

# THE CONCRETE GROVE



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*Graham Joyce, author of  
The Stars Land*

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GROVE**

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**Gary McMahon**

*This one's dedicated to Mark West,  
who always sees the wood for the trees.*

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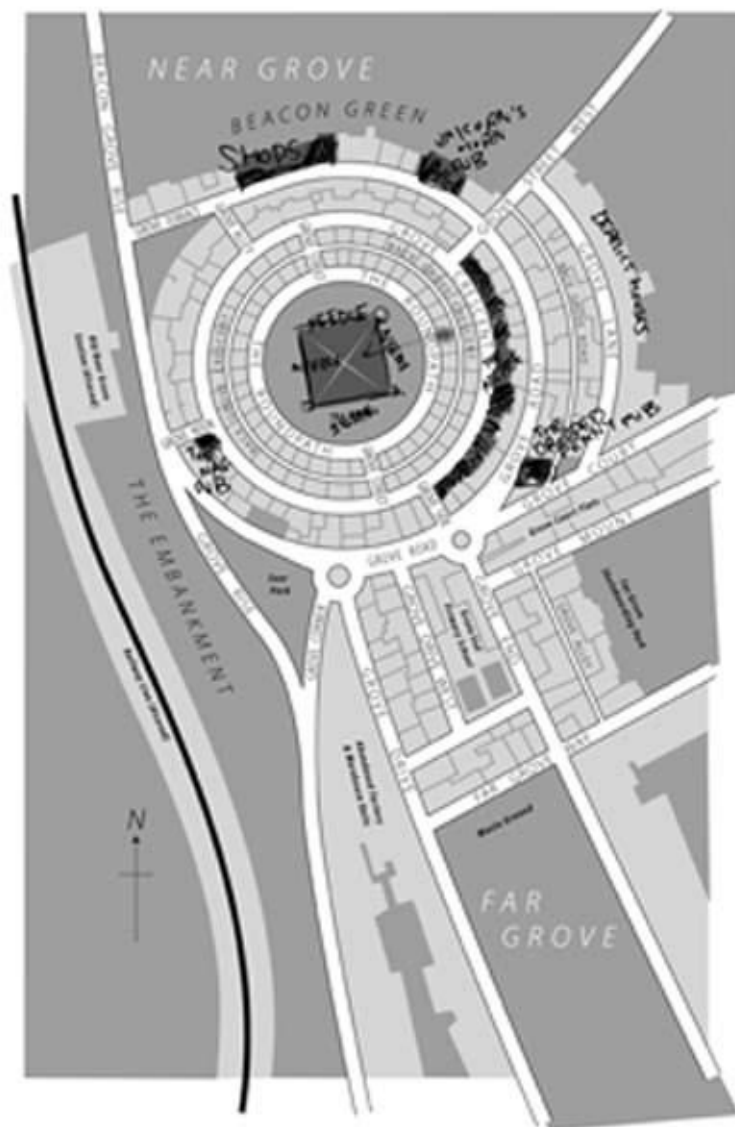
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One of the widespread beliefs is that hummingbirds, in some way, are messengers between worlds. A such they help shamans keep nature and spirit in balance.

*Source: [www.hummingbirdworld.com](http://www.hummingbirdworld.com)*

# PART ONE

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## Shades and Shadows

*“I don’t like it here. The closer you get  
to the centre, the weirder it feels.”*

– Hailey Fraser



# CHAPTER ONE

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HER NAME WAS Hailey. She was just fourteen years old.

And she was afraid.

No, that wasn't quite right. Hailey wasn't afraid, not exactly; she was sad and confused and worried about her mother, and all she really wanted was to be left alone. Just for a few minutes, maybe even as much as half an hour. She needed some time on her own, during which she could think about things and set the facts in order. The world always seemed a little less harsh when the facts were put in place with everything lined up in neat little rows where she could see them properly. Like her books on the shelves or her stuffed toys sitting against the skirting board at home.

It was Hailey's mother who was afraid. Even Hailey could see that. Her mother, she knew, was terrified.

Things had been tense around the flat lately – even Hailey, with her limited ability to empathise, was aware of this tension. Her mother chewed her fingernails all the time, and she lost her temper much easier than ever before – easier and more regularly. She was drinking a lot – cheap wine in big bottles from the local off-license – and Hailey could sometimes hear her crying at night through the thin walls of their crummy little flat in the Grove. In the morning she would pretend that she'd slept well and everything was fine, but Hailey knew that there were tear stains on her mother's pillows.

Hailey walked slowly through the narrow streets, ignoring the youths who were perched on garden walls and loitering at the corners smoking cheap cigarettes and drinking cider from plastic bottles. She paid no attention to the fat man who always seemed to be watching her from a parked car near the shopping arcade, and blanked the old woman who stood on her front step shaking her fist at the sky and shouting at the birds.

Such sights were normal in the Grove – the Concrete Grove. Hailey had learned this. The people who lived on the estate were somehow different from the ones she had known before, in her old life, when her mother had a job and money wasn't a problem.

These people, the ones she now lived among, were closer to the bottom of the pile than anyone else she'd met. That's how her mother termed it: the bottom of the pile. As if society was just a big pyramid of people, squirming and shouting and fighting for position, and she and Hailey had slipped through the gaps to end up somewhere near its base. Sometimes, late at night, when she was unable to sleep, she could almost feel the pressure of all those bodies above her, pushing and shoving and nipping and punching... looking for a way to climb.

She quickened her pace and reached the north end of Grove Road, where the Bailey brothers lived. The twin boys, both fifteen and in the year above Hailey in classes, were possibly the worst bullies at her school. A month ago they'd put little Lloyd Jones in hospital, slashing his back with a straight razor taken from their father's things. Hailey recalled the police visiting the school, when not one of the other pupils had dared say anything against the brothers – which meant, of course, that they had got away with their crime because there were no witnesses. They remained unpunished, even though everyone knew they'd done it. Even the headmaster knew, but he was just as scared of the Bailey family as everyone else in the area.

Was every school like this, or just the one she went to? She didn't remember her old school being so violent or filled with such aggressive pupils, but it was so long ago now – a full *eighteen* months – that she could barely recall anything about the place, other than it had seemed so clean and bright and stress-free in comparison to her current educational establishment.

