

The Blake Curse

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*For Mum and Dad who taught me to embrace determination and scorn the
word impossible*

Prologue

He silently watched his twelve year old daughter eat the meagre dinner, the expired ham she had rescued from the supermarket's trash can and the stale bread she had smuggled from her independent posh school's bin. Outside, the wind howled and shook their flimsy two roomed caravan as the first snowflakes began to coat the frosty ground. The girl shivered and huddled her thin worn sweater around her.

"You can have my pullover," he said as he gave her the only piece of warm clothing he now possessed.

"I'm all right dad." She smiled at him and started clearing the table.

"I'm sorry, Sam. You are a good girl and you deserve better than this. I promise you that next week we will have our home back. You can roam freely in our garden again and eat chicken pie and roast beef. You can concentrate on your studies and fulfil that ambition of yours. Don't let anyone take your dreams away from you, not even your father. And you must always remember that. Go on, go to your room and do your homework, I'll finish off here. Remember that education is the key to all your success."

Why had he done this to his own daughter Samantha, his baby Sam? He still remembered that tiny bundle snuggling in his arms just seconds after birth. He had sworn to protect her and give her everything in life but he failed her just as he failed his wife. His Sam was born into wealth and comfort and now she was reduced to rags, poverty and hunger.

He had been a successful banker with a ten bedroomed farmhouse deep in the English countryside. He had everything he could ever need, a loving wife and a beautiful daughter. However that life was quickly snatched away from him the day his wife collapsed during an evening gala dinner he was hosting for his business colleagues. The few weeks that followed were his biggest living nightmare. He had to watch his six year old daughter cry as she saw her mother bravely battling cancer. The little girl swore on her mother's deathbed that she would stop all this suffering. She would study medicine and find a cure. And that became her strongest ambition. She excelled in all her studies winning scholarships after scholarships. Her deep determination kept her focussed on her goal. She tried to keep them both afloat struggling against their misery but he pushed her down, pulling her beneath the vast cold ocean.

He blamed himself for his wife's death. He had known that she was sick, her wasted appearance was evident, and yet he was too busy recruiting

fame and wealth to spare the time for a quick consultation with the doctor. He never imagined that these things could happen to him, they always seemed to happen to his neighbour or some other person a million miles away. Denial was the best medicine. It kept him going. But the reality finally caught up with him. By the time she collapsed at that fateful gala dinner, the cancer had spread beyond any surgical hope. His beautiful wife passed away within just one month of the diagnosis.

He drowned his sorrow with gambling, alcohol and drugs. The drug pushers descended on him like vultures, sniffing his misfortune and taking advantage of him. They promised a state of contentment but the misery only returned with greater force than ever before once the effects wore off. He gradually needed stronger and more expensive substances and he moved up the ladder of drug abuse. He was up there at the very top, trapped, with no place to go, but he could not possibly survive without them. All his possessions were blown away to sustain his cravings and he was reduced to a mere existence. Nowadays he never even saw his generous monthly pay; it went straight to pay his debts.

Thank God that he had paid for his daughter's education well in advance, tying down the funds so that they could only be used for one thing. That was the only legacy he had to offer her. But that would all change tomorrow. He had stumbled on something that would guarantee their survival. It was big and dangerous but he had reached rock bottom and he could only go up at that point. The risk was worth taking. With the money he would go into rehabilitation and start to rebuild their lives. He fingered the key in his pocket, his ticket to his rebirth.

He could hear his daughter turning the pages of her book in the other room, the wall separating them was too flimsy for any privacy. But he will be silent and quick, she will never know. He had to have his final jab. He needed to forget his misery and see his wife again for the last time. Tomorrow he will seek the best professional advice money could offer. Tomorrow....that word tomorrow...procrastination had always been his weakness.

He filled the syringe with the heroin he had managed to obtain that morning. It had come surprisingly cheap, his supplier having already skinned him for the past six years. He had no trouble finding his vein and he leaned back waiting for his temporary escape from reality. But something was wrong, he was choking and his heart was failing. He tried to get up but he fell over his chair with an echoing bang.

