

GARY McMAHON

RAIN DOGS

"Firmly in the front ranks of the
new wave of British horror."
THE GUARDIAN



**GARY McMAHON
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DOGS**

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Rain Dog:

A dog that is lost after a heavy rainfall because the rain has washed away its scent and it cannot find its way back home.

Some of us spend a lifetime trying to find our way home; we are the rain dogs, lost and stranded after the storm.

PROLOGUE: URBAN RAIN DANCE

THE WOMAN SCURRIES out of the main entrance and across the wide grey slab of the communal parking area, light spilling out of the doors behind her to stain the concrete steps with a cold, white wash. She pulls her quilt-lined padded jacket tight across her emaciated frame; a pitiful attempt to keep out the unseasonable chill. Grief follows her like a stray dog — vying for her attention and yapping at her heels — as she heads for the car.

Monolithic concrete towers loom over her, their gaze blank and impassive under a weak moon that barely even registers in a sky as grey as the structures which sulk around her. These tired buildings do not judge the woman; only her family can do that — and only when they discover her activities, much later, and long after the deed is done.

The car starts on the first try. This is unusual in itself, so she decides to take it as a sign that the night is on her side.

She's aware of the wind's force as it blows against the sides of the little car, for it is a constant fight to keep the vehicle on the road as she heads away from the estate. The town of Stonegrave is sleeping, all good little boys and girls having gone to bed hours ago. The only folk abroad at this dead hour are those in search of things which cannot be seen by the light of day, or who require the cover of night to hide their grim intentions. Dark deeds and darker desires accompany her towards her destination.

She guides the car through the centre of town, being careful to stop at every red light and obey each speed limit sign she sees along the way. It would not pay to be apprehended for such trivial crimes, and therefore her entire plot to be sabotaged by a contrivance of chance and circumstance.

But the omens are good; as always she reaches the place unmolested.

Ringstone Field lies guarded by a tall security enclosure, but she knows the way inside. Local children have dug a hollow under a section of fence, and she follows in their illicit footsteps.

The woman walks around to the back of the car and opens the boot. She takes the package out of the small space and carries it close to her chest as she strides towards the fence. She follows the line of the first low boundary, and then skips deftly over the wooden horizontals; the main security barrier is on the other side, topped with lethal spikes to keep out the curious.

She finds the gap under the wire and slides under the fence on her belly, pushing the package ahead of her. On the other side, she stands and brushes soil from her coat.

The eight large weathered megaliths, known locally as the Dog Stones, dominate the green half-acre like sentinels. They cast no shadows in the darkness, yet when stepping before them she feels suddenly cold and isolated, detached from the world. She walks to the centre of the circle and places the package on the ground, removing the black plastic wrapping to reveal what is inside.

The bound and muzzled dog spills out onto the soft ground, drooling and snarling and whining like a baby. Its claws are extended but it cannot reach to rake her flesh; the knots hastily tied in the thin nylon rope she used to restrict the beast's movements have not slackened at all during the journey.

This is the first one to be brought here still living. The others were dead, all six of them — a mouse, a rat, a rabbit, a fox, and two alley cats. The dead vermin were merely road kill collected from a winding lane a mile outside of town. The felines she killed herself with a kitchen knife. This one she stole from outside an off licence, where it was tied loosely by a frayed leather leader to a concrete bollard.

The woman feels a sense of import as she kneels before the struggling dog. There is the faint stench of something on the wind, a moist aroma of spoiled meat or rotting vegetation. As soon as she notices it, the smell is gone.

She takes the thin-bladed craft knife from her pocket and crouches over the wriggling hound. By now even this dumb animal knows that it will soon die, and the volume of its cries increases, even behind the sturdy leather muzzle. The woman grits her teeth against the aural assault and prepares to cut.

“Come back to me, son,” she whispers, as she raises the knife. The blade flashes in the moonlight and the dog’s cries are cut off, along with most of its head. Gagging, and with tears stinging her eyes, the woman quickly disembowels the animal, spreading the steaming innards across the short grass.

The wind stops. Silence creates a vacuum inside the stone circle and the woman’s ears pop as if she is travelling at high altitude.

“Come back to me.”