She was glad that school was over for the day, and that she could roam around on her own just to get

the horrible prison air of the place out of her lungs. At her old school, she'd been happy to stay behind and help the teacher tidy the class, or play outside the gates with her friends before heading home for dinner. These days all she wanted was to be away from school, yet still she could feel its awful shadow at her back.

She was now nearing the centre of the estate, where the Needle was located. She'd bypassed the shopping arcade, where the worst trouble-makers tended to gather like a herd of bored animals, and was now approaching the middle of the set of concentric streets that made up the main body of the Grove. A number of the flats and houses around this central area were empty, their doors and windows boarded. Others were occupied either by the kind of people you didn't want to meet or tenants who rarely stepped outdoors before nightfall. It was a creepy place, even in broad daylight, yet she was often drawn here by its sense of emptiness.

A border of old timber hoardings and security fencing surrounded the derelict tower block, but everybody knew a way in. Hailey's point of access was through a shallow channel someone had once dug under the fence close to the old red-brick electricity sub-station at the front of the building. She couldn't remember who'd shown her this route inside the perimeter, only that it had been pointed out to her late one Sunday evening, when dusk was falling and the sound of motorbike engines churning up and down the surrounding streets had filled the air.

Hailey got down on her belly and wriggled through the gap, trying her best not to ladder her thick black tights on any hanging wire or splinters. Her mother would kill her if she ruined another pair; the tiny clothes budget for this month was long gone.

The sky seemed to darken around her as she slid under the barrier, as if her entrance had triggered a dimmer switch in the heavens. She knew this was a silly thought, that it was too early in the afternoon to grow so dark, but there was something nice about pretending to be so important that the sky would create an atmosphere just for her.

Somewhere in the depths of the estate a dog began to bark; a burglar alarm went off, the wailing tone bound to be ignored and left to peter out of its own accord. A police helicopter hummed through the sky above her, so she stayed where she was, belly pressed into the dirt, until it passed by. But this was just another game. Nobody cared that Hailey was here; nobody was concerned about her whereabouts. Not even her mother.

After several seconds had passed, and sensing that she would not be seen, Hailey jerked upright and scurried across the cracked and stained concrete forecourt towards the waiting Needle. She stared at the empty building as she approached, peering at its boarded upper windows and security-shuttered doorways. Several of the caged windows on the ground floor had been partially exposed by vandals tearing off the timber and paint-daubed metal sheets and breaking the glass beneath. These openings bled darkness; they provided small, square glimpses of something black, unhealthy and rotten. If she allowed herself, Hailey could imagine things moving in there. Strange things. Dark things. Things that lived in such forgotten places.

What was she doing here? Why did the decrepit building have such a hold on her? She always came to the same place when she was feeling uneasy or simply craved solitude. Despite its central location on the estate, and the fact that there were so many ways in, children rarely played here. The place, Hailey's few friends had often told her, was haunted; and once, a long time ago, a bunch of children had even been harmed by the spirits who dwelled within its crumbling concrete walls. Depending on who she spoke to, these children had either been scarred for life or murdered. The story changed with each telling, the way a fairytale might.

Hailey kept walking. The Needle ignored her, just like everyone else.

She stopped, confused. Why was she thinking of the old building in terms of a personality?

Hailey stared at the grubby concrete, trying to understand her feelings towards the place. She should

be too afraid to set foot here, especially alone, but for some reason the resolutely upright Needle seemed to offer her some kind of solace.

Yes, that was the word: *solace*. She'd encountered it in English class. It meant comfort or consolation. That, she thought, sounded just about right.

She started to move again, towards the tower block. Broken glass crunched underfoot; her left ankle twisted slightly as she stepped into a shallow depression in the ground; her right foot kicked something hard and it rolled away from her across the uneven surface. But she didn't look down. She kept on staring ahead, watching the Needle as it loomed closer. Its tall grey rendered walls were as cold and dry as reptile skin; the boards across its windows were closed eyelids; the patches of weeds and wild grass at its base were as welcoming as a doormat at the threshold of a lovely home.

The conflicting emotions rushing through her – fear of the dark and empty spaces within the building's shell; a sense of feeling welcomed or, more precisely, bidden – made her feel slightly sick as if she'd eaten something bad.

The main doors to the tower block were sealed with security shutters, so Hailey continued round to the rear, where there was a way in through a small ground floor window where the metal sheeting had been pulled aside. The window panel had been removed long ago, before the access point had been shored up, so whoever had then torn away the corrugated metal had been able to slip inside without having to shatter the glass.

Hailey peeled back the thin metal square, struggling to fold it away from the wall. The metal groaned as she moved it, and then finally it seemed to relent under the pressure and bent back to reveal the window aperture beneath.

The opening was roughly the size of the screen of the portable television Hailey had in her room at home. She was a slim girl – didn't eat much, and wasn't even keen on the sweets and sugary treats the other kids seemed to love – so she was always able to squeeze through without much of a problem.

She leaned in and forced the metal sheet further back with her shoulder, turning her body so that she could scabble up the wall and begin to climb through. She wriggled her body into the gap, aware of the metal sheet digging into her side as she moved into the space. Then, with a final shrugging motion and a kick of her legs, she was through and tumbling onto the floor at the other side of the wall.

Dust rose in a cloud around her; the noise she'd made echoed through the concrete shell. Hailey sat on the ground and blinked into the darkness. It always seemed too gloomy in here – much more than she would have expected from the outside. It was as if natural daylight was afraid to enter, and the darkness held inside the Needle acted as a sort of barrier, protecting whatever else lived here from the light.

Now there was another unwelcome thought. Why did she keep doing this, trying to scare herself? It was like some kind of challenge. She was throwing down the gauntlet, daring herself to venture further inside the building. Maybe the bullies were right, and she really was as weird as they said.

A sound came to her from up ahead: a brief scraping noise, like a stick being dragged along the wall. She peered into the darkness, waiting for the interior to resolve in her vision. She saw the empty space, the walls and black rectangles of doorways. Her ears thrummed. She was in a hallway – she knew that much from past visits – but for some reason she never knew which way to turn. Was it left or right up ahead?