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He heard her rushing into the room. She heaved as she turned him round to face her. He was frothing at his mouth and gasping for breath. He could see the helpless terror in her dark blue eyes as she screamed hysterically,

“Dad, what have you done? You promised, we were going back home tomorrow, you promised me. Speak to me dad.”

“Sam, my beautiful Sam, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to leave you today,” he coughed and spluttered but he had to warn her. “Carter did this to me. Hide this key somewhere away from here and don’t let anyone know you have it. Trust no one.... Carter’s network is vast and it infiltrates everywhere, and I can only describe it as British mafia. British Intelligence is corrupt too. They knew everything.....”

“You are not going to leave me dad. You have to keep your heart beating until the ambulance...”

“Stop it Sam, listen to me. It’s too late now, I’m dying. You must hide the key first before you phone for help. Do you understand? Go now and tell no one.” He gasped and looked at her small perfect features and stroked her jet black hair.

1

Tweaking the future

Eight Years Later.....

Ben could feel his vision drifting miles away to the quaint bridge overlooking the River Cam. He hated these sudden trips into the future, they made him feel alien and eccentric but he had no choice but to endure this madness. He should have got accustomed to them seeing that he had had them for sixteen years, ever since he was two, and after all they had come in handy on several occasions, but he still envied the sane minds of others who were oblivious to their fate. Ignorance was bliss. It was fine when they chose to transport him to his personal paradise but it was excruciating if they shoved him deep down in the depths of hell, shredding his heart to bits.

He looked around him as he stood on the bridge. He could see everything in such deep clarity that it was surreal. He was in a dimension that highly sharpened all his senses. He could see and hear the patches of ice forming on the surface of the river, and the developing icicles clinging to the overhanging leaves giving out that festive cheer. He could feel the damp frostiness creeping into his bones and smell the aroma of warm coffee leaking out of the barges waiting in a neat line. He could hear the distant giggle in this bone chilling silence.

Why had he been transported here to Cambridge? He frowned at the moon's reflection on the river. There could only be one reason, to save the skin of his reckless older brother Nick, the disaster magnet. Why should he be the one to constantly get him out of the trouble his happy carefree character had just created?

And here he came. Ben turned round to the sound of his bellowing laugh. Nick was obviously drunk, as was his current girlfriend. They were celebrating the end of the first trimester at university. He was in one of the world's most prestigious medical schools, but sadly that fact did not drill in him any common sense. He had got it into his head that he needed to climb over the bridge railing, just for the thrill of it and he even sucked the girl into his madness.

"Don't be stupid Nick," Ben shouted, but neither his voice nor his presence could ever exist in that dimension. His brother lost his footing and tumbled into the icy cold river dragging his giggling girlfriend with him. If he had been sober he

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might have had a chance but on that day the cold river claimed that final laugh. Ben clutched his chest in pain as that terrible sense of loss descended heavily upon him. He watched helplessly as his brother's body was washed out with the flow.....

Ben's vision returned to his apartment in Oxford. He was crouching on the floor doubling up in pain. The vivid dreams always transported his emotions to wherever they took him and he had to endure the terrible heartache just as if it were actually happening. He had seen his reckless brother dead or injured many times before and he had to go through the same loss over and over again. But he had always managed to change the picture so far.

"You can change this too, Ben," he told himself as he wiped the sweat from his brow and concentrated on slowing his heart rate. He grabbed his ringing phone. "Yes I know Dad," he said before his father could speak. "Nick's in trouble again. I should get going, I've got a two hour drive....Yes I'll take a change of clothes... Hey, don't tell mum. Just enjoy Australia and the blazing sun. Don't let this spoil your holiday. I will take care of everything here."

His psychic father always knew what was going on too. Like him, he had this weird wiring of his brain cells which gave them the ability to dip into the future. Some things were inevitable but Ben found out that he could alter most events much easier than his father could and he had helped his brother out on numerous occasions. He really owed him.

Ben looked at his watch, it was ten o'clock in the evening, and he had just enough time to prevent this thoughtless mistake. The picture had been clear enough for him to be able to read his brother's watch as he climbed over the railing. He sighed as he got up and stuffed his bag with warm dry clothes. They would both need them later. He tried his brother's mobile phone but as he had expected there was no answer. He was probably too busy dancing and drinking the night away.