She stares up at the flat sky and suddenly it is torn in two like a vast silk sheet being divided by a blade; something huge and unseen struggles through the flapping rent, and the woman begins to smile. Clouds shudder like dust in a breeze and the air becomes thin and brittle. Something is coming.

Then — after a pause in which it seems that grieving parents weep, entire species die, the very earth groans, and distant worlds collide — it begins to rain.

The woman closes her eyes and opens her mouth in anticipation of the downpour. After a few moments of anticipation she opens her eyes to see why her face remains dry. Rain is sheeting from that great hole in the sky, even as it shuts like a mouth at the climax of a yawn; yet the fat raindrops halt above her as if a sheet of glass too sheer to be noticed by the human eye protects her.

Puzzled, she looks around. Beyond the imposing stones, rain spatters the ground, churning the soil into mud. Inside the circle no rain falls.

Slowly the woman begins to smile.

She walks out of the protective circle and into the heavy rain, twirling and giggling like a child. Then, with a dark and hungry hope blooming deep inside the chambers of her submerged heart, she begins to dance.

“Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day.”

— Children’s nursery rhyme (traditional)

“Does the rain have a father?”

— Job xxxviii:28

Weather Report #1

(From the *Stonegrave Echo* daily newspaper)

Britain was warned today to brace itself for at least a week of heavy rain, gales and possible flooding, as bad weather swept in from the east late last night.

Forecasters have said that prolonged heavy rain could lead to localised flooding in Northumberland, Cumbria, North Yorkshire, the east of England and the Scottish Borders, where up to 100 mm (4 in) of rain could fall.

The rain will be accompanied by gale-force winds on the East Coast. Parts of Scotland and North-Eastern England will bear the brunt of today's downpours, but by late next week the heaviest rain will fall across North Yorkshire. "It will be wet and windy for most places for up to as much as seven or eight days," a Met Office spokesman said.

PART ONE:
HARD RAIN

Chapter 1: OUT

IT WAS RAINING.

Guy Renford stepped out of the prison gates, too scared to look behind him in case he was suddenly summoned back inside. The sky glowered above him, a vast swirling porridge of grey and black. As Guy stared up at it, he embraced the air that ran its chill fingers across his face. It felt different, that air: lighter, filled with a promise that could never be offered in the stale fart and cannabis-smelling miasma that passed for oxygen behind prison walls. It felt like freedom.

He walked stiff-legged towards the car park, the rain soaking him through to the skin in less than a minute. There wasn't much in his trouser pockets apart from his cab fare, an out-of-date one-way train ticket from Leeds to Newcastle, a battered leather wallet (empty but for a photograph of a heavily pregnant Bella) and a creased stick of chewing gum still in its foil wrapper.

The sound of the downpour was like white noise, blocking his ears and forcing its way inside his mind; thoughts of his wife and daughter were crowded out, flattened beneath the damp weight of the elements.

The taxi driver sat in the cab, reading the newspaper. His face was stern, and he didn't look at all chatty, a fact which suited Guy down to the ground. He knocked on the side window, — disturbing the man in his examination of the daily gossip columns — then climbed into the back of the car.

“Wet out. Again.” Perhaps he was the chatty type after all.

“Yeah, I'm soaked through. Going to need a change of clothes as soon as I get home. Has it really been like this for a month?”

“Longer,” said the man, releasing the handbrake and guiding the car out of the tight parking space. The windscreen wipers were set to full speed, but still they struggled to clear the glass. Rain poured down, obscuring Guy's vision of the looming prison block. He laid back his head on the soft upholstery, and closed his eyes to blot out the grim surroundings as he was whisked back into the life he'd left behind.

They headed south and joined the a1 towards Leeds, the rain hammering at the body of the car like airgun pellets. Traffic was light — nobody in their right mind was out in weather like this, unless their livelihood depended upon it — and the roads were dangerous from the combined threat of flooding and badly restricted vision.

The driver hadn't spoken since his opening gambit, and instead focused his attention on the treacherous road ahead. The radio was on low, and Guy could make out Johnny Cash singing about “The Man” coming around. The apocalyptic biblical overtones in the song seemed somehow appropriate.