Standing, she moved across to the wall, reaching out to touch it, to confirm that it was there, as solid and immobile as ever. The sound did not repeat. Silence grew and swelled and threatened to become something even worse than noise. Hailey closed her eyes tightly for a couple of seconds, and then opened them again. This time the room was clearer; she could see deeper into the building.

A few metres ahead, the hallway became a T junction. Hailey paused for a moment to think, and then remembered that the left turn led to more rooms and the right one would take her to the reception area.

at the front of the building, which was usually littered with empty beer cans and bottles, used condoms and dirty syringes left behind by nocturnal visitors. ~~Everyone who came here used the reception area~~ it was large and uncluttered, and the walls were covered with graffiti that probably dated back to the time when the Needle had been emptied and sealed.

Hailey moved forward, and when she reached the junction she turned left. Her ears felt under pressure, like when she went swimming in the deep end at the local pool. Doorways seemed to lean forward, blocks of blackness taunting her, challenging her to enter. She walked along the hallway, stepping over mounds and heaps of garbage – despite keeping the main area clear of debris everyone seemed to dump their rubbish here. She passed an old sleeping bag, holes torn in the fabric and the white guts seeping out. An old armchair sat against the wall, the stain across its back and arms resembling the bloodied outline of an unusually thin human figure.

Something moved behind her. Hailey refused to turn and look. There was nobody there; the building was empty. It was just a cat or a rat, or even a bird that had gained entry through an upper window, rooting around in the garbage.

The last doorway was closer now. It was the room she always used. The doorway had no door; even the hinges had been removed. She could never say why she came to this room, only that it was small and nondescript and relatively untouched. The other rooms she'd been inside were either blackened by fire, smelled of old sweat and urine, or were filled with random objects – black plastic bags filled with water-damaged porn magazines, broken crates and pallets, wheelie bins, shopping trolleys, and even a surprising number of discarded children's toys.

It was amazing what some people would dump in places like this...

When she reached the final doorway she stopped at the threshold. For the first time she felt a strange sense of apprehension, a feeling that she shouldn't be here, not now. She waited, and the feeling faded. Perhaps it was just a result of the increased tension at home, or something stirred up by that noise she'd heard earlier.

But no, that wasn't it. There was something... something else. Then, at last, she realised what was troubling her. Since entering the building she had been aware of a sort of vibration in the air, a soft thrumming sound that she had at first put down to distant construction machinery or heavy traffic. But there were no building works nearby, and the nearest main road was a couple of miles away. That police helicopter she'd spotted earlier? No. That would be long gone by now.

So what was it, that small sound, that weird throbbing in the still, dead air?

Not hesitating any longer, Hailey stepped through the doorway. The thrumming sound inside her head was threatening to leak out.

The room looked the same as it always did, but there was something different about the space as she entered. That sound was stronger here, inside the room. It sounded like bees, buzzing around a hive. Hailey was puzzled. Was there a wasps' nest in here, or perhaps a swarm of flies clustering around a pile of shit?

Part of her screamed that she should leave, but another, calmer part of her made her legs move and forced her deeper into the room. It was dark. The two windows were covered. The buzzing grew louder, as if responding to her presence.

At the end of the room was a cupboard – a built-in wardrobe. The doors remained intact, and the cubby hole was always empty, as if nobody had even noticed it, or if they had seen the cupboard they had not been interested enough to look inside. The buzzing seemed to be coming from within, behind the closed doors. It wasn't only in her head after all, and the realisation filled her with relief.

Hailey moved forward, towards the wardrobe. The buzzing sound intensified.

She stood before the doors. They were tall and narrow, with stainless steel handles. She reached out and grasped one of those handles, her fingers tightening around it. *Don't*, she thought. *Leave it alone.*

But that other part of her – the calm part – whispered to her that she should open the doors.

~~Her hand made a fist around the small handle. Then it turned, pulled, and the door eased noiselessly open.~~

At first Hailey didn't know what she was seeing. There was a dense cloud inside the wardrobe, low down near the floor on the right hand side. The cloud seemed to be moving, vibrating. The buzzing sound was louder now – it filled her ears, flowing inside her head. The sound was that of their wings: quicker than thought, lighter than dreams.

She was looking at a swarm of giant insects. Flies. Bees. Hornets. No, that wasn't right. They were too big, too quick... too beautiful.

They weren't insects, they were birds.

Hummingbirds.

Hailey had only ever seen hummingbirds on television, on nature programmes, and they had always fascinated her. As far as she knew they lived in America, and places like Ecuador and Mexico. There certainly weren't any in England. So what were these ones doing in a dingy cupboard in a derelict tower block in Northumberland?

They were gorgeous. Their plumage was radiant – green, red, yellow and gold. The colours bled and mingled as she watched, lighting the darkness and forming a shimmering mirage of sad beauty in the bottom corner of that wardrobe.

There were a lot of them in there. Each one was tiny, the size of a baby's hand, and they were clustered in the corner as if they were all feeding from the nectar of a single bunch of flowers. Hailey watched them in silence, feeling a sense of awe creep along her arms, then climb to her neck, where it rose higher and flushed her cheeks.

“Beautiful,” she whispered.

And that one word was enough to break the spell.

The flock of birds seemed to undulate, shifting as if their natural rhythm had been disturbed or even broken. They turned to Hailey as one, their little black eyes peering at her from the corner, their sharp little red beaks glinting in the shadows. Then, as if dancing, they flowed out from their hiding place, breaking apart their formation to hover before her, creating a brightly-hued screen between her and the interior of the wardrobe.

Spellbound, Hailey reached out a hand... her fingers opened, then closed. She tried to grab one – just one – of the hovering miracles, but they all flowed away from her, breaking ranks and forming an opening. She looked through the gap they had made and into the cupboard. And she saw what it was they had been eating, and why their beaks were so red, like they'd been carved from ruby.

The dead dog was folded into the corner of the wardrobe, its legs broken and twisted, its head crushed. The fur of the dog's jaw, and along its neck, was red, tattered, and the corpse had been punctured thousands of times. By countless tiny little beaks. Red beaks. Like rubies.

