

DEAD GAME

23rd June 1992

Dear Sarah,

I can't believe at fourteen I'm writing you this letter! I hope you stuck to your part of the deal and are reading it after 20th July 2003. You'll probably be twenty-five now. You will be – but I won't.

I haven't gone loopy! What I'm about to tell you may come as a bit of a shock. Try to understand. It's about me - and you in a way - in fact it's about us. We've talked about weird stuff in the past, I know, but this may just blow your mind. Sit down.

Do you remember, at Nanny's house this Easter, (1992 - eleven years ago now, for you) when we played Dead Game? Well something happened. Something I've never told anyone. I think I'm going to die, Sarah. That is, I'm going to die young. I'm not afraid and I don't know how it will happen. I met someone who told me. I'm going to die on 20th July 2003! I know... our birthday. You probably think I'm daft to take any notice of a stranger I met on the mountain, but honest, he was creepy and there was something about him made me believe him.

I want to tell you so much, but I know this isn't what you want to hear, especially when you're tucked away in that private boarding school you detest, so that's why I am writing instead – a letter for your future, so you'll know I'm still out there somewhere. Hey - maybe I might even be able to fly. I've always wanted to fly.

Have you ever wondered where we've come from? Why we're here?

There's one more thing and it's important. One day, after I've gone, I need you to tell my story? I'll help you. God, I feel like I'm giving up on life just writing this. I feel like I'm breaking a deal, but at the same time as sealing my fate, I feel oddly like a new journey will begin. You are the one who must narrate my journey, Sarah. It's a massive and bizarre ask I know, but you must remember you'll never be alone. I'll be with you every breath of the way.

Love Archie

PS. How I know all this doesn't matter either, you'll find out soon enough.

DEAD GAME

CHAPTER ONE
20TH JULY 2003
FLYING INVOKES BOREDOM AND TERROR

Archie Fletcher's eyes flicked open. The contents of his stomach shot into his mouth as the plane delved downwards, the sudden descent into Kuwait putting an immediate end to his dreaming. *Bring Me To Life*, Evanescence's new number one single screeched in his ears. He ripped out his headphones, clutched his armrests firmly and swallowed hard.

The commotion in the cabin was quite different from the music that lingered in his head. Automatically he clutched for his St Christopher, muttering under his breath. He was never sure to whom he was praying or if it would help. It just seemed the thing to do when hauling oneself through the air at 800 miles per hour in a giant hollow hunk of metal headed for a warzone.

The Field Support, Second Company, REME were finding it difficult to remain calm. It was an unnerving flight for the hardest of flyers. Archie forced himself to relax. Well rested after his sleep, his natural appetite for adventure overcoming his fear, he grinned hard at the chiselled soldier beside him. James mustered a nervous smile in return.

Peering out of the small airplane window Archie could see the rumbling storm the pilot was attempting to avoid. Streak lightning lit up dense black cloud that threatened to engulf them. It was a losing battle: quick as thought they were in the thick of it, thunder exploded around the aircraft blotting out the sound of shrieking engines. Lightning struck them over and over again. To those inside it felt as though the supreme hand of God had taken hold of the plane and was shaking it to see what was inside.

Overhead speakers crackled into life. "This is your Captain. We've lost an engine. Prepare for an emergency landing."

Archie sucked in a short breath and turned to look at James. This time neither man smiled. Their eyes locked momentarily, verifying each other's fear, then both leaned forward to stare out of the window at the majesty of the merciless storm. The lights in the cabin flickered as the lightning struck again and again and again, each time throwing into stark relief a blur of tense white faces.

"I'm sorry..." The panic-stricken voice of the captain shouted through the tannoy. "We've lost power and we're losing fuel. Ready a life jacket; under your seat, adopt brace position. We've overshot our landing... we're heading into the Persian Gulf. When we hit it's -"

He was cut off. The cabin plunged into darkness. The plane jerked suddenly downwards.

Seconds later, at five thousand feet and falling, Archie's Commanding Officer, Major William Clift unbuckled his seat belt. Madness had erupted and was rippling through his Company. Cries reverberated around the cabin reaching a crescendo of hysteria. Men were clambering out of their seats attempting to smash the tiny windows. Others fumbled frantically for their mobiles desperate to phone home. Some simply remained strapped to their seats and with an air of fatalistic acceptance mumbled the Lord's Prayer. Archie and James were two of these men.