When a news update was announced, Guy asked the driver to turn up the volume, then leaned forward over the back of the empty passenger seat to concentrate on what was being said:

“The British Meteorological Society is at a loss to explain the endless rains that have devastated parts of Britain for the last forty days — an official spokesman saying that this scale of inclement weather is unprecedented, and could reach what he called ‘almost biblical proportions’.

“Flood warnings are in operation throughout the country, and the government are

preparing to issue an official Red Alert. In short, it looks like it's going to get a great deal wetter before the sun comes out."

Guy tuned out the mundane radio chatter, and thought about the last time he'd felt the sun on his institution-pale face. Just over three years ago: in the summertime, he and Bella had taken newborn Kay to visit his cousin in Harrogate, and the sun had been shining almost as bright as his daughter's smile. The memory of heat still warmed his face, and burned away any tears before they came.

For three long, hard years he had held on to the belief that he would feel the sun on his skin once more, and he wasn't about to stop believing now that he was finally back on the outside. That memory was all he had: it was sacred.

The taxi bounced off the motorway at a slip road eight miles north of Leeds, and Guy was forced against the rear door and window as he slid across the back seat. The driver was taking no prisoners: fares were scarce in this weather, nobody wanted to be outdoors. Familiar sights blurred past Guy's face, seeming unstable and dreamlike to his tired eyes, as the car approached the small town of Stonegrave. Boyhood memories diluted by rain and memory; his many pre-teen hunting grounds submerged beneath a cold, creeping despair.

"What was that address?" asked the driver, quick-glancing at Guy in the rear-view mirror. Rain hammered the vehicle, making him feel attacked from all sides, hemmed in by strangeness. This sudden bout of paranoia disturbed him, reminding him of the constant fear he had felt during his prison sentence, and he felt his hand move towards the door handle, fumbling with the mechanism. Suddenly, Guy no longer wanted to be locked in.

"Just drop me here," he said, feeling nervous and disorientated. "This'll do fine."

"You sure, mate? You don't even have a proper coat."

Guy glanced down at himself and smiled.

He paid the driver, giving him all the money he had so as to include a tip and watched from the kerbside as the car veered off into the middle of the street. The driver completed a rapid three-point turn, splashing standing water onto the pavement on both sides of the road, and moved off at a crawl in the direction from which they'd come. Just as Guy was about to turn away and walk the remaining short distance to his parents' house, the car halted. Brakes screeched; the vehicle skidded on the wet road surface; there came the almighty thump of something colliding with metal.

Guy stared into the misty distance, squinting to penetrate the fringe of falling water. The driver opened his door, stuck his head outside, then promptly closed the door again.

Guy jogged the hundred yards or so back to the car and rapped his knuckles on the window; the glass lowered, disappearing into the door as the window wound down. The taxi driver stared at him, blinking. He looked confused.

"What happened, mate?"

"I... I dunno," said the driver. "Felt like I hit something — a big cat, or a dog maybe? — but when I looked, there was nothing there."

"Wait a minute." Guy nodded his head and walked to the front of the car, already soaked through to the skin and unconcerned about getting any wetter. He knelt at the front of the vehicle, inspecting the bumper. The plastic was warped, and the top of the bonnet sported a slight concave dent, as if something heavy had landed on the front of

the car.

Guy followed the gentle contours of the sunken bonnet with his fingertips, wondering what was so heavy that it could cause such damage, and how tough it must be to simply walk away unharmed. There was no blood anywhere in the vicinity; although the rain might have washed some of it away, there should at least be some telltale red spatters on the ground under the twisted bumper.

He walked back to the open window. “You certainly hit something, but it didn’t hang about to sue you,” he said to the driver, smiling in an attempt to lighten the mood.

The man shook his head, spots of water decorating his stubbled cheeks. “Thanks,” he mumbled. Then he drove slowly and carefully away.

Guy turned up the collar of his jacket and walked the other way, suddenly feeling the need to be sat by a radiator sipping a mug of hot chocolate, his mother’s hand stroking his hairline like she used to do when he was a frightened child. He tried to ignore the sensation of being followed, but after a short while he could no longer resist the heat of unseen eyes burning into the back of his head.

He turned around, pausing at a pedestrian crossing. The street was empty; no suspicious figures dogged his steps or back-stepped into the fizzing downpour. He did, however, glimpse the fleeting suggestion of something bulky fleeing away from him through the rain: a large dog — perhaps someone’s roaming house pet scampering home to be warm and dry. It must be the hound that had been hit; perhaps it *was* injured after all.