Hailey tried to scream but the hummingbirds were stealing her air, sucking it from her throat. She backed away, flailing out at the suddenly obscene creatures. Their wings moved faster than she could see; the buzzing sound was louder than anything she had ever heard. She knew that she would fall before it even happened: the image flashed through her mind, clear as a frame from a film.

Walking backwards, panicked and unable to take a breath, she felt her legs tangle and then she went down, hitting the concrete floor hard. She cried out in pain and shock and fear, and the hummingbirds swooped backwards, allowing a small space to open up between her and them. She drew breath; her cheeks swelled; her throat opened. Finally, and with great relief, she opened her mouth and screamed.

The birds backed away as one hovering mass: their colours were like spilled paints, their motion was nightmarish. Where Hailey had first perceived beauty, she now witnessed horror of a kind that she barely even understood.

She scabbled on the floor, turning around and rising to her feet, pushing away and heading for the door.

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Then she saw what the birds were moving away from.

Her scream had not caused them to flee. It was something else. A thing so alien, so unlike anything she had ever imagined, that it took on a strange kind of beauty – a beauty tinged with horror and darkness, and with tears and blood and sweat. Hailey’s belly began to cramp; she felt moisture between her legs.

“What?” she said, and it was the only thing worth saying, the only question she could have asked. She tried to move back the way she’d come, towards the birds, but was caught between two extremes. Her legs skidded on the smooth concrete floor, her skirt riding up to show her dirty, slashed tights. The floor was cold on her exposed flesh. The backs of her legs turned to stone.

Hailey glanced down at the exposed parts of her legs: her scuffed knees, the smooth patches of thigh visible through her ripped tights. Then she looked back at the small, ragged shape that was blocking her escape.

Something vague, dusty and tattered shifted in the shadows near the doorway. Then, as if responding to her whispered question, it began to chuckle.

Others joined the creature, spilling from the joints in the walls and ceiling, squeezing through the plug points and light-fittings. Then, clustered together in a dense and leering pack, they came streaming towards her, aiming for a point directly between her open legs.

# CHAPTER TWO

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TOM RAN AS if the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels.

It was an old phrase – one his mother had been known to use whenever she needed to get a move on if she was late for work or an appointment she needed to keep. *The hounds of hell*. Tom hadn't heard those words in years, never mind used them, so when they came into his head now, as he sprinted between lampposts on a street two miles away from home, he felt a twinge of grief somewhere deep down inside, like a guitar string snapping.

Tom's mother had died when he was twenty-one. She had never seen him finish university and get his first proper job, or even had the opportunity to meet his wife, Helen.

He ran faster, closing in on the crooked No Entry sign he was using as a marker.

*Fartlek* – it was Danish for 'speed play'.

The training method was one of Tom's favourites; it helped rid him of the formless anger he often felt burning up his insides. The technique involved sprinting for prolonged periods between two fixed points – usually street lights or concrete bollards – and it helped improve speed and stamina. In Tom's case, he would run at a steady pace for ten minutes, and then vary this by increasing his pace for a set distance. He only ever used the method when he was feeling particularly low. Today was one of those times.

Helen was having a rough time this week. She had developed minor abrasions that might turn into bedsores along one side of her back, and he was forced to roll her every hour or so to prevent this from happening. She screamed in pain whenever he moved her on the sheets.

Tom wished that she would just make an effort, try to get out of bed, before it was too late. She hadn't left the bedroom for over two years now, and he was losing patience. The woman he had fallen in love with, had worshipped with his mind and his body, was now nothing but a shell. The doctors had told him that physically there was no reason she should not at least be attempting to move around the house, even if she remained in the wheelchair instead of transferring to the sofa or a dining chair. No, her problem was a mental one – she was terrified of shifting her arse from the mattress, just in case she injured herself.

He reached the No Entry sign and allowed himself to slow to a jogging speed. He'd run six miles – two more miles than he had planned – so could afford the luxury of letting his muscles relax a little.

Tom's breathing was soon under control. He knew that fitness was all about recovery time, and his fitness was at a pretty high level. If nothing else, Helen's injuries had helped him get in shape. The shame was, of course, that those same injuries had also ruined her life. Both their lives, if he was honest.

He moved steadily along the street and turned left, cutting through a narrow ginnel and into the heart of Far Grove. He didn't like coming out here even in the early evening, hated straying this close to the place everyone called the Concrete Grove. It was a rough part of town, a Bad Area. Petty crime and anti-social behaviour were the norms, and Tom was not a man who believed in putting oneself in danger.

He increased his pace again, preparing to take the next side street and leave the Grove behind. Even on the outskirts, he could sense the hatred, the poverty, the basic lack of respect, for which the area was known. Even if this negative image was media-created, it was rooted in some kind of truth: the bad always outweighed the good in areas like this one.

The housing estate had been designed to form a series of concentric circles, each one bearing the word Grove in its title: Grove Street, Grove Avenue, Grove Terrace... one after the other, all the

names similar and monotonous, just like the bland flats and houses and the sallow faces he saw whenever he did stray here.

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Darkness was staining the sky; he'd been gone too long. Helen would start to worry.

*Let her, he thought. I'm sick of worrying about her all the time.*

He felt immediately guilty, almost as if he had landed her a physical blow. He knew it wasn't her fault, not really. Ten years ago she had been in an accident with a man who was in all but name her lover. They had been on their way to a country hotel to consummate the relationship, travelling too fast in the rain. The road surface was poor and the tyres had lost their grip on a turn. A simple thing, small accident, but one whose repercussions could be felt like shock waves even now.

Tom no longer felt a sense of betrayal regarding Helen's illicit tryst, but still he could only think of the man who had been driving the car as That Man. He had become a symbol more than a human being, and his death in the accident was only fitting.

The accident had left Helen emotionally as well as physically damaged, and Tom realised that there was a possibility she might not ever again be the person he had married. No, that wasn't right. She would *never* be the same, it was a certainty. Too much time had passed with too little improvement. He was stuck with her like this forever, or at least until she decided that enough was enough and stopped wanting to carry on with what was left of her life.

