

# Splinters

The Novel

By Tony Sheppard

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## Look Inside

### PROLOGUE

Haslemere 2050

An empty house on a plateau appeared dark and brooding through early morning mist, its vacancy expressed through grime - covered windows: “Who owned this place, then?” said Barry, a workman. His boss, Ron, tongue protruding from the side of his mouth in concentration, ignored Barry while carefully negotiating his new blue and white Hovawagun through a pair of lodge gates, before setting off up a meandering incline leading to where the house stood.

“Ron.”

“What?”

“I said, who owned this place?”

“Bloke called Bates: Moved abroad. Used to be a stud farm, but after hunting with hounds got banned, thoroughbred horses weren't needed anymore. I got the place at the auction at Guildford.”

“What you gonna do with it?” said Barry.

“Dunno, yet” Ron sniffed. “Might knock it down and build a Chinese Cemetery. It'd look alright with oval-shaped graves dug into the hillside. Bet you didn't know that's why Chinese graves are shaped like that. Like a womb? It's symbolic of returning to their ancestors. First thing we're gonna do is see if they left anything of value. It cost me a grand, just to have 'Ron Millward - Demolition & Renovation' painted on the side of the van.”

Ron squeezed the brass doorknob with both hands, and drew in a deep breath. Then he yanked it as hard as he could. “I can't budge it” he groaned. “You have a go,” Barry looked at Ron's dust-covered scalp, glistening two inches from his nose, thinking, I'm not surprised. You're so fat, your sweat stinks worse than this hallway. Barry let Ron slide the short distance from cellar door to wall behind them. “Move,” he said. Gauging the angle between his foot and a spot just above the doorknob, Barry pressed his back against plasterboard, restricting his backward movement. I'm sick of this, he decided. Every time there's humping, or chopping to do when we knock these places down, I'm the one who has to do it. You don't pay me enough, mister.

Harnessing his pent-up anger in his right thigh, Barry imagined the brass plate to be Ron's head and unleashed his steel toe-capped boot against it. Then he leapt forward, grabbed the doorknob, and pulled. The door cracked then creaked open slightly as the mould- and dust-sealed oak gave up. Old,

musty air sighed out thankfully into the cramped confines of the passage. “Yuk,” said Barry.

With a further three, easier pulls, the door opened. Ron squeezed past, and flicked the light switch: Nothing. He took an Ever Ready torch, sticking out of his pocket, and pressed the button. Rough, nine-by-two-inch steps, held together by a handrail, disappeared into the gloom below. Less brave now, Ron handed the torch to Barry, saying “Er, you go first. “I’ll fetch the tools.”

*Tell me something new, fatso.* screamed Barry, wordlessly.

The pencil beam swept over a brick floor, then broke into shafts of light, as it pierced cord-like cobwebs. Barry surveyed the empty cellar. They must’ve cleared it out before they left. Kuh. Nobody could’ve been down here for years, he thought. Time for an early tea-break, I reckon. He ducked to avoid a light bulb hanging in front of him, then gasped, and shook his head when it revealed itself to be, instead, an enormous spider, dangling from the ceiling. This place is spooky, he thought.

Barry paused, letting his eyes adjust to give a better perspective of the layout. A carpenter by trade, he knew all about angles and shapes. This room isn’t right, he observed. He ran his fingers over a brick wall, flaking on his left, and shone the torch into that corner of the room. He stopped, and looked at the wall to his half-right, angling away - not at ninety degrees, but slightly off true. He tapped it. Vibration, echoing inside paint-covered plasterboard, told him there was a void behind. Barry jumped as Ron came, unnoticed, from behind. “What you tryna do? Scare me to death?”

“Sorry: Just being careful.”

“Hand me that claw hammer,” hissed Barry, nervously snapping his fingers. Ron wiped dust-caked sweat off his face with a filthy handkerchief, and asked, “Found something?” Barry took the hammer by its head, avoiding the part the cotton touched. He wiped the handle on his jeans, then flipped it over, and crooked its head over the top corner of the plasterboard, grunting, “Dunno. Might’ve,”. He gently eased the handle up, pulling at the same time. The whole thing came away in a crumbling sheet revealing a space. “Get a generator, will you? There’s another room behind here.”

Enthused by this new discovery, Ron turned eagerly away, saying, “Will do. What’s in there?”

“Why d’you think I need a generator?” sniffed Barry, taking several steps backward.

“Oh. Yeah, OK.” Brilliant white light gave the cellar an atmosphere of being, at least, not the morgue-like place it seemed before. Still, Barry had the definite feeling of having been transported back in time, as what he had thought was another room turned out to be a recess about four feet deep revealed its secrets. The sound of Barry’s footsteps had been muffled as his boots transferred from brick to a musty carpet.

Returning with the generator he had pinched off the side of the M3 one night, Ron was prompted to whip out the handkerchief again as dust billowed up into his face. Small nasal deposits remained on his face when he put it back in his pocket. Barry’s gaze traversed from left to right. A wheelchair came first into view. Then a pair of crutches, propped against a writing desk. Barry’s arms spontaneously jerked up to protect his face as what seemed to be a bird of prey, perched on top of the desk, prepared to leap at him. A stuffed owl fell forward, and over the edge. As if completing a successful moon landing, it plopped onto the carpet, and rolled towards the men, leaving a crazy line in the dust.

“Bring up that rig,” said Barry. Ron pushed the trolley of lights nearer to where Barry stood. “What you got?” said Ron. “Looks like junk to me: Might be money in them drawers, though. You have a look. I’ll put the kettle on.” Barry sighed, wondering, Are money and your gut the only things you ever think about? He took off his jacket, and wiped the surface of the desk. Bad idea, he realised as a cloud of dead matter exploded into life. A faint glint, coming from a small statue, lying in an empty shoebox, caught Barry’s eye. He picked up the statue, pulling a drawer open with his other hand at the same time. Several photographs, the top one of which appeared to be a family portrait, clung together inside. He picked them up, too, noting Ron had returned with two mugs of steaming tea. “Tea up”, Ron said, placing the mugs on top of a wooden box.

“Hmmm. Coming,” said Barry, looking again at the statue. Stuffing the photographs in a back pocket, he turned it over, and looked at its base. “Blimey.” he said.

“What’s happened?”, asked Ron, straining to see more than the confined space allowed.

Barry smeared grease and dust off the figure. “It’s an Oscar. An old one, as well: The date on it’s 1991.”

“Oscar who?”

