feeling the isolation from his family swarm round him and swallow him whole. He had never felt so alone in his life before. The treatment that he was getting lately was close to how he treated them himself. The crash seemed to be the last straw. George began to feel the usual and familiar feeling of regret. He regretted getting into the car with Dunney, with or without the smell of weed, he regretted getting behind the wheel of the car, he regretted losing concentration after feeling paranoid about the strange black jeep, and he regretted how he had been acting out the past few years.

The orange and red light of the jaded sun started to die down as the night had begun to creep up. George plodded into his bedroom and collapsed on his cold bed. He did not get a "goodnight" from his mother and even though he did not care much for it before it had certainly made his heart ache now. He draped himself round the bedsheets and tried his best to sleep, but the harder he tried, the more awake he became. He felt tired and heavy headed but his eyes just would not close shut. He sat up with his back against the head of the bed. The silence filled the room and the only sound was the slight ringing in his ears. The darkness made his eyes fuzz with little spots of red, blue and green. Suddenly the headlights of a car moved round his room with a life of its own and quickly stopped. Startled, George leaped from his bed in a sudden jolt. He began to move slower as he got closer to the window. He cautiously poked his eyes out as he hid the rest of his body behind the curtains. He could not believe it! It couldn't be true! It was the strange black jeep with dark tinted windows! He jumped back with the fright. The headlights were shut off and George tripped

over a box on the messy teenager floor. He quickly jumped back up to his feet and built up a little courage to look out the window again. As he nervously shook he moved the curtain and searched for the black jeep with the tinted windows. It was gone! It made no sense to him. Where could the jeep have gone in such little time and why was it there? George had a feeling why it was there: it was following him. For some reason they had been following him but he had no clue as for why. He wondered if he was losing his mind, if he was just paranoid, or if something was actually going on. He didn't want to believe it. He couldn't. But what he also could not do was sleep. O to sleep was not but a distant dream, a horizon on the long dry desert. George was in the middle of that desert, lost without a map or a compass.

II

He had not slept the whole night or at least he had not slept most of the night. It was now morning and his mother called for him to get out of bed for school. The sun shined brightly and painfully through the window at George's eyes. He got dressed and made his way down the stairs. This time there was no smell of a cooked breakfast, no baked beans, no eggs, and no oven sausages.

George could not believe it. There was no plate in his place ready for him to demolish. He took back at first with sheer shock.

'Ma... What's goin' on?' George asked.

'Zachary already left for school.'

'What about breakfast?' He pointed loosely at the table.

All of a sudden burnt toast jumped out from the toaster that was buzzing on the counter.

'There's your breakfast,' his mother said absently.

George carefully took out the burnt toast, dropping each quickly as they were too hot, and made an immediate look of disgust.

‘No way I’m eatin’ that!’ He flung the toast into the bin.

‘Don’t then... I couldn’t care less.’

George, shocked by the reaction of his mother, was stunned for words. In usual cases there would have been an argument next but the subject was almost immediately forgotten when George gripped his right arm when the striking, stiffening pain pulsed yet again.

‘AHH SHIT!’ He snapped with agony but just like that, the pain was gone.

‘What are you shouting for?’ His mother asked.

‘My arm hurt... must be from the crash...’

‘Well that’s what happens when you act the idiot,’ she said arrogantly. ‘Now get to school.’

George stretched out his right arm and swung his heavy school bag over his back and left the house for school. Just as he was shutting the door behind him his mother yelled, ‘Be back straight after school!’

The walk to school was a remote one. He walked alone and a pack of younger teenagers seemed to glare and laugh at George sardonically. George just ignored them to the

best of his ability while his mind began to wonder. He thought of the crash; that terrifying experience, and the strange black jeep with tinted windows. It was nowhere to be seen at that moment. He also wondered about his friend, Dunney. Was he hurt badly? Was he getting the same treatment as himself? What also crossed his mind was a moment he had had with his father and cherished. George didn't have many memories of his father as he was so young when he passed but he did have a few.

George was about five years old, just before his father's health declined. It was the summer months, maybe July. The temperature was soaring as a magnificent heatwave sat right over the country. It was the hottest July in over thirty years.

Zachary was badly burnt after not wearing sun cream. George and his father were making the most of the weather on a reclusive stony beach. The beach was mostly empty because of the stones that had covered most of the sand. It was as if it was their very own private beach. They even climbed down a steady-enough cliff

to get to it. There was a pathway of sand almost engraved in the cliff from the amount of times they had visited the stony beach. George could remember the feeling of the sand between his toes as though it was yesterday. The only sound was the crashing of the small gentle waves against the shore. It's rare to get a five-year-old that would stay quiet and listen to the silence and to take in the peacefulness. That was just who George was; who he used to be. It was then that his father would teach him how to swim. The balloon-like armbands were wrapped round each of George's arms.

'Get in the water ya monkey' His father laughed and splashed from the shallow water.

'But... Dad, I'm afwaid,' he said with a W sounding lisp on his R.

'What are ya afraid of?' He walked out of the water toward George, standing so small and frail in the sand.

'It's too deep and I will sink...'

'Nah you won't, George,' he went down on his hunkers to be at eye level with the boy. 'Trust me, you won't sink. Plus, I will be there the whole time. I promise; I won't let you sink.'

He held out his fathering hand and led George into the calm water.

George's eyes widened as his feet touched the freezing water and he screamed with laughter and his teeth chattered. He quickly got used to the temperature of the water and went in further.

'Look at me Dad!' He cheered as he began to do the doggy paddle.

'You're doin' it George! See,' he said with a great big smile. 'I didn't know monkeys could swim that good!' He lifted George up playfully and dipped him in and out of the water, up to his neck. George laughed uncontrollably.

They walked, exhausted, out of the water as they dripped soaking wet and out of breath. His father wrapped him up in a towel to dry off and he stood shivering for a moment, letting the slightly-sandy towel do its job.

'What can I be when I grow up?' He asked his father, again with the lisp on the R.

'You can be anythin' you want to be, George.'

'I want to be like you, Dad,' he looked up at his father with affection and also the look as if he

was looking at a superhero. His father was his superhero.

It was only three months later that his father was admitted to the hospital after he collapsed in work. He then had only weeks left.

III

George had reached the prison-like school grounds. Luckily he was not too late and made it on time to get in thorough the doors as they would be locked at a certain time. He felt every eye of all the other students glare at him from all directions. Surely, the rumours had spread about the crash and it was probably blown completely out of proportion by now like a game of Chinese whispers.

Principal Hiller marched to-and-fro along the corridor, making sure that every student went to class. George caught his unmerciful eye. Hiller arrogantly stood in front him while he walked to his locker for his books.

‘You haven’t forgotten that you have detention after school today, George, have you?’ Hiller said. ‘And along with your friend Paul Dunne.’

‘Yes sir... It actually slipped my mind with all that happened,’ he said genuinely.

‘Oh really? Are you using the crash as an excuse, George?’

‘No sir – ‘

George was cut short by Hiller.

‘I want to see you and Paul in my office after school!’ He snapped. ‘If you do not show up for some other excuse I will double it!’

George stayed silent and just nodded his head submissively. Hiller smiled an evil grin and walked away proudly. Students parted in the corridor for Hiller like the Red Sea for Moses.

George’s mood suddenly changed as Kim approached him. He now felt happy, the butterflies began to fly round the pit of his stomach. He was all of a sudden not in a nightmare, but in a wonderful dream. He finally felt sympathy from someone after the crash and he finally felt loved.

‘George!’ She called. ‘I’m so glad you’re okay. I’ve heard so many awful things.’

‘I’m fine... Dunney is fine too but I haven’t seen him since.’

‘What about the other driver? I heard it was bad.’

‘Don’t believe everything you hear,’ George said dismissively.

‘I don’t.’

Ms. Best's class was about to begin and so they made their way through the corridor to the classroom. The corridor seemed more neglected than usual for some reason. The leaks dripped, the stains grew, and the smell from the toilets became more distinct. The walk through the corridor then seemed to black out for George. For him, it was as though he teleported straight to his seat in Ms. Best's classroom. He thought nothing of it as he could have been day dreaming and that can sometimes give the illusion of transporting a great distance.

Ms. Best was standing at the top of the classroom beside the whiteboard. She was doing her very best (as she was rightly named) to teach the unteachable. Most of the class was full of delinquents and unfortunately, at times, George was known as one of them. There was also Jay, which was Henno's right-hand-man, and there were a pack of girls grouped together in the back corner of the classroom talking about boys and clubbing, there was Marty O'Neil, whom was a renounced school bully that everyone hated, there was a Gareth Finn as everyone called Giggles for his very distinct chuckling sound

when he laughed, and amongst them all, at the front of the class, was also Brian Fields; his bright orange hair would get in the way of those that tried to look at the whiteboard. There were a handful of good students (but were outnumbered by the bad) which included Kim that had sat in the middle of the room near enough to George.

George could still feel the gossiping eyes surrounding him as he sat in the middle of the enclosed classroom.

Then what happened next was what most students thought as a living nightmare. Ms. Best noticed George was not really paying much attention, not unlike the rest of the class, but she picked him. She asked him to stand up and explain what she had just said. George slowly stood to his feet and began with an 'Emmm' and an 'Uhhhh'.

'Come to the front of the class, George,' Ms. Best decided to humiliate him even more.

George hesitated moving at all with the panic as the class sniggered and whispered.

'Come on, George,' Ms. Best called again with a flick of her finger.

George took his first step and began to make his way to the top of the classroom. The second step was caught in someone's bag strap and he suddenly tripped right over, flat on the ground. The class burst out in a jeering laughter. Jay laughed through his nose and shook his head side to side; the distinct laughter from Giggles was clear and repetitive; Marty O'Neil jeered and called him a "*Clumsy shit*"; even the teacher's pet, Brian Fields could not hold back the laughter. All but Kim were breathless with the hilarity. She was George's only friend there at that moment (maybe his only friend at every moment).

'Quiet down!' Ms. Best hollered.

George jumped up, avoiding eye contact from everyone, and once again hoped that his desk would swallow him up and take him somewhere else (maybe to the peaceful, stony beach). Anywhere at all would be better than that classroom.

'Stay back after class, George,' said Ms. Best as she then continued with the lesson, but not realising how much time was wasted on

humiliating George, the bell then went off and the class rushed out.

George did as he was told and stayed in his seat for Ms. Best. She shut the classroom door when the rest of the students had left. It was just her and George.

‘Now, George,’ she said as she walked closer to him. ‘Something has to be done about this.’

‘I’m sorry Miss... I’m just really... mixed up.’

Ms. Best stood directly in front of him and did not say anything while she just looked at him. George began to feel uncomfortable. It was strange. Something was happening. He felt his heart beat so fast, like that of a chicken’s.

‘Ms. Best?’ He said as though he was asking if she was home.

She quickly leaned in and kissed him on the lips. George jumped back with fright and absolute confusion. The chair he was sitting on hit the floor.

‘WHAT ARE YOU DOIN’!?’ He exclaimed in a high pitch.

‘I know you want this, George,’ she said as she stared directly into his eyes and moved closer to him round the fallen chair.

So many thoughts were flowing into his mind at that moment. It wasn't as he expected. He thought that (as a teenage boy) this would be a dream come true but he did not feel good about it at all; he felt shame, violated and absolute terror. He could not say anything about it to anyone. If he would report her then lads would call him a faggot and all sorts of names. He would be questioned endlessly for why he would not do anything and lads would be saying "If that happened to *me* then *I* would do it."

'Nooo!' George shouted. 'GET AWAY FROM ME!'

'Alright, George, your loss. This is what you're missing,' she unbuttoned her shirt to reveal more cleavage.

George walked round her and moved to the door. The door suddenly swung open and Kim walked in to see Ms. Best buttoning up her shirt and how sweaty George was looking.

'WHAT IS GOIN' ON HERE!?' Kim shouted.

Before George could explain or defend himself Ms. Best begged Kim not to say anything. Kim turned and ran out of the room

while George called out to her. He looked back at Ms. Best and she smiled a menacing grin.

George could not believe what had just happened. It was a complete and utter nightmare. He ran down the school corridor after Kim but she had gone out of sight. He called her name out once but the only person that came forward was in fact Principal Hiller. George had thought about telling him about Ms. Best but he was shut down immediately by his second thought of being bullied for being a *faggot*. Not that there was anything wrong with being gay. It was the fact that he would be bullied even though he wasn't really a homosexual.

'Where should you be now, George?' Principal Hiller asked.

'School's over...'

'Exactly, George,' he began to smirk. 'My office now for detention, remember?'

'But sir –'

'I don't want to hear any more *excuses*, George.'

George's head dropped. He was completely alone and never felt it that much ever before. He

plodded toward Principal Hiller's office for detention while he stared at the floor, watching his feet move. After everything that had happened, one thing crossed his mind before anything else. It was Kim Powers; the beautiful, extremely kind, and wonderful Kim. It was then that George had finally realised his true feelings for her. It killed him to imagine how she felt when she saw him with Ms. Best even though he didn't do anything. It was obvious that Kim had felt the same way about him but after that incident, things might have changed. George had realised that he loved her and always has but he was too caught up in his own selfishness that he could not see it. He felt guilty, ashamed, sorry, again violated and regretful. He had never imagined in his wildest dreams that Ms. Best would ever do anything like she had done. Not in a million years. She was great at her job and it just didn't make any sense. He began to doubt his own sanity. He thought that maybe that didn't actually happen and Kim didn't see anything. Maybe it was all in his head; something to do with the blackout he had had just before the class started.

When George had entered the office belonging to Principal Hiller he noticed that Dunney was not with them. Hiller shut the door behind him and walked conceitedly over to his desk at a slow and steady pace. He could not be more pompous if he tried.

'Where is Dunney?' George finally built up the courage to ask.

'Paul Dunne will not be joining us today, George,' Hiller said. 'It's just you and I.'

'I need to let me Ma know where I am!' George suddenly realised that his mother had ordered him to be home straight after school but she had no idea he had detention.

'I already called her moments ago,' he grinned and slightly showed his front teeth. 'Now as for your punishment,' he then stood directly in front of George.

'What do I need to do?' George asked Hiller while he looked down his nose at him.

'I was thinking long and hard about how I should punish you,' Hiller said almost trying to build the tension. 'Writing out the Code of Conduct or repeated lines didn't seem fitting for

you... I wanted something special; something that would leave a mark.'

The fear began to grow in George's eyes. Not again, he thought. He can't be getting treated like this again and again and again. George had almost forgotten to breathe properly with the tension and fear that had built up inside him.

Hiller began to explain what he wanted George to do.

'I want you to write a letter to your father about all the bad things you have done.'

That was it; the mind torturing punishment for George to undergo. It was, in fact, a cruel and drastic punishment and such a stab to the heart. George's heart sank. The loss of his father was so hard on him and he was being forced to write a letter about the entire bad things he had done. Of course because his father was dead he wouldn't receive the letter but it was the idea that was painful. He could not comprehend how Hiller could be so cruel to him. He had never done anything this malicious before.

Hiller put the pen in George's shaking hand and pointed at a piece of paper in front of him to start writing. George lingered his hand over the

page at first until Hiller pushed him to write something down. George began to write:

Dear Father,

It has been many years since I last saw you. I have never stopped thinking about you. I am writing this letter to you as a form of punishment for I have been in the wrong many times –

‘I don’t know where to start...’ George said to Hiller and had stopped writing.

‘That is exactly my point!’ Hiller exclaimed. ‘You have done too much disgraceful things that there are too many to count. Try harder!’

Once again George put the pen to the piece of paper and began to write:

I have treated everyone badly. I was horrible to Mam and Zach and I haven’t treated them like family. I have taken them for granted and now, ever since the crash, I feel as though I have lost them but I don’t think I can last without them much longer. I have blamed everyone else for how I have been; I have blamed everyone for losing you.

I miss you Father, so much but you told me that you would always be there for me. Where are you now? I blame you for dying... that is wrong but I cannot help it. I blame you for not beating the heart disease; the same thing will most likely kill me too... unless...

‘I can’t write the next thing...’ George said to Hiller which looks at him furiously for stopping again.

‘You do not stop! Write it now!’

‘I don’t think I can – ‘

‘If you do *not* continue writing, I’ll make sure you can never write again.’

George took Hiller’s threat seriously and once again brought the pen to the piece of paper.

If the heart disease does not kill me... I might do it myself. Is it selfish of me to think of such a permanent thing? Everyone would be better off and so would I. There are only few things stopping me: I don’t know how to do it, I’m afraid, even now I have hope that things will get better, Kim... I love Kim.

I have never kept my word with Kim. I keep letting her down. I really want to explain everything to her but why should she believe me. It's not like I've told much of the truth before.

I don't want to be this way anymore...

I want to be me again.

*With love and long lost memories,
George.*

He had finished writing the painful letter but in a way this cruel punishment helped (which most likely wasn't Hiller's idea). It acted as a sort of *vent* for George rather than keeping those thoughts all bottled up inside which was the cause for his behaviour in the first place.