As Tom approached a row of asbestos garages – surely the council should have demolished them, in the name of Health and Safety? – he glanced across the road to examine the grass verge opposite. There was a metre wide strip of what should have been green but was actually brown, with a footpath on the other side. Lying on the ailing grass and curled up into a tight ball he saw what looked like a large rag doll, or perhaps a Guy – but it was nowhere near Bonfire night, so the shape couldn't be an effigy of Guy Fawkes, England's most beloved terrorist...

Once again, Tom slowed his pace. He jogged to a point where he was level with the doll, or heap of clothes, or rolled up carpet... then he realised that he was looking at a person. A small, crumpled person. A child, in fact.

He looked both ways along the street and saw no sign of anyone else in the vicinity. Even the lights in the houses were off. A handful of the doors and windows – even this far out of the heart of the estate – were covered with wood or metal security shutters, and the rest, those still occupied, were shut up tight for the evening.

The sky was growing darker. A couple of birds flew overhead, one of them letting out a sharp squawking noise as it glided over a low house roof. He heard a faint buzzing sound, like flies swarming nearby.

Tom crossed the road, slowly, carefully. He had heard stories of people pretending to be injured so that they could mug an unwitting Samaritan. Granted, these possibly apocryphal tales had been reported in the seedier redtop newspapers, but still it paid to be cautious. These days, caution was the byword. You couldn't just rush into these kinds of situations acting like the big hero, not anymore. That way you risked being beaten or stabbed. Only a few weeks ago there had been an incident where a man coming to the aid of a young woman being abused by her boyfriend outside a pub had been turned on by the couple and beaten so badly that his skull had been fractured in five places.

“Hello.” His voice was low. Small. He felt ashamed at how frightened it made him sound. “Hello there. Can I help?”

The body – the child – did not stir.

“Are you okay?”

As he moved closer, Tom realised that it was a girl, probably in her mid-teens. She was wearing a grey school blazer and a crumpled black skirt. Her black tights were dirty and torn; one of the ripped tight-legs had rolled down to the ankle. There was a smear of mud on one exposed knee.



"I'm not going to hurt you." He wasn't even sure why he'd said that, but it had seemed right, a small reassurance. If the girl had been mugged or raped then it stood to reason that she must be scared, and she might even be pretending that she was unconscious until he went away. "I can help."

He was now standing roughly two metres away from the girl. He could see the knots in her dirty brown hair and the pale skin of her cheek. Her small hands were clutched into fists, her arms drawn inside and held tightly against her chest.

Tom moved closer and went down onto his haunches, feeling his knees creak a little. Sweat dripped from his brow and into his eyes. He wiped it away with the back of one hand.

The girl moved, just an inch. She turned her head slightly, her nostrils flaring, one eyelid fluttering.

"My name's Tom Stains. I was running... I saw you here. Can I help you?" He felt idiotic, stuck there and not knowing what to say. All he could do was repeat the same tired lines, like an actor in a bad television play.

The girl's eyes flickered open. They were blue. Like cornflowers. The blood rushed back into her cheeks, colouring them a warm shade of pink. She opened her mouth, worked her jaw and tried to sit up.

"Let me." Tom went over and grabbed her by the arm, trying to help her to her feet. She looked up and smiled. Her lips were dry; the skin was chapped. He was amazed that he was able to make out such intimate details.

"Thanks," she said. Her voice was dry and croaky. She lurched upright, holding on to him for support. Her grip was tight, her fingers digging into his biceps. "Sorry."

"Don't worry. Let's just get you on your feet." Tom was painfully aware of his bare legs, his ridiculous running shorts and the T-shirt with the silly logo that said "If Lost, Return to the Beer Tent." For some reason he wanted to impress this teenage girl, to make her feel safe. She invoked a strange paternal instinct that took him by surprise as well as a faint erotic charge: a curious set of feelings that he had not realised he was capable of experiencing.

"I'm okay," she said, still leaning against him. He prayed that he didn't get an erection, and deliberately ignored the sight of her thighs, visible through the rips in her tights.

Still sweating, but now for a different reason, Tom led the girl over to a low garden wall. She sat down, finally relinquishing her grip on his upper arm, and rubbed her face with her hands. She had a long, graceful neck. The top three buttons of her blouse were undone.

*Stop, thought Tom. Just stop it.*

"Are you... are you injured?" He kept his distance, still feeling silly in his shorts and T-shirt.

The girl looked down at herself, seeming to inspect her body for signs of damage. "No. I don't think so."

"What happened? Were you attacked? Mugged? Did they take anything?" Tom licked his lips. His throat was dry.

"I dunno. I think I just passed out, like. Fainted. You know?"

Tom nodded. But he didn't know; he didn't have the slightest clue as to why a healthy young girl might faint. "Are you ill, or something? Is that why you passed out?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't know why it happened. It just did. I was walking around near the Needle, next thing I know I'm waking up here." She smiled, but it looked forced, as if she were trying to convince him of something.

"The Needle? That's all the way over there, isn't it?" Tom turned his head due north, raised a hand to point but dropped it before it even reached waist level. Everybody knew where the tower block was; it was visible from just about everywhere on the estate.

"I know. Weird, eh?" She smiled again. "What did you say your name was?"

"Tom. Tom Stains. I've been running..." He glanced down at his legs, lifting his arms away from his

body in an almost apologetic manner.

“Yeah. Whatever.” She glanced along the street, dismissing him.

“What’s your name? I should take you home; get you back safe and sound to your parents.” God, he sounded like an old man.

“I’m Hailey. I live a few streets away. I’ll be fine.” She pushed away from the wall, but stumbled a little. Steadying herself, she grinned. “Or maybe not.”

“Come on, Hailey, let’s get you home. I’m sure your parents will be worried.” He took a step towards her but did not touch her. It wasn’t appropriate, not now. She could walk by herself, unaided, and if he grabbed her she might get the wrong idea – or *he* might.

“Mum. It’s just me and Mum. But, yes, she will be worried. She worries about me all the time round here. It’s not like where we used to live.” She turned and began to walk along the street, her strides slow and uncertain.