Clift yanked at the pilot's door; it was locked. Helplessly he looked down at the flight-attendant secured to a flip-down chair. She stared up at him, eyes wide, face soaked with tears. As a massive strike of fork lightning hit the side-door of the aircraft bursting it open, she screamed. A gale ripped around the interior of the plane. Bodies flew helplessly between seats and were dragged towards the open door; overhead luggage compartments flipped open, tossing

bags and debris into the chaotic equation. “JUMP... Get your life jackets on now... GO, GO, GO,” Clift yelled, holding on for dear life.

People struggled to move, grappling under their seats for a life jacket. The plane was now nose down heading flat out for the ocean. Archie unbuckled and lurched to his feet, his fingers splayed reaching out to grip the seat in front of him. His eyes bulged at the nightmare playing out before him, lightning flashing relentlessly. It seemed insane that Clift wanted them to jump, yet as he watched, Archie knew nothing could be done: the engines were the plane’s heart and the pilot was certainly its soul. Without them they were doomed; jumping was their only chance of survival.

“NOW, NOW, NOW...” ordered Clift, standing back as the plane began to empty. Some colleagues leapt, others were sucked out of the gaping doorway into the darkness, all plummeted for the frenzied sea that smashed treacherously far beneath them.

This is suicide, Archie thought. What am I doing?

Reluctantly he released his grip on the seat and staggered sideways into the almost vertical aisle. It was hard to breathe, never mind stay upright. Someone shoved his shoulder and a body swollen with an inflated life jacket pushed past him. It was James.

“What you waitin’ for? Get moving!”

Losing his footing, Archie grabbed at an armrest, watching as James wrestled with the elements and toppled forward out of the hole. “No!” Archie lunged forward.

Lightning illuminated James’s face as he fell. Then he vanished into darkness.

Clutching the cold metal doorframe, blood rushing to his head, Archie looked up. There seemed to be no end to the sky and no beginning to the sea, they had merged in broiling fury.

“DAMN YOU,” he screamed, “I WON’T DIE TODAY.”

His adrenalin-fuelled rage giving him strength, Archie hauled himself back into the cabin.

“Jump, Fletcher, for God’s sake jump,” Clift shrieked, struggling towards him.

“I c-c-can’t, sir.”

“It’s your choice. Either way we’re done for,” and letting go, Clift threw himself out of the aircraft.

Archie leaned forward hoping to see his Commanding Officer hit the water. He stared down hard, desperate for signs of life but everything was black; there was not even a splash. The elements had fused and it was impossible to differentiate between them. Exploding with intense frustration, in the last few moments left to him he swung round into the empty cabin. Too late now to search for a life jacket he wedged his leg behind a seat, grabbed hold of his head and curled his body to the floor.

“Ah,” he roared, “what’s the point of this, God? It’s a useless end. It’s not my fate. I WILL NOT DIE TODAY,” he chanted. Momentarily he focused on his watch, 23:23 flashed back at him. Why was that so significant? He couldn’t think; just knew that it was.

As he waited for the end, Archie became aware that the surviving engine had cut. The shattered plane was hurtling towards the sea in comparative silence. Beyond the rush of wind and screech of stressed metal he could hear the swell of the ocean. Time seemed to stop. Entranced, he shifted his position, stretching out to clutch what was left of the doorframe so he could see out. In the pitch black of night lighting flashed and for a few seconds it was as clear as day. The sea was coming up to meet him. The plane hurtled towards it, faster and faster and yet everything was happening in slow motion. This was not a new experience for Archie: he had been close to death once before and now as then a kaleidoscope of images haunted his brain; images of the

years he had lived and the people he loved. But this time he was not trapped under the ice and drowning. This time there could be no guiding light to save him, no voice to say, *follow me*.

The angry sea was very near now. Archie blinked, staring in disbelief as he caught sight of something protruding above the waves. It looked like an almighty trident, rusted and draped with seaweed. Transfixed, he stared at it, feeling the tossing spume wet his face. Taking a deep breath and wishing he had on a lifejacket, Archie braced for impact, shut his eyes and surrendered.

Like a ragdoll hitting a brick wall the aircraft smacked into the water and broke up. Submerged, winded and disorientated, his heavy uniform weighing him down, Archie kicked and struggled against the torrential sea.

