

A Distant Voice

Robert Wilkinson

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Chapter One

A Distant Voice

R obert Wilkinson

Chapter Two

Copyright

Copyright

A Distant Voice

Author : Robert Wilkinson

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Chapter Three

1

A Distant Voice By Robert Wilkinson.

Funeral

I always think it is odd when they ask you how the funeral went. Is the answer “We sang some songs then burnt his body, cried, laughed, and all went our separate ways.”

That’s it, now I should be over it. Over him. Well, I’m not.

The day was as it should be; grey and miserable and it passed in a blurred flash, numbness not making me aware of what happened. Now, I recall every detail in painfully slow motion, the solemn faces of our families and friends, the shuffled half-steps at the entrance, the celebrant speaking with love and compassion about someone she did not know; all words supplied to her, smoothed and abridged, delivered with solemnity and a slight dash of humour. Dave would have appreciated that. I nearly said ‘liked’. Then they drew the curtains, a moment where I choked back a huge gulp of emotion, and we took that solemn walk outside, lots of hugs and tears as I was subjected to everyone else’s emotions, and I felt that was undeserved. Some just

walked past, not being able to face me, or themselves. The mourning party broke up into clusters, and they expected me to share my grief with each one, like an audition for a part I had no wish to play.

The phrases were commonplace; 'far too young', 'taken early', 'before his time' and the strangest one, 'at least you didn't have any children.'

What! Why did that have any sort of place at my husband's funeral? Then, the grief ebbed away and memories washed in, some laughs, some distorted to show Dave in a more heroic light, and fleetingly I wondered what elevated the dead to sainthood so quickly? Another overheard thread concerned his motorcycle. Now that was a subject I could wax on with some passion. It was his pride and joy, and I accused him once of loving that damned thing more than he loved me. Loved it to death in the end.

We adjourned to the Hare and Hounds where a stodgy spread of pastries, pork pies, sausage rolls, triangular sandwiches, Victoria sponge and French fancies, plus crisps and nuts (and rock and roll) were laid out. There was no defined end to it- the wake. It just drifted away, the tsunami of emotion now just the memory of a ripple as the mourners mourned no more, went back to whatever their day had in store for them and my sister, who seemed more upset than I, ushered me away, but then I had the distraction of action to wipe away my tears, for it had been a frantic couple of weeks for me.

That sunny Sunday afternoon, when I was dead-heading the climbing roses, at the same time a lorry was dead-heading my husband. A knock came at the door and two solemn police officers stood and I froze as a myriad of possibilities overwhelmed me and I think I invited them in but can't be sure, not that it matters, but details are a thing for me. They told me Dave was involved in an accident and I asked if he was hurt, and the looks they exchanged with one another were

the confirmation I dreaded. I recall my head was in a daze, indecision to the simplest of things rushed at me, making me stagger, and in no time, the lovely Jane had got me to change out of my gardening gear and Jav, the gentle giant ensured everything was secure and they took me to the hospital mortuary to identify him. Well, his head really, for I could tell it was not attached to his body by the contours of the green sheet covering him. He looked asleep, only a slight scratch on his chin showing any trauma. I had to say who he was, and Jane took me away with undue haste, but I could see him later at the undertaker's parlour, which was considerably more amiable than the austerity of the hospital morgue.

My parents, who were old hands at it, made the arrangements for me. The undertaker was a calm, gentle man who listened, took notes, and asked what Dave would have wanted. Now that's a strange thing; for me at least. Many people obsess about their funerary arrangements, but they won't be there in any sentient form to see what actually happened. I have concluded that funerals are for the living, not the dead. I daresay mum and dad have discussed their last wishes, but Dave and I hadn't.

Next item was the inquest, opened and adjourned in the blink of an eye, whilst the engineers performed their own autopsy on the mangled wreckage of Dave's motorbike. Registry office was a chore, but dad was with me, suggesting the appropriate number of death certificates, taking me to the town hall where they had a 'tell us once' process and all the relevant authorities notified at a single sitting. Everyone was so kind.

It was two weeks until they released the body, and the funeral arranged for ten days later.