God, you're thick, thought Barry, sitting on an edge of the trolley. “No, an Oscar. One of those things you got if you were lucky after sitting in a room that smells like a brothel, surrounded by clicking people, for five hours.”

“Clicking?”

“Clicking. You know, top and bottom sets. In your north and south.”

“North?”

“Oh, for God's sake, Ron; Top and bottom sets of teeth.”

“Oh. I get you. False teeth. It is old, then.” Somewhere between receiving the sounds of Barry's words, and, “Oh. I get you,” coming out of Ron's mouth, the significance of Barry's explanations went AWOL, resulting in him contradicting his own last statement, when he next said, “Where would that be, then?”

Barry gave up, merely saying, “Hollywood.”

“Yeah, but, so what?”

Ohhh, what a gob I've got, thought Barry. Story of my life. Should've stuck it in me pocket. “So what?” he gasped: “If it's a real one, it's solid gold, that's what.” Half a soggy biscuit spewed back into Ron's mug. “Give it here,” he spluttered. Barry gave him the statue then bent down to pick up his tea. As he did so, extra pressure in his back pocket reminded him of the photographs. He took them out, downing a slurp of warm Typhoo tea at the same time. “Huh,” he said.

“What?” said Ron, squinting at the statue, trying to find the best place to scratch it.

Barry continued: “This photograph was taken outside, by the side of this house. You can see the top paddock: And the Devil's Punchbowl, over the trees in the background. There's an old bloke. Those crutches are propping him up. He's only got one leg. I think he's only got one arm, too. And there's an old woman, sitting in the wheelchair.”

Ron laughed. “Got his hand caught in a safe, and fell under a bus, running away.”

Deciding to keep his mouth shut, Barry let weary thoughts ease into his brain: God, you're as useful as an exhaled breath of air. I'm packing it in after this job. He moistened his fingers, wiped the picture, and looked again. His low whistle broke the silence.

“What now?” asked Ron, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. Barry was too entranced to reply straight away. Standing between the crippled man and the old lady was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She was taller than the old man. Her right arm lay, snakelike, across his back. Her long, well-manicured fingers seemed to point to something offstage. Her left hand rested comfortably on the old woman's right shoulder. Wiping the picture again brought a smile to Barry's face, as a pair of blue eyes – a blue which seemed to him surrounded the woman's body – seduced him. Perfect teeth, accentuated by full lips the colour of a guardsman's tunic, and the curve of her bosom, just visible by the side of the old woman's head, triggered a rush of testosterone to his brain: But his words, “Don't bother scratching it, Ron; it's real,” were softly spoken, almost reverently.

“How d'you know?”

“There's another woman in this picture. I didn't notice her, what with her blonde hair, and the white summer dress. She's the one who won that Oscar.”

“An old woman?”

Barry sighed a martyr's sigh, then said, “I'll bet you this picture was taken in the 1990s. Before you could grow your own body parts. That's why he's on crutches. Come on. Drink up. We'll be here all day at this rate.”

As Ron's Hovawagun carried the two men away from the house, Barry allowed himself to fantasize a little. Looking out to his right, past the top paddock to his left, the woman - projected from his mind in one glance, like a hologram on the horizon - accepted her Oscar to thunderous applause. She was some beautiful woman, he thought. I wish I'd looked through the lens that took that picture.

The name of the woman Barry was so taken with was Esther: The man on crutches, her father, Terry Clayton. The lady sitting in the wheelchair is Esther's mother, Joan. Her once jet-black hair, white-flecked in the photograph, gave her the appearance of being older than her forty-nine years. Ron hadn't been far from the truth. Shortly after Terry started work, in 1970, he reached out his left arm to pick up something he shouldn't. That greed-prompted decision changed his life. Had he not lost his

forearm, he might never have met Joan.

The person who took the photograph was Esther's husband, Ricky. His finger trembled slightly as he looked through the view-finder that day. Looking at the faces of the people he loved in the compacted environment of the camera was causing a flashback. A thin film of sweat began to form on his forehead as he prepared to press the button. He knew that if he hadn't been there to take the photograph, the world would have been dominated by a force of almost unimaginable evil. Millennium parties throughout the world would not have taken place. Nor would the popping of champagne corks have been heard. That joyful sound would have been replaced by something far more sinister. An epic story of true love, greed, selfishness, murder and political intrigue begins with a storm, many years before Ricky took the picture and later sealed away the wheelchair, the crutches and other things in the cellar.

## Chapter One

### The Great Oak Tree – Solihull England 1950

The telephone rang for the third time within the hour. Tim Howell, a master carpenter, did not hurry to answer it. Everything the stocky 25-year-old did was carefully considered. The first thing his father had taught him was that you only get one chance when working a piece of wood. "It's a bit like life," he had said. "Think long and hard before you make a decision."

On first meeting Tim, people were usually nervous in his company. He had a strong body with tanned, muscular arms, but he rarely spoke and this unnerved people as they could not easily get the measure of him. However, the benign twinkle in his ebony eyes, and his gentle smile would soon put their minds at rest. And the pleasing aroma of polish he could never quite rid himself of.

Tim cleaned his chisel with an oil-soaked rag, placing it on his workbench next to the lump of mahogany he had been working. When he moved to pick up the telephone receiver, he let his fingers brush against its dark, swirling grain. "Workshop," he said, with all the confidence of a proud, skilled craftsman. The tone of his voice was rich and rounded.

"Tim? It's John Barratt at the council."

"Hmm, I was expecting a call from you. It gets busy round here after a storm," said Tim, giving the black and white cat nuzzling his legs a gentle nudge with his left boot. It slunk off to scratch about in the mound of shavings, sweet wrappings and screwed-up crisp packets he had swept into a neat pile against the far wall of the workshop. "Yeah," said John, with a weary sigh. "Certainly was a bad one last night. I've got crick in me neck from talking about it. Look, I need you to inspect the woods behind St Mary's. The great oak came down. It's blocking the pathway and needs shifting as soon as possible. In fact, to save time, we can agree a price now if that's okay." Arrangements for Tim to effectively buy the tree and clear the site were made before they ended the call.

Tim was dismayed to find the oak tree virtually split in half. It was part of local folklore. Generations of children had swung on ropes tied to its branches, carved their initials into its bark and daydreamed of tomorrows while sitting under its protective canopy. Spiders and wood lice scuttled away as Tim began to saw and retrieve what he could. He worked with a loving eye. His grandfather worked on Westminster Cathedral and his great-grandfather had been in charge of the workmen who built Birmingham Cathedral. I'm the man to breathe life back into this timber, he thought. It took him just three days to complete this task.