Guy brushed water out of his eyes with a steady hand; the vague, unsettling image vanished. He carried on along the street, forgetting the sight as at last he neared home.

Chapter 2: RETURNS

LIZZIE STOOD BY the living room window, a mug of coffee cradled in her hands. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, trying to displace some nervous energy. The street outside was a blur, the constant rain bleeding the neighbourhood of colour and vitality. Lizzie thought it looked like the scenery from a black and white film, and she half expected Humphrey Bogart to walk out of Number Sixteen, his hat tugged down over his eyes and the collar of his grey raincoat pulled up to conceal his cruel mouth.

“He won’t get here any quicker,” said her husband, his voice floating through from the kitchen, where he was warming tinned cream of mushroom soup on the stove.

“Pardon me?”

“Standing lookout won’t make him arrive before he’s due, dear.”

Lizzie smiled. Even though Bill couldn’t see her, he knew exactly what she was doing. They had been married for forty-five years, and each knew the other’s habits as if they’d already read the script.

But Lizzie couldn’t help feeling anxious, today was a huge occasion. Her eyes began to prickle like they did whenever she chopped onions.

Then she saw him striding along on the other side of the road. He stopped, looked first left and then right — just like she had taught him all those years ago when he was first allowed out of the house on his own. Her heart tensed, almost missing a beat, when he approached the house. She put down her cup on the windowsill and waved a hand, but he did not see her — could not see her — through all that rain.

Lizzie ran into the hall and opened the front door, tears streaming down her face to mingle with the cold, lancing rain that splashed her cheeks, invigorating her entire body.

“Guy,” she called to the man who was strolling down the driveway, hands thrust deep into his pockets, eyes turned down to the ground. But the sound of the rain drowned out her words, and he didn’t notice her until he was standing right before her, a stunned look on his newly lined face.

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“Hello, Mum,” Guy said. He prepared himself as his mother threw her body down the two steps that led down to the path and embraced him. Her arms encircled his thin frame (he’d lost too much weight inside: not eating through constant fear and worry and panic), and her lips pressed against his mouth, the pressure painful but welcome.

“God, Guy, why didn’t you let us come and pick you up? You’re drenched!”

“Let me inside, Mum, we can talk in the warmth.”

She ushered him along the familiar hallway and into the cosy living room — the floral-patterned wallpaper hadn’t changed in the time he’d been away, nor had much else; he suspected they’d kept things the same to reassure him upon his release. He managed to keep himself together as his mother fussed around him, but when he saw his father standing in the kitchen doorway holding a bowl of soup, his eyes filled up with tears.

“Hi, Dad.”

The old man just stared at him as if a rainbow had suddenly appeared in his home; something beautiful and fragile and slightly tragic. The expression on his face made Guy weaken even more, and suddenly he was weeping openly, his legs buckling beneath him and his hands making clumsy fists at his sides.

“Come on, sit down. Let’s get you dry and comfy and then you can tell us everything that’s happened since we last visited you.”

“No,” he said, too forcefully, slipping off his flimsy wet jacket and collapsing into an armchair. He knew that he’d leave a damp patch when he stood up, but that was the least of his worries. He looked at his mother, she was one more harsh word away from losing it, her lips trembling. “Sorry,” he said, taking her hand, “It’s just... prison, I... well, can we just not talk about it? For now anyway. I want to...” To what? Ignore it. Forget it. Stick it in a box marked: ‘Fuck Ups’ and bury it. Pretend it never happened... “...move on.”

“Okay, son. We understand.” said his father, moving across the room with a towel in his hands. He looked older, less certain of his place in the world since retiring from the plastics factory eighteen months ago: more grey hair on his liver-spotted head, the skin of his face thin and papery, like a fine papyrus.

Guy took the towel from his father and began to rub himself down, scrubbing off the stench of prison along with the rain. He looked around the room, at the pictures and ornaments and knick-knacks his parents had collected over the years. The television was the same one they’d owned before he was locked away, but the silver dvd player was a recent addition. He doubted either of them even knew how to use the thing, and suspected they had bought it because they thought it was the done thing.