“I see.” Tom fell into step alongside her, ready to catch her if she stumbled but not willing to offer his arm unless she asked. “Just you and your mother, eh?” Something turned inside him, like a key in a lock or a tumbler falling into place: some hidden mechanism within the chambers of his heart. Tom didn’t believe in fate or destiny, he clung to no god. But there was something about these events, a sense that the picture was not what it seemed. Beneath the surface, under the façade of reality, something was happening, changes were taking place.

Unbeliever that he was, Tom was confused to think that the steps he was taking now were in fact the beginning of some kind of journey. The destination was unclear, the aim unknowable, but he had willingly taken a turn off the beaten track and allowed himself to be led astray.

Somehow these thoughts failed to trouble him. In fact, he felt more alive than he had in years. Tom couldn’t remember the last time he had embarked upon anything that might be considered an adventure.

# CHAPTER THREE

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NIGHT WAS FALLING in slow shades as they walked along Grove End, past the dark hulk of the primary school, and headed towards the Grove Court flats. The long nights were drawing in. It would soon be Christmas. Tom hated Christmas.

He was so aware of Hailey strolling along at his side that he could think of nothing else, not even the things he hated. He knew that Helen would be expecting him home to prepare dinner, but he could barely even picture her face. All he could see was the girl.

Tom realised that after the initial near-sexual thrill he'd experienced his feelings towards Hailey had faded to something more like fatherly concern. The girl was in some kind of trouble, that much was certain. He didn't believe her story about fainting and not knowing how she came to be lying unconscious at the side of the road, half a mile away from where she'd been roaming.

"Just down here," she said, as if she were deliberately trying to break into his thoughts. She turned, smiled, and then faced forward again. Her strides were now long and even. She seemed much more in control than when he'd first found her. Perhaps he should just leave her here, close to home, and be on his way?

No. If she had been accosted, as he suspected, that would be a foolish thing to do. She was a young girl and it was growing dark. He was duty-bound to accompany her at least to her front door.

There was also the voice at the back of his mind, the soft, purring one that suggested if the girl was this pretty, then her mother must be beautiful. There was no father around, and she might be so grateful that she invited him in for coffee...

Tom laughed softly.

"What's wrong?" Hailey glared at him, her blue eyes flashing in the growing dimness. "What you laughing at?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was nothing. Just a silly thought I had, that's all." He smiled at her and hoped that she couldn't see through his mask.

Hailey coughed, and then glanced slowly around, as if she were looking for someone. "I don't like it here. The closer you get to the centre, the weirder it feels. Don't you feel it? It's like something in the air – a gas, or something."

Tom was confused. He didn't know what she wanted him to say. "This is a run-down area. There are people here who you don't want to meet after dark. That's all."

Several lights had come on in the front rooms of houses and flats. Television light shuddered like a submarine's lamps through thin curtains. Tom knew what the girl meant. This was a strange place, especially after dark. That was why he didn't like coming here, why he wished he could run the other way... any way, just not deeper into the estate.

They turned right onto Grove Mount and then crossed the road. There were two cars parked alongside each other at the mini roundabout at the end of the street, young drivers leaning out of the side windows to make some kind of exchange. Tom thought it was probably a drugs deal, but it could be something worse. He'd heard rumours of all kinds of things changing hands down here, and lethal weapons being given to kids who were stupid and desperate enough to use them.

"Which number is yours?" He tore his gaze away from the illicit transaction – although, part of him reasoned, it couldn't be that illicit if it was being carried out in plain view. Another, more cynical voice replied: *it's more a case of nobody giving a damn*. The air was turning cold, and his legs prickled with gooseflesh.

"Number eleven," said Hailey, slowing down. "Just here, the one on the corner." She approached the

squat block of flats – a two-storey building with a grass verge outside its spiked metal railings.

“You’ll be fine from here. I’d better get back... my wife will be wondering where I am.” He pulled back, away from her, taking a few backward steps across the footpath.

“No, come in and meet my mum. She’ll want to thank you for helping me.” Her smile was impossible to ignore; he felt his own come to life in response, as if it were a bloom flowering in sunlight. “Just for a minute.”

Tom felt his legs move towards her, dragging his resistant body behind. He had the feeling that he might regret this, but still he followed her through the gate and along a narrow concrete path. He didn’t try too hard to leave her and go home.

“It’s here somewhere...” Hailey fished inside her blazer pocket and produced a set of keys. She opened the main door to the flats and walked inside, clearly expecting him to follow.

Not knowing what else to do, Tom paused for a moment to glance both ways along the street, and then he quietly stepped inside the building. The external darkness gave way to a smoother, duskiest darkness inside the building. Hailey didn’t bother to turn on the lights as she ghosted across the ground floor. She opened a door and turned towards Tom, smiling. “Come on up.” Then she walked through the doorway and Tom was forced to hurry before it closed.

They climbed the stairs without speaking, their footsteps echoing on the tiled treads. Tom felt apprehensive. Would her mother really welcome him or would she think that he was some kind of pervert in his daft shorts and sweat-stained T-shirt? “Maybe I...” But he didn’t finish. Hailey had reached the landing and was opening another door; this one let out light as it swung wide, and Tom could do nothing but follow.

The hallway was clean but narrow. At one end there was a glass fire door – presumably this led out onto one of the tiny balconies Tom had seen from the street. He stayed a few steps behind Hailey, wishing he’d just turned and walked back down the stairs. But it was too late now; he’d gone too far to risk looking like a fool. *An even bigger fool*, he thought as he glanced again at his bare legs.

As he watched, someone walked quickly past the other side of the glass door. Then, abruptly, they returned and crossed in the opposite direction. He waited for them to do an about-face and repeat the pass, but nothing moved. For some reason he felt a prickle of fear across his back; his muscles tensed in an involuntary reaction.

Then one of the doors in the hallway opened.

“Hailey! Where have you been?” The woman standing in the doorway was beautiful. Tom stared at her, wishing that he wasn’t there, dressed like an idiot, but he was also glad that he’d accompanied the girl home. It was worth the hassle just to catch sight of this woman, to see her leaning out into the landing and clutching her shirt collar shut across her pale throat.