Dave spent an age cleaning his bike; 'detailing', he called it. Him and his daft brother, Steve. Always tinkering, I thought Dave said he

was going out for a run with Steve, something of a regular event, but Steve said he had shied off at the last minute because of a puncture. Dave died alone, save for the lorry driver who tried to apologise to me in very broken English, and for a brute of a man, he couldn't stop his emotions from running down his cheek. I patted him on the arm and nodded, since it wasn't his fault; Dave slid sideways under his rig on a corner and if there was any comfort in a tragedy such as this, the police said it was quick. I never got to say goodbye and my last words to my husband were "Fish OK for tea?"

Not exactly the thing to be inscribed on his headstone. Not that he had one. I have his ashes in an urn, my intention is to scatter them at our honeymoon destination at Arcachon, a lake in the south of France. Plage Thiers where we had already booked to return for our fifth anniversary in August. I still had to decide whether to go, but Jade, my sister, said she would come with me if I wanted.

Then it was over. I sent the flowers to the care home where my gran now lives. The collection proceeds sat in a fat envelope on the hall table, and I shooed mine and Dave's parents away to grieve in their own ways and allow me to grieve in mine. I felt a little guilty since my immediate emotion was anger. Angry that he had died so needlessly, anger he had left me alone, anger at my apparent lack of a future. I overheard someone say at the wake that I am young enough to find someone new, well I don't want someone new, I want Dave. I want my husband.

Chapter Four

2

Solace

Sleep was no longer my friend and once more, I descended the stairs to make a warm milky drink in the night, and I checked my phone for the first time in weeks and tears frothed from me as I listened to his last message, sent on the Friday before his accident.

“Running a little late, but I’ll pick up a Chinese on the way home. Love you.”

His voice: full of life, full of confidence and love. I felt it listening to that brief sentence. Sixteen words, fifty-seven letters. Twenty-two vowels and thirty-five consonants. I was so careful to press ‘save’ and sometimes, I got to sleep after listening to that message, deceiving myself that he was still here. Sometimes I listened to it too often, and listening to his voice became my fix; the drug, which made my days palatable. Barely.

Is three weeks long enough to grieve? Everyone thought so, except for me. Even my over-caring mother said it was time to ‘get over it’. I could have hit her, and I’m not sure how I kept that rage inside me. People reacted differently. Some just nodded to me, the subject buried

with Dave. Not that we buried him, of course, for his ashes sat in that urn on the mantelpiece. Others crossed the street, pretending not to have noticed me, the subject was too difficult for them. Some oozed a sickly form of fake caring, which was the worst of all the reactions, as their voices lowered a tone, became slower in delivery, as if I had difficulty in comprehension, but I was bereaved, not demented. "How are you coping, hun?" was the usual soft and sickly welcome served up to me, but I don't have a sweet tooth for that, and I ground my teeth and shrugged, which they probably thought to be my emotions challenging me, which it was, just not the ones they assumed. My preferred approach, delivered by Sam, my boss, the tall, gruff office manager, simply said "Sorry that your husband died. Anything you need from me, just ask, although I have no idea what that could be."

He was a gem, and he didn't know, nor did I tell him, how comforting that was. Now, of course, I was back at work. Back in the office, my mind numbed by the stream of numbers, checks and counter-balances, credit and debit, and it helped. Distraction, I suppose, and the routine took my mind away from him, although he popped to the surface at the strangest times, as a word triggered a memory and I smiled. I wanted the day to end so I could go home and hear his voice again in the privacy of our home- my home- since my reaction to that simple sentence was still unpredictable. Sam told me to go home early, but I stuck my chin out and persevered until five o'clock; No-one was allowed to observe any weakness in me and I pulled up onto the drive and a tear tricked its way into my eye when I saw Dave's car still there. I suppose I should sell it, for I don't think I could bring myself to driving it. I'd ask dad. The house felt cold as I entered and I slipped my coat off, tossed my keys into the bowl on the hall table and noticed the red light blinking on the telephone. No doubt some well-meaning message from someone who had just heard the news, so

I pressed play but stood, puzzled as the machine replayed a series of static noises, interrupted by a couple of beeps. It sounded like the old dial-up internet connection noise and obviously a wrong number, yet somehow it made me shiver and I erased it, frowned and flopped onto the sofa and played the now solo game of what to have for tea.