Hiller had spotted that George had finished the letter to his father. He moved, almost gliding, to the desk and carefully picked up the letter and threw it straight into the bin after crumbling it up into a ball. George could not believe what he just saw; he was shocked.

‘Now that you have finished your letter, you may begin writing out the Code of Conduct,’ Hiller said with that same smug, evil grin.

George was infuriated and rightfully so. His eyes gave that away. That was something about George that always gave him away. He may have lied a numerous amounts of times before, but that did not mean that he was a good liar.

Once again Hiller placed sheets of papers in front of George and displayed the Code of Conduct on the wall using a projector. George picked up his pen which was half-way through its ink. Every few minutes George would throw his eyes up at the clock which seemed to tick backwards at times or maybe it was a trick of the eye. While George was writing he felt that strange pain shoot up his right arm again, although it wasn’t as bad as the other times, it still hurt him so much that he dropped his pen on the ground. Hiller pounced like a dog that had seen food drop from the dinner table.

‘YOU PICK THAT UP!’ He yelled at George, crackling his throat.

George picked it up with his good arm while he cradled his right into his chest like there was an invisible sling.

‘Now keep writing!’ Hiller said much fainter as he may have hurt his throat from screaming the first time.

‘Yes, sir,’ George replied expressionlessly.

And he did so. George wrote out the entire Code of Conduct of the school which was about ten A4 size sheets. He wrote until Hiller said otherwise and it wasn’t over until George had written every letter and every full stop.

IV

It wasn't until six O'clock in the evening that George had finished the punishment put on him by Hiller. The walk home was dark, cold and eerie. Luckily enough for George that December was a snowless one, but it was, in fact, full of rain although not that night. It was a clear and cloudless night which did make it very frosty. The white frost sat gently on top of every blade of grass, froze the streets and every car was the colour white. The stars were sparkling and the moon was big and bright; it looked bigger than normal. George took each step carefully as the frost had also taken to the path, making it extremely icy in certain places. The cold was biting and he wasn't wearing any gloves so every now and then he would breathe hot air on to them before putting them in his pockets. The school jacket was doing nothing for him of course; the jackets were horrible. He might as well have not been wearing a jacket at all. He sniffed as the cold had got to him and gave him annoying tingle sensations in his nose. It must have been -10 Degrees Celsius and plummeting

but there was no way George would know for sure. It would usually take George about half an hour to walk home but at this pace it might double. His mind would typically wander in situations like this; just on the move. And so his mind had wandered. It had strolled along with him. Again, he could not help but think about his father especially after the letter. He then suddenly thought about his mother and then his brother. They were still alive unlike his father but he had been treating them almost like outcasts unless he wanted something. He felt the guilt as much as he could feel the cold against his shivering body.

The night was dreadfully silent. George began to feel the eeriness creep up on him and shiver down his spine. He felt every hair on the back of his neck stand up as if they were reaching for something at a great distance but could not quite get there. George's once melancholy and gingerly walk had all of a sudden turned into an anxious and fearful one. He peered over his shoulder and searched all round and didn't notice anything strange at all. But just as he was about to relax the black jeep with tinted

windows caught his attention. It was parked across the road from him. It was still, and so was George. Suddenly the car door opened and George turned away and started to walk as fast as he could on the icy path without slipping. He kept walking, dare he not look back, but he did almost automatically. He looked over his shoulder again to see a man in a black suit and a black fedora; the rim covering the top half of his face. In fact, he was almost just a silhouette in the darkness and all that was clearly noticeable was the clinking and clanking sounds of his shoes as he walked after George. This could not be happening! This man in the black suit was gaining on him and he had no idea why. George felt terrified so he picked up his pace again and then started to run no matter the risk of slipping. His eyes widened and his heart raced like an Olympian going round the tracks. He could have sworn that he could even hear his own heartbeat. Before he knew it he had lost the man in the black suit but he continued to run. He did not want to be out in the night a moment longer. He was unsure why he felt the fear every time he saw that black jeep but now that the driver

chased him in the night he had a real reason from then on.

Finally, what seemed to be the longest walk home of his life, he was at his front door. Before entering the door, he took a quick glance behind for the black jeep or the man in the black suit. There was nothing.

He opened the front door and saw that the sitting-room light was on. As he entered the room he found his mother sitting in her chair like *The Thinker*. She scowled right at George as he walked into the dimly lit room.

‘You had detention!?’ She whispered quite aggressively.

‘Yeah I forgot to say – ‘

He was cut off by his mother when she shouted and stood out of her seat, ‘YOU FORGOT!?’

‘MAM!’ He pleaded her to be silent. ‘Things have been really messed up lately... I think I’m losin’ my mind.’

‘You’ll lose your head if you don’t get out of my sight right now!’

George gave up. He felt so lost; as if he was in his very own Bermuda Triangle and stranded all

alone. He had no idea why his mother would not listen to him or give him a chance. He gave in to the shouting from his mother and turned away to head up to his room. He alienated himself from his mother and brother before but this time it was he who was alienated.

He climbed up the stairs to his bedroom for yet another cold and sleepless night. He wouldn't remember much from that night though, except for the ceiling above his room as he stared at it most of the time while he laid his busy head against the groove in his pillow.

V

The morning was introduced with a lash of rain against George's rattling bedroom window. Yet another day in hell, he thought to himself. What was going to happen to him today? God only knew. No one would have ever guessed what would have happened to him later that day. It would be even more shocking than the day before. There was no way that George could have ever prepared for it.

The day had started off quiet enough. Strangely though, his mother did not start it by screaming at him; she had made him breakfast, but not his favourite. It was just ordinary cereal, although that was much better than *charcoaled* toast. It all seemed to go smoothly enough but maybe it was just the calm before the storm.

When George left for school, there was no black jeep with tinted windows outside nor was there a man in a black suit and fedora. The rain may have pelted down onto the ground but George didn't feel as bad as last night. Maybe that letter helped him in some way. It might have helped him vent his emotions.

It seemed all quiet until a mysterious hooded man crept up from behind him and grabbed him to the side. George was startled and he jumped away from the hooded man. The hooded man seized his arm and pulled him closer.

‘Stay calm!’ The hooded man whispered.

‘Who are you and what do you want from me!?’ George swung his arm away from the hooded man so that he would let go and he did.

‘You need to wake up, George!’

George had no reply. How could this man know his name? He began to back away from the mysterious hooded man, which when the light hit his face, seemed to be middle-aged.

‘You get away from me!’ George yelled and turned to run to school. The hooded man didn’t seem to follow him.

It wasn’t until mathematics class that George saw him once more from the window just across the street. The mysterious hooded man was just standing there with his hands by his side and watching. It looked as though he was looking straight at George, into his eyes from a distance.

George couldn’t take any more of this. It wasn’t over, as he had thought. It was actually

getting worse. But what it was that was happening to him was unknown. He had no idea why he was being followed by a man in a black suit and fedora and this strange hooded man too. Also what made Ms. Best act out the way she did with him and why was Principal Hiller being ten times as cruel as he normally would be? It made no sense to him at all. He could not find the answers. They certainly weren't in school.

As classes started and ended and Jay announced that everyone should attend his "gaff party", George held his wits about him. He turned every corner carefully, kept an eye on his back and even skipped Ms. Best's history class. There was no chance he would risk going back there.

There was one thing getting to him though. It ached at him like a throbbing head pain. Kim Powers was not there in school. He had not seen her at all, the whole day, and he missed her completely. He didn't even get a chance to explain things to her. For once, he finally wondered how she was feeling and it stung at his heart.

During George's walk throughout the corridor while skipping Ms. Best's class he of course bumped into none other than Principal Hiller. He knew what was coming next.

'Detention, after school today!' Hiller yelled almost operatically.

George said nothing; he just accepted it and moved on in the direction of Ms. Best's history class but he would not enter. He would just stand outside the door, waiting for the class to finish.

While he stood outside the class in the silent corridor he began to hear footsteps. They were getting louder and louder. He started to feel his nerves shake and shatter. This could be the man in the black suit and fedora from the other night or it could be the mysterious hooded man. He couldn't move! The nerves had his feet glued to the floor. The footsteps became so loud until they stopped to reveal his brother, Zachary.

'Zach!?' George called for him to stop and talk.

No answer.

'Zach... please...'

‘What is it?’ Zachary asked with a tone as he needed to be somewhere else.

‘You’re my brother...’

‘Oh, *now* I’m your brother?’ He quickly paused. ‘What about before, when I needed you?’

‘I’m sorry...’

‘Of course you are...’

‘What can I do to make everything better?’ George was hopeful in finding an answer.

But Zachary did not answer the question; instead he just shook his head lightly with disapproval.

The school bell then rang quite loudly and as the classroom doors opened to let out the flood of students, Zachary walked away from George and he lost him in the crowd.

The end of school had finally come. But that wasn’t entirely true for George as he was scheduled yet another detention with Principal Hiller. He reluctantly made his way through the leaky corridor toward Hiller’s office. When he arrived at the office, standing outside it was Dunney. George paused for a moment as he

couldn't believe his eyes and then rushed over to him with genuine delight.

'Dunney!' He cheered. 'You're okay!?'

'George!'

They both came close together and hugged with half a handshake too.

'Where have you been?' George asked him.

'I just wasn't ready to come back to school but when I did, *Hitler* himself told me I had detention today!' Dunney referred to Hiller as Hitler, his well-known and used nickname.

'Yeah he did the same to me...'

'So at least we're not alone.'

Hiller showed up and let them into his office. This time he would not be as cruel to them as he was with George the other night. All that he gave them to do for punishment was simple lines. They had to write out "I must be punctual and I must never skip classes," one hundred times. The clock didn't seem to go as slow either. George thought that maybe things were going back to normal. Maybe it was slowly getting better. The punishment was so easy that George had finished already but because he could see that Dunney was not finished, he pretended not

to be. He didn't want to leave him alone with Hiller. For once in their friendship George actually thought about Dunney. Maybe it was the guilt, although Dunney did play a part in the crash after getting high. George let that go. He just sat there pretending to write when he then had an idea. He decided to write another letter as it did help him a little before. He began to put the pen to paper and started with the usual "Dear father":

Dear Father,

I hope to see you soon. I often wonder if you are looking down on us. The last time I wrote to you, I was telling you about how I've been not so good lately and I hope you would forgive me for it.

I don't know what's happening to me. Things have been really strange and terrifying the past few days. Maybe I do deserve it but I want to change, I can change. What will I do?

I'm sorry for everything that I have done. I wasn't a friend to Dunney, I was nothing to Kim, I wasn't a

student to Ms. Best, I wasn't a brother to Zach, and I wasn't a son to Mam...

These are all things that I want to fix but I just don't know how.

I know I won't get an answer in words from you but I just want you to know that I am deeply sorry.

*I hope to see you soon,
George.*

It was a quick enough letter for George to write; he wrote down all that he wanted to say in that moment. In a way he wasn't only writing to his father, but also to himself. It helped him understand his thoughts much better and it gave him a sense of relief after signing his name at the end of the page. He planned to write more. He would write more.

George glanced over to Dunney and noticed that he had still not finished writing out his punishment. He suddenly got the feeling of desperately needing to go to the bathroom. His legs danced as he tried to hold it in, but he could not.

‘Sorry, Principal Hiller,’ George raised his hand. ‘May I go to the toilet?’

Principal Hiller looked at him for a moment and tilted his head slightly, like a dog if you said a strange sounding word to it.

‘You may,’ Hiller said and rolled his eyes and then pointed to the door.

George was slightly surprised that Hiller had allowed him to leave. Maybe Hiller could tell by his eyes that he was telling the truth. After all, George was a terrible liar.

George got out of his seat and shot a friendly smile and nod toward Dunney and he sent one back. He shut the door gently behind him as he made his way to the toilet. He looked as though he was dancing up the corridor as he was bursting to go.

He could have found the toilets with his eyes closed, the smell was that bad. He went into one of the cubicles and shut the door behind him. He made a sigh of relief as he used the toilet. He tried his best not to breathe much as the smell was disgusting. Then he heard someone enter the toilets. The footsteps sounded that of a

woman's. They were shoe heels. George zipped up his pants and listened closely.

'O George?' The woman's voice called, seductively.

George then jolted with the fright. It was Ms. Best! She softly knocked on the door to the cubicle but George kept it shut.

'Let me in, George,' she whispered. 'I'll make your dreams come true.'

'Please! Leave me alone!'

He could see her feet under the door of his cubicle and kept eyes on them. Suddenly another person entered the toilets. They were the footsteps of a man. Ms. Best's feet disappeared from under the door quite violently. George held his hands up against the door to barricade it. The evil Ms. Best screamed in pain as there was a sound of struggle. All of a sudden there was silence. The sound of the man's shoes clinked and clanked on the tiles. George realised that it was the man in the black suit. He built up the courage to crawl on the dirty floor into the next cubicle while the man in the black suit was busy with Ms. Best. He dodged unclean tissues and puddles on the floor but he put it to the back of

his mind. He had to get out. While he crawled he looked back and could see Ms. Best lying against the urinals, covered in blood. She was looking directly at him but her eyes were lifeless. She was most certainly dead. All he could see of the man in the black suit was his legs. The door of his cubicle was then kicked in by the man but George was no longer there. He then kicked the next one in but George was also not there.

George got out of the toilets and was running down the corridor back to Principal Hiller's office. George opened the door to the office to find that what happened to Ms. Best had also happened to Principal Hiller. He lay face down on his desk while still sitting in his chair. His arms were spread out on the desk and the shape of a Y. Stuck in the back of his neck was a pen. George searched the room for his friend, Dunney. But he was not there and maybe that was a good thing. George turned to leave as fast as he could but standing at the doorway, blocking him, was the mysterious hooded man. There was a moment of silence as they stared at each other. George expected that he would attack him.

‘Quick, George!’ The hooded man said urgently. ‘Come with me!’

George suddenly felt that he would be safe with the hooded man. It was strange; he was a complete stranger, although his face was half-covered.

George followed the mysterious man out of the school and away from the man in the black suit. They walked to a small beaten car and they both got in even though George had a last minute hesitation of getting into the car, he quickly thought about what was probably behind and catching up. He chose to go with the hooded man instead of finding out what the man in the suit would do to him.

VI

The drive was silent; none of them spoke at all. Most of the trip George was trying to think of what to say to the hooded man. Then he finally let the words out of his mouth.

‘Where are we goin’?’

‘Somewhere safe... enough,’ the hooded man answered keeping his eyes focused on the road.

‘Who are you?’

No answer.

‘What is goin’ on here?’ George accepted no answer from his last question and so he asked another. ‘Why is that man killing people?’

‘I can’t answer these questions just yet. I will explain it to you when we get somewhere safer.’

‘Why are you helping me?’

‘Like I said, I will answer *all* your questions later.’

That was the only conversation the entire drive. The car had finally stopped outside an old abandoned warehouse. It would have been an old biscuit factory that had been forced to close down. It was strange how a place like that can look so spooky as soon as it becomes

abandoned. George remembered them as kids telling each other scary stories about that factory. Even as he got old, the place gave him the chills. But then he was about to hide out in the derelict factory.

‘How exactly is this safer?’ George asked the hooded man as he got out of the car.

‘Just trust me.’

‘Why should I trust you?’ George stood still. ‘I don’t even know your name.’

The hooded man had nothing to say to him. He pulled down his hood and looked directly into George’s eyes. He was middle-aged like he had thought earlier. He had bright blue eyes and they were surrounded by wrinkles and worry lines. His eyes looked kind and familiar and his face was covered with stubble but he was a complete stranger. George had no idea who this man was. He had never seen a face like that before in his life. But how did this man know his name? It was clear that he knew George.

‘Are you not goin’ to answer any of my questions?’ George snapped.

‘Just call me Clint,’ the mysterious man said.

‘Clint? Okay Clint, please tell me what is goin’ on.’

‘Come inside now,’ Clint began to walk into the factory.

It really frustrated George not getting a straight answer so he began to think of alternatives. He thought about Kim. Maybe he could go to her house for help. But then he quickly struck it out of his mind as he didn’t want her to be in any danger. Then he suddenly thought about Henno. Henno showed him a little respect before and suggested that they should hang out sometime. Maybe Henno would help him out. Besides he was certain that he had experience in dangerous situations.

George made his mind up. He was going to leave as soon as possible to search for Henno. The only problem was that he had no idea where Henno lived. But then it suddenly struck him; Jay was having a “gaff party” that day and of course Henno would attend. He just had to get away from Clint. George walked slowly behind Clint toward the Factory but as soon as Clint got to the entrance, George ran to the car and luckily enough the keys were still in the ignition and he

drove out of there like a getaway driver. Dust flew up into the air as the wheels started to spin. All Clint could do was look on with a disgruntled expression as he drove out of there with the car.

VII

George drove and didn't look back despite his curiosity about Clint. He had made his mind up. He was heading to Jay's party to find Henno. After all he couldn't return home either. He didn't want his family to be hurt. The man in the black suit had shown the levels to which he would extend to get to him even if that meant killing others.