He tried hard not to look at the framed photograph that stood on an occasional table by the door, but his gaze was drawn to it. It had been taken on his and Bella’s wedding day in the little chapel in Harrogate. She had looked stunning — like something from a fairytale — and Guy had felt like the prince who saved the damsel from the dragon. The photographer had caught the moment exactly: Bella’s veil blowing away from her face in a sudden breeze, her short blonde hair glowing in the sun, her eyes big and wide and full of love. It was the best picture of her that he’d ever seen; his own copy had been torn to pieces when she refused to visit him in prison. It was an act of vandalism that he now regretted; yet another example of how he was unable to control his temper, even after it had caused him so much trouble.

Rain battered the windows and he turned to watch it smear like grey slime against the glass. His thoughts drifted as his parents spoke to him in hushed tones, careful to keep the conversation on the right track, reciting banalities — the terrible weather, what was on tv later that night, asking if he’d eaten in the last few hours. He thought of Bella: how she had been; how he could not help but remember her with her belly still large and loose from the pregnancy; eyes pregnant with regret; screaming in pain on the delivery table, as she clutched his hand to tether herself to the earth.

How could she just turn her back on him like that? Guy had been put away because of her, because of the child that had grown inside her. He had been forced into a position where he had to protect them both, putting his own safety and welfare to one side. It wasn’t fair, not any of it. He had lost three years of his life — arguably the most important three years a man could ever have. He clenched his fists, wishing that

he could replace the love he still had for her with hatred. But he couldn't. His wife still meant everything to him, and if asked he'd do it all over again, including the violence, the despair and the incarceration.

"Soup?"

He snapped out of the fugue, blinking back more tears and staring at his father's hand resting on his shoulder. "Sorry, what was that?"

"Would you like some soup, son. You look like you need it."

Guy smiled. His parents, despite their awkward good intentions, knew exactly what they were doing, and he loved them for it. "Yes, Dad, I'd love some."

After consuming two bowls of soup and half a loaf of wholemeal bread, Guy followed his mother up to his old room. The wallpaper in the stairwell was new, as was the colour of the paint on the first floor landing, but the rest remained unchanged. When he walked into his room, it was like entering a time machine; he skipped backwards through the years to when he'd been a rowdy teenager, daydreaming about the girl he'd just met whose name was Bella. Despite not living here for many years, his parents had kept the room like a shrine, or at least a reminder of his youth.

"Fucking hell, Mum, you could've at least changed the *Star Wars* wallpaper."

She shot him a stern glance and nipped the meat of his arm with bony fingers. "Cut that out. You might talk like that in clink, but not in my home."

"Sorry, Mum." He smiled at her, then laughed aloud. He was a thirty-three year old man being told off by his mother, and nothing had ever felt so welcome.

She went downstairs to give him some time alone while he reacquainted himself with the house, sensing his need for space. It was all too much — the old room, the soup, the tender gazes. So very different from the casual brutality he'd experienced during his spell behind bars.

He opened the drawers of the dresser that stood beneath the window, admired the way his clothes had been neatly folded and put away. His father must have been to the old house to pick everything up; the rest of his stuff would be in storage, waiting to be claimed. Something else that required attention once he'd cleared his system of the penal lifestyle.

His brother Vince had offered him the spare room in his large flat in the centre of town. Vince was away in Leeds on business, but was due to return the following day. Although he felt welcomed back into the bosom of his family, Guy suspected that nothing would really return to normal until he was once more accustomed to the sense of freedom. The room at Vince's place was a definite step towards that, and he was looking forward to living with his brother again. Before Guy had married Bella, the two had been inseparable; this was a chance to rediscover himself and for the two men to bond all over again.

He walked to the window and looked down into the small but tidy garden at the rear of the house. The constant downpour had flattened the lawn so it looked like a huge snooker table, and his father's roses were ruined, but the hedges were all trimmed and the borders clearly defined. His father was a fastidious individual, a man who could always be relied upon in a tight situation. He'd been a tower of strength when Guy had received his sentence; even more so when he'd actually been sent down.

Something moved over by the back fence; a quick, darting motion. Guy struggled to see what had drawn his attention, but the rain was too heavy and whatever had been

there was gone. Probably next door's cat leaping the fence after pissing all over his mother's japonicas.