Still conscious, lungs bursting, he fought to see through the murky water and glimpsed a shadow disappearing beneath him as he battled upwards, pulling, pushing and driving to the surface. Breaking through, fit to explode, he gulped in a deep breath of cold night air. Unable to focus, he felt something clutching at his legs, as though a giant hand had grabbed him and was wrenching him downwards under the water.

Thrusting and twisting, grabbing and heaving at whatever had him trapped, Archie wriggled free, kicked out and once more began his fight for the surface, but the hand caught hold of him again, this time hauling him fast, upwards and out of the water. This could not be happening! But it was. In that moment, gasping for air like a landed fish, Archie knew that what

he thought he had seen from the plane was real: it was a trident, and someone, or something had hold of it – and him.

Hanging upside down above the waves he saw the monster that held him captive. Half-man, half-fish the creature towered over the ocean, its long brown hair thick with seaweed and shells, its face streaming with water and livid with anger. Clutching the trident in one enormous hand and Archie, a miniature helpless figurine in the other, the monster held him there for a moment longer then dived, smashing him back into the sea. Stripped naked by the brute force of the impact, Archie knew no more.

When he came to, it was daylight and he found himself tied tightly to a large piece of debris floating on the water. As it rolled on the swelling waves he went with it, completely submerging over and over again. He had no idea how long he had been there or whether it was night or day. He knew he was alive because his head ached abominably, but strangely he could feel none of his limbs. As he slipped in and out of consciousness time passed and the sun rose higher, beaming down on his naked body.

Archie's hearing kicked in first, to waves crashing on a distant shore. Squinting, he tried to look about. In the few seconds before the sun blinded him he glimpsed a blue cloudless sky. Tears streaming, he shut his eyes against the glare and attempted to change position, but a severe throbbing in his head forced him to stop. Flat on his back, the waves lapping around him, he strove to make sense of what had happened; he had no memory of lashing himself to the debris. How had he got here? Was that Poseidon Sea God a bizarre nightmare during his fight for

survival? What other explanation could there be? At least his limbs seemed to be coming back to life again and apart from a headache and a raging thirst, Archie was not aware of any injuries. To make sure, he quickly scanned his body, starting with his feet and working his way up: ‘Legs, fine, torso okay, arms - ahh!’ A spike of excruciating pain struck his right shoulder as he moved it; he immediately stopped and it subsided to an ache. Only then did he realise he had no clothes on and that what he was attached to was the aircraft door. He panicked, tried to sit up, but the pain was so intense he gave in and lay still.

After a time, soothed by the soporific warmth of the sun and the gentle motion of the water, Archie felt strangely at peace with the world. He was out in the middle of nowhere, mother-naked and unable to move and yet the sensation was not unpleasant. Lulled into a doze, it came to him that above the lapping waves he could hear a strange fluting sound. He strained to listen; yes, what he was hearing was without doubt music, but not like anything he had ever heard before. It became clearer and more defined as though an orchestra was playing something classical; it had to be coming from a boat. Help was at hand.

Elated, Archie turned his head, tears of pain blurring his vision. He could make out where the sea met the sky, but could see no boat. He moved his head up and swivelled round to the other side. All he could see was a deserted shore, yet the music played on. ‘It must be in my head,’ he concluded, sick with disappointment and gripped again by panic.

“The curses of the night have been dispelled, Archie.”

Archie’s eyes flicked wide open, to be blinded immediately by the sun. He screwed them up against the glare and ignoring the pain in his shoulder pushed himself onto his elbow and called out, “Who said that?”

“Have no fear. I will do you no harm. I can help you plan for the future,” the soft, male voice whispered. Backed by the music it sounded almost hypnotic.

“Where are you? I can’t see you,” Archie looked around at the empty ocean.

“You can see me, but you cannot look at me. My light shines too bright. I am the sun.”

“W-w-what do you want?”

“I want to help you return home safely.”

Forcing himself to relax Archie lay back down; clearly this was a figment of his imagination. He must have sustained a head injury, which would account for the appalling thumping behind his eyes. In the circumstances it was hardly surprising his mind was playing him tricks. All things considered he was lucky to be alive. Unless... Oh God! The thought stopped Archie in his tracks. “Am I dead?”

“No, you are not dead.”

“Okay, let me recap. I’ve recently fallen out of the sky, had an almighty battle with Neptune, I’m now naked, tied to an aeroplane door and floating on an open ocean. And as if that weren’t enough, I am being serenaded by a phenomenal orchestra whilst having a full-on conversation with the sun, and you are seriously telling me I’m not dead?”