He drove cautiously and kept an eye out for the black jeep with tinted windows. That jeep would most certainly destroy his small car with one bump.

The rain rattled against the car windows and he turned on the wipers. They squeaked every time they moved and it clearly irritated George while he drove. He banged lightly on the steering wheel and whispered to himself, 'What will I do Dad?'

Finally, after a long and gambling drive George made it to Jay's house. He could hear music pounding from the car and the front garden was full of drinking teenagers (Most of whom were underage). George parked the car

and slowly got out. He put his foot onto the curb and lifted himself out of the small car. As he walked toward the house the music got louder and louder. Everyone had a drink and a smoke in their hands and God only knew what exactly they were smoking. George saw Giggles sitting on the doorstep alone so he went over to him.

‘Hey, Giggles, do ya know where Henno is?’ George asked him.

No answer.

‘Hey, Gareth?’ He called him by his real name to get his attention.

Giggles slowly looked at George and he noticed how large his pupils were. Giggles was higher than a kite.

‘I believe... Henno is with the pony...’ Giggles said absently.

At a party like that George had genuinely wondered for a moment if there had actually been a pony or maybe it was part of Giggles’ hallucinations. It was, in fact, Giggles’ imagination; the effect of being as high as he was.

George entered the house anyway to search for Henno. He had hoped that Henno wasn’t in

as bad as a condition as Giggles was. If so, then he would have wasted his time in going there. But lucky enough George found Henno as sober as he. It baffled George for a moment why he wasn't smoking or drinking like the rest of them. There must have been a reason.

Reason or no reason, George went over and joined Henno anyway. Henno looked happy to see that George was there despite what the rumours were saying about him.

'Ah Woody!' Henno cheered and referred to George's nickname. He could see that George didn't approve of the name so he quickly corrected himself. 'Welcome George.'

'Can we talk, Henno?' George said close to his ear trying to talk over the loud music without shouting.

'Sure!'

Henno brought George out into the hallway and onto the staircase. Henno sat down on a step and his knees came up to his shoulders and spread apart. He scratched another teenage pimple and made it bleed so he wiped it with his sleeve. He had shaved his head completely, of course to make himself look tougher. The scars

on his face from the bad acne added to the tough look. If you didn't know the scars were from acne, they would terrify you.

'So what can I do for ya?' Henno asked.

'I'm in some serious trouble, someone is after me...'

'Okay, I'll help you out,' Henno said.

George was surprised. He thought that it would take more to get Henno to help. Maybe there was a catch. There was! And it was revealed when Henno opened his mouth to speak again.

'I'll help you, George, but first I need your help,' he said and smiled as though he now had George in the palm of his hand and he did.

'Yeah, I'll help you out,' George said hoping he won't regret it.

'You're probably wonderin' why I'm not drinkin' or anythin',' Henno said just before standing to his feet. 'I have work to do. I'm lucky you came to me actually, because everyone else here is pissed or high and I would have went on me own.'

'So where are we goin'?' George asked.

'Just to a client of sorts...'

‘Listen, if I’m helpin’ you with this I need to know *everything*.’

‘Alright, alright... I’m sellin’ a big bag of weed! HA!’ He laughed out.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Hell yeah! This one is big though!’ Henno cheered as he put his arm round George’s shoulder. ‘We’ll make loads of dosh out of it!’

‘Only if you promise to help me.’

‘Of course, George,’ Henno said and smiled at him.

George could not tell if Henno was lying or not but then again, Henno was a much better liar than him.

‘What do you need me to do?’ George asked him out of curiosity.

‘I need you to back me up if shit goes wrong... but nothin’ should go wrong; it’s just a simple sell and leave job.’

‘Are you sure?’ George asked about his second statement.

‘Absolutely!’

Suddenly Marty O’Neil joined them.

‘When are we goin’, Henno?’ Marty asked slightly swaying.

‘Soon.’

‘Wait! He’s not comin’ too!?’ George shouted to Henno. ‘You said it was just me and you!’

‘Well Marty looks tough so I could use him.’

‘He’s pissed...’

‘You shut the fuck up, you!’ Marty glared at George.

‘Quiet down lads! It’ll be fine,’ Henno calmed the intoxicated Marty. ‘We better get a move on. Are you with us George?’

George paused for a moment as if to think about his decision but he then began to follow Henno and Marty.

As they were leaving the house party Jay was passed out on the floor, face down while Giggles started to climb the table and dance with himself. There were teenagers making out on the sofa quite repulsively and there was a group doing drugs together in the corner of the room. It was a party from hell. What was even more ridiculous was that most of those teenagers in that room were spreading rumours about George and about how he did something very bad. They were hypocrites. Teenagers like those were what gave them a bad name. They were all

scumbags. There are many exceptional teenagers but it would be the scumbags that adults would always refer to as “*all teenagers*” even though they were once at that age. It was the way of that society.

They had reached their destination. It was cold and dark, which came with this time of year. But what was surprising, was that it actually began to lightly snow. It wasn't the kind of snow that would stick though. It just disintegrated as soon as it touched the ground. It was too wet from the rain.

They were waiting down an alleyway for the *client* to show. What was George getting himself into? Should he have stayed with Clint? After all, he had no idea who he was. He thought he could stand a chance with someone of Henno's nature. He tried his best to justify his bad decision. It most certainly was a bad decision.

A door opened up next to them in the alleyway. Suddenly there was a bright light shining from the doorway and then they all slowly but surely entered one by one. George was last in. They were escorted in by a rather

large man with hands that looked as though they would crush bone and they most likely had.

‘So what’s your name big fella?’ Marty just had to ask.

Henno and George were biting their lips with nerves.

‘My name is Hector,’ the big man finally said.

‘That’s a fuckin’ strange name!’ Marty laughed.

Hector just looked to Henno with sheer disapproval and began to walk ahead, leading the way to his boss, to whoever was buying the weed from them.

‘Keep quiet, Marty!’ Henno whispered a snap.

‘Would ya bleedin’ relax.’

George new fully that he had made a stupid mistake, but it was too late now; to turn back now would be dangerous.

They finally came to a dimly lit room with a snooker table in the middle, a mini bar to the side, and two sofas facing each other on the opposite side. Sitting on one of those sofas was a small stumpy looking man with a half-finished cigar hanging from his bottom lip. His fingers were short and thick and he wore a ring on

nearly every one of them. He sprawled himself on the sofa like *Lord Muck*. He acknowledged the arrival of his guests with a horrible grin and a wave of his cigar.

‘Welcome, boys!’ He announced. ‘My name is Charley Manning. My friends call me Manny.’

‘Which would you like us to call you?’ George politely put.

‘Mr. Manning,’ he said with a serious expression on his red, chubby face.

Everyone grew silent and anxious.

‘I’m only joking!’ Manny laughed out. ‘You can call me Manny.’

Each of them seemed to force a laugh out to break the tension. Manny then invited them to take a seat on the sofa opposite him.

Hector sat over on the edge of the snooker table just watching them while George and Henno sat on the sofa and Marty on the arm of the sofa.

‘So, do you have the money?’ Henno asked Manny.

‘Hold on, hold on, no need to rush into business. We’re all friends here. Why don’t ya have a drink?’

‘Sure...’ Henno reluctantly gave in as he was aching for the money like a child in a candy store. He wanted it all.

‘So anyone have any good stories?’ Manny wondered.

None of them answered.

‘How about you?’ Manny pointed at Marty and he shook his head. ‘What about you?’ He asked George.

‘I don’t know; I can’t think of any...’

‘Sure I’ll tell one! So anyone ever hear about the story of the three pigs?’

‘HUFF AND PUFF!’ Marty laughed out as he swayed.

‘Yeah that one with the wolf! Well I have a slightly different one. Want to hear it?’ Manny said but didn’t wait for a reply. ‘So once upon a time there were three pigs. These three pigs were aiming high in life; they wanted it all so they left their safe home. They headed out to the big city where there were many, many wolves. The three pigs thought that they would make it in the big city; they had high hopes as tall as the buildings surrounding them. One little piggy was out of his mind, one little piggy was out of his heart,

and the other little piggy out of this world. The three little pigs thought that they could take on the wolves in their own business. They thought they stood a chance but they had no idea... The wolf didn't need to go to their homes; they came to him all at once. He had them in his paws. They were caught in a trap without anywhere to run. So the first little piggy to be killed was the one who had lost his mind, the second little piggy to be killed was the one who had lost his heart and the last little piggy – ‘

Hector pulled out a knife and pushed it straight into the back of Marty. Marty fell to the ground and was quite clearly dead. Henno jumped up and George hid himself behind the sofa. Henno took out his own knife and stood in defence against Hector but he was suddenly shot in the back of the head by Manny. Manny was still sitting in his sofa with a smoking gun in one hand and a cigar in the other.

‘Where's the other little piggy!?’ Manny asked Hector.

‘I don't know...’ he said quite dumbly.

George had snuck round the dim witted Hector while he was distracted by Henno. He

was running for the exit. The door was just ahead. He was going to make it. He would make it. But before he got any closer, the door opened from the other side. George could not believe it. It was the man in the black suit! There was a brief moment as they both froze and stared each other in the eyes. This was the first time George had ever seen his face. He was paler than anyone he had ever seen, his eyes were lifeless and dark, his jaw was pointed and square shaped; very distinctive, he was clean-shaven and seemed very neat, but he looked like the definition of evil.

The man in the black suit began to walk slowly and eerily toward George as he started to back away even though it was back to Manny and Hector. There was something much more terrifying about the man in the black suit. George started to run but the man in the suit didn't; he continued to walk at the same slow pace (which seemed more disturbing for some reason). George kept running until he then bumped right into Hector and he grabbed him by his neck. He then took him right back into

Manny and threw him on his knees in front of him.

‘The third little piggy!’ Manny said with a puff of his cigar. ‘What will we do with you, eh?’

‘Please! You need to listen!’ George struggled to say after Hector had grabbed his neck.

‘Why should I ever have to listen to you!?’

‘Because your life depends on it!’

‘Now I’m intrigued... Go on,’ Manny said and then looked at his watch to indicate he hasn’t got all day to listen to him.

‘The man in the black suit is coming for us!’ George shouted while he was on his knees.

‘Oh is he now? HA! Hear that Hector? There’s a man in a black suit that is coming for us.’

Hector heard his own name being mentioned and began to listen but because he didn’t know what was going on he just laughed and shook his head.

‘Why don’t you go check this out Hector?’ Manny pointed to the door. ‘Find the man in the suit.’

Hector was not the most intelligent but he was a loyal bodyguard to Manny and what

happened next genuinely brought a feeling of sorrow to Manny.

Hector moved cautiously to the door to investigate and at first there was nothing but out of nowhere the man in the suit grabbed him and pulled him out into the hallway.

‘What the hell was that!’ Manny screamed out.

Meanwhile George began to search for another exit. He found a window just about head height and began to clear rubble so that he could get out. The man in the suit then stood in the doorway with the head of Hector in his hand. Manny was still sitting in his sofa when he shouted out with fear until he was quickly silenced by a knife thrown directly into his heart by the man in the suit.

George cleared the last bit of rubble and tried to lift himself up and out but he could not. He could not find the strength. It was like a nightmare and the monster was right behind him. But he suddenly had a burst of energy, probably from the adrenaline, and he launched himself through the window and onto the street. He rushed away from the window as fast as he

possibly could. He had no idea where to go next but he just ran any direction at all just to get away. He hadn't a notion where he was heading.

VIII

Running through the cold and wet streets, George became breathless. He began to think that he should go to the police. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before. But what exactly would he say? They surely wouldn't believe him. What about the bodies; especially that of Principal Hiller's and Ms. Best's?

As he slowed down he came across the television screen, without sound, in a shop window. The window had slight condensation so it blurred a little but it was clear to George. It was the news station and it was titled as "Breaking News". It was about the murders of Principal Hiller and Ms. Best and the main suspects were, in fact, George and his friend Dunney which had went missing. They showed the most recent pictures of them both and with a warning sign underneath. George was a wanted criminal! They thought that he had done it! He didn't know what to do now.

He kept his head down as he walked so that no one would see his face now that he was wanted for murder.

The rain came down heavy on him as he found himself walking somewhere he said he would not go. But he had no other choice (or so he thought). He was at the front door of Kim Powers' home. He checked to see if anyone else was home but he could only see the light on in Kim's room. He searched the ground for a small enough stone to throw at her window to get her attention. He hit it on the first try and it worked. Kim came to the window and saw George standing in the rain. She looked shocked and slightly worried. She pointed round the side of the house for him to go to. When he ran round, nearly slipping in the grass, she had come down to let him in the back.

His clothes dripped from the soaking rain when he stood in the house.

'What is happening, George!?' She questioned him as she stood in her dressing gown.

George then realised, as he looked at her, that this was the first time he saw her without make-up and he was happy with what he saw. She was naturally gorgeous. To George she was absolutely perfect.

‘George!’ She called him for attention. ‘You were on the news! Please tell me you didn’t do it...’

‘I didn’t do it! How could you ask that?’

She looked him right in the eyes and saw that he was telling the truth. Anyone that knew George would see that but the police wouldn’t care much if he was lying or telling the truth; they went by their evidence and suspicion. They wanted to catch someone for those murders. They had to.

‘Somethin’ is happenin’ to me and I don’t know what to do,’ George pleaded although he knew that Kim couldn’t do a thing to help.

‘You can stay here for tonight; my parents are away.’

She then threw him a warm towel to dry himself with and she walked over to the kitchen to get him a warm cup of tea. While the kettle boiled George dried his hair.

‘Listen, Kim, about Ms. Best...’ he said with an apologetic tone even though he was innocent.

‘I know, George, I know you didn’t do anything... I was just... shocked to see that.’

They both were awkwardly silent for a moment until the kettle began to whistle. She made him a cup of tea and brought it straight over to him.

‘Thank you,’ he smiled at her but his eyes still showed a worried look after everything he had been through.

He took a shivering sip from the hot cup of tea and it was very comforting to him, maybe just because it was from Kim. It soothed and warmth him inside. For moment he had forgotten everything else -it was only half a second- and he was in heaven. He was always in heaven when he was with Kim. She was an angel. He stared at Kim and he could see everything that was beautiful about her. He could see the small freckles going from her cheek, across her nose, and to her other cheek. He could see how big and bright her eyes were even at that time of night. She had a slight *bed head* which George thought was endearing. He also noticed her small hands; ever so gentle and soft, even though there were bits of skin pulled off at the nails; it was a habit of hers to pick at loose bits of skin and to bite her nails. George

loved absolutely *everything* about her; he could not find any flaws about her. She was truly wonderful.

‘Thank you,’ George said to Kim again. ‘For everything,’ he continued.

He so desperately wanted to tell her how he felt about her but the words would not reach his quivering lips for some reason. He felt afraid. He was certain she felt the same but for some reason he doubted it then.

‘You’re welcome,’ Kim said before she then quickly kissed him on the cheek.

George may have been well known in school, he was quite popular, but he had never actually kissed a girl before. He was seventeen years old and peers would pressure each other into all sorts of things but to kiss a girl was something he should have done when he was twelve according to the peers. The real George was somewhat a romantic and undoubtedly he stayed that way his entire life. He would break the rules a number of times but not when it came to this. He felt that he shouldn’t have to kiss or have sex with anyone just for the sake of saying that he had done it. George longed for love since

he discovered it; to spend his life with one woman, to do those certain things with and no one else. But his romance had been pushed to the side the past few years because of the way he had been. But now his eyes were opened.

George felt butterflies in the pit of his stomach. He could not hold his feelings back any longer. He gently took Kim's hand and held it for a moment while he got lost in her eyes. She looked back and became just as lost. George slowly stood up from his seat, still holding Kim's hand, and lightly pulled her closer. George suddenly thought about the old movies when the male actor would grab the female actor and kiss dramatically; he thought of Gregory Peck, Clint Eastwood of course, or even of Humphrey Bogart.

George pictured himself as one of the actors in the black and white movies and he got closer to Kim and finally kissed her. She kissed him back. It was just as he ever imagined it; it was wonderful! It was completely worth the wait for George. They stared, deeply and passionately, into each other's eyes.

‘I think I’m fallin’ for you,’ George said to Kim while his hands gently held her close.

‘I think I’m past falling...’

There was another moment of them both staring deeply into each other’s eyes. It would have been an awkward silence but for them it was not. They were just enjoying every second of it.

It suddenly dawned on George that he was still being hunted by the man in the black suit. He could turn up at any moment like all the other times. The fear had flown straight back into George. He realised the danger he had put Kim in. He could not stay there any longer. He had to get out as fast as possible before it’s too late. Was he too late?

‘I have to go...’ George stood back.

‘Why? Tell me what’s happening?’

‘I’ll explain everythin’ to you later, I promise.’

George threw on his wet jacket and went for the back door again. He paused for a short time to look back at Kim. He gave her a look of promising, but also worrying, eyes.