While Tim worked, he imagined what strong furniture he would make with this fine oak. He knew that a new Magistrate's Court was planned for the city centre. They'll need the best timber for that, he reasoned. I'll even make a special gavel and present it to the Lord Chief Justice on opening day. Then his imagination ran riot: the botanical gardens; they've ordered six new benches for putting amongst the flowers and hedgerows. Benches are popular. A good, solid bench will outlast us all, he mused.

When he had finished his work, Tim had one hundred planks of the finest oak, each over twenty feet long, eighteen inches wide, and two inches thick. All had been cut with mathematical precision. After the timber was seasoned, there was enough to make fifty benches, half of which he sold

wholesale to cover his costs. Nothing went to waste, and after he had finished all that remained was a stump surrounded by blackened earth. He sold the off-cuts to a man who made rocking horses and toys, the shavings to the local huntsmen and the sawdust to the licensee of a pub near his workshop, and in doing so unknowingly completed a sequence of mystical events that had begun the night before he had received the telephone call from John Barratt...

It had been the kind of impossibly hot summer's day when insects seem too tired to fly. Later, when the sun began to sink below the horizon, they rose like golden clouds of pollen. Prompted by a Super-natural air that chilled the ensuing night, birds left the parched land and flew in chevron flocks towards an orange and cinnamon-hued sunset. For those who had the ability to see it, the ghost-like apparition of a man soared across the heavens. Hovering above the Earth forming a perfect emblem of the letter Y, his long fair hair shivered with energy. Telepathically, he spoke to those who had the ears to hear him: "Souls of the dead, I command you to listen to my words." The response was immediate: souls which had left the bodies of people and remained in the afterlife, responded: "Pythagoras, Master of the Harmony of the Spheres, I hear you," said the soul of a man.

"Most revered of Druids and seers, we hear you," said another, this time the soul of a woman.

"Man is abandoning his fear of God and descending into a secular way of life!" boomed the apparition, ominously. "Why should we concern ourselves, O mighty one?" asked a different soul.

The apparition quivered. "I am but a servant of *The Almighty*, creator of the universe and all therein. This emblem, Y, hereafter signifies the straight and narrow path of virtue, which is one, but, if once deviated from, the path will breach and ever widen. If the situation on Earth is not reversed, nation will fight nation and mankind will destroy itself."

"But what can we do?" said another, indifferently. "They're still rebuilding after yet *another* world war. There isn't time." Somewhere in the never-ending cycle of the birth and death of galaxies, a star collapsed in on itself, lighting up the distant heavens. Energy, rippling away from the apparition and across the void in sweeping waves, became thoughts the souls understood: "Time! What is time? You are what you are and know the way."

"What d'you mean?"

"Do you not possess between you all the knowledge and understanding man has acquired since time began? Transmigration into the minds of men and women is the only way to prevent mankind from annihilating himself and every species on Earth. Our spirits must return to Earth. During the transmigration your dispersal will be indiscriminate, but *I* must wait for a special person whose body I will inhabit. Prepare to be returned to a temporary home."

Behind St Mary's Church, Solihull, England is an incline leading to a flat wooded area of about three acres. On this plateau, last inhabited by the d' Oddingswell family, manorial lords of Solihull in 1320, a Celtic homestead once bustled with life. No buildings remain to give an idea of what the settlement looked like, but a dried-out moat marks its boundary. In this place, some 20 metres from the moat and on the unprotected side of the complex stood the great oak tree.

The great oak tree braced itself against a chill wind, now sharp and scouring. Thin branches at its crown waved like a drowning man's arms searching for something to cling to. Leaves, unable to resist being pulled first one way then the other, released their fragile grips. It was as if the tree, in a desperate effort to salvage something from the situation, had jettisoned them to search for a safe place. The leaves and their cargoes of acorns shimmered in the greying light as they fell. After the storm, the tree stood like a crucified martyr against a dark brooding sky. Then, Nature abandoned its ill-tempered little fling and launched into a passionate affair.

Thunder and lightning raged in the upper atmosphere! Positive and negative atoms smashed into each other with increasing ferocity, violating the air around. Then, within this chaos, countless souls allowed themselves to be drawn in to a boiling mass of clouds, which spread across the sky as opposing forces of nature battled against each other. From the prehistoric man who discovered how to make fire, through the age of Greek philosophers and scholars, to the mathematical genius of the Chinese, the heroic conquerors such as Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great, through the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the greatest empire the world had ever known, the British Empire, souls prepared to be transported back to Earth.

With an ear-splitting crackle, a bolt of golden lightning in the shape of the letter Y reached out from the heavens before accelerating to strike the uppermost branches of the great oak tree.

Telepathic energy surged through every branch and fibre of the tree before bursting through its roots and into the ground. Finally, the great oak tree lay felled and defeated.

What remained cooled. The swollen, sap-filled veins contracted, but whereas the electricity had dissipated, the energy of souls including that of the Druid, remained in the coagulating mess. In the years to come, any person who came into contact with remnants of the great oak tree, a splinter more often than not, would become a host to the soul of a dead person. That person would not even realise the splinter was there until the soul had infused their blood and reached their brain. Some were the souls of people whose religious faith had kept them going in times of persecution, and they would use their energy to support people who felt marginalised or threatened. Some souls were those of people who had lived good lives; others were erotic bent on reliving pleasures of the flesh. Other souls that had been drawn into the transmigration were malevolent souls – bending even in death to evil machinations of the Devil – who would create havoc in the minds of the people they infected. Many years would pass before the supreme tempter of mankind would contest the ultimate prize – the souls of the human race. Then, with Armageddon looking inevitable, a final battle would take place between the forces of good and evil, manifested in the form of a shroud-covered man...

## **Esther – Her Birth & Early Years**

**E**sther was born in Margate, England, in January 1971. Swallows, not normally seen until March, careered through the sky and the first flush of insects muffled the sounds of mating calls, giving the impression that Mother Nature was in a hurry. Inland, melt-water first dripped, then trickled, and finally rushed away as if giving up its attempt to wake up a dozy world.

One late-summer's evening of that year, Esther's parents, Terry and Joan Clayton, ambled along Margate seafront. Twenty-two-year-old Joan, nicknamed "Olive Oil" in childhood because of her uncanny likeness to the cartoon character of that name, was window-shopping and eyeing brightly coloured, fashion garments, thinking, Will I ever fit into them again?