“This is Tom. He brought me home.” Hailey’s voice had lowered an octave, her whole manner changing and becoming surly, that of a stereotypical teenager.

“Hello... listen, I’m sorry.” Why the hell was he apologising? He’d done nothing wrong. “I found her out in the street, near Far Grove. She’d fainted. I just brought her home. So she’d be safe.” He was backing away, raising his hands and probably looking like he was trying to escape. He might as well be wearing a T-shirt with ‘Guilty’ printed across the chest, rather than the message about the Beer Tent.

The woman turned to Hailey, her brow furrowed with worry. “Did it happen again? Did you black out?” She pushed fallen hair out of her face with a thin hand. Her hair was so black that it looked blue beneath the cheap hallway lighting. Her hand was like a small animal, snuffling along her neat hairline.

“It’s okay. I’m fine. He helped me.” Hailey turned to face Tom, pouting. She suddenly seemed much younger than she had before.

Tom smiled. He didn't know what to say.

"I suppose I should thank you." The woman stepped out of the flat. Her feet were bare. She was wearing an ankle-length skirt along with a white blouse – the outfit made her look vaguely bohemian. "I didn't mean to be so unwelcoming. People round here... well, you know. Some of them are a bit grim." When she smiled her dark eyes blazed. Her cheeks flushed red.

"I didn't do anything. Just brought her home. I thought she might've been mugged." He was poised for flight. Just one wrong move on her part and he felt like he might flee. What was wrong with him? Was she so alluring that he was afraid of her?

Yes. Yes, he was. She was terrifying.

"Please. Come in. Have a drink. Let me thank you properly." She stood aside, and he caught a glimpse inside the flat. It was small, poky really. Bland white paper on the walls. Cheap carpet on the floor. "You must think I'm terrible. Fancy a beer before you go running off again?" She gestured with her head, raising one eyebrow as she looked at his shorts.

"Oh. Yeah, I was out for a run. I don't usually wander around the streets in this get-up. Not after dark, anyway." This exchange finally broke the tension; he felt calmer now, in control of his emotions.

"Drink?" She made a drinking motion with her left hand. He noticed that she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"That would be lovely," he said, and took a step forward. A single step that felt like he had recommenced the journey started outside, when he'd decided to escort Hailey home. "If you don't mind, that is."

"If I minded, I wouldn't have asked. By the way, my name's Lana. Lana Fraser." She held out a hand. Her fingers were extraordinarily long – he hadn't noticed before, but they seemed distorted above the top knuckle. He reached out and shook her hand, feeling those weird fingers. They were cool to the touch.

Tom walked into the flat. Hailey was already inside, vanishing into a room – presumably her bedroom – on the right hand side of an entrance area that was too small to be called a hallway. Another door up ahead – this one open – led into what must be the living room.

"Go on in. Make yourself at home." Her voice was close to his back. He imagined that he could feel her breath on his neck, but that was silly. He knew that she was standing a few paces away, closing the door, locking it behind them. "I'll be just a moment."

The living room was small, but cosy. There wasn't a lot of furniture, just a TV, a slightly battered two-seater leather sofa, two mismatched armchairs, a coffee table, a bureau shoved against the wall and a bookcase stacked with hardbacks. Tom made for the latter, crossing the rug that lay over the laminated floor. He had always been an avid reader, and loved to check out people's book collections.

He could hear voices in the other room, the one Hailey had entered. They were raised, but not shouting. A concerned mother checking that her daughter was okay.

He ran his fingertips along the worn spines of Lana's books, noting the fact that these were well-thumbed copies.

"Tea, coffee, or a nice cold beer?"

He turned, surprised for a moment that she had managed to sneak up on him so quickly. "Oh, I think a beer would hit the spot."

"I think I'll join you," said Lana, heading for the open-plan kitchen that took up one whole side of the room.

The cooking and living/dining areas were separated by a series of floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves and a narrow breakfast bar, which helped give the impression of two rooms where there was really only one. Tom watched Lana moving behind the shelves, catching sight of her through ornaments and knick-knacks as she bent to the fridge and then crossed to the sink. Then he turned back to the

bookcase. He spotted a couple of Graham Greene novels immediately, and nodded his approval. The books were in no particular order that he could make out – unless it was a purely personal system – and each one was a hardback edition, either with or without a dust jacket. Steinbeck stood next to John Irving; Tom Sharp rubbed shoulders with Dickens; Shakespeare snuggled up next to Stephen King.

“Are you a reader too?”

He turned, clutching a battered copy of Norman Mailer’s *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*. It was one of his favourite novels. “Yes, I am. I love books, always have done.”

“Good,” said Lana, handing him a glass of pale beer. “That’s something we have in common from the start, and I think that potential friends should start off from a shared interest.” Her smile was radiant... it was also cheeky; he felt as if she were teasing him.

“So we’re going to be friends, are we?” He took a sip of his drink. It was ice-cold. He closed his eyes briefly, savouring the taste.

“I think it’s the least we should do, don’t you? Seeing as you were kind enough to help my daughter.”

“Is she okay? I mean... unharmed?”

A flicker of something dark passed across Lana’s already dark eyes. She shook her head; a vague gesture that Tom failed to read. “She’s been having these mini blackouts. They don’t last long, just a few minutes. The doctor says it’s nothing to worry about, just stress from the move and some stuff that went on back where we used to live.” She waved her hand, dismissing the subject. “Yes, she’s fine. Thank you for being so concerned.” She smiled to show him that the comment was genuine, but her eyes remained shaded.

“Shall we sit?” She moved across the small room, heading for the sofa, then changed her mind and lowered her thin body into one of the armchairs. Tom followed her, and sat on the sofa. He had almost finished his beer. “Refill?”

“Only if you are,” he said.

She nodded, stood, took his glass. Their fingers touched again, and this time it felt strange, like a tiny electrical current had passed between them. She stared at him with those dark, dark eyes, a puzzled expression on her face.

When she returned from the kitchen she was carrying a tray. Upon it were their refilled glasses, and two more cans of beer. “One for the road,” she said, winking.