“No, you are not dead. You are what we call ‘in Transit’. I have pulled you into an island tide, you will be ashore fairly soon. This, Archie, is the game of your life, so listen to me carefully. To return home you must let Hope guide you, and should you be so unfortunate as to meet my bewildering and evil sister, you must be vigilant. Keep your mind focused or she may take it from you. She can confuse any fool at a mere glimpse. Remember, I am always here for you. Be wise, Archie. Trust the foresight I have given you and go quickly.”

The music stopped as suddenly as it had begun and Archie's reality became once more the sound of the sea cascading around him. He could hear waves breaking on the shore more clearly now. Iridescent droplets of water clung to his skin, trembling with tiny rainbows. They reminded him of his mother's story about his birth. Strange to think of that now when his life was hanging by a thread. "Mum," he whispered, "help me. I do not want to die; not like this."

CHAPTER TWO
1978
BABIES DON'T KEEP...

“20th July, 1978; time of delivery...?” Joanna Fletcher’s buxom midwife lifted her nurse’s watch, “Eleven twenty-three a.m. Weight: seven pounds and three ounces,” she announced, scribbling in Joanna’s maternity notes. “Congratulations Mr and Mrs Fletcher, your baby boy is beautiful. Do you have a name for him?” She closed Joanna’s notes and popped them at the end of the bed.

“Not yet,” Robert Fletcher answered, sounding wheezy and harassed. He puffed hard on a blue inhaler then dropped it back into the gaping pocket of his yellow flares.

Understanding his tone the midwife bustled to the door. “I’ll leave you with Master Fletcher for a while. I’ll be back in half an hour to take you for a bath, Joanna,” she said with a smile, leaving Robert and Joanna alone with their brand new baby for the first time.

For several minutes in that small yet private hospital room the new parents remained silent, transfixed on the sleeping child that lay swaddled in Joanna’s arms. Baby Fletcher was perfectly content, full of colostrum, hushed and utterly worn out after his entrance. The only interference of the peace was a slight crackle from the black and white television set on mute in the corner of the room.

Robert broke the silence, looking across at the red blanket folded neatly on the bedside locker, the crochet pin sticking out of the ball of wool beside it. “You’ve finished it then.”

Joanna followed his gaze, “Not quite, it’s nearly there though.” Smiling she added, “Is there any news on Patricia?” Robert’s eldest sister had fallen for her first baby at much the same time as Joanna and the two women had shared the toil of pregnancy, both due within a few days of each other.

“Yes, Jack phoned earlier. You aren’t going to believe it,” Robert grinned, “Pat went into labour just before breakfast, so we should hear something soon.”

“Oh, they’ll be like twins! I wonder if this freakish weather set her off like it did me.” Joanna glanced up at the window remembering the tremendous thunderstorm that had been raging when they’d dashed to London City Hospital at three o’clock that morning. “At least the rain’s easing off a bit now. It’s more than can be said for Hurricane Fico...” Joanna turned her attention to the flickering television screen. “Can you turn the volume up? They say it might hit Hawaii.”

“Mm,” Robert agreed without looking up, his gaze firmly on his son.

With a fleeting grimace of pain, Joanna leant forward and offered the swaddled bundle to his father. “Here, you hold him.”

“Are you sure? I might drop him,” Robert’s face creased with anxiety.

“Of course you won’t,” she smiled.

He stuck out his hands and took the bundle from her, fumbling a little, his eyes filling with tears as he held his son, “He’s so small,” he whispered.

“Small and perfectly formed,” Joanna giggled, kneeling on the end of her bed to tweak the television volume. “He looks like you,” she added settling back down.

“He certainly has my hair.” Still buzzing with adrenalin Robert combed a huge and shaky hand through the baby’s mop of jet black hair so much like his own but without the lengthy sideburns.

“Not mine, that’s for sure!” Joanna laughed patting her white-blonde hair, which during her labour the midwife had scraped back into an elastic-band. It felt tight and was making her head ache.

“He looks slightly Oriental don’t you think?” Robert said, tilting his head slightly. “A bit like my Great Uncle Archibald.”

Behind her large, national health glasses Joanna’s eyes widened. “Archibald, Archibald,” she muttered, reaching for the baby book on the locker and riffling through the pages until she found the one she wanted. “That’s it! It’s a perfect name for him.”

“What?” Robert frowned. “I’m not sure...”