Life resumed, but now a pointless routine devoid of laughter, excitement, and love. His daft brother, Steve, called around, all false sorrow, lots of 'if only' pointless observations and that sideways look in his eye which made my flesh crawl. He couldn't help it; Dave was his hero, helped him out of several scrapes and although he was less than two years younger than Dave, he seemed to be much younger; more naïve, much less dependable and I think he was coping with his brother's loss much worse than I was. After a tedious couple of hours, I prised him off the armchair and sent him home, although he asked if there was something of Dave's he could have as a remembrance. I said I'd think it over.

Another of those strange messages on the answerphone appeared a couple of days later, and I thought I could hear breathing, but when I replayed it, it became indistinct. I tried the call register to find out who had called, but there was nothing, and that was something which puzzled and disturbed me. I had my holiday to look forward to and managed an ironic laugh at that notion, which turned to annoyance when I discovered I needed permission to take his ashes on the plane. Classed as foodstuff, for god's sake! I took a small amount, emptied a talcum powder container, washed it and filled it with his ashes, although fine gravel would be a more accurate description. I would take the rest up to the moors where we used to enjoy a ramble and scatter them there as well.

My return to Arcachon with Jade was surprisingly relaxing. It was meant to be a celebration of mine and Dave's fifth wedding anniver-

sary, which it wasn't now. We hadn't made it that far. Jade was her usual butterfly-like self, settling on one thing, then alighting on another. She tried hard to make me forget Dave, which offended me. I didn't want to forget him, and told her so in no uncertain terms, to which she had a sulk and took off and joined a group of people determined to party all day, and she ended up getting horribly drunk and I spent most of the night listening to her being sick in the bathroom. Definitely no second honeymoon, but it was relaxing. We visited the Grande Dune du Pilat, which is the tallest in Europe and quite a spectacle. Bordeaux is a box of delights and I spent some time in a quaint old bookshop on the square and found an English language book, 'In Cold Blood' by Truman Capote, and not something I would normally read, but I found it enthralling. Most days were spent by the water sunbathing, boating, or paddle boarding. As usual, the return home was depressing, arriving at Gatwick airport in the rain, and the drive back was solemn.

The hall mat had a small mountain of letters, and I piled them on the coffee table as I fired up the central heating and made a drink - no milk, of course; I would stock up in the morning. Whilst tonight, I'd allow myself to sink into melancholy. I awoke early in the morning; the rain had gone and the sun danced with the clouds attempting to show herself. I stopped in the hallway as I made to visit the local shop when I saw the voicemail light winking at me. Surely I hadn't heard the phone ring, and I checked the settings, which showed the phone should have rung five times before clicking to my new, solo message. "Obviously not here; leave a message." I pressed 'play' and the hissing static returned, although I swore I could just detect an attempted word, or maybe a groan? I replayed it, but could no longer detect anything other than static, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Chapter Five

3

Blood Money

The following week, I received an unexpected visitor. Jack Grimes is David's boss; I must get used to saying 'was'. He bought me a bouquet of flowers, which was nice, along with a small box of Dave's personal effects from his desk. Jack said what a loss Dave was to their practise, and that Dave was a talented architect destined for greater things, then Jack smoothly said, mine was the far greater loss, and I felt he was genuine. He brought me some paperwork to sign and presented me with a cheque with a staggering amount written on it, and he explained their pension scheme also had a life insurance element worth four times Dave's annual salary. I hardly said a word, since I felt guilty about being rewarded for his death. Jack stayed for an hour and gave me a hug as he left, his face was wet, but that was the effect Dave had on people's lives. The money would pay off the mortgage, but the price was too high, and I broke down, sobbing longer and more loudly than since he had passed. I hoped nobody would come to the house to see me like this. Why did I feel embarrassed by my grief? So many

unanswered questions filled my head, and I needed my fix of hearing Dave's voice; it had been a while.

"Running late, but I'll pick up a curry on the way home. Love you."

I sat down. What? I replayed it and his calm, slightly amused tones penetrated my soul, but the message was different. He said 'curry', but had he not said 'Chinese' originally? I was sure he had, but the message said 'curry'. Was I going mad? I strained my mind to recall what he had actually brought home, and it was Chinese. Sure it was. I think. I shook my head and stood at the French window, allowing the cool of a light drizzle to envelop me. The house phone rang, but I ignored it. I was in no mood to speak to anyone.

