

# *Gaslighting*

## *Definitions*

### **1). Gaslighting (verb)**

*A form of manipulation and emotional abuse. The perpetrator aims to create doubt in the mind of a targeted individual, or members of a group. Targets begin to question their own memory, perception, and sanity.*

*The term was first used in *Gas Light*, a 1938 play that inspired the 1944 film.*

### **2). Gaslighting (verb, colloquial)**

*Arsonists' slang for the technique of using a fuel-filled Molotov cocktail, launched from a distance, to ignite a flammable or explosive compound, thereby creating a much larger inferno.*

## *Prologue*

### *Kindling: Uncle Peter*

*A short excerpt from Remorseless – current paperback edition page  
224*



‘You didn’t know you had an uncle, did you? Mummy and Daddy didn’t tell you, did they?’

Billy shook his head, his face a picture of misery.

‘That was very bad of both of them. Don’t you think?’

The boy was confused, but nodded.

‘If I were you, I’d want to punish them. For lying. Lying’s bad, isn’t that right boy?’

Again, a desperate nod.

‘So. As it’s not your fault, I’m going to let you go.’

Billy’s eyes, already huge, threatened to pop out, either in fear or disbelief.

‘R-r-really?’ His voice squeaked.

‘Really. But you’ll have to promise. You’ll never forget Uncle Peter. That you’ll think of me every day.’

‘P-p-promise.’ Billy’s head jerked up and down. ‘Every day, Uncle.’

‘You know, boy. Normally I think people tend to lie. But today, I believe you...’

\*\*\*



***Saturday***

***Pre-ignition***

Billy Leech woke seconds before his alarm clock had a chance to rouse him. As the usual staccato burst of music from his favourite punk band started playing, his palm slammed down on the *off* button while his eyes focused on the digital display. His ears, alert for any unusual sounds, twitched as he strained to hear if either of the other house occupants were up and about.

Nothing from downstairs.

Just the wind rattling a branch against his skylight window and a few groans from the roof rafters in his attic bedroom, creaking above his head.

Satisfied that he was the only one conscious at 3am, his designated witching hour, he grinned into the darkness, slipped on his shorts and tee shirt, and padded across the bare floorboards to the door. He had no need to be stealthy, but it was a habit ingrained in his psyche, and he seemed to drift down the stairs like a wraith, his feet avoiding the steps with loose planking, so that he arrived outside his mother's room with only the air disturbed by his movements.

In any normal household, the light spilling from the gap at the bottom of a bedroom door would suggest the resident was awake.

But this was no normal household.

Billy's hand twisted the doorknob and he craned his head into the room to check on his mother. A flicker of disgust warped his features for just a moment, before they relaxed back to form his habitual surly teenage scowl.

Suzie Leech was snoring. A snuffling, grunting wheeze that reminded Billy of happier times – their regular family trips to Bucklebury Farm Park when his younger self had been able to pet the animals. Despite the park being just a few miles from his current home, he had not visited for several years. That last time had been a few weeks before he had been forced to come to this place, to live in this dump, all the while thinking it would be a temporary arrangement. Soon after, his mother had followed, insisting they stay in a vain attempt to leave behind the horrors of their house in London. As if their dreadful memories could be expunged by some country air.

'Pah! You stupid, snorting sow.' He muttered under his breath as he pulled the door to, thinking how much he had grown up since his uncle had come to visit them, that one fatal night when events had wrenched Billy from the innocent grasp of childhood.

The image of his mother lying on a different bed floated through his brain for a few distressing seconds, then he squeezed his eyes shut to clear his mind. His feet, as if driven by another soul, a malevolent presence that had visited his

family that same night in Chelsea, carried him to his Nana's room.

Billy tingled with anticipation, the thrill of the predator, as he tugged open her door. No light on in here.

Nana was dead to the world.

*Well, not quite. Soon, maybe...*

The delicious thought murmured in his head as he switched on the light. The old dear did not stir, her breathing was regular and deep – hardly surprising, given the cocktail of drugs Billy had added to the small glass of warm milk he had brought her some five hours before. Empty now, other than some opaque residue, long since dried, clinging to the inside.

*Good.*

The sickly-sweet smell of Nana's preferred pot pourri irritated his nostrils, but it amused him to know why she felt it necessary to have several jars dotted around the room, flooding the place with cloying odours. Lavender with a hint of mothballs.

He gazed down at her for a few moments, wondering if she experienced vivid dreams as she lay there, her wrinkled mouth open and quivering as she breathed, her head nestled, snug in the down pillow with her thinning chestnut hair draped around her. Maybe he would ask her in the morning, though he knew she was probably too far gone from the various medications he had fed her to remember much at all.

'No sweet dreams for you then, Nana... Just another nightmare.'

Billy chuckled, pulled back her duvet and inspected her.

Unlike the dyed hair, the thin yellow silk of her nightgown could not disguise the ageing truth, the frail seventy-four-year-old body, with its bony hips and parchment skin, veined, wrinkled and liver-spotted.

Disgust once again tugged ugly at Billy's lips, and his shoulders shuddered at the sight of her. He knelt on the edge of the bed, unbuttoned the front of his shorts, reached inside and prepared himself.

The stream of warm urine was aimed at Nana's crotch and it stained the silk as it spread down the insides of her emaciated thighs to the sheet below. The sight sent a wave of euphoria through Billy's frame, electrifying him.