Ben settled back deep in thought as he drove on. The burden of responsibility was getting to him. He was just eighteen but he felt like ninety. Just two years separated him and his older brother but the difference in maturity was centuries apart. If anything, the older Nick should have been the responsible one and he the reckless one.

Ben had always felt isolated by his deep thoughts and he could never quite fit in anywhere. Well for starters, he possessed this incredible photographic memory which apparently came hand in hand with his psychic ability. He had always been too young amongst his other classmates having gone up classes sometimes twice in a scholastic year and that

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enabled him to read Law at St Mary's College in Oxford and graduate with first degree honours at the young age of sixteen. His phenomenally high IQ did not go unnoticed and he was soon recruited by British Intelligence. They were eager to ensnare him into their agency before others descended on him. He was now quickly advancing up the ladder and his career took off with a very promising start.

But the weird connection between his brain cells was not the only thing he had inherited from his father, Josh Blake, a renowned strikingly handsome Hollywood actor with eight Oscars to his name. Their age was the only thing that could possibly tell them apart. Physically he was his own father's carbon copy and he had none of his mother's Mediterranean features. Ben knew without any modesty that he attracted the attention of every female within his one mile radius. His tall athletic build and perfectly chiselled features together with his dark hair and eyes were the winning combination. He was the perfect prototype, tall, over six feet, dark and uniquely handsome. To the casual eye it would seem as though the heavens had thrown all their gifts on one individual, brains, beauty and psychic shrewdness.

But it did not feel that way to Ben. Those same gifts turned him into the serious thoughtful introvert who would rather sit silently and contribute one word to the conversation rather than a whole sentence and all the admiring women who swooned around him because of his physical appearance generally gave up on his sullen and curt one word replies. He never dated. And moreover he enjoyed his solitary, reclusive existence, pretty much like his father. He had even inherited his character too, all his likes and dislikes; it was as if he had been cloned.

He finally parked his car and made his way to the river bank. It was a bitterly cold December night and the north arctic wind blew relentlessly against his coat making him shudder. He longed for that thick quilt and soft bed, but he had to wait for his carefree brother while he partied his night away. He had just made it with fifteen minutes to spare.

He could hear his own footsteps echoing along the path as he paced back and forth along the River Cam, always keeping the bridge within his sight. He did not dare stop moving for fear that he might freeze to death. He had this uncanny feeling that he was being watched; well he would not be surprised if the occupants in the barges called the police on him. Who was crazy enough to walk by the river in this freezing weather, and not only walk but retrace their steps over and over again? But his brother will come along any minute now.

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And sure enough he heard his happy bellowing laugh cutting through the still night air. Ben saw him stop some distance away as he started kissing the girl beneath one of the weeping willows overhanging the river.

"This is great, so now I have to watch my brother make out with his girlfriend," murmured Ben. But he did not have to wait for long because Nick soon felt the urge for that rush of adrenaline and he took the girl's hand and dragged her towards the bridge. Ben stepped out from the shadows and stood in his path.

"Come on Nick, we are going home."

"Oh, hello Ben. Ellie do you remember me telling you about my hundred year old baby brother? Well here he is... But what are you doing here in the middle of the night?" His brother's loud slurred voice echoed around the silent bank as he squinted at Ben. He rubbed his eyes and finally decided that he was experiencing a hallucination, so he turned and headed for the railing.

"Yes it really is me; it's not your imagination. And as to why I'm here...well I'm saving your skin like I always do. Why else would I be out here in this freezing weather? Come on Nick, you're drunk and you can hardly see the ground you're walking on. I'll give you a lift home," Ben insisted.

"Chill out baby brother, you really need to let yourself go at least once a year at Christmas time. I just have a dare to accomplish and then we will all go. Come on Ellie, don't worry I'll hold you really tight and close to me," and he started to climb over the railing as he offered a helping hand to the giggling girl but Ben stopped her with a stern warning,

"Ellie dear I definitely know that your beloved Nick will, within the next minute, fall headfirst into the freezing river and will drag you down with him. You are so drunk that you will definitely not be able to swim ashore. I'm afraid that my first priority has to be my brother. You will be rapidly washed away by the time I come back for you. I would strongly suggest that you go back to the pub and call a taxi unless you want to end up in the city morgue. Do you really want your parents to go through so much pain when they see your mangled corpse on a stone slab?"