Standing at the doorway, getting wet allowed my mind to attempt to unscramble my thoughts. The money- blood money, so it felt to me, was Dave's last gift. Security. Doesn't everyone crave that? I preferred to still have him, but that was a road to suffering, so I parked that notion; no doubt I would revisit it again. I looked at Jack's thoughtful gift of flowers, still in my wet clothes, then I arranged them to my satisfaction, had a long shower, ordered myself a pizza and finally listened to the message, half expecting more static. It was Steve, asking if I had given any more thought to a keepsake for him, and what was I doing with Dave's Beamer? Cheeky bugger! If he thought he was getting that, he had better think hard and think fast. I hadn't given his request any consideration and was in no hurry to save it would get him off my back.

My food arrived, and I had a glass of wine with it, then had a moment of self-pity and, on an impulse, called his mobile saying how much I loved him and missed him. His phone was still in a box in the spare room, the battery dead now, like him. I would need to sort his stuff out. He always had good clothes, nicely tailored shirts, smart trousers, all kept pressed and neatly arranged. Should I throw them

out? I asked mum who just said I'd know when to sort things out and what to keep. She had done the same for gran, after grandad had died, since her mother was in no state to decide for herself. This was all so difficult.

That night, I dreamed about him. He came to me and took my hand, leading me outside, to the bottom of the garden to the seat which caught the late sun, where we enjoyed the birdsong settling down for the evening, where we had laid a few flat stones as a cosy patio to accommodate a small heater and we just sat and spoke with no words, just the joining of minds and emotions and I fell asleep there, on that seat as he faded away from my dream and I awoke with a start. I was still in bed, and the dawn suggested an entrance, and for the first time in weeks, I felt relaxed and comforted. That dream had been so real, so unassuming, just the two of us together, enjoying one another's company, as we always have. Had. It was Sunday and mum had invited me for Sunday lunch and I agreed, just hoping she would treat me normally. I glanced at my cell phone. A message. "I love you too."

I dropped it, the room swirled, and I grabbed the back of the sofa, edging around it and slumped down, gasping for breath. I retrieved my thankfully still intact phone from the floor and re-read the message. It was from him. From Dave. Impossible! Was someone playing a sick joke on me? Daft Steve, no doubt, and I would have strong words with him. He and Dave were so unlike, and I sometimes wondered if they were actual brothers at all, but the familial resemblances were there. Dave very much his father's son, and Steve, taking after his mother. I made a mental note to call in on them on the way home, and hoped Steve was not there, for I doubted whether I could hold back from rebuking him. How he did it was a different matter, but Steve was a tech addict, so a possibility.

Lunch was pleasant, dad shook his head a lot when mum kept cooing over me and he gave her ‘the look’ a few times, and as mum shooed me out of the kitchen whilst she cleared the dishes into the dishwasher, dad took me by the arm and we walked around the garden, talking about his flowers, how the latest batch of compost was rubbish, his plans for a new stone patio to replace the deck which was rotting. It was to be his spring project, and he suggested he was seriously considering taking early retirement, something which surprised and pleased me. I mentioned the windfall from Dave’s work, and he immediately suggested I pay off the mortgage, which I had already decided to do. Life moved on, it changed, as it always did, and he said I should take things at my own pace, that I should ignore any well-meaning suggestions to ‘get over it’. His brother, my uncle who I never met, had died in a freak accident at work when he was just twenty and dad spoke with both emotion and authority of a shared sense of grief. It surprised me how many people’s lives are punctuated with tragedies, and I took comfort from the fact they survived in one piece, although, as dad described it, a repaired vase; the shape was still there, the colours retouched and bright, but the cracks were there, holding everything together.

I called at Dave’s parents at four, and thankfully Steve was out, and they made me welcome, as ever. I told them of Dave’s insurance and remembered that I needed to claim on our own policy, and I paled at the thought of more blood money.

Chapter Six

4

Is Anybody There?

I don't know why I did it, in hindsight, it was Jade and Sally- my best friend- who suggested it, but I went to a spiritualist church, having no expectation of what happened there. I suppose I thought of Victorian England, ladies in long dark dresses, men with starched collars and all sitting around a round table, a lace tablecloth spread in front of them as they formed a circle, all holding hands.