‘Be careful, George.’

George did not say anything. All he did was stare the same passionate stare before running out into the night.

IX

George had more regrets to add to his list while he walked in the rain of the cold wintery night. He continued to make bad decision after bad decision. He begun to think he made a huge mistake in going to Kim's that night, although there was no sign of the man in the black suit. Maybe he was wrong not to trust Clint; whoever this Clint was. How did he know George's name? The curiosity hadn't got to George when he drove away from Clint that time but it certainly took hold of him while he walked in the rainy night. He had a flood of completely mixed thoughts. There was the fact that people have been murdered round him, he was being hunted, but also the fact that he had just had his first kiss with the girl of his dreams. It was too much to take in.

He was alone in the dark night or so he thought. He put one foot after the other not really knowing where he was heading. The rain drops danced on the ground round him and his shoes made squelching sounds with each step. Then he heard it. There were footsteps not far

behind him. The man in the black suit could have caught up with him. He's done it before. George tried to pick up the pace but he suddenly became out of breath. He had no more energy in him. The insomnia had taken its toll on him. He just hadn't got any strength left in him. The footsteps became louder and louder by the second. George fell to the wet ground and could not get back up to his feet. He was caught! The footsteps became a silhouette in the darkness. George lifted his shaking and shivering hand and tried to drag himself away. It was useless; he barely moved more than an inch.

He didn't want to give up so easily. He searched his surroundings for something to fight off the man in the black suit with. There was nothing but puddles and dirt. He never imagined that he would die that way. He thought it would have been the heart disease that would take him.

If it was the man in the black suit, then it would most certainly have been the death of him. But luckily enough for George it was not his hunter. The silhouette became clear. It definitely wasn't good but at least it wasn't the

man in the black suit. It was a policeman. He had recognised George further up the street and began to follow him. George was too weak to run or fight back. The policeman sat George up and called for back-up. The policeman wrapped his coat round George to keep him warm but also wrapped his wrists in handcuffs.

George must have had another blackout as a police car had suddenly appeared which definitely, just a moment ago, wasn't there. The lights flickered and flashed throughout the dark and rainy night. It was not a place for someone with epilepsy. Curtains were pulled open in the nearby houses by curious neighbours and George was put into the back of a police car. From there he was brought to the police station.

The police station was badly lit up by flickering lights in the dark and showery night. George was made wait in the shadowy interrogation room while he was still handcuffed. The interrogation room was nearly pitch black. It was an eerie kind of darkness. There was a large mirror on the wall next to him. It was a one-way viewing mirror.

The door opened up and a quite large detective walked in and flicked a switch on the wall which lit up the entire room. The light was a painful kind of artificial light. George winced and flinched from the painful brightness. The room was completely tiled and all that was inside besides George and the large detective was a wide table and two beaten up chairs.

The detective was silent; just stared at George with a menacing look. He threw a folder down onto the table in front of George but it stayed unopened. George couldn't keep his eyes in the same place. He looked at the intimidating detective, but only briefly as he avoided eye contact. He looked at the folder on the table and only wondered what was inside and he also looked at the one-way viewing mirror, wondering who was on the other side.

The detective pulled out the second chair opposite George at the table. The light flickered ever so slightly for a moment while he sat in the chair. The detective had made himself comfortable and leaned back in the chair and his grey worn suit jacket fell open, revealing his gun in its holster. It made George more nervous.

Maybe the detective wanted him to be nervous; wanted him to be afraid. How was George going to get out of this? He had to tell them about the man in the black suit. But who was he? George had nothing to give to the detective at all. It all pointed to George. There were murders and the police needed to catch someone.

‘I’m Detective Buckley, George,’ he said while he stretched out his arms. ‘It seems you are in some trouble. Care to explain what happened?’

‘I don’t know what happened...’ George said with a defeated tone as he had no idea how to find the words.

‘So why did you do it?’

‘I didn’t do it!’

‘So you know what I’m talkin’ about? Why were you running?’ Buckley asked, now leaning into the table.

‘It was someone else and he was chasing me...’

Buckley caught George’s eyes glance at the closed folder on the table just in front of him.

‘You want to know what’s in that?’ He asked George as he pointed with his stumpy finger at the folder. He slid the folder closer to George

and suddenly opened it up. It was horrifying! They were photographs from the crime scene of Ms. Best's and Principal Hiller's murders. George jumped back as far as he could in his seat but couldn't move much as he was cuffed to the table. It was torture! Buckley spread out the photographs slowly so that each one was in George's view.

'Stop it!' George yelled. 'Why are you doin' this to me!?'

'Why did you do it, George!?'

'I DID NOT DO IT!'

'Who did then!?'

'The man... in the black suit...' George said almost regretting it. How could the stupid detective ever believe him? George didn't even believe it at first either.

'Is that the best you can come up with, George?' Buckley nearly laughed it out.

'That's the truth.'

Detective Buckley almost struggled getting out of his seat with his weight. He stood up slowly and stopped behind his chair.

'So, George, tell me, where are the others?'

The question confused George so he did not answer.

‘Where are the others?’ Buckley pushed the question.

‘What are you talkin’ about?’ George finally asked.

‘What have you done with your mother and brother? Do you know where Paul Dunne is? Did he help you or did you kill him too? You were captured nearby the home of Kim Powers which is now missing too. Where are they?’

It was too many questions at once for George to answer and they were terrifying questions. Everyone his loves are missing and the police think that he has something to do with it. His mother and brother! It can’t be! The man in the black suit must have taken them! He knew that Dunney had disappeared; he had seen that happen, but he had no idea about his mother and brother. They could now be dead! George’s fear had become a reality. Kim Powers was also missing! Not Kim! He didn’t want to involve her in all of this. He began to blame himself. He shouldn’t have gone to her house that night. It was all his fault. All sorts of terrible thoughts

started to cross his mind. All the people he cared about were taken from him and he had no idea whether or not they were alive. He wished that he could take everything back and treat them kinder. He wished he could tell his mother and brother how much he loved them. He wanted to be a better friend to Dunney. He really wanted to tell Kim that he loved her with all his heart. But how could he if he was handcuffed to that table? She might not even be alive. He had no idea where to find them.

‘Where are they, George,’ Detective Buckley pushed his question once more at the melancholy George.

‘He took them from me...’ he muttered under his breath.

‘What’s that?’ Buckley asked him to speak up as he could not understand his miserable mumbling.

‘He *took* them!’

‘Don’t give me more bullshit about this so called man in the black suit!’ Buckley barked and slammed his hands on the table, shaking it where it stood. ‘Just do everyone a favour and

confess, George.’ He seemed to calm a little and slightly begged.

‘I AM INNOCENT!!!’ George bellowed as he jumped out of his seat as much as he could for he was still handcuffed.

‘More bullshit!’

‘It was the man in the black suit!’

‘He’s not real, George, you are the man in the suit! You had a breakdown and turned on everyone.’

George became silent. Could what Buckley just said be true? George had had a few blackouts that he tried to ignore. It makes sense, unfortunately.

Detective Buckley saw that his accusation had an effect on George. He saw that he had planted a seed of doubt that had begun to grow so he decided to leave him alone in the interrogation room with his thoughts.

‘I’ll give you a moment, George,’ Buckley said while he opened the door with his hand swung round his back. He felt chuffed with himself. He grinned cynically as he left the room, accomplishing in filling George with that doubt.

X

George sat alone in the painful light of the bright interrogation room. He was completely alone but he still felt intimidated in that tiled room. The viewing mirror caught his eye again. It looked as though it became dauntingly larger before his eyes. It was as though it had come to life and started to stare down George. He could not turn his eyes away from the mirror no matter how much he wanted to. The idea that someone could be behind it was terrifying. What was more terrifying, was that it could be anybody behind the mirror. There might not have been anyone at all behind the mirror but it was the fear of not knowing. It was almost hypnotising George as he sat in the overwhelming room.

The door shut and George turned his head from the mirror to see who had entered. It was not Detective Buckley or any other policeman. It wasn't even the man in the black suit, luckily for George. It was Clint; he had come back for George. He had come for him in that horrible place. George actually felt relieved that he had

showed up. There was something about Clint that George liked. Somehow he thought he could truly trust him. He seemed a kind stranger. He was a stranger.

‘Clint!’ George managed to let out from his mouth with the surprise. ‘How did you get here?’

‘I have my ways, George,’ Clint said while he casually walked into the interrogation room.

‘How come they let you in here?’

‘They didn’t let me in, I let myself in.’

‘What are you talkin’ about!?’ The confusion started to frustrate George.

‘I’m sure you have many questions but like I said before, I will answer them all when we get somewhere safer. Now, are you coming with me?’ Clint gestured his hand toward the door.

George had a look of bewilderment on his face. He was arrested and handcuffed to the table; he can’t just get up and leave. Detective Buckley would surely stop them.

‘Are we just goin’ to simply walk out!?’ George finally asked.

‘Yes,’ Clint answered as calm and casual as can be.

‘I don’t understand...’

‘I don’t expect you to... yet,’ Clint said. ‘Now, are you coming?’ He gestured his hands again to the door.

George became more frustrated as his handcuffs prevented him from the slightest of movements. How did Clint expect George to simply walk out of the police station like that?

George lifted up his hands to show off his handcuffs to Clint but they simply slipped away from his wrists and fell to the table. The handcuffs were now mysteriously unlocked. George’s jaw dropped with the shock. It could not be! Clint just smiled right at George when the handcuffs fell off. Did he have something to do with it? He didn’t come near George the whole time he was there. How could he have unlocked them without him realising it at all.

‘Now, are you coming?’ Clint said again with a gesture of his hand but also with an innocent smile.

George stood up to his feet as his leg wobbled with real nerves. He got one more look at the intimidating mirror and followed Clint right out the door. Not one member of the police force

noticed them leaving. Not even Buckley as he walked right past. It was one of the strangest things George had seen the past few days. It made no sense what so ever. Who was this man, Clint? Why was this complete stranger helping him?

Not one policeman lifted their head to realise that their one lead suspect in a murder case was walking right out the door. It seemed while George was with Clint he was invisible.

George looked back at Detective Buckley rushing out from the interrogation room screaming and shouting like a child having a tantrum after being refused a bar of chocolate in a sweet shop. George could not understand it. How did they not spot them? Maybe Clint was some sort of magician which would explain the handcuffs. But magic isn't real. The thoughts going through George's mind were all over the place. He was trapped in some sort of phenomenon. Clint said he would answer all of his questions when they reached somewhere safer. The key word that got to George was *safer*. It told him that even Clint knew that he was never going to be completely safe as long as the

man in the black suit continued to hunt him. Clint would soon explain everything. Clint would help and George would have to let him this time.

XI

Clint had brought George back to where he had originally wanted them to hide out; the old biscuit factory. That factory had always given George the creeps, but after everything that had happened over the past couple of days it wasn't the worst place he could be. The whole factory was completely surrounded by a seven-foot fence and beyond that was another row of fences. They simply used the gate to enter and Clint locked it behind him so no one could get in (or out for that matter). The factory still smelt of freshly made biscuits. It was like a haunting smell that stuck to the walls of the building and a reminder of the life that was once crowding the factory at all hours.

'Why here?' George asked Clint as they entered the factory. 'Why the old abandoned biscuit factory?'

'You really want to know?' He stopped in his tracks.

'Yeah...'

'I like the smell... it brings back memories.'

George did not choose to respond. He had more important things to worry about like his family and friends. They never once left his mind especially Kim. Finally, he thought about those round him but it just might have been too late.

Clint led George to the locker rooms in the old factory so that they could get comfortable. It was like something from a horror movie (hardly a place to get comfortable). The lockers were badly banged up and the walls had darkened. There was no way of knowing what time of day it was as there was no window. The room lit up when Clint turned on a lantern he had placed on the floor. It brightened the room up enough to see all the cracks and cobwebs.

‘I’ll give you a moment alone, George,’ Clint stood back to the door.

‘Why?’ George wondered out loud. ‘I have questions that need answers!’

‘You need time to think first... then you may be ready to hear what I have to say.’

Clint shut the door softly behind him as he left the locker room. George was left standing there with utter confusion written all over his

pale face. He didn't have the time for it. He needed to know what was happening. All of that waiting round wasn't going to save his loved ones. But then he remembered what happened the last time he didn't listen to Clint. That didn't go down well at all. It almost got him killed and he got arrested. So he did what Clint had suggested. He sat down on the bench to think for a moment. Then he had a thought! He remembered the letter idea. He searched his pockets almost frantically and found what he was looking for. He found a pen with enough ink in it to write ten letters. But he didn't have any paper on him. He glanced across the floor hoping to find something to write on. Then he saw something that could work. It was an old box of biscuits. He picked it up and actually took a look inside to see if there were any biscuits inside but of course there wasn't. The rats had eaten it a long time ago. He ripped the box open and saw that the inside was perfect to write on. It was blank and the texture was cardboard so the ink would not rub off. He sat back on the dusty bench and began to write another letter. It went as follows:

Dear father,

I am lost now more than ever. I don't think I have ever felt so alone in my life before. I thought that I had a horrible life and that it couldn't get worse but I know now how wrong I was. I guess it all started when I lost you. I was only five so I couldn't have understood it completely and that took hold of me through the years. I never really let you go and I blamed you for going. I let it build up inside me for so long and I took it out on everyone else and I shouldn't have... I always knew I was wrong deep down but it was like I was someone else at times. It was as though I was watching myself do and say things that were wrong. I never treated mam with respect at all. I never treated anyone right at all.

I wish I could turn back time dad. I wish I could be with you again and we can go to that beach in the summer. That is the happiest memory I have. I messed up but I can fix it. I just need to know how to fix it. Right now I can't see a way out... no way that helps anyway.

This man in the black suit, whoever he is, has taken everyone from me. I want to help them but I don't know how. I want a chance to show them all that I care about them, that I love them. I'm not sure why the man in the black suit is after me but I know I want it all to stop! I can't go through this much longer. I can't even go to the police because they think that I killed those people...

Luckily I found this man named Clint or he found me anyway. I've never seen him in my life before but he knows me. I'm still not sure if he's just a crazy man or... if I'm the one that has gone mad. He seems to actually want to help me so maybe I'll go along with him. I have nowhere else to go anyway.

*Your son,
George.*

Clint then opened the door to the locker room as if he knew that George was now ready. Maybe it was just a strange coincidence and great timing. George stood up from the bench greeting Clint politely.

‘So, George, are you ready now?’ Clint asked him.

‘I don’t know where to start...’ so many questions began to flow into George’s mind but it was too much at once. His mouth could not keep up with it. Then he finally thought of something to ask.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Clint and I’m here to help you beat the man in the black suit, as you call him.’

That then made George suddenly think of another question to ask. It even became two questions as he spoke.

‘Who is the man in the black suit and what does he want from me?’

‘He is Death, George, and he wants you.’

George suddenly fell silent. He checked behind him for the bench so that he could take a seat. He had to take two large steps back to reach it but he managed to sit down. He looked like a lost boy in a large shopping store. He had no idea what to say to what Clint had told him. How could the man in the black suit be Death? Maybe he meant it metaphorically...

‘What... what do you mean *Death*?’ George asked Clint.

‘He is the Grimm Reaper, the collector of souls, *Death*.’

‘So what are you sayin’; I’m dead!?’ George said as his breathing picked up speed. His chest began to rise and fall at a fast pace.

‘No, you’re still alive, George, but not if he gets you. I know why you haven’t been able to sleep the past few nights.’

‘So what is happenin’ to me exactly?’ George asked with a hint of panic in his tone. ‘How do you know that!?’

‘You had an accident and now *Death* is chasing you as you lie in a hospital bed in a deep coma.’

‘So this is all a dream, it’s not real?’

‘I didn’t say that, George. It is all very real. It’s just not the same reality in which you lie in a hospital bed. This is another world between worlds. You are in *Death*’s reach now and he will do absolutely anything to get to you.’

‘Fuck him!’

‘George... no matter what, *Death* is as natural as life. *Death* is so misunderstood. Now, I know

he has strange methods but he is different for everyone. He has his reasons for acting the way he is acting with you now but it all leads to the same place after it all... well for most.'

'Leads to places like Heaven or Hell?'

'There are many different types of places but to answer simply, yes.'

'How can I stop Death?' George moved on to another important question.

'You cannot stop Death; just defeat him for a while longer, whether it's years or days.'

'How did you defeat Death?' George wondered out loud to Clint, looking for tips.

'I didn't defeat him, George... that's how I can be here to help you.'

'But everyone else is here... there were other people he killed...'

'Everyone else that you have seen since the crash is not real.'

'But you said it was real...' George became frustrated trying to make sense of it all.

'You are real, I am real, Death is real, but everyone else is part of your subconscious, like in a dream. Those people that you have seen

killed are still alive in the reality in which you lie in a hospital bed.'

'Right... Okay...' George began to let it all sink in. 'So how come you couldn't defeat Death?'