Joan's daily intake of fluid was a large glass of hot water, into which she squeezed the juice of one lemon. Her favourite and main meal of the day was a burger and fries. A multi-vitamin tablet was followed by a glucosamine with chondroitin capsule, and a garlic tablet. She wore long black, sleeveless dresses, which she bargained for at any of several charity shops lining the local high street, and she wore open-toed sling-back shoes whatever the weather. She went to bingo three nights a week, which suited her dreamy character. Her hair was black and shoulder length; this she wore swept up and secured by a rubber band.

Joan and Terry had moved to Margate in the summer of 1970 in order to enjoy their lifelong holiday at the expense of the taxpayer in more clement surroundings. Elizabeth, Joan's sister, had married Alan Taylor, a local man, two years before. Terry, whose battered nose and features reflected his lack of success as a featherweight boxer, was admiring Joan's profile in the shop window. Wonder if she's ready for a bit of hanky-panky, yet, he thought. Swerving to avoid his foot descending on something a local dog had left on the pavement, Terry lurched into the arms of a man standing in a shop doorway. He regained his balance in one nervous sparrow-like movement. "Sorry mate, only one wing, see," said Terry, waving the stump that was all that remained of his right arm, lost in an accident at work. "Buy a magazine, sir?" said the man. "Read about the big issues in the world today?" Terry looked into the man's soft brown eyes and instantly found himself compelled to take the magazine. "Sure. How much?" he said, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand. This was one of several habits Terry had retained from his time in the boxing ring. Sometimes he pinched sweat from the end of his nose, or he might sniff, particularly when nervous. Although the man's reply, "This is the only one left, take it," was delivered in little more than a whisper, the words resonated in Terry's mind as if the bell in Margate harbour had been rung. "Thanks, mate," said Terry, accepting the gift. He moved away after being prompted by a nudge from Joan. Thinking the man pictured on the magazine cover was the same man he had just spoken to, Terry turned back. He felt the man's presence, but he had vanished. "Must've stepped back into the doorway. I hope he didn't think I was drunk when I lurched into him," Terry muttered.

"You all right?" said Joan, angling the pushchair round a corner.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Still scanning the cover, and noting that the man pictured appeared to be standing

outside a Cathedral, Terry looked up. A tile-covered church steeple on the other side of the road pointed like a ladder to the sky. The words, "We ought to have Esther baptized," came in a spontaneous rush. "Of course we will," said Joan. "Let's see the vicar now, while we're here."

Three weeks later, Terry, Joan, her sister, Elizabeth, and Alan Taylor, Elizabeth's husband, attended Esther's baptism in Margate Methodist Church. Alan, glad they were in a crowd, kept his head down, but Terry, convinced he would make a good impression if he looked up towards heaven, leaned back and raised his chin. Two red eyes set below a crown of thorns seemed to bore into Terry's brain. An effigy of Christ crucified loomed over the congregation like a giant condor hanging in the sky. Feeling that it might pounce down and admonish him for his sins at any second, Terry pinched the end of his nose, then eased his way past Joan, saying, "Got to go to the toilet."

"What?" said Joan to an empty space.

Terry returned in time to reply to the minister's question: "Will you love your children, committing yourselves to care for them in body, mind, and spirit?"

"Yes," said Terry and Joan. Then it was the godparents' turn.

"Will you help these parents to nurture their children?"

By the time Terry left the church, he felt different. It was obvious to him that the service had real meaning. After the baptism, each child was taken amongst the congregation. "I thought it was great," Terry confided to Alan on the way out. "Did you see that boy? He shook my hand!"

Alan, a more sombre man, gave it thought, then said, "Y' know, there's a lot to be said for it. Them kids'll remember the experience. Esther took it all in. I bet if you asked her in thirty years' time if she remembers it, she'll say 'yes.'" After a pause, he smiled, and said, "Fancy a pint?"

"Okay, Joan. We're going for a drink."

"Well make sure it's one, not a skin-full. There's plenty at home. Bring me and Elizabeth back a couple of Snowballs."

You never know, mate, thought Terry. Tonight might be the night for some hanky panky. "Okay," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

It would be hard to find sisters more opposite in character. Elizabeth, the elder by five years, retained the air of quiet competence her mother had instilled in her. A pre-war period of high unemployment and post-war austerity had produced a generation of women who fed and clothed their families on very little, and seemed able to cope with almost anything. Joan and her peers, whose formative years had been in the relaxed Sixties, when take-away restaurants took the place of Lyons' Cafes, determinedly detached themselves from the behavioural characteristics of their forebears.

Terry, officially unemployed since the accident in which he lost his forearm, occupied himself by watching television and answering the door to people who came to buy cheap cigarettes or anything else he could get at the right price on the black market. He had his mind on one such a deal as he walked to the pub with Alan. It nearly cost him his life.

"Watch out!" said Alan, grabbing Terry. The driver of the bus Terry was about to walk under blared his horn, then stopped his vehicle and glared at a petrified Terry. Terry sniffed, bowed to the driver and waved the bus through with his stump. "Phew. Thanks, Alan. That was close," he said, with a broad grin.

"Well, if I were you, I'd try looking where you're going. You seem to do a lot of thinking. About your arm, was it? I noticed you rubbing it."

"Yeah. When I was a lad I wanted to be a boxer, but never made it. I started work in a factory, then..." Reminded of the way in which he had lost his forearm, Terry shuddered. "What happened?" asked Alan. "If you don't mind me asking".

"Tell you in a minute. What d'you want? Bitter?" said Terry, opening the door to the Railway pub.

"Bitter-shandy, please, replied Alan. "It'll need livening up this time of day. By the way, what got to you in the church?"

Terry shrugged. "I dunno. I just felt uneasy. I mean, it was my idea as well as Joan's to have Esther christened, but why did we feel we had to? We only ever go to church for christenings, weddings and funerals." While he was fetching the drinks, Terry thought a bit more about why he went to church. "There are two seats over there," he said, giving Alan his shandy and nodding towards a window. Thanks," said Alan. "Why do we feel we have to go to church? That's a difficult question. I think about things like that. I felt the same as you, you know."

"Oh?" said Terry, sliding along the seat under the window.

“Yes. I've got a theory. What d'you think a caveman would do if you showed him how to cook with one of them new-fangled microwave ovens?”

Oh, God, thought Terry. He's on his favourite subject, now, philosophising. I suppose, if I were the caveman, I'd wonder where he got the electricity from. “Dunno. Think I was an alien?” he said.