The girl looked at him, and a spark of intelligence penetrated her drunken stupor, she shrugged and turned round and ran towards the pub a little way up the river bank.

"Now why did you have to do that, I wanted to kiss her on..." but Nick never finished his sentence. He lost his footing and plunged into the icy

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river. Ben swore as he took off his coat and dived in straight after him. The freezing water paralysed his lungs but he managed a painful deep breath and swam towards his sinking brother, dragging him ashore.

He could hardly control the violent shaking of his whole body as the cold water froze into ice on his very own skin. But he tried to fight off his light headedness, his brother was unconscious and he could not feel his pulse. He started to panic, he was no good in medical emergencies. The door of a nearby barge opened and he heard hurried steps running towards him. The girl quickly took control of the whole situation as she adjusted Nick's head and put her lips against his and started forcing air into his lungs. Nick quickly responded and rolled over coughing river water out of his mouth.

"You both need to warm up fast. Can you help me take him inside the barge?" she asked the shivering Ben. He nodded and together they dragged him in, away from the biting cold wind.

"Put him on my bed. I'll sort him out and then I'll boil the kettle for a warm drink. You have to take off your wet clothes and towel dry. Use this blanket to warm up and try to stay close to the heater," she ordered as she gave him a towel and blanket and turned her back on him.

Ben automatically did whatever she said. He stripped off his soaking icy clothes and towelled himself dry. He then wound the small hand towel around his waist and huddled against the blanket. Soon the warmth of the room started clearing up his fogged up head and his shivering eased. He felt his blood surging into his numb cadaveric white fingers and he looked with interest at his surroundings. The girl was struggling, trying to take his brother's wet clothes off. He looked closely at her face.... and his heart stopped beating.

He had seen this girl plenty of times before in his vivid dreams. Her striking colouring made her truly unique, her huge deep blue eyes contrasting vividly with her long jet black hair and pale white skin. He had often seen himself caress her delicate porcelain features and run his fingers through her fine hair. He would draw her close to him and kiss her before making love to her. He had sworn to love her for all eternity as he placed a wedding band on her finger. And he had seen her giving birth to his three children. He sat down heavily on a nearby chair and leaned forwards, vigorously rubbing his temples as he tried to sort out his emotions. She turned round to face him,

"Are you all right? You look extremely pale."

But he was too emotional to utter a single word, so he looked away and nodded.

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"If you've warmed up, can you help me here, he is quite heavy and he is not exactly very cooperative," she said with a smile as she struggled to peel his brother's tight soaking jeans off his waist. It was a futile task. She looked infinitesimally small standing next to his gigantic stoned out sibling. She had just about managed his jacket and shirt but not his tight jeans.

He flung his blanket aside and helped her take off the rest of his brother's clothes. He watched her as she gave him a quick medical examination. Nick looked fine now. In fact he was happily snoring away like an innocent one year old infant, totally oblivious to the chaos he had just caused. He was just sleeping off his alcohol intoxication.

She picked up their soaking clothes and tried to squeeze out as much water as she could. "I'm afraid they will not dry up so easily and I'm sure none of my clothes will fit either of you." She was barely five feet tall and very petite and small framed, hardly reaching any higher than his chest, very much like his own mother. Despite her small size, she had a perfect hourglass figure with curvy hips, tiny waist and full round breasts which could hardly be concealed by the faded, shabby, old sweater that she wore. Gosh his dreams had often highlighted those perfect proportions too.

He had to stop gawping at her. He must look very silly standing there with a tiny towel barely going around his waist and staring at her like a perverted madman. He would surely soon scare her out of her wits. He cleared his throat and tried hard to drag his mind back to what she had just said.

"I've got a change of clothes for both of us in my bag which I left outside on the bridge," he finally said. His main priority now was to retrieve his bag and put on some decent clothes.