He turned away from the gloom outside the window, feeling the mournful grey wash filling him up with negativity. Adjusting the net curtains and smoothing down the bedclothes, Guy left the room and headed for the bathroom to change into some dry clothes.

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"I want them back," Guy said, sipping the expensive whisky his father had poured into a cut crystal glass.

His mother sighed and leaned back on the sofa. She'd never truly forgiven Bella for blanking Guy after he went away, and he doubted she ever would. He knew it was difficult for her, that she did not understand his desire to put everything right.

"Go on," said his father, pouring more whisky into his glass.

"I don't like what she did to me, but I can understand why she did it. She thought it was best for Kay." (Oh, and didn't it hurt so much to even say his daughter's name?) "Like I said, I believe she went about it the wrong way, but she was painted into a corner. She had to do something, and that something was to pretend I'd never existed."

"But you *do* exist, son. And you were put away for protecting your fucking family."

Guy stared at his mother in shock. It was the first time he'd ever heard her use any language stronger than "damn" or "bloody", and he wasn't sure that he liked it.

His mother blushed; his father chuckled softly. Guy shook his head. "I'm away for three short years, and dad turns to drink and you start swearing like a docker!"

That broke the tension, and everyone relaxed visibly, their posture slackening, smiles appearing on each of their weary faces.

It was dark outside, the moon and stars battling to shine through the rain-clouds. The sodium wash from streetlights only served to intensify the atmosphere, and Guy felt like the house was underwater. He almost expected to see a shark glide past the window, casting its dead gaze inside, searching for warm prey.

"Look, there's nothing we can do about this tonight. I think I'm going to have an early night. See you both in the morning." With that Guy stood up and kissed his mother on the cheek. His father slapped Guy's thigh and gave another drunken chuckle. That whisky was strong, and the old man had sunk three generous measures.

Climbing the stairs to his room, Guy experienced a brief and unwanted mental flashback to a time before it had all gone wrong: retiring to bed with a brandy; lying next to Bella, a hand resting on her bloated stomach as she read the latest Nikki French paperback; feeling the baby kick, and chuckling in the comfortable darkness.

Then he recalled Kay's birth, and the sense of pride and strength and panic that had gripped him. The way the tectonic plates beneath his life had shifted, altering his personal landscape forever.

When he entered his room he shut the door and pressed his forehead against the cool wood. He undressed slowly, feeling the strength drain out of him, and when at last he slipped into bed he cried himself to sleep.

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Bill always smoked his cigars on the patio outside the back door. Lizzie hated the smell, and if even a single shred of smoke drifted indoors she would scream enough to bring the house down. He loved his wife, but sometimes she could be a right royal pain in the arse.

He drained his glass and rested it on the floor, making a mental note not to forget to take it inside when he locked up for the night. Rain created a soothing staccato backbeat to his thoughts as it pelted against the flat roof sheltering the patio.

He was glad to have Guy back, overjoyed that he was out of that damned place, but this recent development regarding Bella concerned him. Bill had expected his son to request to see his daughter, but getting back together with his wife seemed like pure fantasy. He hoped that Guy realised how difficult it could be; Bella had made a new life for herself and Kay, and Bill doubted that Guy would be part of her plans. At best, all he could really expect was to be a weekend father.

He stubbed out the cigar and dropped it into the glass on the floor. His back was troubling him tonight, so he didn't bother to bend down to pick it up. It could wait until morning, after a good night's rest.

As he turned to enter the house, Bill sensed more than saw a flickering movement in the tiny wet windows of the greenhouse to his left. When he looked there was nothing, only shadow and imagination. But for a moment Bill thought he'd seen the figure of a man standing on the grass, watching him.

Drunken oaf, he thought, not entirely convinced.

He stepped over the threshold and into the kitchen, pulling the patio doors shut behind him. There was a hollow thump, the muffled sound of impact, down near the bottom of the door. The glass he'd left behind tipped over and shattered against the concrete flagstones.

"Damn cat", he said, recalling how the wayward feline next door liked to dig up his borders. Then he turned off the lights and went upstairs, where his wife lay in bed reading one of her seemingly endless supply of magazines.