Once finished, he eased himself off the bed, checked his handiwork, and, satisfied with the effect he had created, rearranged the duvet to cover his mother's mother again.

Time to up the stakes, he thought.

Tomorrow, he would give an enhanced performance.

With one last glance at her, still almost comatose, he lifted the glass from her bedside table and picked up her slippers, then glided from the room.

Two hours later, he was climbing back into bed, well pleased with himself, convinced his Uncle Peter would approve. As his head dropped on to the pillow, his teeth gleamed in the dark at the thought of what they had planned for the

coming days, the special events that would mark the conclusion of his childhood, in celebration of his mere sixteen years on the planet.

With that final thought, he drifted into blissful sleep.

\*\*\*

Doctor Colin Powers heard Judy's scream but thought he was still dreaming about her at first. Then he came awake with a start. The high-pitched screeching flushed the residue of sleep from his brain as he bounded across the bedroom while yelling a reply down the stairs.

'I'm coming, my love!'

A sickening lurch in his chest warned him that he had leapt into action too fast, and he forced himself to slow down as he dragged the dressing gown from its hook on the back of the door. He was still getting used to his medication, and at moments like this, tachycardia and dizzy spells still caused him some distress. The last thing he needed right now was to have a heart attack or black out and tumble down the stairs to where Judy was waiting, staring up at him.

Even dressed in her running kit, she looked stunning to Doc, and his heart did a little jig at the sight of her, bathed in yellow dawn sunlight as she stood in the hall. Her lovely face, pale and distorted from shock, was still enough to send happy hormones cascading through him, boosting his mood immediately. Despite the accompanying surge in energy levels, he was cautious and used the bannister to aid his progress down to her.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?'

'The neighbours' cat!' She raised a trembling hand and pointed at the front door, her violet eyes still on his.

Although the door was ajar, Doc could not see outside and wondered whether Judy's hyper alertness was caused by something real or imagined.

'I'm sure the cat'll be fine. Why don't you just go for your—'

'It's not going to be bloody fine, Colin!' She took a pace towards the oak timbered door, hauled it back on its hinges and stepped away as the object of her horror swung into view.

Doc arrived at the foot of the stairs at the precise moment the accuracy of her comment hit him. A brick between the eyes might have had less impact than the sight suddenly confronting him. He staggered back, his ankles tripping on the bottom step, throwing him off balance and on to his butt with an agonising crunch of the coccyx.

The yelp at the back of his throat failed to reach his lips. He was struck mute, though his mind immediately went to work and conjured up a number of explanations for the travesty adorning their front door. None of which would he share with Judy.

'Who'd do such a thing, Colin?' Judy's face started to crumple and Doc knew the tears would be flowing again this morning. Internally, he raged at the idiot

who had sparked her grief, but was still winded and unable to reply, so she filled the silence. ‘And why? She’s just a harmless animal...’

Doc finally managed to speak as he raised himself up, although he had no answer he was willing to mention to her. Instead, he gave her a reassuring hug, all the while inspecting the feline corpse.

Stapled, spread-eagled to the woodwork.

*Crucified.*

‘It’s okay. It’s just a stupid prank. Probably the Dooley boys and their gang of thugs again.’ The lie felt uncomfortable on his tongue, but the local farm lads were the go to suspects for any such acts of mindless vandalism or senseless cruelty. He felt her nod as he went on. ‘I’ll take Flossy down. Poor Mrs Bunting will be devastated... Are you still up for your run?’

As he held his wife, Doc couldn’t help but think back to the sparrow with a broken wing he had found after it had thudded against his study window a week earlier. Its hollow bones, its apparent fragility, almost weightless, as it squawked in outrage at being lifted from the ground, pecking at his thumb as he rescued it. Judy’s quivering body vibrated against him in much the same way, the tears soaking into his dressing gown before she grabbed a handful of his lapel to dry her eyes. The very same cat now affixed to Doc’s door had made short work of the wounded bird soon after the rescue, having sneaked in through the kitchen window.

Karma?

Hardly.

Nature was often cruel, but humans had easily exceeded the worst she could offer, as Doc knew only too well.

‘I’m okay. I just get so tearful sometimes.’ Judy shrugged herself out from his hug and nodded to herself, her face rearranged into an expression Doc recognised as one of determination to get on with her life, as best she could. ‘Please take her down before I’m back.’

After one last glance at the offending body, and a wan smile offered in an attempt to reassure Doc, she jogged away without a backward glance.

On closer inspection, Doc began to assess the differences between today’s unexpected arrival and the only other similar instance he was personally aware of, and he did not like the conclusions crowding into his mind.

As ever, there were many people who had read his books detailing the misdeeds of the criminals he had assessed and helped catch over the years he had worked as the senior Forensic Psychiatrist for London’s Metropolitan Police. Many more had watched his TV series, now on its fifth season, in which he tried to relate unsolved murders to serial killers already serving time. Any one of those readers or viewers could have taken the simple details he had relayed and done this for some nefarious purpose.

Over the years, he had been the target of many cranks and pranksters, but

nothing so serious that he had ever lost a night's sleep. But today *felt* different.

And the attack on this animal *was* different, he realised, as he compared the circumstances with that other occasion.