'I was too far gone in my reality where I lied in a hospital bed. It was too late for me but it is not too late for you. But the longer you stay in this reality the stronger Death will become. Things will become stranger to you as days go by. More and more won't make much sense.'

George could not believe what he was hearing. Finally, everything was being explained to him clear and simple but it didn't feel clear or simple at all. This was something from nightmares or from the movies. George knew very well the existence of death but not as a being. He never imagined that Death would be hunting for him especially as a teenager. Teenagers think they are invincible most of the time and sometimes that can lead to the death of them. George wasn't going to let it beat him whether it was real or not. Somewhere in George's actual reality his family waited for him

to wake. He just needed to find out how to wake, how to defeat Death.

‘How can I defeat Death?’ George quizzed Clint with another question.

‘It’s different for everyone,’ Clint explained. ‘Only you know what you have to do. For some people they must return to a particular place, for others they must commit an act and then they wake. You need to wake up George... you just need to find out how.’

‘But I have no idea how I’m goin’ to do that!’ George cried out with frustration. ‘Where do I even start!?’

It was a lot to take in on such a small amount of time. Clint wasn’t surprised about how George had reacted. In fact, he was just simply glad that he had had George with him now and listening to what he had to say. He desperately needed George to listen to him or Death would most certainly catch him. Death would get stronger the longer George stayed in the coma and it became clear that it was true. The past few days just kept getting stranger and stranger. George knew now that Clint was his only chance, his last hope.

George continued to sit on the bench in the old dusty locker room while trying to think of more and more questions that he needed to be answered. It must have been just over an hour that they had sat in that locker room. It was valuable time being spent but Clint knew that George needed it. He needed to hear everything that he was supposed to hear.

‘How did you die?’ George asked Clint as he pushed his hand through his dark hair on his youthful head.

‘It was my time; I didn’t get to the hospital on time.’

‘I’m sorry...’

‘Why are you sorry? Death is misunderstood. I do miss certain things from that life I had but I spent my time well. They say *spending time* for a reason; you never get that time back; you are constantly spending time but it’s completely up to you how you spend it. Spend it wisely, George.’

‘I just need to wake up first...’

They sat for a brief moment in silence. George somehow felt relieved that this man Clint was here with him to help. He now had an

explanation for all the strange and terrifying things that had happened to him.

George then suddenly remembered what happened at the police station. He remembered how Clint rescued him.

‘How did you do that at the police station?’ George asked. ‘How did you make us invisible to them?’

‘I am not slowed down by my humanity anymore; I can control the subconscious with greater power now.’ Clint answered with confidence.

‘Can you teach me how to do it?’

‘You wouldn’t be able to do it as powerful as I can because you are living but sometimes people can control their dreams once they realise they are dreaming. Have you fully accepted that this is not your reality, a dream in a sense?’

‘Yes I have... I think...’

‘No, you must fully accept it,’ he lightly snapped with a breath of sigh in his words.

‘I am!’ George became defensive and agitated, maybe to the fact that Clint was right. ‘How can I accept it?’

‘You just believe it completely without an ounce of doubt.’

George scratched the top of his head with thought and confusion. He wanted to accept it but he always had doubt. Maybe it was the moment he had had with Kim that was holding him back. He really wanted that to be real. But she was taken from him; he needed to believe it completely, he had to wake up. What would it take for him to accept it? There was a difference between wanting to believe and actually believing and that mattered in the subconscious world. There was no lying to Clint, he seemed to know everything.

‘Make me believe... please,’ George pleaded Clint. He seemed close to begging on his knees.

In the blink of an eye they were both on the roof-top of the old biscuit factory. It slightly dizzied George from his feet. He couldn’t believe his eyes. It was impossible! It was no longer cold, it no longer rained or snowed, there was a high, bright sun in the clear blue sky above them and it almost seemed peaceful over the town. The factory somehow became as tall as a mountain and they arose high above the distant,

cotton-white clouds. George spun round with excitement, looking over the edges of the rooftop.

‘Did that help?’ Clint spoke with a sneaky grin at the side of his mouth.

‘I accept it,’ was all George thought of to say.

Part Three

I

It was a bright winter morning but it was not as cold as before (technically not even winter in the subconscious world) and night didn't seem to pass at all. It was suddenly morning. The bright sun shone over the technicoloured sky and the birds sang their usual morning tunes. It was a magnificent sight for that of a supposedly surrealistic world. It was magical. But in that surreality Death roams the streets and he always knows where the living would be.

Outside the old abandoned biscuit factory, the black jeep with tinted windows was parked near to the gate. The dark door opened on the driver's side and a foot, with a freshly looking polished shoe, trudged to the ground. It was Death. He casually walked toward the back of the jeep after shutting the door behind him. He made the

short pace to the booth and with an emotionless look he opened it up. Death always knew where the living was and he knew where George was at that time. Death was getting ready and became stronger deeper into the subconscious world but George had one small advantage: Clint was there to explain things and to help him through it. It enraged Death that Clint was there, it bothered him, and so he decided to try and smoke them out in a sense. He wanted to separate George from Clint. It was his only chance, because all the time that Clint would be there the closer George came to waking up. Death had a job to do and he would do everything in his power to accomplish it but he would not take a loss to heart (if he had one) as Death always came to everyone in the end. George would die but it was a question of when.

Death pulled something large out of the booth. It was a large old television with a video player (why it was an old television was only known by Death, maybe it gave off a creepier vibe than a flat-screen. High definition wasn't what Death was going for). Whatever was on that tape, it was made just for George. It was a

little message for him. Death had something to show George and maybe, just maybe it would make his plan all fall together.

George spotted it through a cracked window from the factory. He saw the old television lying all by itself just outside the front door. How did Death put it there without them not noticing? It puzzled George and the curiosity got the better of him as always. Clint warned him not to go but George insisted that he must. It was a foolish choice but the television called to him. The screen lit up even though it was not plugged in. At first the screen was completely fuzzed until something began to clear up. There was a shape of a person but it was still not completely clear.

Clint pushed ahead and went out first. There was no sign of Death. It was safe for George to go out too. When George came out closer to the television he could then see that the person in the footage was his friend Dunney. He was tied up on a wooden chair and tied up in a thick rope. There was only one light source in the room from a poorly lit light bulb and it shone directly on him in a coerce way. George watched

on as the tape began to play. The footage wasn't the clearest; it was hazy and would hop and skip every few seconds. Dunney sat there with terrified eyes; his eyes were all that he could move. His mouth was taped shut and he breathed through his nose abruptly. Then Death appeared from behind the camera and still wore his usual black suit. He stared into the camera directly into George's eyes with a slight sinister emotionless grin.

The stare sent the most horrid shiver down George's back. Clint grabbed George by his arm and warned him away.

'No good will come from watching this,' Clint warned but George just had to see what had happened to Dunney.

Death stood up straight and paused meticulously for a moment as if letting George prepare for what was to come next. There was no way he could ever prepare for what was to happen to his friend.

Death stood close behind Dunney as he sat helplessly in the chair. He quickly snapped the tape from Dunney's mouth and the stinging pain made him scream out and gasp for more air.

Death then nudged Dunney as if he had a que to take.

‘George...’ he finally said breathlessly. ‘What is about to happen to me now... is what will happen to the others unless you turn yourself in...’ Dunney said with a terrified deep sigh.

Death quite suddenly walked off screen and the footage blurred for about five tense seconds. When the footage became clear again they could see that Death was back but this time he had a drilling tool in his cold hands. Dunney begged and pleaded to be left alone and became more erratic with his screaming as the drill was turned on. He brought the drill maliciously toward Dunney’s hand and he screamed out in pain as the drill reached its target.

Clint then done what he should’ve done a long time ago and swiftly pressed the eject button on the video player. The screen turned black and the tape came out and on it was a sticker with the title of “Dunney” on the side. George stood still in sheer shock.

‘George, that wasn’t your friend...’ Clint tried to calm him.

‘But I saw him... that just happened and he said it will happen to the others too!’

‘Remember what I told you, George...’

‘I need to help them!’ George shouted completely ignoring Clint and began to walk to the gate of the factory.

‘George!’ Clint called out. ‘Listen to me!’

George remembered his earlier mistake of not listening to Clint and stopped in his tracks.

‘What are we goin’ to do then!?’ George turned back to Clint.

‘We need to focus on how to wake you up. Don’t fall for Death’s traps.’

‘I can’t just let him do that to my family!’ George cried as he couldn’t handle the thought of it.

George knew that it was some sort of dream but he still couldn’t stand what was happening to his loved ones. His best friend was tortured before his very eyes and he couldn’t do anything about it and he was told that the same would happen to his mother, his brother and his love, Kim. He couldn’t stand the thought of it. It nagged at his aching heart.

‘Your family are waiting for you to wake up.’ Clint walked closer to George trying to ease his mind. ‘Remember everything that I told you.’

‘Why are you helpin’ me?’ George asked. ‘Are you my guardian angel or somethin’?’

‘Yeah something like that,’ Clint said with a nod of his head. ‘I’ve been allowed to help you because I asked. Not many people get someone like me to help them through this. Fortunately, I was allowed but only under certain circumstances, certain rules.’

‘Who allowed you? What rules?’ George quizzed as Clint made him intrigued.

‘It’s all very complicated; too much to explain to someone that is still living,’ Clint explained but decided to give it a go as he could see that it was a distraction for George. ‘Well I was allowed by those that choose where the living goes to after death, they’re the Judges. The Judges thought that you deserved another chance so I’m your chance.’

‘But what were the rules?’

‘Just basics really... I can’t say them unfortunately which is one of the rules.’ Clint

actually laughed after speaking which made him seem more like the living to George.

Something as simple as laughter reminded George that Clint was once alive. He was no longer a man of Earth but he was here to help George. He thought that he should be more grateful to this stranger, to this guardian angel.

‘So where do we start?’ George asked Clint.

‘Only you can figure that out.’

‘I’ve really no idea...’

‘Well try writing another letter to your father again, that might — ‘

‘How do you know about that!?’ George cut him off.

‘Don’t be naïve... this is more my world than yours.’ Clint answered with a dismissive tone as if it was the least of George’s worries and he was right. George was being hunted by Death, of course there was much more trouble out there than having your privacy invaded. So George had to let it go, and so he did reluctantly. In fact, he took up on his suggestion and decided to try and write another letter. But there was only one problem. Just as he got to a seat and was about to begin writing he went blank. He didn’t know

what to say. Where would he start? He had to think but it was a difficult task to pull off at this old spooky abandoned factory. There were no thoughts of figuring out how to wake up exactly but other thoughts, memories started to grow in his mind that was probably planted by his surroundings.

He remembered a day many years ago but it was about six years after the death of his father. George had a different group of friends at the age of eleven. It was a year before he met Dunney or even Kim. It was the last time he properly saw his childhood friend, Karl Whelan, as the Whelan family had moved away shortly after.

Karl was the same age as George. When you're a child you are best friends with someone for many reasons, but some would be that they had the same name, same birthday, same street, and so on. For George and Karl, they had the same birthday and street so they were very close. Karl was a slim, small boy with thick *Buddy Holly* glasses. He was as smart as he looked; helped George out in school. They looked a lot alike too. If it wasn't for the thick

glasses on Karl's face no one would be able to tell them apart. They looked more like brothers than George and Zachary did. Zachary also went round with George and Karl. They were like a little trio that had fun (too much at times) on the streets. And of course if there was trouble George was the cause of it.

That day was a summer day and there was not a rain drop in about two weeks. It was a scorcher as the weatherman had said; the hottest summer in many years. The sun was splitting the trees and there were little heatwave lines round every car. The amount of water that was wasted by kids playing water fights was enormous. George didn't want to do any water fights that day. He did that every other day so he wanted to change it up a little –go on an adventure. They had spooked each other with haunting stories about the old biscuit factory every Halloween but neither of them would have ever been brave enough to venture there. It was beyond their bravery until that one day.

George was bored so something troublesome was bound to happen. The three of them,

George, Zachary and Karl, each sat gloomily on a broken wall round the corner from their street.

‘I’ve an idea!’ George cheered as he leaped from the wall with excitement. ‘Let’s play truth or dare!’

‘Okay I dare you to slap your own face!’ Zachary laughed out now that he trapped George with his own game.

George did not hesitate and he quickly slapped his own face harder than he had anticipated. It even surprised Zachary how dedicated George was to the game. They all had to take it seriously after that or they’d be called “chicken shit” which was their most common insult.

It was then Zachary’s turn to take a truth or dare.

‘Truth or dare?’ George asked him.

‘Truth...’ Zachary answered smartly as George would have got his revenge for the slap.

George thought long and hard; he had to get Zachary back. The only thing he could do with truth was to cause embarrassment. But Zachary could simply lie so he had to pick something he already knew that Karl did not. There was only

the three of them but it would still be humiliating. George had it! It was something they all did at some point but he would have Zachary say it out loud.

‘Is it true.... That you... wet the bed!?’

‘Yeah...’ Zachary said shamefully.

‘Really?’ Karl asked holding back a little laughter. ‘Still?’

‘Well, no!’ Zachary defended himself while George made the most of his revenge with laughter. ‘I haven’t for ages!’

‘Right, oh right, your turn Karl.’ George nodded his head toward him still smiling.

Karl thought about it for a moment. He didn’t want to end up humiliated like Zachary so he couldn’t pick truth. If he picked dare all he would have to do is something stupid and then it would be over. So he picked what he thought was his safest bet. He picked dare.

‘Okay... I dare you to...’ George glanced round to the old biscuit factory. ‘I dare you to go in there!’

‘Where...?’ Karl thought and hoped maybe he misheard him first.

‘Into the haunted biscuit factory!’ He said with an almost evil grin.

‘NO!’ Karl exclaimed. ‘I’m not doin’ that!’

George was bored and his boredom had thought up this game to play. He was curious about the old factory but wasn’t brave enough himself to venture inside so it came to him to dare Karl to check it out. It was a worthy sacrifice in a way.

‘You can’t say *no*, Karl!’ George stood up. ‘You have to do it! Or you’re a chicken shit!’

‘That’s true...’ Zachary agreed as he was just happy that he wasn’t the centre of embarrassment. ‘You have to do it...’

‘But... but— ‘

‘No buts Karl.’ George stomped his foot. ‘Come on, I’d do it if you dared me.’

‘How far do I have to go in?’ Karl asked now accepting that he had no choice. Once you were dared it had to be done. Karl chose dare so in a way he made the decision in going to the factory. There was no turning back.

‘You have to go to the top floor and wave at us from the window just so we know you did it.’ George lay down the details of the dare.

The genuine fear could be seen in Karl's eyes and that was what George wanted to some extent. Mainly he actually wanted to see if the factory was really haunted. George wasn't the best of friends even since then. Deep down he felt guilty but he definitely didn't let that show as he kept pushing Karl to do the dare. Once George got his mind set it had to be done. He was using his best friend as the tester, the lab rat.

And so it had begun. Karl built up the courage in his shattering and shivering short legs to head toward the dark and derelict factory. It was most certainly dark. Even though most windows were broken in, they didn't let in much light. There was eeriness about the building that sent shivers down their spines but maybe it was just the haunting stories they told each other every Halloween.

One story they told was that the reason the factory was closed down was because an old employee of the factory lost his mind and murdered his boss and other workers before killing himself. They said that his ghost continued to roam the factory and would show himself to those that would trespass and he

would add them to his collection of souls. Whether or not that was true it was a terrible thing for George to do to his best friend. It was a dangerous gamble. If it was true, in this case, curiosity would not kill the cat, it would kill the cat's friend.

So there it was at its creepiest, the old biscuit factory, just ahead of them. The three of them stood in a line at the gate of the factory grounds. The gate was always locked but there was a gap big enough for them to fit in the fence just to the side.

'Right, good luck!' George cheered on Karl while he pointed out the gap in the fence.

'Be careful...' Zachary sincerely warned.

Karl took a deep breath and crawled under the gap with one hand holding the fence as he went through.

'Here I go...' was the last thing Karl had said to them that day.

George and Zachary watched Karl disappear into the factory with every second that passed. The closer Karl got to the factory the smaller he looked and the bigger and more terrifying the factory became. It was a daunting sight and

George began to feel his deep guilt surface from his very cold bones. George's expression changed from anticipation and excitement to fear and guilt as time went on and there was no sign of Karl at the window. It was as though Karl was swallowed up as soon as he had entered that factory door. George and Zachary waited and waited, expecting to see Karl suddenly appear at the window, but there was nothing. After an hour they became even more worried. The ghost must have got him, they thought. They didn't know what to do. They were too afraid to go into the factory and also too afraid to tell their mother because they were always told to stay away from that factory. Where was Karl and what was taking him so long? Then they saw it! They couldn't believe it. They couldn't move with the shock that shook them from head to toe. There was a man in the window in which they told Karl to appear. The man looked horrific with his ragged clothes and tall, hunched stance.

'THE GHOST!' Zachary bellowed and pointed his finger.