Chapter 3: A PROMISE

ROSIE LAY AWAKE in the darkness, watching the plaster patterns swirl and conjoin like ink blobs on the dirty ceiling. There were cobwebs in the corners, but they didn't bother her; she'd been in dirtier rooms, lain on grubbier beds. Her past was like that ceiling: old, damaged, full of hairline cracks that threatened to widen and become gaping fissures.

The hospital ward was quiet, the only audible sounds in the entire building the muted chug of someone coughing in a distant room and the gentle *slap-slap* of moist-sounding footsteps shuffling along a polished corridor floor. Rosie listened intently to those footsteps, held her breath until they faded away. Thankfully, this time they didn't stop outside her door.

Rosie did not want to be here; it wasn't right that she was lying in this strange, narrow bed. She was taking up a valuable space that could be used for a more deserving case. Hank had not hit her that hard, not this time. There had been other far more serious occasions, but admittedly this one *looked* worse than the others ever had.

Tears swelled in her eyes, then formed a thin band down her bruised cheek to trace the outline of her jaw. The bones there were damaged, not broken; she would be mended in a few days, and the external scars would vanish, becoming part of the complex tapestry that formed her life, just as they always did. The marks on the inside, however, were another matter entirely. They would blend into the shiny scar tissue she'd been carrying around for the past two decades, hiding it away in the part of her soul reserved for secrets and lies and promises not kept.

The coughing stopped. A door banged against a wall somewhere in the night. Rosie closed her eyes but couldn't sleep. Her mind was racing to process this new sensory information, making neurones detonate like distant fireworks within the battered bone of her skull.

It had been a dream, she was sure. A memory of water pressing against her face; of a savage pressure at the back of her head, pushing, forcing her head down into a bathtub. Rosie had fought long and hard to rid herself of the fear that had begun when she was fourteen; to exorcise the demons which had capered through her head, cutting and slashing and damaging, destroying her peace of mind and leaving her without any real protection from the past. Now, finally, at the age of thirty-five, she had believed that the worst of it was over. That she was healing.

Just how wrong could a person be?

Earlier that afternoon, after Hank's silent and threatening visit, she had drifted into a light doze, the hum of the hospital serving as a lullaby. The gentle buzz of conversation — families visiting their loved ones, filling them in on the details of a life outside the sterile hospital building — had lulled her, acting like calming background music. Her eyes had flickered closed, darkness spreading across her field of vision like a slow-moving stain. Calm. Quiet. Peace. A soothing sensation, like warm waters lapping at her bare feet...

And suddenly she *was* underwater, her hands tied up behind her back and her face hovering inches from the scarred enamel coating at the bottom of an old bathtub she knew all too well. *His* voice was around her, inside her: a dull, booming stream of

obscenities that could not penetrate the surface of the dirty water in which he was attempting to drown her. Blood and semen ran down the inside of her thighs; his spiteful calling card, his little gift to her.

Her eyes were open, the water stinging them, and suddenly and without warning another face drew close to her own, rising up from the bottom of the bathtub like a soapstone carving of some submerged ancient deity. A man's face. Screaming —

Then she woke up.

That sordid little bathroom was a place she never wanted to visit again, a zone of dread and panic and the purest essence of nightmare. This, she always thought, was her hell, and it called in her weakest moments. The stained toilet bowl filled with vile yellowy water, the filthy, cracked tiles on the walls, the lopsided sink with no plug. The bathtub.

Those slow, wet footsteps she'd noted earlier in the corridor had returned; and this time they did stop right outside the door to her ward. Rosie had the sense of someone standing there, perhaps even reaching out to brush the door handle with pale moist fingertips, but not quite ready to enter the room. Not yet. She sat up, straining to hear what sounded like a gurgling whisper... her name, spoken through a mouthful of fluid... *Rosie*.

Then all was silent; the whispering ceased.

Wincing from the sudden flare-up of pain in her side, Rosie shuffled to the edge of the bed on the cheap mattress that crackled under her weight, slid her feet to the floor, and slipped them into her carpet slippers. Traffic noise droned beyond the closed windows, a constant urban lament. Streetlights smeared the streets below, making an expressionist painting of this small, unassuming town she had almost grown to love.