She burst out laughing, "Oh, I thought that you had lost your voice in the river. You have done nothing but nod and stare ever since you entered the barge. So tell me, do you go about with a bag full of spare clothes just in case someone decides to take a dip in the river on a freezing December night?"

"Call it intuition." He picked up his blanket from the floor and gathered it around him as he headed for the door but she stopped him.

"I think you'll look very suspicious if you go out there looking like that. I'll go and get your bag."

He looked around the cramped barge. It was one of the smaller, older models. It was just a one roomed space with a bed at the far corner and a kitchen and table at the other. There was nothing else. And these few pieces of furniture crowded up the entire space. There was a low door presumably

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leading into the bathroom. Everything was neatly stacked and clean. However he could not help noticing the plain simplicity of everything around him. The table and chairs had definitely seen better days and the blankets were clean but badly worn out, just like the jeans and sweater she wore. She must barely be making ends meet but perhaps she had just rented the barge and was living in it temporarily.

He was just about to go through the books and papers littering the table when he heard her footsteps outside the door and he quickly moved away. It would be embarrassing if she caught him snooping around after she had been so generous with them.

She smiled warmly as she gave him his bag and coat. She then turned her back on him, busying herself in the kitchen end of the barge as she prepared some steaming coffee and cleared the table. Ben hastily put his dry clothes on and then proceeded to clothe his brother who was still out cold.

"I'm sorry about the mess we've created. Your bed is quite damp, you could come over to his place for the night if you prefer. It's just five minutes away and I'll be there too. He is quite harmless really, he wouldn't hurt a fly," he said as he curled his fingers around the warm cup of coffee and sank down on one of the chairs. He was dead tired and he could think of nothing better than to curl up in bed with this enchanting girl beside him.

"Thanks for the offer but I'll pass on that one. It will soon dry out. And in any case it is your brother who should be apologising."

"How do you know that he's my brother?"

"I think the people living on Mars heard him introducing you to his Ellie. And you are definitely Josh Blake's son. I bet you get that a lot, people must recognise you wherever you go. But you don't look anything like your brother."

That was true, his brother was exactly like his uncle Max from his Italian mother's side of the family; the Conti clan as his father called them. There all the males were gigantic and all the females, including his mother were small and delicate. Nick was no exception to that rule, he was huge over six feet tall, with olive skin, deep chocolate brown eyes and light coloured curly brown hair. He even had this Mediterranean carefree attitude in life and you could easily hear his loud booming voice from miles away.

"He takes after my mother's side of the family. She's Italian, hence his loud voice and boisterous attitude," Ben smiled, "I'm Ben, by the way, though an introduction hardly seems necessary since you seem to know everything about me. What about you? Where do you usually live?"

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"I live miles away," she answered vaguely and quickly turned the table back on him, "Do you go to university here in Cambridge?"

"No, I work with a law firm in London and live in Oxford," he answered equally evasive; British Intelligence was not something he could mention to casual strangers. He probed further, "Are you into medicine? You acted really professionally with his CPR and you did give him a thorough examination." He let his eyes wander to the stack of books at the other end of the table. They were all about science and related subjects.

"Sort of. I like medicine." She casually picked up the books and pushed them in her rucksack. The corner of his mouth curled up in a smile. What was the point in hiding the books? He was not blind and he had already read some titles. He already knew where her interests lay.

"So are you a medical student or a BSc or nursing student? You are definitely into science. Do you know Nick? He's a first year medical student at St. Joseph's, though it is hard to believe it seeing the state he is in right now."

"No.....to both questions. I don't know him and I'm not a student," she insisted. "And I am not from around here either. I was just passing through Cambridge with the barge." Ok she wasn't giving any information about herself. And she even turned the conversation back on him,

"Did you just come to Cambridge?"

"Yes, I drove over tonight."

"That's handy for him," she said nodding towards his snoring brother. "You drove for two hours on a freezing night in December and arrived just fifteen minutes before he walked out of the pub. I saw you pacing around the very same bridge your brother would eventually fall from. You conveniently had a bag full of dry clothes and you even had the patience to wait for him while he kissed his girlfriend under the weeping willow. You tried to stop him going over the railing, you managed to scare his girlfriend but unfortunately not him. It was as if you knew that this was about to happen."