No nails this time, just staples. Mrs Bunting's cat was obviously dead long before being pinioned to the door – the stench of decomposition was enough to confirm that – unlike the similar case he had heard about, rather than witnessed, during an investigation several years before. Just someone trying to mess with him, without properly mimicking the event. Probably found the cat already dead, and only thought of the prank after discovering it somewhere, road kill from a careless driver perhaps.

*Another bloody 'anti-fan...'*

Without further thought he went to the cupboard under the kitchen sink, found a bin liner and a screwdriver, pulled on his gardening gloves and returned to the offending object.

With the tip of the screwdriver he levered the first staple from the cat's paws while breathing through his mouth to avoid choking from the smell. Flossy must have been dead for days, and as he prised another fastening loose, a sense of unease crept over him. Doc tried to ignore it, but could not shrug off the feeling as another part of his brain flickered into life. It gave him a mental shake as he re-assessed the situation.

This was done at night. A lightweight staple gun had been used. On Flossy's rotting corpse.

Not a hammer and nails, used to torture an agonised cat before beating it to death.

Doc had hoped this difference was enough to dismiss the event, but now he knew better. The dark compartment in his mind, one that he'd tried to keep sealed since retiring from his role as a criminal profiler, ripped itself wide open, already drumming the words into his consciousness:

*Silent. Stealthy. That's the difference.*

Not a prank, then. More like a message.

Doc sighed as he resigned himself to his dark side's discomfiting conclusion.

*It's a warning.*

A warning of worse to come.

\*\*\*

'Oh, for chrissakes, Mother! Not again.'

Despite her diminished olfactory senses, Suzie Leech could smell the tang of stale urine as she lifted the duvet to check, and even her mother's ubiquitous pot pourri could not mask the odour.

'I – I'm sorry, sweetie. I don't remember... I was so tired again.' Rosemary Connor cringed with embarrassment as her daughter castigated her. 'Let me get up and I'll change the bedding.' She slid to the edge of the mattress and eased

herself upright, wobbled for a few seconds, then placed a steadying hand on the bedside table, her face a mask of confusion.

‘Don’t be bloody stupid, Mum. You can hardly get down the stairs without help, and look what happened the last time you used the washing machine. Anyway, you’d only forget–’

‘Where are my slippers? My feet are cold.’

With the duvet in one hand and the stripped sheet in the other, Suzie wrinkled her nose at her mother, and shook her head. Life here was supposed to have been an improvement, a chance to recover, to gain support from her mother, and it had been perfect at first. Now, well, it was just a constant mind-numbing battle to keep herself sane.

‘You must’ve left them downstairs. And it’s August. How can you be cold?’ Suzie couldn’t help the strident tone sharpening her voice – she had exhausted her reserves of emotional goodwill on her own recovery, and the tank was now running on empty. A gin, vodka and opiate hangover didn’t help either. ‘Get in the shower, and make sure you keep hold of the rail. Pull the alarm cord if you need me. I’ll be downstairs, busy cleaning up your mess...’

‘All I had was a small glass of milk at bedtime. Look.’ Suzie could see nothing where her mother pointed other than the bedside lamp and alarm clock. Baffled eyes appealed to her, as her mother realised. ‘I was sure Billy brought me a glass... Maybe that was the other night. I promise I had nothing else to drink since my dinner. Though I don’t remember eating that either.’

‘That’s a dozen times in as many weeks. Well, you’ve had your warning, and I won’t listen to your pathetic moaning any more. I don’t care if it’s uncomfortable, I’m putting a rubber undersheet on your mattress after I’ve disinfected it. *Again*. Or maybe I should just burn the bloody thing. It’s starting to stink. We’ll be buying you nappies next. What the hell has happened to you?’

The look of sheer misery on her mother’s face was almost enough to melt the ice facade Suzie perpetually hid behind, but not quite. Watching the frail old woman turn and limp to the en suite bathroom prompted a rare moment of piercing introspection.

*Maybe she’s sick. Alzheimer’s or something... I’m such a complete bitch!*

She opened her mouth to utter something. An apology perhaps, for the woman who had borne her, breastfed her, brought her up, and more recently helped her through the most traumatic period of her life. Before any utterance could break through her self-imposed emotional barricade, the bathroom door clicked closed behind her weeping mother. As the sobs reached her ears, Suzie took a pace towards the source of the sound, thinking she might be able to say something to soften the stinging blows she had just delivered to her mother’s pride.

*Oh, sod it! It’s just not worth the hassle.*

It was already after nine o’clock, and her son’s tutor was due at ten.

Suzie yelled up the stairs from the landing, her neck arched, her head

throbbing as she projected her anger at his attic room door. ‘Billy! Get up you lazy blighter!’

‘I’m down here. Cooking breakfast. Want some?’

How the hell did he do that? Always sneaking around. She never knew where he was, or what he was doing. It had been happening more and more over the last couple of years. He seemed to materialise in different places, like some sort of magician.

She shrugged and plodded down the stairs, her own heavy footfall telegraphing *her* movements as the smell of bacon wafted up to meet her. It was not at all appetizing, it just stirred the queasy sludge in her belly, and made her feel even worse.

‘I’ll just have coffee for now, love. I’ll make us all a nice lunch later.’