“Here, look,” Joanna pointed at the page. “It means ‘true and bold’, it’s the perfect name for our little soldier,” she repeated. Her eyes bloodshot with tiredness she looked at her husband, desperate for his approval.

Robert shook his head, “Archibald... hmm, I don’t know.”

Disappointed, Joanna sighed. Her husband had found names hard to discuss; he’d insisted on meeting their baby first, said it seemed wrong to name a child without at least looking at him. Yet, having finally met his son, Robert was clearly none the wiser. She supposed he now had to believe he would know their baby’s name when he heard it.

They were silent.

“This is the longest-lived hurricane the Pacific has ever seen,” said the sombre voice of the TV newsreader. “It started on the 9th of July. Hurricane Fico has developed from a tropical disturbance off the coast of Mexico. It moved north-westward and then quickly westward, with winds reaching 140 mph on July 12. Today, 20th July 1978, Hurricane Fico is still moving westward towards Hawaii. It has intensified from a Category 1 to a Category 4 storm over a period of eleven days, with winds peaking at 140 miles per hour. Six people aboard...”

“We don’t need doom and gloom today,” Robert said switching off the set, babe still nestled in one arm.

Lost in thought, Joanna gazed out of the hospital window. The midwife had left it ajar to let in the fresh air. As Joanna watched, the clouds broke allowing through a shaft of sunlight and with it transpired an almighty rainbow spanning the entire window view. She gasped, “Oh Robert... look... how beautiful!”

“Wow, that’s awesome.” With exaggerated care Robert got up from his chair and carried the baby to the window. “Look at that, my son,” he whispered to the sleeping newborn. He frowned, turned back to Joanna, “There’s a bit of a draught. Should I shut it?”

“No need, it’s good to have some fresh air,” Joanna said, but as she spoke, a strong breeze sprang up from nowhere. It sighed and whistled through the window, flurried the floral print curtains and blustered around the room ruffling the bed sheets and sending a shiver through all in its path, and as it sped by a whispered voice seemed to follow in its wake. “*I give you this child... take care of him... he is yours... for a time...*” Then it died down, leaving an uneasy stillness as though it had never been.

Robert and Joanna turned to each other, their eyes frozen wide open. “D-d-did you hear that?” Joanna asked, white-faced and trembling.

Abruptly, Robert moved to the cot by the bed and laid the babe down, gently teasing the honeycomb blanket up and around him. Satisfied, he moved over to the window and shut it firmly. Only then did he turn back to Joanna.

“Hear what?”

“That voice... it said-”

Robert cut across her, “It was just the wind.”

“But didn’t you hear...?”

“It was the wind,” Robert insisted. “You’re tired, darling.”

Perplexed, Joanna frowned at her husband and drew in a deep breath about to argue. The words she was certain she had heard still ricocheted in her ears. But maybe Robert was right; she *was* exhausted; so desperately needing to sleep. She must have imagined it after all. With a shrug and a concealed yawn she refocused her thoughts on baby naming. “Well if not Archibald, let’s call him ‘Archie’, he’d only end up being called Archie if we named him Archibald.”

Robert swung round to her and laughed out loud, “That’s it!”

Joanna pushed herself upright and almost bounced with joy, her face lighting up as she watched her husband’s expression change: he knew as well as she did that ‘Archie’ was their baby’s name.

“Well done you and thank you my beautiful Jo.” Robert leant over the cot to gaze once more at his son, “He’ll be called Archie. He’s perfect. I know in time he and I will be the greatest of friends.” He kissed the baby’s forehead. The infant let out a muffled grunt and started to rummage. He squirmed and squinted trying to open his eyes then he seemed to gaze knowingly straight into his father’s blue ones as if to say, ‘You’re right, Daddy, we shall be the best of friends,’ and for a split second, Archie’s tiny mouth parted and he smiled.

“Oh look, Jo, he’s smiling at me!” Lost in his son’s face Robert beamed back, positive the infant’s smile was meant solely for him.

“How lovely, darling.” Joanna knew it could only be that the baby needed burping, but she was not about to dent her husband’s joy. Outside, she noticed, the sun had gone in and the rainbow had evaporated. It was raining again.

A few days later Archie was taken from the hospital to 23, Eversely Avenue, the 1930's pebble-dashed, three-bed end of terrace to which the Fletchers had moved during Joanna's third trimester of pregnancy. It stood directly opposite the park on a busy cut-through to London's city centre. A wide tarmac driveway swept up the right hand side, framed by a low stone wall.