I was wrong. We went into an old Methodist Chapel, the square room laid with carpet, about thirty chairs set out facing a small stage which had three chairs on, and surprisingly, to me at least, there was a large wooden cross. I assumed it to be a relic of the chapel's past, but I was wrong as the service opened with a prayer and a hymn. The leader, a tiny woman with a frizz of dark hair and overly large spectacles, read some messages out, which meant nothing to me, then she introduced a tall, severe woman, although I didn't catch her name. She was, despite her looks, jovial, with a rich scouse accent which somehow always brokers humour. I was bored as she pointed to people, all wide-eyed with expectation, told them a lady with a cat was with them, did a

large piano mean something? and other bits of trivia, all of which was greedily lapped up by the congregation, and there were few empty seats. Then I froze.

“The lady with the ponytail, yes, you, love.” She intoned, and I coloured up; my hearing went to that setting where everything seemed to be muted, like I was in a tunnel. I snapped out of it and listened to her, noticed Sally nudging Jade.

”You have lost someone dear to you,” she continued, and I thought that was a safe bet, for surely everyone there had lost someone dear to them, otherwise, why attend? She swallowed hard and put her hand to her throat. “It was sudden, dear, but he, yes it’s a ‘he’, he said something about something sticking. Wait. This is recent, isn’t it?” I nodded. “Just say something love, it strengthens the connection.”

I cleared my throat and prised a ‘yes’ from my dry mouth. She nodded, then shook her head. “Sorry love. It’s difficult for someone who passed recently.” She stopped, and I saw a tear roll down her cheek, and she clenched her lips tightly, nodded again and moved on to a noisy parrot apparently sitting on a ladies’ shoulder. I noticed how many of the audience were women. I could only see three men. Not that it mattered, and the ringing in my ears persisted for a few more moments and Jade whispered something to me, which I didn’t catch, then the meeting drifted to an end with smiles, tears and another hymn; ‘Abide with me’, which I rather like.

The meeting concluded with an invitation to stay and chat over tea and cake, and my friends encouraged me to stay. The leader with the frizzy hair came to us as we sipped our insipid tea, although the homemade lemon drizzle cake was delightful. She asked if it was our first time, and hoped we would come again since ‘new blood’ was always welcome. I suppressed a sarcastic comment about human sac-

rifice, and she drifted away, to be replaced by the tall scouser. Her voice lowered, for me only.

“I didn’t want to say it in front of the crowd, but it was your husband, wasn’t it?” I choked back a tear and nodded, and she leaned in closer, holding her throat. “Did something happen to his throat—no, his head? Oh, my days, he had his head severed in an accident.” She touched my arm, and a spark jolted us both and she smiled. “Bloody nylon carpet. So sorry for your loss, love. Look, he did well coming through. Here, take my card. I do private readings, so if you want, I can come to the privacy of your home and see what comes through?” She smiled, then, most unexpectedly, hugged me and floated off to a small group of ladies eager to devour her words of wisdom. I looked at the card, a simple, homemade affair, saying ‘Margie Lawler. Medium’, with her phone number on it. I put it in my bag and realised my face was wet and Sally gave a tight smile to Jade, indicating sympathy, took my cup and saucer from me, and breezed; “Sod this. Wine beckons in the pub a few doors down.” We waved frizzy hair goodbye and walked into the fine drizzle which refreshed me, and we hastened up the street to the bar, which was more than a few doors down, found a table and bought a bottle with three glasses and dissected the evening.

The night was jolly, and we managed another bottle before Sally dropped us off at our respective homes and I yearned for the red light on the phone to be winking at me, but it didn’t. Margie said that he would have expended a lot of energy coming through, and I sat and cried at the thought. This was all so hard, and as excited as Sally and Jade were at the result of the evening, I felt sad, sadder, for no reason which I ascribe any logic to. My sleep was fitful. Images of Dave, no, a parody of his face flashed before me. Sad Dave, not the happy, warm, loving husband I missed so much, but a pale, dull face. No, a head. Shit. I awoke with a start, tears streaming again. My God, this was not

me at all. Maybe I would give Margie a call. A warm milky drink as my companion, I returned to bed and hugged my knees, and the thought nagged me. Something sticking. Is that what she said? What did that mean? I picked up my mobile phone and called him. "I miss you so much, and will love you forever," was all I said, ending the call with a kiss and I cried myself to sleep, not for the last time.