‘You want me to chuck some vodka in it for you?’ Suzie could hear Billy titter as she arrived in the room, even though his back was turned to her as he tended his sputtering rashers. He spun round, and took in the situation immediately. ‘Oh God, please tell me she’s not pissed the bed again?’ Billy hoisted the frying pan and dumped several rashers of bacon on to two thick slices of toast, then ladled ketchup on them before making a doorstep sandwich. He took a hefty bite and watched his mother loading the washing machine as he chewed with his mouth open. ‘I’m not surprised. She was down here last night, guzzling milk again. We’re almost out thanks to her. I keep telling you – she needs to go into that care home. I found her stinking old slippers under the grill this morning. I think she was warming them up but must’ve forgotten. We’re lucky she didn’t burn the place down. Fucking disgusting. Almost put me off my appetite.’

Suzie slammed the round glass door on her mother’s stained laundry, twisted the machine’s dial with an exaggerated flick of the wrist to kick-start the unwelcome wash load, and turned on her son. ‘Enough of the language, young man. And this *is* her home. You know full well she’d rather die than leave this place!’

‘Maybe she should top herself, then. Useless old bat.’

‘Jeez, Billy! Don’t be so...’

Whatever had happened to her innocent little boy?

That train of thought shunted into, and then immediately whistled straight out of Suzie’s mind.

She knew exactly what had happened to her son.

But that was over seven years ago.

A whole lifetime ago...

Now he was turning into a handsome man before her eyes. His androgynous good looks would have been equally appealing on a girl, especially when he was just a cherubic child, though he had filled out with puberty, and already sported the same masculine air of impatient superiority his father had possessed.

A twinge of jealousy passed through her as she contemplated his fine features

– his long lashes, the two stunning turquoise eyes, sculpted lips and perfect brows. Much of his beauty had come from her genes, though his father had been handsome too. She often wondered what other paternal traits might have been passed down to her son.

*Don't think about that!*

Suzie didn't notice her fingers climbing to her face, a subconscious reaction whenever thoughts of Billy's father – or the events surrounding his death – entered her head. Better to just think about her son in the here and now.

With his long sideburns, his broad shoulders and imposing height, he could already pass for an eighteen or twenty-year old, and Suzie had little doubt he had been visiting pubs and even nightclubs despite being just fifteen. She hated to admit it, but he was devious by nature, and she was sure he had managed to obtain a false ID, despite his denials – one that would guarantee him illegal access to the local adult haunts.

He probably had a girlfriend too, but refused to share anything personal with his mother since the day he had been struck mute, an affliction that lasted more than three years after that dreadful night...

When he eventually started talking again, there was no hint or possibility of closeness between them. He preferred to confide in his psychotherapists and largely ignored her for most of the time.

The pain of recollection scorched Suzie's psyche whenever her maternal instincts resurfaced like this, which is why she rarely thought back to how their lives had changed so irrevocably, and why they had drifted apart.

*Drifted?*

No that's not right...

*We were driven apart.*

'Bloody hell, Mother. Stop doing that. It's gross! Ew.'

Startled, Suzie plucked her right hand away from her face, and saw the blood and tissue under her nails, the tiny slivers of skin she had just torn from her cheek.

'Oh, my God!'

She rushed to the downstairs bathroom, slammed the door behind her, leaned against it with her eyelids squeezed shut, mentally preparing herself to look in the mirror.

Billy had obviously followed her down the hall, though she had not heard him, and he was now banging his fists on the door so hard she could feel the blows as if they were being hammered into her spine. His angry bellow was harsh and raw as it lanced into her skull.

'Why do you keep wasting Dad's money on useless plastic surgery and expensive bloody tissue grafts if you're just going to keep ripping it all off your ugly fucking face? Dad always said you were a stupid cow! You're hideous... You *always* will be... Get used to it!'

The banging ceased the moment his outburst ended.

Silence.

He had magicked himself away again.

She eventually managed to open and focus her one good eye, and, as always, the sight in the mirror devastated her.

Suzie fell to her knees and puked in the toilet pan, and like her mother, only minutes before, wept for the woman she used to be.

\*\*\*

The clean sheet and duvet now covered the source of her mother's indignity – the moisture-proof membrane Suzie had bought after the first bed-wetting episode – and now the old lady was ignoring her daughter, staring out of the window at the Berkshire countryside while sitting in her favourite armchair, bundled in damp white towels.

The atmosphere was thick with disapproval, and had weighed heavily on Suzie when she had first entered, carrying the offending item. The half bottle of codeine linctus she had imbibed, immediately after her confrontation with the hideous image in the bathroom mirror, had soon bubble wrapped her in its familiar warm embrace. Although she no longer experienced the highs the drug used to deliver, she did achieve a sense of remoteness, drifting above day to day worries, oblivious to painful recollections of her family's warped history.

She patted the pillows, smoothed the duvet, and then offered an olive branch to her mother, her voice mellow and forgiving. 'Your roots are showing, Mum. I'll dye your hair for you again if you want... No need to get dressed, I can do it now.'

No response.

At times like this, Suzie reflected on the difference she had seen in her mother since her father had died. In the few years since he had taken his life, the formerly energetic matriarch had physically and mentally shrunk into the diminished husk now silently occupying this room.