“Why d'you think he'd think that? And why does it always have to be something from up there?” said Alan, pointing to the heavens. Passers by on the other side of the stained glass window caught Terry's attention. He sipped his pint, thinking, God, I don't know. Hope they don't eat all the sherry trifle. Mustn't forget her Snowballs. “Because even though he's only a caveman he knows there's something else up there? Something he doesn't understand,” he offered. Froth erupted from both men's drinking glasses when Alan thumped the table with his fist. “Exactly. Now, d'you believe in telepathy?” Terry prevented the spilt froth oozing down the side of his glass with his forefinger. I know if I stay in this pub too long my missus will give me a message, and it won't be telepathic, he surmised. “Erm, sometimes I get the feeling someone's watching me,” he said, ruefully.

Alan laughed. “Right. And that's how we all felt inside the church. What did you have for dinner on August 31st 1969?”

Terry choked on his pint. “Bloody hell. How should I know? I bet you do, though. What sort of a question's that?”

“Well, can you remember the Lord's Prayer?”

“Of course.”

“I bet everybody does. It's not just something you learned when you were a kid and forgot like maths. You *want* to believe there's a force up there. I think there is, and it's powerful, like what you feel when you look into a special woman's eyes. A meeting of minds.”

Where's he going, now? thought Terry. There'll be more than a meeting of minds if we don't get back soon. Her fist'll meet my stump if we're late. “Yeah. I get what you're saying,” he said, knocking back the last of his pint. “Come on. We've got to get back.”

Alan wasn't going to let Terry get away with the last word, though. “Course, the issue about Christenings and things is we do them because we feel uncomfortable if we don't. We *know* there's something else out there. We just don't know what, yet. At the moment, mankind communicates either by speaking face to face or on the phone. Man is bound to discover how to transmit thoughts sometime, and do away with wires. Same with electricity pylons. Case proved, m'lud? Now, how about the arm?” Terry sighed, then shrugged...

“Left school in 1965, aged sixteen, went to work in a local factory making coil tops. Bloody hot work, it was; stripped to the waist in front of a bloody massive press for eight-hour shifts”... Reminded of the strategy that enabled him to finish long before his fellow workers, Terry stopped talking as memories flooded his mind:

Production workers filled a box with 100 units, which they put onto a shelved trolley. The target for each man was ten boxes per shift. When the trolley was full with ten boxes, the worker pushed it to a checking-in point. There, each box was weighed, and if found to be the correct weight, a tag with the worker's number on it was tied to it. The worker then pushed the trolley to a place of storage. This was an easy fiddle for Terry. At the end of his shift he would stack only nine boxes at the storage area, rip the tag off the remaining one, cover it up with an apron and wheel the trolley back to his place of work. Making sure no one was watching, he would lift up the floorboards beneath the press and stash the box in the hole. That way he would have an easy night once a week...

Terry sniffed then took a sip of his pint before carrying on: “I started work this night, as usual, when the press got to temperature. I had to put two brass terminals into impressions in a mould, then put a pellet of powdered plastic in. Pulled down the safety guard, pressed the bleeding button; the only thing was, one of the pellets wasn't in right so I switched off the safety and reached in to set it right; but it had started to melt and slipped. I tried again, but it was too late...”

“Bloody hell,” said Alan, his face screwed up as if feeling the excruciating pain he imagined Terry had felt. “Did you get compensation?”

“To bloody right, I did”, said Terry. “Thirty grand; then I met Joan at a Social Security office in Birmingham”.

On the walk home, Alan's words reminded Terry of the man who had given him the magazine on the sea front. 'The issue,' he said. 'The Big Issue.' Funny, I only ever saw him once, he thought.

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Although absent in Joan, she had passed on her mother's indomitable spirit to Esther, her first born, who gave the world a preview of her single-minded nature by refusing, although kindly and without any sign of petulance, to be spoon-fed after she was weaned. Each time Joan attempted to prise Esther's lips apart with a spoonful of food, she turned her head away, lips clamped shut. "Oh, I can't be bothered with this. Here, you try," Joan said, with frustration. Terry took the spoon and swirled it round in the bowl of creamed chicken soup. Then he offered it to Esther, who clamped her teeth shut even more tightly while shaking her head. Wanting to feed herself, Esther reached for the spoon.

At first, the puree went everywhere except in Esther's mouth, but she quickly got the hang of it. She took only a few seconds to advance to a fork when she began sharing the same food as Joan; although a diet of burger and fries caused Esther's early growth to be a little stunted. This unfortunate situation improved when she started school in 1975, four years later.

At school, Esther quickly became best friends with Sheila Watson, a girl who lived in the same street. Meals at Sheila's house evened out the poor diet Esther was more used to. Having recently given birth to Esther's sibling twins, Andrew and Margaret, Joan didn't mind. Esther, accepting in her innocence that such a relationship with one's mother was normal, became a sort of surrogate mother to all children. Some thought her bossy, but in truth it was her love for mankind in general that shone through. It was the buying of a book that had significant consequences for Esther's future. In an attempt to keep up with Esther's voracious appetite for learning, Terry scoured the local car boot sale each Sunday. He was surprised to find that the man standing behind a table covered with videotapes, cassettes and books, was the same man who had given him the magazine on Margate seafront. "Haven't seen you for ages, mate," said Terry.

The words, "I get around," came softly, like before.

"What d'you do, anyway?" said Terry, idly poking a book on the stall with a grubby-nailed finger.

"I'm searching." The man shrugged to indicate that he did not yet know what for, and, kneeling down, took a book from a box lying on the grass beside him. He offered the book to Terry. "'Snow White', sir; A perfect introduction for a young mind to the world of politics, and the complexity of relationships, in a fairy story. Ingenious, don't you think?" Terry found it too difficult to make the philosophical connection, but took the book. No one knew the name of the bookseller: he never offered it. Nor could anyone have discerned his origin by his accent. Indeed, any accent this nomadic character might once have had was now a blend of verbal sounds so neutral accommodating and disarming as to be immediately understood by all who heard it. There was a reason for this:

On July 16<sup>th</sup> 1969, a rocket named Apollo 11 took off from Kennedy Space Center. The mission of the crew was to attempt a landing on the moon and. Each man had a job to do, which took their minds off the enormity of what they were attempting. Still, the nervous shifting of their eyes from dial to computer monitor while cramped together in the juddering confines of a tiny module, bolted on to the nose of the rocket, straining against the force of gravity, was evidence enough of the stress they were feeling.