The drizzle from the previous evening had made the transition to full on autumn rain, which lashed at my windows, and I took a long shower before going to work. It was Friday, and another weekend beckoned, and this time, I decided not to go to mum and dads for Sunday lunch, but I would attend to matters more physical and go for a run; something I had neglected since... Everything now seemed defined by Dave's loss. Work dulled my spirit as I collated results and compiled a report for Sam, who asked if I was OK, and I shrugged a reply, tidying my desk as four o'clock approached. There was a message on my mobile phone. "XXX." That was it, and I stopped in my tracks at the source of the message. Dave. Bless him. I smiled and took comfort from my obvious insanity, for this was an intimacy allowed only to me and something not to be shared. I held the phone to my heart and smiled.

Chapter Seven

5

Dark Clouds

My weekend started badly. Steve was waiting as I got home from work. There was always something about him which I didn't like, or trust, and since Dave, he was taking the persona of a stalker. I was short-tempered and asked him what he wanted as we stood outside in the rain. I did not invite him in saying I had no time and was going to the theatre with some work mates. He asked if I fancied a drink sometime and I snapped a 'no' back at him and he looked crestfallen and asked what I was doing with Dave's car, and had I thought anymore about a keepsake. He always conflated the two things. I said not yet, and was that all, since I had to dash, and he looked like a little boy lost as he half-waved a goodbye. I shook my head as I unlocked my door and picked up the post, and as I did, my heart skipped a beat when I saw the red light flashing; I dropped everything and pressed 'play', and considered my sanity since the message was from the coroner's office informing me that the inquest would resume a week on Tuesday. Another ordeal to test me.

I hadn't lied to Steve, well, not completely, for I was going to the theatre with some colleagues, but that was the next night. I phoned my dad and asked him if he could sell Dave's car for me, for I would not sit in it again; just thinking about it brought back memories of leather polish and new carpets. Dave liked his vehicles. Dad asked me about probate, but I think that depends on the coroner, and had given it little thought and dad said he'd see to it for me, since he had done that before as well. I would have to go with him to sign documents, which was fine. I know I could do it, but the enthusiasm for the task was not there.

I phoned Dave that night and went to sleep with my phone by my head, dreaming of another message. I felt so pleased he was still communicating with me. Disappointment met me in the morning since no message came to my emotional rescue. I made myself busy sorting out the garden, then vacuumed around the house before having a long soak and dressed up for my night out, which was good, although my mind drifted at times, and when I returned home after having a meal and drinks with my friends I wondered what my company had been like. I called Dave again, telling him briefly what I had been up to, and that I still loved him. The following day, I worried since no reply was forthcoming and so I went for a run along the canal towpath, through the park and back by the sports ground, where Dave used to play football until his knee could no longer stand up to the rigours of the game. It was just four miles, and we regularly did longer runs together, but it's lonely on my own. Maybe I should get a jogging 'buddy' and chuckled at the thought.

The light was flashing, and I caught my breath as I released the message. More static, and heavy breathing- not the creepy kind, just someone struggling after heavy exercise. Words were half-formed, then I was shaken by a single, clear word, unmistakeably spoken by my

husband. 'Death.' Then nothing, just crackle and hiss. That worried me, for no good reason, for I knew he was dead. Bloody knew it too well. I sat in the lounge; perched would describe it better as I fretted at this message. Once more, when I replayed it, there was nothing, and I wondered if my mind was playing tricks, or someone was, and my suspicions around Steve resurfaced. Dave always said Steve had too much time on his hands, and I wondered if such occurrences were even technically possible. I think I needed help. These thoughts needed to come out of my head and have objectivity applied.

A call from my dad interrupted my thoughts, and did I have the V5 document and service record for Dave's car? I said I'd look them out, and dad had someone interested, but how much was I expecting? Blowing out my cheeks, I shook my head, which was stupid, since he couldn't see me, then I said I'd leave it to him. I think he was reluctant, suggested a figure and I just agreed, and really wanted the thing off the drive, that constant reminder of Dave's absence.

I had a good soak, picked at some lunch, and found the papers. Dave was very well organised, and I called my dad, who popped over and picked up the documents and keys. I said he didn't need to see me when he brought someone to view it. He understood.

I wondered if I had upset Dave, then re-questioned my sanity for the millionth time. What was I thinking? He was dead. Gone, shuffled off his mortal coil, deceased. Snuffed it. I would make an appointment to see my GP and knew I was embarking on a long path of talking to a stranger about the intimacies and feelings of my life with my husband. So be it.