Robert and Joanna's lives were transformed. Their days revolved around their newborn who made his wishes known in no uncertain terms. A hyperactive baby, Archie, it seemed, liked neither bath nor bedtime and each evening his cries of protest could be heard three doors down. There was no in between with this little boy: when he cried, he howled, mostly claiming he was hungry. A very greedy and stubborn infant, nothing would suffice until his needs were satisfied. Nevertheless, when Archie reached the age to laugh, oh how he laughed, he could illuminate an entire room with one giggle. A whole-hearted roar would generate meltdown in seconds, contagious yet pure, so much so that sometimes it was hard to breathe. This child brought joy to everyone in his life. Robert and Joanna became like children again, always singing, dancing and storytelling, completely absorbed by every precious second of parenthood.

Life was not easy for the Fletchers in the late seventies. Joanna, a devoted and besotted mother, insisted on staying at home to look after their baby. Robert, as the sole breadwinner, found his fear of failure and will to succeed almost overwhelming. A trained geography teacher, he searched in vain for full-time work, but it was hard to find in the capital and he was not prepared to work away from home. So he either had to take supply work whenever and wherever it was available or change his occupation completely. With no set amount of money coming in, a mortgage to pay and another mouth to feed, any job would do. He took on door-to-door sales, advertised as a local handyman in the local newsagent and at one point even found himself selling ladies underwear; anything to bring in the pennies. Fortunately, neither he nor

Joanna were materialistic, they never truly wanted much for themselves. They got by with ‘make-do-and-mend’ and were blissfully happy just the way they were.

Baby Archie had homespun toys and a homemade cot. The table where they ate had been handed down the family line and was considerably well used, as were the set of hard-backed chairs. Beyond the ancient gas oven and equally ancient fridge-freezer – both acquired from a charity shop - there were no modern gadgets in the kitchen to help ease the load. There were no carpets on the floors; in the living room they had no lounging sofas. They did not even have a television, they would simply sit on homemade cushions on the floor and play until Archie’s bedtime and then read or fall exhausted into bed. Their one inessential item was a camera, which had been a gift. Saving every spare penny for film they recorded each precious moment of Archie’s development. Instead of pictures, their walls were adorned with row upon row of photographs millimetres apart: in their hall; above the mantelpiece; up the stairs, even in their bathroom. These were far more precious to the Fletchers than priceless art could ever be. Quite literally, all that the family had were the roof over their heads, a subsistence ration of food and each other. And within this loving, committed cocoon of devotion young Archie thrived.

One evening six weeks after his birth, when the evenings were still light and the distant smell of barbeque lingered on the air, Robert and Joanna were as usual absorbed in Archie. “There’s nothing quite like the smell of a baby, I wonder what it is that makes you want to pick them up and sniff them. They are almost edible, don’t you think?” Joanna sniffed her infant obsessively. “Oh God, you’re just so gorgeous.” She lay on her back in their double bed, nuzzling and kissing her son as he nestled into her neck.

Robert switched on the bedside light. “Come on Master Fletcher,” he said, mentally preparing his eardrums. “It’s your bedtime. Mummy needs her sleep.” Picking Archie up from

Joanna's chest he pulled him in close and whispered in his ear. "She needs to recharge her batteries before the two o'clock feed."

For once the expected onslaught did not come and Robert, grinning at Joanna and holding his breath, placed Archie gently in the cot that stood at the end of their bed. "I'd get your head down, Jo, whilst he's asleep. You'll be shattered tomorrow if you don't."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Joanna yawned, snuggling under the covers and cuddling a piece of used muslin permeated by Archie's scent.

"Course not. I'm only going to be filling in those applications that came this morning. I'll do the washing up first though; you need to sleep," Robert whispered, covering Archie with the red crocheted blanket his wife had stitched religiously every day of her pregnancy. He picked up Joanna's empty teacup and bent over the bed to drop a hard kiss on her lips, "Love you."

"Love you too," murmured Joanna, already half asleep. She was physically and mentally drained. The colossal demands of breastfeeding her baby, which she insisted on doing, were taking their toll. She reached out to switch off the light and Archie began to rummage; a few seconds later he was snorting and kicking at his blanket. Joanna groaned, shoving her head deep under the pillow. It didn't help; she could not block him out; he started to whinge. Joanna, whose natural instinct was to get up and nurse him, forced herself to stay put and finally fell into a deep and necessary sleep, only to be rudely woken far too early by her now screaming baby.