"I told you, call it intuition. And I did feel that I was being watched as I stood on that bridge, so it must have been you."

"Well as you can see I have no TV here, so you provided quite a distraction." She laughed. He liked her laugh.

"I really can't thank you enough for what you did for us today. I'll be going back to Oxford the day after tomorrow but I would really like to take you out to dinner tomorrow evening, just to thank you and perhaps you might even want to reveal your name to me. You can keep everything else as

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a well hidden secret but knowing your name would be nice." Ben smiled broadly, he could see the all too familiar daze in her eyes, his smile could charm any one of the female species from the very young to the very old. He knew that and he had often used it to get himself out of trouble.

But the admiring look was quickly guarded, "I really would like to meet again but I have to go home very early tomorrow."

"That's fine. Where is home? I could look you up if I'm in the neighbourhood."

"As I said it is a thousand miles away...way too far for you."

"OK, I take the hint," he smiled, again dazzling and confusing her as she blushed deep red and gazed totally hypnotized into his eyes. He slowly leaned forward towards her. He stayed there, their lips barely touching, drinking in her sweet scent. She did not flinch back. Ben could almost hear her heart racing fiercely, and feel the heat radiating from her blazing cheeks. The chemistry was definitely there despite her constant rejections. He toyed with the idea of taking this further, he could so easily seduce her tonight and she would be a very willing participant, but then he decided against it. He would not use his physical charms on her, at least not tonight. He was sure that their paths would cross yet again. He leaned back on his chair and he saw deep disappointment flood her face.

"Anyway I guess I had better free your bed for the rest of the night. It's already three in the morning and you must be shattered. Thanks again." He slowly stood up, stuffed their wet clothes in his bag and half dragged his sleeping brother out of the barge. He turned round and shook her hand as he thanked her again. But he could not let go of her hand,

"At least tell me your name," he pleaded as he looked deep into her blue eyes. She smiled as she looked down at her worn-out shoes,

"It's Sam, but you must not tell your brother. I don't want him to know who had to undress him and see him naked tonight. He might be disappointed that it was not his Ellie," she laughed.

"Ok Sam, my lips are sealed. Well I hope I'll see you around some day. Call it intuition but I'm positive that I'll bump into you again sometime soon in the very near future and perhaps you might change your mind and have that dinner with me. I can look forward to that." He took her hand and kissed it lightly, his lips lingering against her delicate skin and despite the pale moonlight he could definitely see that she blushed bright red once again.

2

Setting the stage

...He knew that he was going to visit that house again, the deserted run-down house in the middle of the glorious English countryside. He was always being transported there, ever since he was ten, but he had no interest in being there. Indeed he had never seen the house or its surrounding countryside in his sane tangible world, that house existed only in his vivid dreams.

It was always the same dream, that young child Ben walking up the narrow lane to the house and opening the groaning gate. He always knew what he had to do, it was a natural instinct like breathing. He would sneak inside through the downstairs bay window and head straight for the kitchen where he would retrieve a bunch of keys from the bottom drawer. He would select one of the many silver keys to open the patio door and he would run across the tennis courts and across the fields and go into the stables... there the dream would end.

*But today it was different, Sam was with him. Of course she would be there; a Sam was always present in **all** his vivid dreams now, ever since that cold December day six months ago, the day he had actually met her in his true dimension. It seemed as if his brother's reckless adventure had sealed his own destiny with the mysterious girl.*

He parked his car at the foot of the lane. Sam paused in front of the street sign and lightly passed her finger over the letters, removing the build up of dust and snow. Every letter revealed gave her a sharp stab of pain in her heart, Sherwood Close.