George didn't say anything; he couldn't. Then as suddenly as the man appeared, he disappeared into the darkness. They heard a high pitched scream coming from the factory and quickly dispersed from the gate. The brothers ran home as fast as possible. George hid in their front garden while Zachary took it upon himself to get help. Zachary hollered round the house in a panic calling for their mother. When she came to him he was speaking too fast to make any sense. After his mother calmed him down he told her what had happened. Zachary and George being children thought it was the ghost of the factory but their mother had other thoughts. She knew better. She quickly rang the police and Karl's parents. George avoided everyone with the fear of being blamed but no one said anything to him. Zachary told everyone what happened but he left out the parts that would get George into trouble. When the police finally showed up (they weren't the fastest at responding to emergencies) they joined the search in the factory. Of course the parents of Karl and most other neighbours ran straight over to the factory. The factory was bigger than

they all had thought. George didn't remember returning to the factory but somehow he was back during the search and he managed to see the police take out the man in the ragged clothes in handcuffs, and soon after he saw Karl being brought out by his parents and quickly rushed to an ambulance just at the gate. That was the last time George ever saw Karl. He blamed himself even if no one else did. He definitely didn't do the right thing by making his friend go into that factory but it absolutely wasn't his fault what had happened to him in there. Karl's parents moved away very soon after that incident and George never heard from him again.

II

George was haunted by this memory along with many others but that one stuck out because he was in the very building in which he sent Karl in to. He had another question for his protector, Clint.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ He asked while Clint was waiting outside the room.

He poked his head through the unclosed door. ‘What?’ He did not hear his question fully.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ George asked again with a gesture of his hands that pointed round the dusty old room.

‘It’s a place that triggers off a lot of important memories for you; it’ll help you figure out how to wake.’

‘I remembered something...’

‘And...?’

‘It’s about my old childhood friend, Karl,’ George said with genuine morose in his expression.

‘And you blame yourself for what happened?’ Clint said but it seemed to only disguise itself in a question.

‘Yes...’

‘What else do you blame yourself for?’ Clint said as though he was on to something.

‘Everythin’...’

Suddenly there was a loud and intrusive bang on the front door. They both jumped with fright. Clint ordered that George should stay where he stood while he made his curious move toward the door. He opened it up ever so slowly as it creaked and cracked with age and rust. In front of him was another tape but this with a different name on it. It had two names on it actually. The sticker titled “Mother and Brother”. George saw the tape and Clint quickly destroyed it by throwing it to the ground and stomping on it repeatedly.

‘They are not your real family, remember that!’ Clint shut the door behind him while George tried his best to ignore what was on the tape.

No matter how much George tried, it nagged at him that what had happened to Dunney in the first tape was also done to his family. But it wasn’t his real mother or brother. He must remember that!

He had to distract himself again so this time he thought of something to write about to his father. Clint left him alone again just in the next room so that he can think clearly and write without hesitation.

George had one thing he had to figure out and that was how to wake up so somehow the memories he had would help him. He had to encourage his mind to remember everything and so far he thought about his childhood friend, Karl. What did he have to do with it? He had to think, so the letter to his father would help him think. He began to write:

Dear Father,

I am writing to you again because I need your help. I'm in danger. I'm being hunted by Death. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but it is actually happening to me. That is who this man in the black suit is... I can't stand what is happening even though it's not necessarily all real. I can't stand what is happening to the people I love in this place. It is absolute torture! Please help me wake, dad.

I remembered something recently. It was about the time I lost my best friend, Karl. I sent him into the factory, I sent him to his doom. It was my fault what had happened to him. We were just so stupid back then... Of course it wasn't a ghost, of course it wasn't haunted. I wanted to know for sure so I sent my friend in as a test dummy. I put him in harm's way. It should have been me, not him.

I blame myself for everything. Clint said that the answer is linked to my memory and which is why he brought me here. This place triggered the memory of Karl and now it's triggering the memories of all the other things that I blame myself for. Like the time Zachary broke his arm at that picnic in the park, the times mam had to leave work for me, the times we didn't have a dinner on the table, and most of all the time your health took a turn. You died because of me.

So has it got something to do with those memories? If it does, then I will do whatever it is that I must do. I want another chance, I want to be better than I was before, and I want to show everyone that I really care.

Your son,

George.

George felt closer to the answer at that point. Once he finished writing the letter he felt a step closer, a step ahead of Death. But you can't ignore Death for long; it only angered him. Death would soon find a way; it was all a matter of time. And with time, Death grew stronger.

'I know what you must do now,' Clint said, suddenly appearing at the doorway.

'I think I do too...' he hesitated slightly.

'You think you need forgiveness?'

'For everything... yes.'

'George, you need to realise that there are some things that you don't need forgiveness for. You blame yourself for things which you shouldn't. We must go to the people that represent the part of you that blames yourself. In that case, we need to go to the place in which it happened and the person you must speak to will also be there. So where are we going first?'

'I need to find Karl. I need him to forgive me...'

'Karl should be here in this building somewhere then. And obviously Karl represents the part of you with the blame. You need to forgive yourself for what happened. Let's find Karl.'

And the search had begun. It was as though they went back in time and George was among those in the search and rescue for Karl back when they were eleven years old. The factory was completely haunting just as George had imagined it. Dust fell from the ceiling as they moved through the abandoned corridor and there were frightening noises that echoed from all round. It was most certainly haunting. It was haunting George with every step that he took.

Clint slowly trailed behind George while they moved. George kept looking back at him for encouragement and reassurance. Somewhere in that old spooking factory his childhood friend, Karl, waited for him.

George spotted some movement at the end of the corridor. It wasn't exactly clear what it was but it looked as though it was a person. George called out with fear and hoping that it wasn't a *Death trap*. There was no reply but they

continued to move carefully forward. George got to the point where he had seen the movement but there was nothing. It seemed to get darker and darker by the minute. Visibility was low with the dust as well.

George came to a window. He recognised it immediately. It was the window he had told Karl to go to and wave from. It became brighter all of a sudden with the discovery of the window. There was a silhouette standing in front of the shattered window and George called out again, not getting a reply.

‘Go ahead,’ Clint nudged George forward as some sort of encouragement. ‘You don’t need me for this.’

George hesitated at first and almost pleaded not to go alone like a child but he held it back; he knew he had to do it alone.

He took each step gingerly and even forgot to breathe with the fear so each breath he took was deep and long. Finally, he reached the silhouette which became clear enough to describe as a young boy. It was Karl but he was still eleven years old. It was all George’s mind had to make him up. He had never seen Karl after that age.

'Karl...' George called with a shaky tone.

No answer.

'Karl...' He called again and stood closer.

'George,' Karl turned his young head to look directly at him and revealed horrific scars across his face and neck. 'Look what you've done to me!'

George stood back with utter shock and threw his hand over his mouth.

'Look what you did to me...' Karl turned the rest of his frail body to George.

George closed his eyes with the fear. He couldn't look at it especially with him saying "Look what *you* did to me". George slowly began to open his eyes; he had to.

'Karl...' George said with his eyes pointed to the floor. 'I'm sorry for what happened.'

'Look at me!'

George shot his eyes up and stared Karl directly in his eyes wide open. Karl's eyes were that of a young boy's but they did not look it. They seemed as though they were a man's that had been through war and saw many violent things. George couldn't fight the tears that began

to flow. There was a huge lump in his throat that made his breathing shake.

‘I wish I could turn back time and be a better friend to you, Karl. I wish it was me that went into the factory and not you... please forgive me, please forgive me...’ George cried and bellowed as he fell to his knees in front of Karl.

There was complete silence for a moment while the tear flowed from George’s eyes. He cried and cried as though he hadn’t cried in years which might have been the case. His face was reddened and his eyes were bloodshot and then the words were delicately whispered. ‘I forgive you’ was softly spoken into George’s ear and he smiled a hopeful smile which seemed new to him. Karl was gone; he disappeared along with the darkness.

Clint was suddenly beside George as he helped him to his feet.

‘Now, now,’ Clint comforted him. ‘That bit is over now.’

‘How long will I be doin’ this for?’ George said with a wipe of his tear with his sleeve.

‘Until you wake...’

George made a tired and morose sigh but he did not protest. He knew he had to keep going. He could not afford to make a mistake.

'So where to next, George?' Clint kept to the plan.

'I think we should go to the picnic where Zach broke his arm... I need to say sorry to my brother... but wait doesn't Death have them captured?'

'This world doesn't make much sense, George. No one else here is real. There can be a million Zach's here along with the same amount of Karl's.'

'So Zach will be there then?'

'Yes.'

'Then we go to where we had the picnic at the park.'

'Okay but beware Death could get a tighter grip on you in the open. I can keep him away for a long enough time here in the factory but out there in the open, not so much.'

'I know but it must be done...' George said and Clint knew he was right. He can't hold Death off forever and it was the only way

George could wake up. There was no choice in the surreal and cruel world.

As they left the front door of the factory they then noticed another tape on the ground. George picked it up and read the label without thinking. The title on that tape was “Kim”. George’s eyes widened with fright and his heart skipped a beat. Not Kim, not sweet and beautiful Kim!

Clint quickly grabbed George by his arms and shook him.

‘George!’ He shouted. ‘Don’t fall for it! That is not the real Kim!’

George couldn’t help it. The thought of something happening to Kim was unbearable and it felt so real. George collapsed to the ground with the heartache. He couldn’t go on anymore. He felt tired and once again his right arm pulsed with the stinging pain. Death was getting stronger and George was becoming weaker. Time was running out. The ground shook all round them and the sky turned a blood-red colour. There was fire from the buildings round them and the streets filled with thick black smoke. Clint grabbed George’s weak body and lifted him to his feet.

‘Snap out of it, George! You’re losing the will to live!’ Clint shouted from the heavens. ‘Kim is waiting for you to wake!’

The smoke quickly cleared as though there was some sort of vacuum sucking it away and the fires died down to nothing. George was coming to his senses. He loved Kim with all his heart and needed to be with her. He needed to wake up.

III

The park was large and seventy per cent trees. The day they had a picnic it was sunny but their father wasn't with them. It was of course, sometime after his death. George and Zachary were older; they were in their early teens at that point. So being at that age George became even more rebellious and short tempered. They had decided to have a picnic that day because the weather was really bad that year so their mother wanted them to make the most of the good weather. It was a gorgeous day they had picked to go to the park, and it was also a gorgeous park. The grass was so green and the trees were as tall as skyscrapers, towering over the bright meadows and unfenced fields.

Their mother had picked the spot to lay down the picnic blanket. It was a good choice. She had picked a small, bright circle-shaped field surrounded by tall pine trees. The brothers had finished a snack prepared by their mother and decided to explore the surrounding woods. It looked as though they had the park to themselves from where they were. That wasn't

true though as it was a very popular park and it was a beautiful day so it was jam-packed with people. They just could not be seen or heard from where they were having their picnic. Their mother picked a great spot.

George felt peaceful in the woods. There was something calming about the quiet sound of nature. It was easing. Zachary thought to have a bit of fun and so he launched a small pine cone right at George and it plonked him right on his head. He ducked and held his head with the pain but laughed out when Zachary started to run. He searched the ground thoroughly for something to get Zachary back with while he ran after him.

'I'll get ya, ya bastard!' George laughed a playful threat.

He found the perfect pine cone about the size of a golf ball. He quickly picked it up and aimed at his moving target. He launched the pine cone and it bounced right off of Zachary's left butt cheek. Zachary thrust forward with his hands in the air and a painful laughter burst out of him.

‘Ya got me, ya got me!’ Zachary shouted with one hand in the air and the other on his ass as he rolled on the carpet of the woods.

George got to him and playfully kicked Zachary as he stood to his feet, still clutching his ass.

‘I bet I can beat you at climbing!’ Zachary said looking for another challenge, another competition with his brother.

‘Me arse you can!’

‘That tree there!’ Zachary pointed at a tall tree next to them. ‘Whoever gets the highest wins!’

‘You’re on!’ George said and suddenly ran to the tree as though a gun had gone off signalling the start of a race.

Zachary quickly followed by gripping George’s arm trying to slow him down. The tree was pretty old. It was so old that it was thick enough for them both to climb at the same time. It must have been as old as the park or even older.

It was easier than they had thought. One foot after the other and before they knew it they were a good few feet up the tree. That tree was made for climbing in a way with its holes and grooves

to take hold of. George could hear Zachary on the other side of the thick tree trunk giving out to the tree and yelling that he was going to win. George didn't waste his energy on yelling back; he had to win. And George did win. There was suddenly a thumping sound that confused George. He had no idea what it was until he couldn't hear Zachary's yelling anymore. George called out and waited for a response but he got none. He peeked round the tree trunk as far as he could but saw nothing. The panic began to grow in him like the tree had grown in the woods. He tried to climb down as fast as possible and during his descent he saw Zachary lying on the ground next to the tree. He had fallen. George raced down to him and froze for a moment staring at his brother lying still. It was a horrifying sight for him. Zachary finally moved and sat up while moaning in pain. His arm was obviously broken but that was all besides a few cuts and bruises.

George helped Zachary to his feet and carried him by his good arm out of the woods. They were just a couple of mischievous young teens that got a bit too impish for their own good.

When they finally reached the circled field their mother took them out of the park and quickly brought Zachary to the hospital. It was a painful end to a wonderful picnic at the park. They never even returned to the park all together and never did any one of them climb trees again either and of course George once again blamed himself for the misfortune.

When George and Clint got to the park it wasn't as George had remembered it; it was much darker and dull. It was certainly different. There was something spooky about it. There was no longer a peaceful feeling from the trees but there was an eerie one. It didn't seem as though it was the same place –many of the trees looked dead and bare. Some even blackened in the distance. The grass wasn't as green as before; now it took a shade of brown or grey. The sky was dismal as it was completely covered with dark sinister looking clouds. Death was most unquestionably getting stronger.

As they came to the circled field he had once had the picnic on Clint had noticed a large lonely crow make its gargling sounds as they

passed. Clint watched it with careful, worried and sharp eyes. The crow watched back with its terrifying beady eyes and its rough feathers made it look even more dangerous. Those eyes could stare right into your soul.

They moved on and Clint tried his best to ignore the crow (there was only one anyway). George brought Clint to the middle of the circle where the picnic blanket was still lying. Everything was laid out as if someone had just set it all up. George half expected to see his mother nearby preparing the lunch. There was absolutely no one round.

‘Where is everyone?’ George asked Clint.

‘Where would Zachary be, do you think?’ Clint stood facing the woods surrounding the field.

George didn’t have to say anything; he just moved one foot after the other and made his way into to the woods while Clint followed.

The woods were very different –much more daunting than before. The tall, terrific trees towered and soared up into the sky with their branches bending and twisting in all directions. It was not the same woods as before; this was a

place of nightmares. The tree didn't seem to have their natural beauty like before; they seemed to have some sort of life of their own – but not a sympathetic life– as they creaked from the dead wind.

It shivered George's bones to the core.

There was complete silence. The only sounds that were made were the slow, careful footsteps made by George and Clint while they moved through the woods.

There was a sudden snapping sound of a twig breaking as though it was stood on. When George and Clint turned to see what had done it they were taken back a little. It was Zachary lying on the ground beside the exact tree from which he had fallen from and broke his arm many years ago.

George rushed as fast as he possibly could over to Zachary lying there on the pine-covered ground. George got to Zachary and lifted his body up in a sitting position against the tree.

'Zach! Zach!' George called with a nervous excitement in his voice.

There was no answer from him but he did open his painful looking eyes as though he was

looking into the person who had done him serious wrong.

‘Zach, I just— ‘

‘You might as well have pushed me!’ Zachary snapped.

‘Please... listen to what I’ve to say...’ George begged and pleaded him.

‘Why should I listen to you?’ It was a valid question asked by Zachary as it was something George used to say in arguments at home.

‘Because...’ George started and Zachary just stared motionlessly. ‘Because... I’m your brother.’

Zachary continued to stay silent but his expression on his scratched face changed as if to say that he would listen.

‘I am so sorry for everything I have done to you, Zach,’ George began. ‘I am sorry for breaking your arm, I am sorry for not treating you like a brother, I am sorry for everything I have done to you.’

The expression had changed on Zachary’s face completely. He was no longer aggressive at all; he was sad. A tear appeared in his eyes and rolled down his cheekbone.

‘It wasn’t your fault that I broke my arm, George.’ Zachary said as he wiped the tear away. ‘You’re my brother and always will be.’

George threw his arms round Zachary and shut his eyes with relief from the hug. They held each other for a moment and as soon as George took his arms away to look at Zachary he was gone. George was kneeling on the ground by himself. He sniffed and quickly wiped the tears from his face as he stood up. Clint made his way over to him as if to urge him to get going.

It wasn’t silent anymore in the woods. There was a sound of a murder of crows bellowing throughout the city of trees. There was no fixed position to where it was coming from –it sounded as though it was coming from all directions– but it was distant.

‘We need to leave now, George,’ Clint seemed worried.

‘Alright...’