I had never met my GP before, and she turned out to be understanding and empathetic towards me and my plight. I didn't relate all the messages and replies, just said I was addicted to listening and re-listening to his last message, which wasn't strictly true, since I hadn't

listened to it for about a week. She prescribed me some anti-depressants, fluoxetine. Green and yellow capsules which would help me a little, but she referred me to the visiting psychiatric nurse and he or she would determine the best course of action, but my GP said to contact her, if I had any problems. She was nice. Everybody was nice. Except Steve, he was a prat. I decided to give him one of Dave's watches. He didn't wear it much- there I go again; he wore nothing now, did he? I should have said he wore a newer one more recently, although it got mangled in the accident. I would take it around one evening on the way home from work.

Chapter Eight

6

Trick or Treat

The front of the garage was wide open when I called around to Dave's parents. Steve was tinkering with a motorbike, an old-fashioned one. His newer one was on the driveway, gleaming after being washed. I pasted on my smiley face and wondered why I felt uneasy around Dave's brother. He looked up as I called a cheery, 'Hi,' and he forced a grin through his characteristic grimace.

"Thought you'd appreciate Dave's watch; I engraved it with his name on the back; I bought it for him one Christmas." I handed it to him, in a nice box I found in the loft and he wiped his hands on a cloth, took it as if it might electrocute him and nodded. Tears fell from his eyes, which surprised me. I don't know why it shocked me, after all, they were brothers and Steve always looked up to Dave. He turned away, embarrassed at his display of emotion, and his mother appeared and fussed over me, as she had taken to doing since her son had died. She ushered me in, and Steve brought his normal ride into the garage, closed the door, then went to wash the grime and emotion from his hands and face. I stayed for tea, which was plain, and uninspiring,

shepherd's pie with a million different vegetables and we chatted for a while and then Steve showed off his new possession.

Dave's father patted me on the hand and muttered, 'very thoughtful. Thank you.' We chatted and ate, and I wondered how long and even if I would continue to have a relationship with what were now my former in-laws. The evening was pleasant enough and at least saved me from having to think what I would eat, then I waved them goodnight and Steve gave me an awkward, emotional hug. The hall telephone blinked its red welcome, and I smiled and played the message. An appointment to see Paul, the psych nurse for Wednesday, which was the day after the inquest, so he may well earn his money that day.

The inquest was in an old building resembling a waiting room at a railway station and smelled of fresh paint. The coroner sat on a raised dais, behind a desk, the Crown insignia large behind him, and there were several rows of benches, and I was there (of course), Jade, mum and dad, Dave's parents and Joelle, his sister, who I didn't know very well. Steve wasn't there, and his mum whispered he was still too upset. A couple of journalists sat at the side, looking bored, along with two police officers and a man in a dark suit, who I didn't recognise. The proceedings were quickly over. The man in the suit was the Traffic Incident Inspector, and he related that Dave's bike showed no skid marks, indicating he hadn't braked for the corner, and it was difficult to estimate his speed because of that. A written statement from an eyewitness stated he wasn't going very fast but skidded on some loose chippings on the corner and collided with the lorry. Traffic man said there was the briefest of marks- only nine centimetres which suggested he may have applied the brakes too late, or that they had stuck, causing the accident. The wreckage of the motorcycle was too severe to provide further information but looked in good order. The attending police officers, who both offered me their condolences when

they left, gave brief statements, and that was it. Accidental death. I think I felt more emotional at the end of the inquest than I did at the end of the funeral. We went for some lunch and ate in comparative silence. Dad insisted on paying and Dave's dad tried in vain to pick up the tab, then we went home. I shooed Jade away, and I sat on our garden bench all afternoon until it went dark, having no idea what I thought of, just the finality of it all made me numb. I slept soundly but dreamed of him, smiling, then shouting- I was sure they were his last moments, and I awoke to the dawn, grisly and grey, with a heavy burden of sorrow weighing on my shoulders. I took a green and yellow capsule, expecting a miracle which the doctor said wouldn't happen. I remembered the psych nurse was coming at nine thirty, so showered and made myself somewhat presentable.