Throwing back the covers, Joanna, padded barefoot and zombie-like over to the cot. "What is it, Archie?" she asked, attempting to soften the irritation that crept into her voice and reflecting she could well understand how it was possible to be driven over the edge of sanity by sleep deprivation. Picking him up, she sat on the end of the bed, drew back her floral nightdress and latched Archie onto her breast. His cries stopped, transformed instantly into satisfied

slurping. Feeling as though her eyes were filled with shards of gravel, Joanna looked at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table: 23:23 shone back at her. Robert was still downstairs. She sighed, “Why don’t you want to sleep little one? You’ve barely slept all day, you must be tired. Mummy’s tired. Actually, she’s past tired; she’s completely exhausted. This lack of sleep is no good for her.” Joanna refocused her eyes, looking down at her nuzzling infant, “Or you, come to that, Mister.”

Joanna continued to mutter and hum at Archie for a good thirty minutes, trying desperately to stay awake and alert whilst he fed. Finally his sucking slowed and stopped, his little fists relaxing against her breast. “He sleeps. At last,” she murmured. “Dare I burp you? Don’t wake up again, God forbid!”

Then a thought popped into Joanna’s head that had not occurred to her before. Seizing the moment, she placed Archie down on her own bed, surrounding him with pillows and cushions. Then she began to drag the cot out of their bedroom and onto the landing, shutting the door behind her and heading for the tiny box room at the top of the stairs.

“What are you doing?” called Robert, disturbed from his form filling. Joanna stopped pulling and took a breath, by which time her husband was half way up the stairs.

“I can’t have another night like last night,” Joanna explained, “or the night before or the night before that. I’m so tired, darling. I’m going to put Archie in his own room now. He’s nearly seven weeks. It’s silly him being in with us, all we do is wake each other up. I’m sure he will sleep for longer if he’s completely undisturbed.”

“Are you certain?” Robert’s face was shadowed with concern. “I don’t know, Jo. Don’t you think it’s a bit soon?”

“No I don’t,” Joanna snapped. “I’m his mother and I have decided he needs his own room. And that’s that!” She continued to drag the cot, ramming it at the box room door. “I need to sleep... and I need to sleep now, do you hear me?”

“I don’t think that cot is going through that door, honey, not unless you mean to bash through the door frame,” Robert said mildly, raising his eyebrows at his wife to make it clear her lack of composure both amused and astounded him.

This irritated Joanna even more and she burst into tears of frustration. “It went through our bedroom door okay; the doors in this house can’t be different sizes.” She continued to slam the cot at the rigid door frame until forced to admit defeat. “Fine, he can sleep on the landing.” Turning on her heel she headed for her bedroom.

“Don’t be silly,” her husband laughed, steering her back to the abandoned cot.

“I’m not being silly, Robert.” Joanna stood, hands on hips, eyes closed. “You made the wretched cot so you can dismantle it and set it up in his bedroom. I can’t.” She tried to force her eyes open in an attempt to give her husband ‘the look’, but failed. “Please, Robert, it’s either that or I’ll go mad.”

“Whoa, you really do mean business don’t you? Okay, I’ll sort this out. Let’s see if we can get it through at an angle.”

Together they edged and nudged the bulky homemade cot through the box-room door. “There now,” Robert said smugly, standing in the open doorway of Archie’s new nursery, the cot squeezed snugly into the corner by the window. He put his arm tight around his wife’s shoulders, propping her up. “All we need now is Archie.”

Joanna turned out the light and tiptoed along the landing to fetch her baby. Holding her breath she carried him back to the box room, placed him into his cot and tucked him up neatly

with his red blanket. For a moment both parents stood looking down at their sleeping firstborn then crept from the room, Joanna closing the door softly behind them.

“What if we can’t hear him cry,” whispered Robert, worried.

“You are joking aren’t you?” Joanna stared at her husband in utter disbelief. “Our little man has a mighty set of lungs on him and this is hardly an eleven-bedroom mansion, of course we’ll hear him.”

“Let’s leave the door ajar,” Robert ignored his wife’s sarcasm.

Joanna was too tired to argue. “You do what you like; I’m going back to bed.” She disappeared into the darkness of their bedroom leaving her husband listening at the nursery door.

After a while, satisfied that all was well, he snuck back downstairs to finish his paperwork.