As the rocket left the Earth's atmosphere, the crew began to experience emotions far different from those of aeroplane passengers, who would have clouds and the ground beneath them to keep the scene in perspective. Witnessing the Earth slowly shrinking in size was an awesome and fearsome sight, reminding them that they were relying on this small, man-made machine to propel them further and further in to space. The crew successfully completed their mission and returned safely, but emotionally they were not the same. Only they out of the five-billion people living on Earth had reached out into the universe. Had felt the mighty power in the void; that stem cell from which all things emanate, and to which they one day return. Only they had been held in the womb of creation. Some of them had been profoundly moved by the experience. The power and presence of an environment, so pure as to be closer to what mankind thinks of as God than any other, was now present on Earth, carried by the brown-eyed, softly spoken man, in a splinter nestling in the palm of his right hand. He did not know what force was driving him onwards; he only knew that each new experience brought him closer to something – something wonderful.

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Twelve months later, Esther was 'infected' by souls for the first time. By now, Sheila's mother, Hilda,

was more of a mother to Esther than Joan. She fed Esther most of the time, and she and her husband, Norman, took her with them on outings. Hilda was the one who liaised with teachers at the school regarding both girls; she took them to school and brought them back at the end of the day. It became routine for Esther and Sheila to do Esther's homework together while Hilda was preparing their evening meal. Sheila and Esther were now in the habit of reading aloud after tea. On one such occasion, Esther, now six, read from 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'. She sat next to Hilda while Sheila watched. Sheila's father, Norman, recorded the process on his 8mm camera. Speaking slowly and deliberately, Esther began: "Snow White put the tablecloth on the table..." She paused and looked at Hilda as if needing confirmation that she had got it right. Getting a nod of approval, she glanced at the camera before continuing. "Can you see me, Mister Watson?"

"Yes, I can see you, Esther. Tell the story."

"Yes, and perhaps then I can see me," she quipped. "Then Snow White put seven plates, seven cups, seven knives, seven forks and seven saucers on the table."

"And there were seven beds against the wall. Snow White lay upon one of the beds and went to sleep."

Esther sniffed before continuing, a quirk picked up from her father, Terry. "It happened..." Esther stopped reading and looked at Hilda. Getting a smile in return, she continued: "...that seven dwarves lived in the cottage. When the dwarves returned to the cottage, Snow White was still..." Esther turned to Hilda, and grinned. Encouraged by a wink, Esther finished the sentence with a flourish: "...asleep!"

"They..." The next word, being a word she had not seen before confused Esther, and she struggled with the syllables. "They... grunted."

"No," said Hilda, gently. "Well, they probably did, but you're wrong."

Esther flung her arms round Hilda's neck, and shouted "Granted" in her ear.

Hilda winced. "No," she said, more firmly this time. Returning to the book, Esther took a peep at the camera to see if her admonition had been recorded. Hilda pointed at the first syllable. "What does that say?"

"Ga," said Esther. Then, getting it in a rush, she flung her arms round Hilda's neck and shouted, "Gather!"

Esther continued. "They gathered round the bed to look at her. Snow White was *so* surprised when she woke up." Esther read on, seeking a little help from time to time. Eventually, tired now, she stumbled over a word and came to a halt. "Look. What's the word?" asked Hilda gently, pointing at the page. Esther put her nose on the page, sniffed, then peeked at Sheila in desperation. Not being able to see the word, Sheila shrugged, and sucked her thumb. *Traitor*, thought Esther. She raised her head from the book, unaware that as she sniffed she had dislodged and inhaled a minute piece of paper, made from the wood of a tree inhabited by human souls. Now, lodged in her lungs, the dried pulp began to give out a protective force that slowly infused her being. "Cuppa," Esther suggested. A hint of frustration in her voice showed that she was guessing. "No, where's the uh?" Esther shook her head in frustration. Hilda laughed and put her arm round Esther. "Well done, you read a lot of the story to us. But I can see you're tired now. Shall I finish it?" Esther nodded.

"Right, Esther, it's time for you to go home now," said Norman when the story was finished. With that, they all broke into a fun rendition of "Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's off to work we go."

The second occasion when Esther was infected occurred one afternoon in late summer the following year. Now aged seven, Esther was enthusiastically riding Billy, a wooden rocking horse, in Sheila's bedroom. Over the years it had become smooth and polished while providing hours of fun for children. Its dark colour and strongly defined oak grain gleamed as the sun's rays caressed it. Then came a shout from downstairs: "Dinner's ready." While swinging a leg over the horse, Esther caught the inside of a thigh on its rump, breaking off a splinter. Nestled under the first layer of skin, it caused her no immediate discomfort, but an erotic force within it would lie dormant, waiting to take advantage of Esther's sexual awakening in years to come...

## Chapter 27

### Pam & Jo

Rachel Jefferey had been incandescent with rage when the news of her son's death broke. She could not have cared less about her husband, but Jonathan... It was just too much; but she knew she had to be careful. She was in the care of Al Green, whom she suspected of always working against her. She held herself together admirably when he phoned with an update. "The whole thing was a tragic accident, you have my word on it," he said. "Your son and husband were in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all. Agents at the scene positively identified an amateur hunter who fired one round from a high-powered rifle, from the forest next to the tenth green. He was a little loose with his aim, and the bullet ricocheted through the trees. It was a chance in a million."

Rachel did not believe him for a second, but felt that she had no option other than to accept his version. "Oh yeah? Keep me informed," she said, slamming the receiver into its cradle.

"Every goddam thing I've tried to do has gone wrong, somehow. It's as if that Green is one jump ahead all the time. He's got an excuse for everything."

"What's happened now?" Asked Joanne Amin, Rachel's secretary.

Rachel walked slowly across her office and looked through the window for a moment. Then she swivelled on her heel, saying, "He's given me some bull about a hunter who can't hit an elephant from six inches, firing off a bullet that bounced off a tree and killed them both."

"D'you think he knows more?"

Rachel twiddled a pencil between her fingers. "Damn sure he does."

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Another less prominent, but no less seething, person mourned Senator Jefferey's death. Her name was Pamela Levesey. Their passionate affair had been a clandestine one, and she knew that she had not been the only other woman, but she had loved him. A tall, twenty-six-year-old Texan, Pamela's honey-blonde hair and southern-belle looks had driven Jefferey crazy with desire. During one particularly energetic session of lovemaking, the tiny splinter that had been ripped from Esther's thigh during her rape was transferred from the zip in his trousers to Pamela. Fed up with the thrusting of a sweaty old man, the soul had wanted something different, something sweeter.