*It was not supposed to have turned out like this.*

Suzie and her son had arrived here from their abandoned home in London in desperate need of the type of unconditional love only close family can provide, and in those first weeks, months and years, the support from her mum and dad had been nothing short of incredible.

Suzie had been hospitalized, and only managed to join Billy several weeks after that frightful night had left her a deformed and devastated widow. She could still hear her little boy's screams as she was being lifted into the ambulance, a row that her mother said had continued for three days, almost non-stop, before he finally exhausted himself and fell into a twenty-four-hour sleep. When he woke, he did not speak to his Nana or Gramps, and was still mute by the time Suzie arrived, her lacerated face in bandages, and her mind equally shredded.

That was the first time she'd witnessed the coldness in her child's eyes. Reserved exclusively for her, it seemed. She sighed, her mind returning to the bedroom and her mother's frosty demeanour.

*Be a better daughter. A better person. Try again.*

'Would you like some breakfast? I'll bring some boiled eggs and some of that soft white bread you like, cut into soldiers, just like you used to do for me... Mum?'

Still nothing.

With the bubble wrap in danger of popping, Suzie decided to beat a retreat just as the doorbell chimed its jaunty tune.

Billy's tutor.

'I'll get that, then sort some food out for you.'

The short journey down the stairs allowed a few more moments of reflection, with thoughts about her little boy now at the forefront of her blunted mind.

The local school had been a disaster for him. Tormented and bullied for his perceived weakness, his inability or unwillingness to speak, his unsmiling presence, his lethargy, and his reluctance to get involved with any group activity. The teaching staff had initially suggested a special needs establishment might be more appropriate, but her mother had insisted the lad would be better off staying where he was, and for a while it seemed she was right.

Then came the events that finally led to him being expelled.

Suzie let the air from her lungs rattle her lips as she exhaled, as if the act might somehow cure her frustration and impotence. She reached for the door latch, just as her son beat her to it.

'I'll get it, Mummy dearest. Let's not scare poor Smiffy away, eh? Even with that plaster on your cheek you look hideous. And you might want to pull a brush through that haystack of hair before you let members of the unsuspecting public see what's become of you.'

Her hands automatically flew to her scalp, and she pressed her fingertips through the tangle she found there. The sight of her face during her brief foray into the guest bathroom had tossed any thoughts of her overall appearance from her mind, and she hated to admit it, but her son was probably speaking the truth.

Cruel, callous truth, designed to cut deep into her soul.

But the truth, just the same.

And there was more. Delivered with a contemptuous twist of the knife.

'You could do with a shower too. You were wearing those clothes last night before you collapsed. Drunk, as usual. You're disgusting... I had to help you to bed. Yet again.'

Had he? Probably.

She couldn't remember. She clawed at her memory for some hint of what had happened.

Blank.

Since shortly after dinner.

How much vodka and gin had she drunk?

Tears pricked at her eyes as she looked up at Billy's sneering face, so reminiscent of his father, desperate for something to say, to appease him. Would she ever be able to bridge the yawning chasm now separating them?

Irrationally, she wanted to hug him, to tell him it would all be fine, but she knew it wouldn't – and she knew only too well how he would respond to the tiniest hint of affection on her part.

The doorbell chimed again.

'Go on. Run along and sort yourself out. He's getting impatient. And so am I.'

Suzie just turned and plodded up the stairs to her room, already craving the effects of the other half bottle of her pharmaceutical crutch.

\*\*\*

'We're supposed to be getting things ready to celebrate my well-deserved and much belated promotion, and here you are, asking your mate, a newly minted Detective Chief Inspector, to investigate the death of your neighbour's cat!' Jack Carver poked a playful finger at Doc's belly as he added, chuckling to himself, 'Marriage is certainly agreeing with you. Not much yoga going on from the look of it.'

Doc tutted as he bent to open the plastic sack at his feet and show Jack the offending corpse. 'I'm not asking you to investigate. I just want to know what you think, that's all.'

'Whoa, Doc! Wrap it up. It bleedin stinks, mate. I'm no expert on feline homicide but it chucks up like it's been dead for months. Why don't you dump it in the bin, and give me a hand with the gazebo thingy? I've got loads of food and booze too. It's in the car. Come on.'

'This is serious, Jack.'

Doc's frown and funereal tone stopped Jack in his tracks, startled by this seeming overreaction.

'You said it was a prank. Why the worried face?'

'I said, *at first* I thought it was a prank.'

'Yeah, well. There have been a few. It's only to be expected after so many TV appearances.'

'I've got a very bad feeling about this one. You know the reason.'

'Really?' Doc was looking at him expectantly, as if Jack should have immediately made the connection he so clearly had. The moment Jack had arrived, a few minutes before ten, Doc had started on about the neighbours' bloody pet. Jack gave his head a theatrical scratch as he tried to remember some other case involving dead cats, but nothing occurred to him. 'I give in. What am I supposed to be remembering? And can we please get the stuff out the car? We've got forty mouths to feed and they'll start arriving in a couple of hours. If I don't

get cracking they'll be going hungry.' The last time Doc had offered Jack the use of his magnificent country home for entertaining his police colleagues, things had been completely chaotic. Judy had almost had a nervous breakdown and Doc had been about as useless as a chocolate teapot. Which was why Jack was itching to get his celebratory brunch barbie set up right away. 'It won't look good if the new DCI can't even organise a piss up in your back garden, will it?'