“So,” said Tom, a panicked feeling welling in his chest. “You say you haven’t lived here long?” This woman was confusing him. There was a mutual attraction here, he could feel it, but it seemed that they were both trying to ignore the connection.

“Do you live here, in the Grove?”

Tom shook his head. “No. I... not that there’s anything wrong with living here, of course.” He felt his cheeks burning. He was talking himself into a corner. “I mean... shit. Sorry.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. It *is* shit here. I’m not fooling myself otherwise. Hailey and I used to live in Newcastle. It was South Gosforth, to be exact, right next to the Metro station. We had a nice home. I had a good job. Then a couple of years ago it all went tits-up when my husband bailed on us and his debtors. We lost the house and we had to come here. It was the only place the council would give us; according to their stupid little points system we didn’t have a high enough rating for anywhere decent.” She took a long swig of her drink, closed her eyes and swallowed.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so nosy.” He rubbed his palms on his thighs, then realised that the action made him look like some kind of madman. He stopped, held up his hands. Then he picked up his glass and drained it. “Listen, I should go.”

Lana nodded. She licked beer foam from her lips. “Is the wife waiting for you at home?”

For some reason he could not identify Tom felt guilty. “That’s right. She’s... she’s not well. There

was an accident several years ago and she relies on me.” Why did he feel the need to justify himself? Was it because, really, he didn’t want to leave? He wanted to stay here and drink into the night with this woman, trading histories, telling stories, laughing and bonding and becoming friends – perhaps even more than friends.

He stood, tugging at the hem of his shorts, trying to cover the goose pimples that had appeared above his knees. “I should... you know. I should leave.” He felt dizzy, like the world was spinning faster beneath his feet. He tried to hold on, had to hold tight. If he didn’t, he thought that he might fall off the edge of the planet.

“Thanks again,” said Lana, following him as she walked to the door. “Listen, I didn’t mean to come on too strong then. It’s just that I don’t have any friends here, and I think I get a bit needy. Just ignore me.” She reached out, as if she were about to touch his arm, but then let her hand drop away.

“It’s fine. I can be your friend.” Jesus, did he really just say that? “How fucking corny,” he added, pausing by the door.

“Just a bit,” said Lana, smiling now, looking happier than she had done only seconds earlier. “But it was a nice thing to say.” She turned her head slightly to one side, and he caught sight of a faint scar along her jawline.

When he left the flat he had to fight not to look over his shoulder, just to catch another glimpse of her as she closed the door. He heard the locks slide into place, and paused to listen for her footsteps. But of course he couldn’t hear them; there was no way her bare feet could be heard through the door. Yet he told himself that she was standing on the other side, thinking about him.

Tom descended the concrete stairs, and left the building. He glanced at his watch and was shocked to find that it was now almost 9 PM. The street lights were on. Voices drifted towards him – kids’ voices filled with intent. The song of distant sirens accompanied him as he jogged back along Grove End, along the side of the school and towards Far Grove. He felt like he was leaving something behind, something that might just prove to be worthwhile. Never before in his life had he experienced feelings like these: it was terrifying, but it was also liberating. Had he ever felt this kind of thrill when he and Helen had first met? He thought back, to the time when they’d swapped phone numbers in the university canteen, and realised that what he had felt then had been but an echo of this, and not a very strong one.

The voices receded, far behind him. Laughter. Running footsteps.

In the silence that rushed in to replace the sounds, Tom became aware that he was being followed. He turned his head to glance over his shoulder and saw a quick, light movement as something shot through a gap in the school fence and padded across the yard. He felt his feet slowing; his hands clenched into fists. *Run*, he thought. *Just keep going*. But his body refused to obey. It felt like all the blood was rushing out of his feet. The beer he’d consumed pooled in his lower stomach.

Despite this physical reluctance, he pushed onwards, aware that whatever had entered the school was now moving back in his direction. It drew level with him, keeping pace behind the high metal railing. He saw its dark, glistening flanks as it ran. The shape darted between pools of sodium light, and for a moment he thought that it was a child loping along on all fours. Then, gasping with relief, he saw that it was a short-haired dog. Of course it was. The relief was displaced once again by fear when he remembered that there had been sightings of packs of stray dogs in the area – he even recalled a story about someone being attacked one night by a mangy mongrel.

Tom tried to look away, to look straight ahead, but he was unable to take his eyes from the beast that ran alongside him, loping between patches of lamplight. The road was narrow here; the creature was so close that he could have reached out and touched it through the gaps between railings. There was moisture in his eyes; he felt like weeping.

Then the dog turned its bristly head to face him. And Tom felt an emotion that at first he could not

explain. Never before in his life had he experienced real fear – the kind of fear that makes you realise that you are always a single moment away from death. One thought filled his mind, casting everything else in shadow: the dog's face was human.

It was a hound with the features of a person, a male. A boy.

In the split second during which the thing looked his way, Tom made out its wide green eyes, its strangely hairless cheeks, its flaring nostrils and thin, curling lips. He was struck with a sort of nostalgic horror as the face of a young boy smiled at him from the body of a dog. Nothing he could have imagined would have scared him as much. He had not been this afraid since childhood.

And then it was away, bounding further into the school grounds, towards the dark classrooms. He tried to tell himself that what he had seen could not be real. That it was impossible. After all, he'd experienced but a single, snatched glimpse and not a prolonged look at the thing. He even managed to fool himself for a while, as he peeled away from the school railings and ran along in the middle of the road. Then, when finally he reached the brighter area where the road bisected Far Grove Way, he admitted all over again that what he had seen had been something from a nightmare, a nightmare that he should have remembered from long ago.

Even if his eyes had deceived him, it must have been his brain trying to tell him something, to warn him that he was close to making a big mistake. He shouldn't be here, in this godforsaken wasteland of the Concrete Grove. In fact he should never come here again.

Helen was waiting for him back home. Behind him, at Lana's flat, there could be only trouble. It was time to go home to his wife, and return to the life he had chosen many times, whenever he had been called upon to make the decision.

Running hard now, quickening his pace towards a full sprint, he tried to rid his mind of the shame and the guilt and the slow-burning rush of illicit pleasure. But no matter how fast he ran, and how far he went, Tom knew that he could never outrun himself.



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