Pamela would not have been surprised if Rachel had had something to do with killing him, after all the gossip was that Rachel was one of a clique of women who were intent on ruling the world. Needing to be sure, she chose to start with Rachel's secretary, Joanne Amin, in her quest to find out the facts. Petite and very pretty, Joanne wore her long black hair fastened discreetly in a bun during office hours: This allowed men or women to appreciate her stunningly beautiful childlike face; the result of a third-generation mixture of White and Indian genes both sexes found themselves irresistibly drawn to when they looked at her. On the night Pamela chose to follow her, in August 1997, she let it fall as free as her spirit. It was Saturday. Pamela followed Joanne's red corvette through the streets of downtown Washington. It was past midnight when she pulled into an underground car park on the corner of Washington and Ninth Streets. Pamela followed her in, and parked up.

On exiting her car and swinging her purse over her shoulder, Joanne dropped her keys. When she bent down to pick them up Pamela saw two perfectly rounded breasts inside a white, Sara Berman camisole. Pamela opened the tinted window of her sky blue cabriolet. "Hi, Joanne," she shouted. "Fancy seeing you here. Off on the town?"

"Oh, hi. Yeah, the Bailey Club."

"Oh, what a coincidence, so am I. Got a date?" said Pamela.

"Nope. You?"

"I'll buy you a drink."

The two women clattered down the back stairs of the car park and out on to Ninth Street. Pamela had not a clue what the Bailey Club was, never mind where it was, she just followed Joanne's lead. They exited the car park and walked a block, then Jo stopped and rummaged around in her bag. She asked Pam if she had a Bailey Club identity card. Pamela made a fair show of looking for the card she knew she did not have, then said, "Dammit. Must've left it behind."

“Too bad. Good job you ran into me. I'll get you in on mine.”

It took a moment for Pamela to adjust to the dimly lit reception area of the Bailey Club, and she let Joanne lead her downstairs. Wide double doors at the bottom opened to reveal a comparatively small lounge. Soft music welcomed the two women. Around three sides of the dimly lit room were booths, interspersed with low tables, plush settees, and easy chairs. Fairy lights flickered on the wall behind the bar. In the middle of the room was a small dance floor. Pamela noticed couples dancing. They were all female. “What's your pleasure, Pam?” asked Joanne. Pamela gave Jo a quizzical look at this shortening of her name. Strobe lights, reflecting off dark, sultry eyes, glinted back at her. Pam quickly scanned the back of the bar. “Um, spritzer, please, she said, suddenly annoyed at having ordered alcohol, but it was too late to change her mind. What the heck, she thought. I'll just stay an hour, have a chat, and arrange to lunch with her tomorrow.

Jo led the way to where two white girls and a black girl sat, chatting. “Hi, Marie,” said Jo, to one of the white girls. “This is Pam. She works in the same place I do. Pam, meet Marie.” Jo then pointed to the other girls. “This is Sharon, and this is Chelsea. We call her Chav.” The girls laughed as Pam waved, and said, “Hi.”

“Hi, Pam,” they said in unison.

Pam sat slightly behind Jo, sipping her spritzer while the girls chatted. Noticing a thin layer of perspiration on Jo's neck, Pam turned her head away, embarrassed at the thoughts of sexual intimacy that crossed her mind. The erotic soul was hungry for love. Brought out of her musings by Jo saying “Wanna dance?” Pam felt more than a little foolish when she heard herself reply, “You asking?” Jo took Pam's hand and led her to the dance floor.

Pam realised that she did not know what to do. She had never danced with another woman. Jo, sensing her nervousness, took control by putting both hands on Pam's hips. They swayed to the rhythm of the music for a few minutes, then Jo broke off as the beat changed to an oriental theme. She lowered her eyes, and began to gyrate her hips. She pushed her long hypnotising fingers through her dark, flowing tresses, which shimmered as the light caught them. Jo cast a flirting glance in Pam's direction. Then she lowered both her chin and her gaze.

Pam was transfixed. Her heart beat a little faster as Jo moved her hands down, lightly covering her breasts. The hands moved further down, smoothing the hips. Then Jo brought them back up again, caressing the insides of her thighs. Pam's tongue flicked over her drying lips. “No,” said her conscience. “Yes,” whispered the erotic force inside her. As if reading her mind, Jo took her hand. “Come on. We'll go to my place,” she purred.

Again, “No,” but Pam did not say the word.

“Looks like Jo's scored,” said Marie as the pair left the dance floor and walked away.

“Hmm. Nice arse,” said Chelsea, bringing hoots of laughter from her friends.

“She's got lovely tits as well,” said Sharon, leaning back against the plush leather corner surround. “Plenty for Jo to get her gob round. Bet Pam's a virgin.” Their laughter followed Jo and Pam through the doors and up the stairs.

The cool night air caused Pam to catch her breath as they emerged outside. Jo quickly flagged down a cab. She told the cabbie their destination, then opened the door. As the taxi pulled away, the cabbie pursed his lips. He had picked up from the Bailey Club before.

Jo smiled confidently, then leaned over and kissed Pam lightly on the lips. Pam felt herself drawn into beautiful liquid Asian eyes. She could not break away. Her legs went weak, and her heart thumped as the tip of Jo's tongue gently prised open her teeth. Pam groaned, and gave in completely. Her legs twitched. Jo put a hand on her knee, and left it there, only removing it when the taxi pulled up outside her apartment. She swivelled round and opened the door. Her exit was more elegant than Pam's, whose legs seemed to have lost their ability to support her. Jo paid the driver, who smiled as Pam fell out onto the sidewalk, then got up and wobbled away. “Have a good night, girls,” he leered.

Jo gave him the finger. “Yeah. Wonder how many of those the other one will be getting in a minute,” he muttered as he drove off.

Jo led the way to her apartment on the third floor. The front door opened directly into a large sitting room. Still holding Pam's hand, Jo threw her purse on to a huge, cream-coloured leather settee, and led her to a large shower room. There, she slowly stripped for Pam. The sight of Jo taking off her jewellery, and crossing both arms before lifting off her top to reveal naked breasts, mesmerised Pam. A faint, intoxicating fragrance infused her brain. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the tiles. Then

she let the mood take her.

Jo then turned her attention to Pam, who took in every inch of Jo's glistening skin in one glance. First, Jo kissed Pam, putting a hand over a breast. Pam gasped. She melted as Jo pushed her jacket off her shoulders. Then Jo undid the buttons on her blouse. A tingling sensation spread throughout Pam's body as Jo snapped her bra, revealing her voluptuousness. Putting both hands inside Pam's trousers, Jo pushed everything to the floor, then she stood back, leaned against the tiled wall and stretched out a hand to turn on the water.