Paul was pretty much as I expected. Hair, wavy, slightly too long, and light brown. He has a calm manner. We talked, and talked, or rather I did, then remembered my manners and offered him a drink, and Paul availed himself of one of my herbal tea selection. Dave hated them, but Paul enjoyed the lemon and ginger. He was with me for over two hours, and I told him everything, the messages, the dreams, the spiritualist church and he listened closely, asked me how I felt when these things happened, and he booked an appointment in ten days to visit me again. I was to record my thoughts and dreams if I could recall them. I returned to work the next day, and the weekend galloped towards me again. It was a while since I had my last Dave fix, and I needed another, so listened to the message on my mobile.

“Running late, but I'll pick up a Chinese on my way home. Love you.”

Chinese! It had changed back- or did I imagine the whole 'curry' thing? Shaking my head, I wandered upstairs and picked up his phone and put it on charge, and wondered if there were any messages on it

which he hadn't sent me. I have no idea why I thought that, but it felt the correct thing to do.

As I skipped down the stairs, the red winking eye caught my attention, and I pressed play. "Ssss." Static. "Ssteve...." static. That was it. Clearly said 'Steve' and I wondered if he was in danger, and what should I do about it? At least Dave was in contact again, for it had been a week since he had been here.

What am I saying? He's gone. Paul said so. I went to his bloody funeral and his inquest, didn't I? Sally's ringing thankfully interrupted my thoughts, asking if I fancied a night out? I didn't, but try me tomorrow, I said. Tonight, I drink alone, a photo of Dave in front of me, a microwaved meal, and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc as my company. Halfway through the bottle, I collected his phone and scrolled. Our messages to one another made me cry. I scrolled through hundreds of photos of myself, many of which made me smile, sometimes for the wrong reasons. I was flooded with happy memories and made a promise that I must download all these to a folder, so they never got lost. He had a couple of voicemails from acquaintances who didn't know he was dead, and that was a task I would have to undertake soon. His text messages were full of banter between him and his friends, his brother and sister, and the last ones between him and Steve caught my eye as I opened a second bottle. Steve asked Dave for money to start a motorcycle repair business, but he had these grand schemes before and never saw things through. I said, "Quite right too." When Dave said no. There were lots more, and Dave encouraged Steve, but without giving him any money. He'd done it before when Steve tried to make a living making computers. I'm no business guru, but when you can buy an off the shelf PC for less than he could assemble them, it would never be a success. I had another drink and smiled at the interchange, then I had a tremor in my hand. It was as if I was trying to shake his

phone from my grasp, then a door slammed upstairs, and I jumped. The wind had got up, so I secured the doors and windows, went to the loo, and continued down the stairs and the eye winked at me.

Static. A long exhalation of breath, then a shout, which made me drop the receiver. “Death!” Then a long drawn out tapering off of the static and the line went dead. Lights in the lounge flickered, and I swallowed hard, feeling an iciness in the room, which appeared out of nowhere.

I was nervous, this disturbed me, and I broke out in a cold sweat and picked up the phone and the text thread. Now, it looked like Steve was having a go at motorbike repair and his father had loaned him some money for equipment. Dave encouraged him and I recalled Steve working on a bike in the garage when I dropped off Dave’s watch for him. I pulled my cardigan around my shoulders and then the tremors returned as I saw Dave agree for Steve to service his pride and joy, for a fee, which seemed a lot to me, but I did not know what a normal price would be. I trembled more, and the lights flickered again, and I went cold. The same cold I recalled from the morgue as I read the last text.

Dave: ‘Are you sure the brakes are OK? They seem to stick a bit.’

Steve: ‘Double-checked mate, they’ll loosen off with a spin.’

My phone rang, and I was crying when I picked it up and I didn’t breathe as I heard Dave’s voice.

“Sorry to leave you. Don’t blame my brother, he’ll live with the guilt for the rest of his days. I’ll wait for you on the other side..” he choked the ultimate words; “I love you, and always will, but I must go....”

The lights went out and a brilliant silent flash of blue- white light bathed the room and I felt a warmth in my very core, as David’s face formed in front of me, smiling, loving, neither happy nor sad. He pursed his lips and mouthed the word ‘more’. It was our thing. When one of us said I love you, the other replied with ‘more’, which we

shortened from 'I love you more'. Then, the happiest, saddest thing happened, he faded into the still brilliant light which did not dazzle, and the room emerged from the silver mist, and he was gone, and I knew he would not contact me again, his job done, and I cried.

THE END

Don't forget the others

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