Jack hoped his infectious, jocular tone might shift Doc's feet towards the car, but his friend remained rigid. Worse still, his face was a stone mask, all expression gone, and his eyes seemed to be peering inwards.

Seeing Doc like this sent an irrational and unexpected tremor of fear through Jack. The hairs on his forearm jumped to attention, as if static electricity was emanating from the psychiatrist's brain, affecting Jack's follicles, dragging the fine filaments upright. He went to speak, but before he could, a name croaked forth from Doc's lips – one he had not heard his pal utter for several years.

'Leech.'

That unexpected word discharged the strange aura surrounding Doc, and Jack wondered if he had imagined its presence. Perhaps age was finally catching up with them both. An over-active imagination was not one of the many failings Jack would admit to, yet, right now, he had an ominous feeling that Doc was channelling something weird.

*Evil.*

'Peter Leech? Or his brother, Shaun?' Jack was on firmer ground now, but he still hadn't made a connection with the dead cat, pinned to Doc's door. 'What've they got to do with the thing in that bin bag – other than the fact they're all dead, though the Leech boys'll be even more decomposed than that rotting moggy?'

'Peter was blamed for doing the same thing, when he was a small boy. Shaun was the guilty party, but the younger lad was caught red-handed, hammer in hand, the cat wailing in agony... Don't you remember?'

A vague recollection blossomed into a fully-fledged memory as Doc spoke, and Jack immediately rattled off the reasons why today's little escapade was different, but Doc interrupted him, impatient now.

'Of course, I know all that! Think about it – the cat was *posed* here, at night, and fixed to the door with a staple gun. Easily muffled, no banging, no animal squealing in agony, otherwise I'd have woken up and caught the perpetrator in the act. This is not about torture. Or mimicking the *exact* details from all those years ago. It's a message, a crude and effective one at that.'

'You're doing it again, mate. Reaching.' Jack was automatically sceptical, but simultaneously couldn't shake the sensation that things had changed fundamentally, that their conversation had opened a door – one he was inexplicably reluctant to step through. They had worked together, on and off, for almost three decades, and during that time, Doc's frequent mental leaps had regularly taken him by surprise.

And Doc's accompanying insights were rarely wrong.

As that last thought occurred to Jack, a lone gust of wind caught the bin bag. The sudden movement and rustling noise made him step back. Fearful.

*Christ! I'm bloody jumpy today!*

He tried to make a joke of his reaction, though he was still unsettled by it.

'Blimey. You sure that cat's dead, mate? Maybe it just needs a bath!'

Doc's impassive face did not crack a smile, or anything else to suggest he had heard, though when he spoke, his voice was firm, determined. Certain.

'Leech. You know the family lives less than six miles from here?'

'What? The wife and the kid? They moved out here too? Where, exactly?'

Doc had relocated from his multi-million-pound home in central London soon after his arrival back from France, having found Judy there after months of searching for her. She could not face returning to his old home – it held too many painful memories – so Doc had sold up and moved to this magnificent country pile near Pangbourne. An idyllic location, with a stunning brick and timber Tudor home, beautiful ornamental gardens that extended down to the River Thames at the rear, with its own wooden jetty where Doc's forty-foot motor cruiser was moored alongside. It would be easy to feel jealous, but that was definitely not one of Jack's character traits. And Doc was generous too – Jack was just starting two weeks' holiday, the first proper break he'd had for years, and would be taking the boat tomorrow for ten nights of leisurely river cruising.

'Suzie Leech's parents have lived on Bucklebury Common since she was a teenager.'

'What? Where that Middleton lass comes from? The one who married prince what's-his-face?'

'They have a house on the very same road, Jack... More importantly, Suzie Leech has been seeing Dickie for treatment and—'

'Prof Maddox? Is he coming today? Did you invite him?'

'Yes, but—'

'He's a psychiatrist... What treatment? Did she go loopy? I wouldn't be surprised after what happened to her. Having her eye gouged out and half her face turned into mincemeat. And her poor little kid, he'd have been a basket case too, after all he went through that night.'

'No, she wasn't being treated for mental illness or PTSD. She was seeing him in his clinic, in Harley Street. She's had dozens of operations since that horrendous night. Facial reconstruction and extensive plastic surgery.'

'I thought the Prof gave up wielding a scalpel.'

'He did but he still personally oversees the team performing the most complex, difficult or interesting cases. And Mrs Leech certainly falls into all three of those categories.'

'So, what has she got to do with this?' Jack used the tip of his foot to delicately nudge the bag at their feet, in an effort to overcome his earlier

superstition. ‘Your putrid pussy cat.’

‘I’m not even sure *her* presence has any bearing on what happened here last night.’ Jack sensed Doc was not sharing the whole truth, that he was indeed sure there was some sort of connection, and his next words sort of confirmed it. ‘The lad, Billy. He knows all about his family history. Details, Jack. Way more than he should.’

‘And you think he did this? How old is he? Fifteen? Sixteen? Why on earth would he? I doubt he even knows who you are, or that you’re living round here...’ Then another question occurred to Jack. ‘And how do you know what he’s found out about the Leech brothers’ escapades?’