Clint suddenly became frightened. He could see something deep in the woods. It looked like a dark cloud moving fast toward them. It was no cloud! It was hundreds of crows flying right at them.

'Run!' Clint shouted to George.

'Just do that teleportin' thing you did when you tried to show me this place was a dream. Bring us to the clouds again or sometin'...' George suggested.

'I can't! Death is too powerful here!' He quickly grabbed George and pushed him ahead. 'Now run!'

And so they did but they could never out run that murder of crows. They were right behind them while they ran as fast as they could, dodging the trees round them which also seemed to come to life as their branches swung at their feet. The trees creaked and cracked with every little movement they had done. George was tripped over by a long branch that had fallen in front of him. Death was certainly more powerful than before.

The cloud of murder swarmed round George and they screamed and bellowed from above while they moved in a twisting formation.

George quickly grabbed a large pine cone from the ground next to him and launched it up into the air knocking a crow right out, but it was

a hopeless effort as it didn't seem to make much of a difference and he was out of pine cones.

The black cloud of crows became darker by the second and George could not get to his feet. He was trapped in a dome of crows that pecked viciously at him with any sort of movement. It was most certainly an act of Death.

There was suddenly a bright light that caused George to squint his eyes slightly. Was this the end? Was this the famous light people talked about seeing when faced with Death? It wasn't. The murder of crows had somehow caught fire and began to disperse. The fire made a doorway out of the dome. George crawled with every bit of strength he had left. One arm after the other, he dragged himself out and then he saw the source of the fire. Clint was holding some sort of flamethrower in his arms while he continued to spray it up into the air and all round, burning the crows and the trees to dust. George didn't bother to wonder where Clint had got the flamethrower, he was just glad that he was saved.

George finally got to his feet and Clint took him by the arm and immediately directed him

out of the dangerous woods, out of the death trap.

IV

As more time ticked by Death grew stronger and stronger. It would soon be too much for either George or Clint to endure. Death has been round since the beginning of life and nothing has ever beaten him. Sooner or later Death always won; George and Clint would much rather later. It was inevitable that Death would catch George but it was a question of *when*. Clint wanted George to get a second chance to prove that he can be better in life, to prove that he can be a kind and caring brother, son, friend, and even lover if he was lucky enough.

They had left the terrifying grounds of the forest-littered park and returned to the old abandoned factory. The factory seemed even more derelict and destroyed than before for some reason. The fences looked weaker, the windows were broken through even more so, and there was no longer a haunting smell of biscuits being baked. What did it mean? Could it have been a sign of Death's strength and Clint's weakness? George didn't have the strength in himself to even bother to ask. He felt

considerably weaker and his legs wobbled where he stood.

'I feel really tired...' George's eyes were half-closed as he told Clint.

Clint suddenly grabbed George by his shoulders and shook him while he shouted 'Don't you fall asleep! Don't sleep!'

George slowly snapped out of it.

'What happens if I sleep?'

'You will never wake.'

'I just feel so weak...' George said as he rubbed his dark eyes.

'You need to keep going!' Clint clicked his fingers at his face. 'Where will we go next?'

'My mam, I need to find my mam,' he said it to himself almost.

'Where will we find her?'

'At the house.'

It was a brief stop at the old factory but Clint knew that time was running out and it was running out rapidly. They had to move on. They were getting so close to the answer, to George's awakening.

George's family home wasn't far from the old factory. They had reached the street in less than

fifteen minutes, but every minute, every second counted.

The street was completely empty. There was no sign of life in any of the homes, not even his own. The adrenaline had kicked in again for George so he found the strength to make his way to the front door. Clint stayed close to him while they approached the door. The door was almost shut but there was a small gap to show that it could be opened up with a light push. There were no sounds at all from inside the house. George even built up the courage to call out but there was no reply. George went deeper into the hallway and the front door suddenly shut tight behind him and Clint was still outside. George ran to the door to try and open it but somehow it was locked and he couldn't unlock it. George was trapped!

'Clint! Clint!' George banged on the door in a panic.

'I'll try find another way in!' He shouted back.

George then heard something coming from the sitting-room. The sitting-room was just down the end of the hall but he could not see in. It was a strange sound. He had to continue, he

had to make his way down the hall. There was nowhere else he could go. One foot after the other he brought himself to the sitting-room to investigate the strange sounds. His breathing was shaking and vibrating with the beating of his heart. He turned in to the door of the sitting-room and saw his brother and Kim sitting on the chair together and kissing with absolute passion. George froze. It was a complete shock. His brother and the girl he loves! It cannot be!

‘Get off!’ George shouted at the top of his voice but they ignored him and continued to kiss. ‘Get off!’ He bellowed again but still they kissed.

It was a heart-breaking sight for George. The rage built up in him and he ran at them, wide-eyed, with the adrenaline. He went to grab them from each other but suddenly in the blink of an eye they were gone. George had grabbed a cushion from the chair instead when he was going for them. He threw it to the ground and took deep breaths. It was obviously a trick put there by Death to distract George from his mission. He couldn’t let Death win. He had to keep moving.

Leaving the sitting-room, there then began another sound. It was almost like switching a station on the television once George left the sitting-room. *Tap! Tap! Tap!* The new sound went again, forcing George's curiosity to shift to fear. It came from the kitchen. *Tap! Tap! Tap!*

George reached the door to the kitchen but it was closed over. The sound was much louder at that point and became more aggressive. *Tap! Tap! Tap!* He slowly pushed the door open to reveal the source of the tapping sound. It was his mother chopping with a large kitchen knife at the counter. She had her back facing George at the door as he came in gingerly.

'Mam?' George almost whispered and wondered what she was doing.

'I'm preparing dinner,' was all she said in an emotionless tone, still with her back to him.

'I need to talk to you Ma'...'

'I don't want to talk to you,' she suddenly turned pointing the knife at him aggressively.

'You ruined my life!'

'But Ma, please...'

‘That’s enough!’ She charged at him with the knife and he fell to the ground, cowering up in a ball as he held his knees.

‘No! Wait!’ George screamed out blocking his face. ‘I love you!’

George still covered himself and his eyes were closed and he waited for the painful blow but there was nothing. He hesitated at first but he then opened his eyes and looked up. It was like a completely different person from just a moment ago. His mother was no longer the same viciously aggressive woman she was. She was almost angel-like as she stood in front of him with a smile and a glistening tear running down her cheek.

‘My George!’ She exclaimed with a joyful cry as if she hasn’t seen him in years. George had no idea what to say; he was completely blank. His mother then came closer to him and he flinched. She slowly and lovingly placed her hand on his shoulder and brought him in closer for a hug. She ever so gently held him for a moment.

‘Oh my sweet George, I love you.’

‘What is happening, Mam?’ George cried softly after the hug.

‘You mustn’t blame yourself –none of it was *your* fault– your father’s death was not your fault,’ she then gently kissed him on the cheek and was suddenly gone.

Clint finally found a way in through the back door which just so happened to be next to the kitchen. Clint rushed over to George as he got up from the floor. George did not wait for Clint to say or ask anything.

‘I know where to go next and it just might fix all this,’ George said.

‘Where?’

‘To my Dad... I blame myself for his death,’ he said as though he had just learned it for the first time. It was the source of all of it. It was what had started everything else. It was where it all began.

‘Where will we find him?’ Clint wondered.

‘There’s really only two places that I can even remember him: the beach we went to for our holiday in the countryside or at the hospital just before he died.’

‘Which one do you think?’

‘I think we should go to the hospital,’ George said with certainty. ‘If it’s somethin’ to do with his death then it’s there.’

And so they would make their way straight to the hospital, not returning to the old factory this time. They were so close to the end, so close to finally figuring it all out. George was closer to waking up but Death was always there setting obstacles for them so that he can take yet another life. Whether it was right or wrong was only ever truly known by the dead.

George knew that it was not the same world as his true reality but as they were heading to the hospital his doubts, if he had any, were drained out of his mind as there was not one person in sight; the place was completely deserted; it was a ghost town. The hospital was gleaming in the jaded sunlight that shone hazily over the mountains. This was it; they had reached what could have been the end of a terrible nightmare. They came to the entrance of the hospital which began to look similar to the old abandoned factory. It was badly damaged, windows were smashed, lights flickered and there was an apocalyptic air to it.

‘Where is everyone?’ George asked Clint just as they entered the hospital.

‘Like I said before; only you, me and Death are real in this world... but keep an eye out...’ Clint said as though he was worried about something but wasn’t entirely sure so he chose not to say.

The place was a complete wreck. It looked as though it was ransacked by a large gang of raiding, raving lunatics. Hospital beds were sprawled out onto the floor in the corridor and there was also blood spurted out on the walls. What had happened? It freaked them out. Clint was mainly scared just for George. He had no reason to fear for himself.

The lights flickered, giving a sense of blinking, all through the corridor while they continued to search for George’s father. He would most likely be in the same room in which he lay before he died. George had very few memories of his father as he died when he was so young but he could remember where exactly to go to find the hospital room that his father was once bedridden. He was five years old and he could remember passing the nurse’s station of

that floor and the waiting area just beside it, he could remember the number on the door of his father's room: number 107. George could also recall that his father's room was not a private one as it was shared with eight other patients.

George's last conversation with his father was a short one. George had showed him a drawing that he had made for him and his father praised it while fighting the tears. George was sitting on the side of the bed to be closer to his father. He didn't really understand why his father was sick—he was only a toddler. George's conversation with his dying father was cut short by a patient just in the bed next to them. It was a woman in her mid-fifties and she was sleeping. While she slept she began to wince and whimper and that soon turned into a horrific cry. There were no nurses or doctors round so she continued to cry. Everyone was silent because everyone could hear her, there was no hiding it. It was a horrible thing to hear someone cry like that in their sleep. No one knew what to say. George's father told his family to leave as it became unbearable and heart-breaking—too much for a child to witness. But George, being a toddler, protested with a

small tantrum as he wanted to stay with his father. He begged for his father to come home but he couldn't and didn't understand that that wasn't possible. George's mother took them out of the room and while on the way out she found a nurse for the crying patient. The hospital was no place for a child.

In the meantime, George and Clint had passed the nurse's station and the waiting area. They had stopped just outside the room numbered "107". The door was completely shut so nothing could be seen on the other side. George waited.

'So my Dad is in here,' George said, although it seemed more to himself than to Clint.

'Go ahead, George.'

George lifted his hand, reaching for the handle of the door, as he shook with anticipation and nerves. He swung the door open and it made a creaking sound. He saw in the room not his father, but the crying patient from many years ago. She sat in an upright position in her hospital bed as if she was waiting for someone. George was confused but also angry that it wasn't his father. It was so frustrating!

‘Why are you here?!’ George didn’t give the woman a chance to say anything as he jumped to the question with a sharp tone. ‘Where’s my Dad!?’

The woman did not answer; she just lied in her bed silently as she stared.

‘ANSWER ME GODAMMIT!’

‘He is not here,’ she finally answered with a soft tone in her frail sounding voice.

‘Where is he?’ He threw his arms up into the air.

‘He is very near.’

‘Why are you here?’

‘You put me here, George,’ she pointed at the bed with her soulless eyes.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am part of your subconscious. So the real question is; why have YOU put ME here and not your father?’

George was lost for words.

‘Why are you here?’ She asked George.

‘Eh because I want to wake up,’ he answered almost absently.

‘Why am I here?’ She quizzed him again.

George thought for a moment. 'Because I can't forget you...'

'Do you want to forget me?'

'Yes!' George snapped. 'Who are you and where is my father?'

'You already asked these questions—are you not satisfied with my answers?' There was a puzzled expression on her face. 'I am *you* in a way. I am here because you put me here. And why have you put me here? Because you think you deserve to be punished. You blame yourself, George. You chose me, subconsciously, to be here instead of your father.'

George did not answer.

'So, do you still blame yourself? Do you think you must be punished?'

'Um, I guess so... but I don't want to be punished anymore; I want another chance.'

'You thought about suicide?' She said with little emotion.

'Eh well, yes.'

'So you asked for death and now it's here.'

'And I know now that I don't want it... please forgive me for those thoughts...'

‘They are not thoughts to forgive, they are they thoughts you need to speak of. You cannot bottle up your emotions any longer. That is what I had done and I still cry.’

‘I want help. I need one more chance...’

‘Do you deserve it?’

‘Maybe not, but my family deserve to be treated better by me. I want to show them that I love them.’

‘Then in that case your father will meet you at the beach,’ she said as though she was happy with that answer. ‘Now, you better go before *they* get you.’ This confused George a little. What did she mean by “they”?

It then became suddenly clear from the terrifying, aggressive screams coming from outside the hospital. Clint came rushing into the room, shutting the door behind him.

‘We gotta go now!’ Clint urged as he went over to the window.

‘Who are they?’ George asked.

‘They’re not good at all!’ Clint smashed the window open and quickly covered the window ledge with a blanket so that they would not get cut from the shards of broken glass.

‘Jump out now!’

‘Wait!’ George didn’t want to leave the woman behind but as he turned to her bed she was gone. She wasn’t real and George knew that but he still couldn’t leave her behind. The *real* George was definitely showing more.

‘Out the window, now, George!’ Clint gestured urgently with his hands pointed at the window.

George hopped onto the window ledge and jumped down to the ground and the hospital bedroom door was smashed through. Clint threw himself down and out as three monstrous men came rushing at him, one of them almost grabbed him. The three men didn’t seem to be men anymore. They looked crazed and maddened by an apocalypse. They just screamed constantly and their eyes were blood-red. They seemed as though they were zombies and had targeted George and Clint as their lunch.

George and Clint ran with all the strength they had but Clint started to limp after he threw himself out of that window. They sprinted hastily to a van that had been parked in the

hospital carpark. George had reached it first and then Clint.

‘QUICK GET IN!’ Clint said in the panic. The three crazed men were catching up fast.

George got in the driver seat to look for keys but there was none! He searched and searched and searched with his eyes wide open with the fear of the monsters right behind him. There were no keys in the van! Clint looked to George for a moment in quick thought.

‘In there!’ Clint yelled and pointed into the glove compartment.

George swiftly moved his hand across and opened the compartment. He found the keys and quickly started the van. Then George suddenly sped off just as Clint shut the passenger-side door. The crazed men were still behind and they also found a vehicle of their own and then suddenly accompanied by another. They had some sort of military jeep that was equipped with its very own machine-gun-turret and the other was a motorcycle with a side-passenger seat. They screamed with absolute madness while in pursuit. The van that George was driving wouldn’t have stood a

chance. Clint quickly moved from the passenger seat into the back of the van. The crazed men on the motorcycle were gaining on them from behind. The passenger was holding a large machete and he waved it around in the air above his head. Clint opened up the back of the van and just like with the flamethrower, he made a rocket launcher appear. The motorcyclist's jaw dropped. Clint did not hesitate and he fired the rocket, sending the motorcycle into smithereens.

The motorcycle may have been destroyed but the military jeep still raced after them. They began to fire from their turret sending large bullets past and through the van. It sounded as though George was trapped in a tin can that kept getting kicked and battered. The van started to look like a sieve with all of those bullet holes that had riddled it.

The crazed men's military jeep gained on them and then the van was forced to a halt as the tires were then blown out.

George knew they had to do something fast or the crazed men would catch them and bring him to Death. Suddenly he thought about his subconscious. Just like a dream, he could think

of something and make it happen. Clint did say that it would be difficult for George to do as a living person but it can be done. He knew it wasn't reality but he had to convince his mind and senses that it wasn't. He thought hard.

The crazed men jumped out of their military jeep and began to charge. Clint had stumbled off of his feet when the van came to a stop and so he had no time to think up something that could have stopped them. But then something happened. One of the crazed men was shot down and then the other. It was Detective Buckley holding a smoking gun. It had worked! George had thought up the detective so that he would come to save them.

'I've been lookin' for you!' Detective Buckley howled out to George after holstering his gun. 'This world had gone mad!'

'George,' Clint called. 'Did you get the detective to come here?'

'I did.'

'Good thinkin', but it also isn't a good sign... You're further from life and closer to death now, we must hurry!'

‘I have a vehicle,’ Detective Buckley turned away. ‘Come on!’

‘We might as well go with him for the car,’ George said.

‘Alright, but we can’t trust him completely; he’s from your subconscious and Death could use him and you could lose control of him.’

‘We’ll be careful.’

They decided to take the opportunity to use the car Detective Buckley had brought. It was a bold move but they had no choice –George was running out of time.

The world had most certainly “gone mad” as Detective Buckley had said. It was a complete apocalyptic scene like something from a movie or an old surrealistic-style painting. It was no longer December; it was absolutely seasonless, and it was unrecognisable to George’s eyes. They were surrounded by smoke and fires as they drove through the town of some sort which for some reason looked like an old Western town. George was deep in his subconscious; he had to wake up as soon as possible or he would never wake.

Detective Buckley was driving the car while Clint sat in the front side-passenger seat and George in the back.

‘What do you remember from your life, Clint?’ George asked him.

‘Everything.’

‘You can’t remember absolutely *everything*, can you?’