The two women stood enjoying each other's beauty for a moment while warm water flowed over them. Pam watched Jo pick up a bar of soap, and lather up. Bubbles ran down Jo's body, and trickled into the shower pan before swirling round and disappearing beneath her toes.

Pam tilted her head back and leant against the tiles under gentle pressure from Jo's smoothing hands. They seemed to have a magical touch in them. She began to tremble as Jo turned her round, and started on her back. Oh, God, she thought, her breasts pressing against the wall as Jo's hands began a rotating, downward motion on her shoulders. Pam instinctively opened her legs as water trickled off her head, down the middle of her back, and under her bottom. She was sure she would have orgasmed then, but Jo took a shower rose and sprayed the soap away.

When Pam's back was done, Jo turned her round, and repeated the process. Pam closed her eyes and swayed with the pleasure of it. It was as if she was alone under a waterfall in a beautiful, tropical forest. She imagined the humming of insects and sunlight bursting through a swaying canopy, as the erotic force in the splinter took her on a telepathic journey back to the beginning of time. Then Jo sprayed her clitoris with the shower rose. Pam froze, and held her breath. "Ooh. Oh, my God," she said, beginning to shudder uncontrollably as her body reacted with climax after climax. She was sure she would have fallen in a heap if she had not put out her hands to support herself, and was still shaking when Jo turned the water off. Jo took a towel from the rail, and wrapped it around her. Then she took a smaller one and fluffed up Pam's hair. "Go and lie down on my bed," she said quietly. "I'll be back in a minute." Pam flopped onto a king-size bed, closed her eyes and went back to the forest. Presently, Jo came back, carrying a lighted candle and a bowl of hot water. These she put on a bedside cabinet. She took from a pocket a small bottle of fragrant massaging oil. "Turn onto your front," she said. Pam obeyed. She would have done anything Jo asked at that moment.

Pam felt a dribble of warm oil between her shoulder blades. Jo massaged the muscles in her back. Pam just knew she had done it before as Jo worked every muscle in her back, neck and shoulders, then said, "Turn over again." The look Jo gave her as the towel fell away made Pam blush. She's quite pretty, really, thought Jo. Her tousled hair makes her look like a boy. "Was that nice?" she asked, knowing by the look on Pam's face that it had been. Pam blushed and nodded. Jo dribbled oil onto Pam's breastbone and spread her fingers. "Honey, if you think that was good, just close your eyes and I'll make you fly," she said, cool and confident.

Pam closed her eyes as Jo moved her hands round and down, and over her breasts and stomach. No sound could have perforated the mood as the force inside the splinter took Pam back to a time when similar acts were part of a daily ritual. Her eyes flickered open as Jo moved her hands over her stomach, and further down. This was her last chance to stop. "No," said her conscience. "Yes, Yes," said the erotic force; it could wait no longer. Pam drew Jo down and kissed her. This time it was *her* tongue that probed and flicked inside Jo's mouth, bringing emotional urges that could not be denied. Jo moaned, and moved a finger to press the button that would send Pam into raptures of ecstasy.

Pam began to tingle as Jo worked her tiny pleasure spot. Their moist skins glowed; beads of perspiration formed on their bodies. Way past the point of no return herself now, Jo took Pam's right hand and placed it on her clitoris. Pam closed her eyes again and, feeling herself coming to passion, arched her back. "Don't stop. Don't stop," she cried. Pam's eyes flew open as they orgasmed together. She stopped breathing for a second, then made a noise, something between a growl and a purr. Pam was sure she could have died from it. Senator Jefferey had never made her feel this way. When Pam could take, no more she put her hand on Jo's, who slowly laid her head on Pam's stomach. Both women clung to the moment, not wanting to let it go. The only way was to take it with them into sublime sleep.

Sunlight streamed in through the window in Jo's apartment as Pam woke to the sound of birds singing. She breathed in deep drafts of cool early-morning air and snuggled closer to Jo, entwining the toes of her right foot with the tendon on her heel as she did so. Pam gently squeezed the breast nestling

in her hand.

Jo murmured something unintelligible, and tossed her hair, turning towards Pam as she did so. She breathed in Jo's sweet scent, and blew the tresses away. Dark, fathomless eyes twinkled back at her. "Hi," she sighed, contentedly. Jo yawned, turned on her back, and stretched her long, arms. The satin sheets fell away to reveal her beauty. "Hm, hi. Want coffee?" she said, with a sleepy, slightly husky voice. Pam leaned across and slid a hand between Jo's legs. A smouldering look answered Jo's questioning gaze, but Pam's words, "Later, now it's my turn," re-awakened her passion. Jo lowered her arms, and pulled Pam's head down. She whispered, coquettish, "Be gentle. I'm a virgin," in Pam's ear, and began to writhe beneath her. This drove Pam wild. She grasped Jo's hair, and pulled her head up. It was Sunday... no need to hurry.

In the afternoon, the pair showered, drank coffee, and ate toast while sitting on pine stools in Jo's kitchen. Jo spoke first. "Terrible about Senator Jefferey, wasn't it?"

Now's my chance, thought Pam. "Sucks. How's Rachel taking it?"

What Jo said next surprised Pam. "The bitch couldn't care less. If the kid hadn't been killed, I'd have said she probably had him shot."

"What makes you say that?" said Pam, as if not really interested.

"You must've heard the rumours. I mean, how is it that all of a sudden she announces she's having a kid? Never mind she was forty-three at the time. She wasn't even sleeping with him. Everybody knows he was sleeping with you, along with half the White House Staff." Seeing the hurt this statement had caused Pam, Jo shrugged off her embarrassment, saying, "Sorry, no offence. Anyway, she hated him."

Pam let her off: "So you think there's more to it?"

"Stands to reason. I'm no shooter, but surely whoever fired that shot didn't expect the kid to get it as well. Some say the Mafia did it. What d'you think?"

They ate and drank, then Pam said, "What's security like for Rachel?"

"She has regular meetings with Al Green. She sneaks off and thinks I don't notice. I had to fetch her from the Pink Room one day, when she was supposed to be with Jefferey. She was in a huddle with Betty Eden, and all those other high-flyers."

"Wow!" said Pam. "So you think Rachel's got something different in mind?"

Jo shrugged. "Dunno. Seemed a bit fishy at the time. Now it looks a whole lot worse. Come on, let's go back to bed."