Doc’s eyes had that introspective look again, his brow furrowing this time, as if he was firing questions into his own mind, searching for answers himself. Several seconds passed with the only movement coming from another gust of wind rattling the leaves in the trees, once again animating the bag on the ground between them.

‘I wanted to help him... But I’m beginning to think I may have made a very big mistake.’

\*\*\*

His mother might have been ugly, but Mr Smith, his most recent home tutor, wasn’t much better looking than the dopey bitch. Like a deformed bulldog. The pug-faced features. Slobber foaming on his jowls. A vile specimen of humanity, but he was serving his purpose. Well, had been...

‘You want me to make a kilo? You’re off your head, kiddo. It’s bloody dangerous, mixing and cooking such highly volatile chemicals. Do it yourself. Brilliant student like you, should be no problem. Or are you worried you’ll blow yourself up?’

‘I don’t have all the facilities – you do. And I need the enhanced ANFO, made to those specs, and much more of the oxy powder than the tiny amount you mixed for me the last few times.’

‘It’s not going to happen!’

Billy snatched the single sheet of paper from Smith’s hands, crumpled it and tossed it in the bin by his desk, then sank into an armchair opposite the man who was supposed to be teaching him advanced chemistry and physics for the next three hours.

Now *that* was not going to happen. Billy had other plans.

He had selected this individual himself, having dismissed the previous teachers his mother and Nana had foisted on him. And it was not so much for his specific skill sets, although his multi-disciplinary educational credentials were most impressive. Much more important to Billy was the man’s personal history.

His criminal past.

‘Sometimes, Smiffy, I think you forget yourself. And why you’re here.’

‘And you’re taking the piss, Billy. I know you like to pretend you’re some sort of Machiavellian adult masquerading as a young teenager, but the truth is, that’s all you are.’ Smith’s face flushed almost purple as he crouched forward, perched on the edge of the sofa, glaring, barking at Billy. Not that anyone was likely to hear – the study was in a separate brick-built outbuilding that used to be the neighbours’ stable. ‘Just a spoilt little rich kid who thinks he’s in control.’

‘Perhaps you need a little reminder of why you’re here. *Roland.*’ Billy twitched a finger on his remote control and the high definition screen covering the top half of the end wall illuminated, then a video started playing. A young boy’s moans, mixed with Smith’s panting grunts, immediately filled the room, blasting through the Bose sound system.

‘Oh, shut it off, for chrissakes!’ The deformed bulldog’s head shook furiously and a few gobs of spittle sprayed from his lips as he yelled. ‘Enough, already!’

The child’s naked body and the disturbing images showing precisely what Smith had been doing to him were seamlessly replaced with a video documentary explaining the physics of flight, paused on a frame with a lecturer scrawling on a whiteboard.

Billy sucked a little air through his teeth and across his tongue, aware that his mouth would be curling in apparent disgust, as if those few seconds of film had affected him. They had not, other than to reassure him that Smith would do exactly what he was told. The tutor shrank back into his sofa, giving the impression he wanted to melt into the cushions, to be invisible. Or anywhere but here.

*Perfect.*

‘So, you’ll do it, then?’

‘Sometimes, I think I’d rather take my chances with the police...’ Smith tried to sound menacing, threw himself forward again, grabbed a cushion, and wrung it with a vicious twist. ‘Or just throttle you right now.’

‘You like threatening kids, don’t you? Hurting little boys too.’ Billy was a big, strapping lad, but Smith was an inch or so taller, and probably twenty kilos heavier. Much of that extra weight was flab – not that it mattered. Billy didn’t feel the slightest bit threatened by the big man’s bluster. ‘You could try it. At best, you’ll be arrested for molesting me – like you were for that *other poor innocent child* we were just listening to.’ He couldn’t stop the snigger accompanying the words he’d emphasised. ‘At worst, I might have to explain to the police why my paedophile tutor was found lying unconscious on the study floor.’

‘Jesus Christ, kid! You are so full of shit. You talk like you’ve stepped out of a gangster movie. How old are you – really?’ Smith rubbed at his forehead with the heel of both hands as he spoke, not expecting an answer. ‘Yeah. I’ll sort it out. When do you want it?’

‘I need it tonight.’

‘It’ll take me all day to source the chemicals and then do what I need. You can’t rush a job like this.’

‘You’d better poke off and get on with it then. Class is cancelled today. If anyone asks, we were here, together until lunchtime. Just make sure my mother and grandmother don’t see you leave... Sir.’

Smiffy shot upright and towered over him. For a nanosecond, Billy thought the man was going to attack him, that the threat had not been an idle one. His body automatically tensed for the assault that didn’t come. A sliver of satisfaction gleamed in Smith’s eyes as he mistook the reaction for a flinch.

‘Be careful, kiddo. You might just’ve bitten off more than you can chew.’

‘Tick, tock, tick, tock. You’re wasting time. You should get moving.’

The gleam flickered as Smith hesitated, then extinguished as he nodded to himself before leaving without another word.

\*\*\*

Doc watched as Jack put the finishing touches to his temporary gazebo while muttering about the weather.

‘No rain forecast but you never can tell. We’ll set up the grub and booze on a table under this canopy...’ Jack paused from his efforts for a moment, glanced at Doc and then asked, ‘So, how’s Judy? I assume you can still talk to me about *her* problems.’