‘I have no human mind to hold me back anymore,’ Clint said pointing his finger to his head. ‘I remember everything: the things I love, the things I regret I had done, the things I smelled, heard, felt, and saw... Absolutely everything.’

‘What if you don’t want to remember certain things?’

‘There’s no way you can forget.’ Clint said. ‘But if you don’t like the bad memories just think of the good things you had done and hopefully they out-weigh the bad.’

‘I don’t have much good ones...’ George said with his eyes facing the floor.

‘So make them.’

‘I will...’

‘So here we are! We have reached our destination!’ Detective Buckley cheered from the driver seat. But they were nowhere near the beach. Something changed in the way Detective Buckley was acting. George had lost control of him. They were at the police station. The back doors were locked and so George could not escape. Clint threw his hands at Buckley when he tried to take out his gun. Buckley gripped the gun and Clint held his wrists. The gun pointed upwards and two loud shot rang inside the car sending bullets through the roof of the car. There was a struggle until Clint forced the gun to point at Buckley’s head. Clint pulled the trigger and Buckley was dead. The blood was spurted all over the inside of the car. Suddenly the car doors unlocked and George fell out and coughed and puked with the sight of the blood.

‘Death took control of him,’ Clint said as he stood out of the car. ‘We have to go.’

Then there was more bad news that had come with the screaming sounds from more crazed men. George and Clint could see them coming – they weren’t far. They went to get back into the car but the keys had disappeared! And this time,

Clint could not make them reappear. There was sheer panic in George's eyes. He had never had a nightmare like this before. Clint saw the panic in George's eyes and quickly made his decision.

'Run,' Clint whispered to him and he turned and charged in the direction of the countless crazed men without even giving George a chance to protest against him sacrificing himself for him. George froze for a second but he had no choice, he used the advantage and ran the other direction. He didn't even get a chance to thank Clint for everything that he had done for him. He cried as he ran away from the old police station. Clint knew that he didn't need him anymore. He just had to get to the beach and see his father so that he can wake. There was no need for Clint to be there except for sentimental reasons. He ran and he ran, without looking back. Whatever Clint had done it had worked for the crazed men were not behind him but he still ran. It was as if he now had an unlimited amount of energy to keep running.

He so desperately wanted to wake. He longed to see his family again, to hang out with Dunney again and be a proper friend to him, and he

wished to kiss Kim for real and to tell her how he felt about her. Maybe that was where the energy had come from.

Nothing round him was familiar anymore. His surroundings were beyond recognition with its apocalyptic theme. Buildings were just rubble and the sky was glowing with a dark reddish colour from distant fires. The only sound was silence –the silence of George’s heartbeat which thumped in his ears. It was definitely not the same world as before or he hoped that it wasn’t and that he would make it to the beach and wake up.

V

It had become a complete desert and George was no longer running. The heat from the bright sun shone down on him as though there was a giant magnifying glass directly over him. The sand was very difficult to keep steady on. His feet sunk into his own footsteps and filled his shoes with sand. He felt the thirst and his lips blistered. He only thought of finding something to drink at this point. Nothing else came to his mind, not even Kim or Clint or anyone else for that matter. But it was a desert. There was nothing. He had thought that he had spotted a puddle in the near distance but it was just waves of heat that curved and swayed on the hot surface of the burning sand. It was a desolate land with nothing to give but a life to take. George walked and walked, forsaken in the wasted land waiting for hope to appear. How did he get there? There were no deserts in this country till now. It wasn't real! George had forgotten somehow! How could he? He wasn't weak anymore, he was no longer exhausted by the overwhelming heat and the sweet sound of a

trickling river came softly to his ears. The sand evaporated and fell away as though someone had pulled some sort of plug. George felt the power that Clint had showed him earlier before. He was able to control his surroundings and he found his hope. But as the sand disappeared and grass quickly grew, he turned to see Death walking behind him. He wasn't too close, about an hour away but George could see him and he could see George.

George knew he had time so he didn't give up the hope he had suddenly found. Death catches up with everyone eventually but George didn't want it yet and Clint didn't want that for him either which was why he helped. But time was different in this world. An hour suddenly changed dramatically and so did the distance from Death. As George turned his head he could see that Death was only a few feet away from him. Death's face was completely different as he came closer. His face had no skin like before; he was just a skeleton. He stopped just a couple of steps from George and stared with his empty eye-sockets.

‘Stay away from me!’ George shouted with a challenging tone but Death was unshaken. ‘I am not goin’! Not now!’

No answer. Still, Death just stared with an eerie silence.

‘I can’t go... Not yet,’ George said with a different tone –more beseechingly this time as though talking to an old friend that he was trying to convince.

Sand began to appear round George’s feet again and he moved back with a slight panic that the desert was returning. His surroundings shifted completely. Small rocks and stones suddenly appeared along with the sand and his shoes had disappeared leaving him with his bare feet. The sand felt different this time. It wasn’t as hot as before nor was it as painful. There was a familiar feeling about it.

George looked up to Death once more and Death turned away. George was completely confused. Death was walking away from him as though he had chosen to ignore him. George then heard a soothing, old familiar sound. It was a gentle wave crashing to the shore. He had made it to the beach! George was standing on

the beach between a green and brown cliff and the calm blue sea. Death was no longer present nor was he in a distant sight. There was a calming atmosphere surrounding George. It was a familiar one; one that he had not felt in such a long time. It was almost an alien feeling to him but he had felt it before in a distant memory. That memory was linked to that beach. It was just how he had remembered it. It was peaceful and it was utterly beautiful.

George waited momentarily and very quickly he spotted another distant figure walking up the beach. A silhouetted man was walking casually toward him as though going for an ordinary walk. George waited in the same spot. He sat on a rock at one point and then skidded some flat stones in the calm ocean while he waited. He felt much more relaxed now that Death wasn't present anymore. He watched the stones bounce across the water and remember how he wasn't able to achieve the skidding when he was younger. But now it came as an ease to him. Things always change; what was once a problem ten years ago may not be a problem years later. It can change without anyone even realising it. It

was a strange thought that had entered George's mind but it was a slightly comforting one somehow. It made George see that he can overcome his problems no matter how small or great; whether it was skipping a stone across water or defeating Death until he was ready to go.

The silhouette had become clearer. It was definitely a man but George still could not see exactly who it was. He had an idea who it was going to be. He was expecting his father to show. And then when the man became clear enough George was stunned with the surprise to see Clint walking casually closer to him. He was glad to see that Clint was okay but he was confused that his father was not there.

'Clint!' George called out. 'We did it.'

'We did,' Clint smiled and stood in front of George as if he had more to say but he just stared out to the sea.

'I don't understand... ' George searched Clint for answers.

Clint did not answer at first while he listened to the soft crashing of the waves. 'I missed that sound...' He finally said with his eyes closed.

‘Where is my father?’ George asked. ‘He should be here.’

‘I’m here, George,’ Clint said. ‘I always have been just like I promised.’

‘What!?’ George was taken back. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I am your father,’ his eyes welled up with tears for the joy of being with one of his sons again.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ George was almost angry after everything he had been through.

‘But I couldn’t, it was one of my rules I told you about. If I said anything then Death would have you,’ his father said and George began to understand.

George then looked as though he only realised that Clint was his father and he fell into him and embraced him with a hug that he had been longing for such a long time. George couldn’t hold back the flow of tears bursting out as he finally held his father after all these years.

‘I miss you so much!’ George cried out.

‘I know, I know. I miss you too,’ his father rubbed George’s back with a caring motion.

They held each other tight for a few minutes as though they were making up for lost time. George's father kissed him on his forehead and looked at him as they each took a deep breath. They got themselves together and stood apart almost awkwardly. George began to recognise his father more and more and he seemed less like Clint now.

'This is my favourite memory I have of you, Dad,' George said gesturing his hand round the beach.

'Mine too,' his father replied. 'You need to hold on to that memory but don't block out any of the bad ones. You need to talk to someone about how you feel.'

'I wish I could talk to you...'

'You can but you must also speak to another person. Do not bottle up anymore.'

'I promise.'

'Good,' they smiled at each other with relief after all that they have been through.

'So, when will I wake?'

'Soon,' his father said. 'This will all just be a dream, George. I love you.'

'I love you too, Dad.'

And there was a sudden bright light that blinded George causing him to shut his eyes tight. His right arm had that stinging pain again but it would not go away this time. George was scared. What was happening? The bright light had given him some sort of headache and he held his head with his good arm. He realised he couldn't move his right arm –it was in a sling. He opened his eyes and they slowly began to focus. He was in a hospital bed and it was night time. There was no one else in the room. He then learned that his right arm had been broken. He had a patchy bit of teenage stubble on his chin and his eyes were dark with tired bags. It was all a dream...

George sat up in the hospital bed. It was definitely night time as the hospital was dark but it was lit up by a few dimly lit bulbs. George had a private room so he was completely alone. He moved himself from the bed and walked cautiously to the door. He was still afraid. The dream was so real to him that he wondered if he really was awake now. The hospital was so dark it looked as though it would be from that of a nightmare. George was almost naked,

vulnerable as he walked down the corridor. All he had on was the hospital gown. There was a bright source of light at the end of the corridor. George gingerly inched closer and closer to the light. It was a nurse's station and there was a young, pretty nurse sitting there alone. She didn't notice George until he called out to her. She jumped from her seat with great fright and became even more shaken when she realised that it was George.

George was unsure why she had got such a fright. Maybe his sneaking round in the dark had a part to play but she continued to stare at him with shock. She could not find the words and so she ran away without saying anything but made a gesture to George telling him to wait where he was.

George took a seat and waited patiently for the nurse to return. But he was a little confused at her reaction. It was very strange for a nurse to act like that, although she was young and probably not a nurse for long.

A door swung open and the nurse returned with a doctor. She stood there, the doctor, with a wide-eyed expression on her face and then she

rushed over with the nurse by her side. George stood up to greet them but the doctor urged him to stay sitting. The nurse grabbed a chair and placed it in front of George's seat. The doctor sat in front of him in the chair.

'George Eastwood?' the doctor said knowing exactly who he was but to see if he knew that himself.

'Yes.'

'How are you feeling?' She then shone a torch into his eyes to check his pupils.

'I'm okay.'

'George, my name is Doctor Kelly Walsh; you have been in a deep coma for the past few weeks after a serious car accident.'

'Where are my family?'

'It's late and we sent them home. They've been waiting for you to wake for so long but I told them they should go and get some rest. I'm just so shocked I have to say... to be honest I didn't think you'd ever wake.'

'So what now?' George wondered.

'I got the nurse to call your mother and she should be on her way as soon as possible... Can

I just ask you to return to your room and rest until she gets here?

‘Yeah, okay...’

George returned to his bed and the nurse and doctor escorted him on the way. The nurse turned the switch and the light lit up the room to reveal many “get well soon” cards and flowers scattered all round just for George. He didn’t even notice them when he woke up in the first place. He couldn’t believe it. He thought, for some reason, that maybe it was some sort of mistake and they were meant for someone else but the name on every single one was to George. He didn’t think anyone cared but there were at least a hundred cards in the room.

The nurse herded George into his bed and then left the room almost afraid to leave George in case something would happen to him. Both the nurse and Doctor Walsh left the room after a thorough check to see if George would be okay by himself. They were surprised he could even walk. They were astounded. He suffered no brain damage which Doctor Walsh had said was a huge possibility.

George felt tired somehow but he couldn't sleep. He was being called by all the cards and flowers that were sent to him. His curiosity got the better of him. He picked up the closest card to him which was signed from Kim with kisses on the bottom:

To my dearest George,

You are my best friend and I wish now more than ever that I had told you exactly how I felt about you. I didn't put up with your nonsense for no reason. I love you so much with all my heart and soul!!!

I hope and wish that you would wake up as soon as possible so that I can tell you all of this in person. I have been a mess without you so please wake up soon. I love you so much.

I will visit you soon again and hopefully you can talk back to me this time.

From Kim xxxxx

George couldn't help but smile with a tear roll down from his eye. He held the card close to his heart and then placed it back down. It was a lot

to take in and was very overwhelming for him. It was not at all how he imagined it would be. There was even a card from Dunney. There wasn't much on it except for:

George,

I am truly sorry for what happened. It should have been me in that coma, not you. Please wake up man!

The van that hit us was in some sort of police chase so they ran a red light and crashed into us. I don't remember the crash though...

But please man wake up, I miss you.

From Paul

He also saw that there was a large card put together by Principal Hiller and all the other teachers from the school. It was filled up completely with caring messages from all the teachers including Ms. Best (whom would truly never do anything wrong). He thought for a second that maybe he was still dreaming; it couldn't have been real. Did they all truly care for him? George thought and thought but it was

a pointless circle. He couldn't think properly as he then felt the weight from his heavy eyes. He was so tired and his arm was still sore. He lied on the bed and without him even realising it he had fallen asleep. It was a deep, deep sleep and he had no dream, as far as he could remember.

VI

He was awakened to the sound of footsteps rushing through the hospital corridor. They were loud and echoed while they tapped the hard floor. It was brighter now. It must have been morning but George had no way of knowing for sure. George sat up against his pillow so that he could get a better look. The footsteps got louder and louder as they became closer with each second that passed by. It was his mother that had then came in through the doorway. She stood there in awe for a moment as if she froze. Zachary then followed.

‘George!’ They exclaimed with joy.

They came over to the bed and hugged and kissed George with happiness and relief that he had finally woke up from the coma.

‘I’m awake, Ma,’ George cried with sheer bliss.

‘I know, George, I know,’ she said with a smile and a tear down her face. ‘I love you so much! Please don’t do that to us again!’ she placed her hand by his face.

‘I’m so, so sorry... I won’t ever do anything stupid again,’ George cried. ‘I love you so much and I’m sorry. I need help...’

‘I love you too. Everything will be okay...’

The family of three huddled in again for another hug as they became more overwhelmed by the emotions.

Finally, George had let it all out and it poured and poured until he felt no more. Zachary had felt that he now had a brother again and their mother was joyful for the gift she had received; she had her youngest son back in her life and in her arms. George no longer felt alone and had also realised that he wasn’t getting the help because he wasn’t asking for it with words. No one could read his mind and he knew he had to change his ways. He loved his family and he had to show it. He had to make the most of his second chance at life given to him by the help from his father.

It was the same day that George could return home. It had finally come and the word had spread that George had woken up. It was a local miraculous event that had everyone talking. Kim

had heard the news and wept with delight. She could not wait to see him.

The drive home was strange but not in a bad way. George was talkative and Zachary and their mother talked back. There was no awkward silence nor was there a tension. They talked and laughed like a proper family. The crash may have been the best thing to ever happen to them. It woke George up.

They had finally got home and George felt as though he hadn't been home for such a long and strenuous time. Out of the car they went and Zachary helped George out. Their mother rushed to open the door and let them in. But something caught George's eye. It was a black jeep with tinted windows parked across the road but the engine was still on. He stared and stared with the fear that had suddenly rushed back into his blood. Zachary was confused to why George wasn't moving. George just looked at the jeep and the engine was cut off.

'What's wrong?' Zachary asked George.

George didn't answer but he continued to watch the jeep. The driver-side door opened up and George lost his breath. He watched and

waited to see a man in a black suit but the man that had got out of the jeep was just an ordinary man. He paid no attention to George at all and ran into the neighbour's house across the road.

'What's wrong, George?' Zachary asked again.

'Nothin'...' He said with a hint of relief and he began to feel silly. 'Let's head in.'

The door was shut behind them and George somehow felt like he was a guest, but a welcome one. He took a gander at himself in the mirror in the hallway and he saw some bad scratches but they would heal, he saw some stitches on his lip and he saw the sling round his broken arm. The pain was real. The more he thought about the dream the more ridiculous it sounded.

George made his way up to his bedroom and saw that it was exactly the same way he had left it. There was no reason it shouldn't have been. He noticed a blank piece of paper on his desk and then sought for a pen or a pencil. He found a pen in a cup on the desk. He took a seat and began to write:

Dear Father,

I want to thank you for everything. You saved my life, gave me a second chance. I want you to know that I will do everything I can to make things better. I love my family and I want to show that from now on. Death isn't something to fear. It is inevitable and will happen to me someday but I should respect it. Maybe when it's my time Death will be much more approachable. It's just a type of changing. You are still with me so I know in my heart that death is not the end.

I still miss you and I cannot wait to be with you again but I won't rush it. I know I will see you again so there is no need to ask for Death to come. This is my life and I will make the most of it. This is my time and I will spend it wisely. I promise you that I will be a better person.

I love you and I will see you many years from now.

*Your son,
George.*

There was then a knock on the door. George took a look out his bedroom window but could

not see who it was. He dropped the pen on the desk and started down the stairs. There was a slight bounce in his step. George got to the front door and opened it up. The sun blinded him for a moment as it shone directly on his face. His eyes then adjusted so that he could see who it was that had been knocking. A smile slowly grew on George's bruised and scratched face until it wrinkled his dark eyes.

THE END