She walked to the big window and stared out at the night, watching an old bag lady struggle into the mouth of an alley pushing a shopping cart filled with empty tin cans, the labels removed for a reason that only the old woman would ever know. Rosie felt like crying, but didn't know why. A heavy sadness descended onto her shoulders, its weight almost bending her double at the waist, invisible arms wrapping around her chest. The bag lady blended into shadow, glancing back over her shoulder before the alley swallowed her up. Rosie felt like the woman was staring directly at her. She fancied that the ancient, street-wizened face was etched with a pity which Rosie did not feel she wholly deserved.

Another memory of water. Of grabbing hands and unwanted attention.

...Rosie...

Casting out these dark thoughts, she limped across the room and stood by the door. The ward exhaled behind her, the other sleeping patients mumbling, or sighing, or breaking wind in the night. She could no longer sense a presence on the other side of the door, but still her hand hesitated before pushing it open.

The corridor was empty.

Rosie shuffled towards the Coke machine that stood against the wall by the notice board, her legs stiff and feeling as if they did not belong to her body. Suddenly thirsty, she popped a coin into the slot. As she waited for the chilled can to drop into the dispenser, she scanned the small square cards pinned to the corkboard: ads for roommates, someone selling a mountain bike, a lady called Sapphire offering "Executive Massage". A faded business card bearing the moniker "Andrew

Stonegrave, Attorney at Law”.

Surely it was a coincidence. All those years ago, in another lifetime, she had lived in a place called Stonegrave, a small town in Yorkshire — the place of her birth and of her tiny taste of death. After it happened, she fled England and started again over here in the States... but that damned place haunted her still.

She took the card from the notice board, crumpled it into a tiny ball, then threw it into the wastepaper basket beside the drink machine. Andrew Stonegrave, Attorney at Law, would find no new business here, on this night. Not if she could help it.

Sipping her soda, Rosie padded back towards her room, acutely aware of the sounds of laboured breathing, hiccups, moans and groans that marked her short journey back to bed. Suddenly, the urge to urinate took hold of her; that would teach her to drink soda in the middle of the night.

She turned to face a door marked ladies, pushed it open, and then took the left of two doors that presented themselves midway along a short vestibule. Once in the quiet, empty lavatory, she let herself into a cubicle and sat on the toilet pan. The dim lights above her flickered, threatening to go out, but then stabilised. Wincing in pain, she tugged her panties down around her bruised knees, shuffling her bottom on the cold plastic seat. Her thighs ached from where Hank had kicked her, and the bruises on her abdomen were turning purple.

After she'd finished, Rosie checked that she was not pissing blood, then flushed the toilet and went out into the main room, approaching a sink to wash her hands. Running the water, she looked only downwards, into the basin. She was terrified to look at what he'd done to her face. The mess he'd made of her features for the unpardonable crime of forgetting to iron his work shirts.

Once the sink was full she turned off the taps and laid her hands in the warm water, limp as dead sea creatures. Her knuckles were partially skinned, scabs forming where he'd crushed her fingers against the living room wall. Fresh tears leaked from her eyes, but Rosie fought them, swallowed them down like harsh liquor.

Feeling like it was an act of defiance, she raised her head and looked into the mirror. Even in the gloom, the damage was visible. Her left eye was swollen almost shut, the skin of the cheek below the eye cracked and bloated over the bruised cheekbone. Her top lip was burst, held together by a couple of small, neat white stitches.

Rosie wanted to close her eyes, but she didn't. Wouldn't. Instead, she stared at what her husband had done to her. The bloodshot eyes that looked back at her were filled with hatred, and for the briefest instant she did not recognise them as her own.

“You stupid bitch,” she said, the sound of her own voice flattening against the walls of the cramped room and sounding like a stranger's threatening tones. “He *will not* do this again.” The force of her resolve chilled her; she had recounted these same words in her head many times; this was the first time she'd ever spoken them aloud; the first time she'd truly meant them.

She tugged at her greasy blonde fringe, arranging it to cover the worst of the cuts on her forehead, then dried her hands and went back out into the corridor.

One of the doors opposite was open, and as she passed she caught a glimpse of awkward movement inside the single room. Rosie stopped outside the door, listening to the sounds of someone struggling in their bed. She pushed open the door and stepped across the threshold, feeling suddenly anxious as a shape moved quickly back