They were on safe ground now. After helping Jack haul a couple of cases of booze, several carrier bags full of meat and pre-prepared salad into the house, his friend had finally stopped huffing about doctor patient confidentiality and Hippocratic oaths getting in the way of their *professional* relationship. Doc was relieved at the change of subject.

‘Still mixed. She has good days and bad days. She was doing so well, but just recently... I don’t know.’ Doc did not need to explain more as Jack was well aware that Judy’s mother’s death had hit her hard, then losing her son less than a year later almost destroyed her. She lost the will to live. ‘Getting back to normal’s not an easy task for anyone recovering from the depths of suicidal depression.’

‘She still blame you for that? Josh and her mum dying?’ Jack finished hammering a peg into the ground, tightened a guy line and, satisfied with his handiwork, eyeballed Doc. ‘Or does she blame me?’

Maybe this was not such safe ground, Doc thought. Jack, ever the detective, had clearly sensed some animosity from Judy, something that had been building within her over the last year or two. With a twinge of guilt, Doc realised he had been subconsciously encouraging the shift in her attitude, directing her negativity away from himself, and on to his friend. He tried to justify his complicity as he answered.

‘It’s not so much that she *blames* you, Jack. More that she won’t allow me to

get involved in your active cases again. She's fine with us working together on the TV series, but she gets pretty irate whenever you try to drag me back into consulting for the Met again.'

'So... what? I can't even ask for your advice now? Is that why you've been so offhand with me lately, when I've called about my investigations?' Jack's voice took on a petulant note as he tossed the rubber mallet to the floor in disgust, then pursed his lips and turned away. His voice was almost back to normal as he added, 'Did you clean the barbie, or have I got to do that too?'

'Jack. Wait.' Jack had started striding towards the Aga-sized contraption that Doc had cleaned and prepared the night before, currently concealed under its vinyl weather protector, standing in its permanent location on the patio.

'What?' Jack stopped and turned to face Doc. 'Did you? Clean it?'

'Of course, I did. Listen. Judy has no problem with us being pals. It's the profiling she has an issue with.' Jack's face was doubtful. Unconvinced. 'Her exact words were: *You can have a beer with him, invite him for a barbecue, consult with him for your TV series and books. But that's it! You almost died twice doing that job, working with Jack and I can't lose another person I love...*'

'So, she does blame me.' Jack had his hands on his hips, his head shaking at the injustice of it all.

'Well, she has sort of shifted her thinking.' Doc didn't add that he had encouraged the shift. 'It's a form of transference. She'd been blaming me for all the bad things that've happened over recent years, but she's largely replaced me with you in that role... Sorry, Jack.'

'Oh, great. Well that explains why she's a bit frosty on occasion.' He shrugged, a resigned smile on his face accompanying his words. 'I'm just glad you two are getting on so well now. You had a tough couple of years when you first got back together. I promise I won't bring up any current cases this time. Okay?' He chortled and slapped a hand on Doc's shoulder. 'Well, not within her earshot. Fair enough?'

Doc was relieved to hear his pal making a joke of it, but Judy really had been upset and distressed at the thought of him being sucked into helping Jack hunt the worst sort of killers again. Her emotions had taken them both on a vicious roller-coaster since he had found her, lying in a coma in a Parisian hospital bed several weeks after she had thrown herself from a bridge into the Seine river. Doc had thought he had lost her, and spent many days by her side, willing her to wake up, clutching her hand as if he could somehow transmit his own life force into her. A lung infection had seen the life drain out of her, and her body, wasted away from months of neglect, had almost succumbed.

'It's been a tough time for her, but we're through the worst. And I'm retired. Officially and forever. No more active cases for me. So, let's get on with preparing for your guests – we've got an hour or so. Judy should be back soon, too.'

They strolled together to the patio and Doc hoiked the cover off the gleaming Weber Genesis gas powered grill, then folded it as Jack stood admiring the device in its full glory.

‘I love this thing, but I reckon it cost almost as much as Sally’s car!’ It was an exaggeration, but Jack’s consulting income from Doc’s TV series had allowed him to treat his daughter to a second-hand Peugeot cabriolet as a gift when she graduated from university – and buy a brand-new Jaguar XK for himself. ‘This barbie’s a beaut. Four burners under that grill, a side burner for veggies, a Dutch oven, spit roaster, pizza stone and waffle iron. I’ll bet you’ve not used half that stuff, mate!’

That was true, but more importantly, Jack’s good humour was back. Doc grinned, pleased that their brief spat over his reluctance to share confidential details on the Leech boy, and the confirmation that Judy had redirected her animosity towards Jack, had not spoiled his celebratory mood. That was about to change.

As Doc tucked the folded vinyl cover into the stainless-steel cupboard under the grill, Jack hoisted the hood and immediately dropped it back in place with a clang that made Doc’s ears ring.

‘Jesus fucking wept! I thought you said you’d cleaned this last night!’

‘I did.’ Doc stood, wondering what had got into Jack, having seen him jump back after slamming the grill hood, as if electrocuted by it, his face chalk white. ‘What is it?’

Doc grabbed the handle and opened the grill, stunned by what he saw inside, his mind jumping to conclusions even as Jack murmured behind him, his breath now hot on Doc’s neck.

‘The Leech brothers again? What the bloody hell’s going on, Doc?’

\*\*\*