He put his arm around her shoulders and gently steered her away, up the deserted lane towards the ghostly house. The bare trees on either side gave the wintry air that extra chill as they unnervingly watched their slow progress. Ben opened the aging gate and looked at the house. It never changed its appearance in any of his dreams, not even a single minute insignificant detail. The same thick overgrown ivy climbing up to the straw thatched roof, the same splintered wooden door firmly shut and the same overlooking windows all grimy, dusty and forgotten. It was almost hilarious really, there was even the same spider web blocking the right hand side bay window. He went straight to that very window and heaved at the sliding pane of glass. He swiftly slipped inside and Sam silently followed.

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The damp musty smell hit them hard as did the gloom of the rotten furniture inside. Ben could feel Sam trembling beside him as she covered her face with her hands and swayed unsteadily towards him. Why had he brought her here to his childhood dream? She was scared and he had to get her out of there fast. As always he knew what he had to do. He half carried her quivering body to the kitchen and retrieved the bunch of keys.

The cold sharp air outside revived their flagging spirits. Holding her hand, he started to steadily cross the decaying tennis court, their feet crunching the dried twigs. Who would let this magnificent property rot to such a degree of waste and disrepair? The house and surrounding grounds must have seen happier times and Ben could almost hear the cheerful laughter echoing around the now dismal fields, but they were but a tiny forgotten whisper now.

The stable was faithfully waiting for his arrival, its solid existence never moving, never changing, just like everything else in the house. He selected the key and opened the door. His eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness within and he purposely walked towards the farthest side of the stable. This was where his usual dreams ended but that day Sam was with him and he had to finish the dream. Ben dragged the heavy stone trough to the side to reveal a small trapdoor. Again he knew which key he had to use, the small rusty bent one. He felt the lock give way and he lifted the trapdoor. Rats spilled out of the hole. Sam's petrified screams pierced the deadly silence and she started to retch as she felt sick all over the stable floor. He had to take her out of there but first she had to give him her father's key...

Ben came back to reality, to his office. The elusive Sam had been constantly present in all his dreams for the past six months now, ever since that cold December day. But he had made no attempt to track her down. Indeed he had kept his promise and had not even discussed her with his brother. He knew for certain that he would eventually meet her again and this time he would get to know all about her life, the details of which she had tried so hard to keep hidden from him.

He dragged his mind back to his present problem and reread the confidential letter he had just received from his boss, Dave Bowes. His first mission was about to start and he was ready for it. His acting skills, no doubt a gift generously handed down from his father would be an added bonus and he knew that he could blend in anywhere and pull it off. He smiled, and after burning the letter in his fireplace, he went straight to Dave's office.

His boss was leaning against the window sill, looking out into the busy street below. He was lost in thought, a million miles away. Ben liked this elderly, portly gentleman with his bald shining head and wide welcoming smile. He especially admired his calm and collected nature and Ben knew that he had loads to learn from him.

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Dave slowly turned round to face his young, energetic agent,

“Good morning Ben. I guess you have already read the brief outline in my letter. I’ll go straight to the point. Four years ago my niece passed away. She was just sixteen and full of life, it was tragic. She had been into drugs for three years and her parents were not even aware of it. No one ever expected it because they were both respectable members of society, my sister being the headmistress of a local school. That day, my niece came home from school like any other normal day and after having a quick dinner she went straight to her room claiming that she had loads of homework to do. The next morning my sister found her dead on her bed. Hundreds of young people die experimenting with drugs but for the parents involved, drug overdose could only mean murder and the perpetrator has to be caught. Who pushed the drugs in the first place and who controlled the pushers. Unless the top guy is weeded out the problem will keep on returning.”

He sat down, he was apprehensive about revealing all the delicate details but he had observed Ben closely for two years. The young agent was both capable and clean.

“I naturally opened a big investigation here. However after six months I was forced to close down my hunt and I was given different assignments. My gut feeling told me that I was very close to uncovering an embarrassing fact and that someone high up in this very agency knew that, but I had no hard facts. I secretly kept the case open using only one single agent who was not connected to my department in any way. One month ago this agent was killed when his apartment burned down. There was nothing suspicious, an overheated gas boiler..... but I suspect otherwise. He had constantly come up with one name, Edward Carter, the bank billionaire with a lot of political connections mounting to quasi mafia proportions. Carter has a daughter, two years older than you, who incidentally is a second year Law student at your brother’s university, St. Joseph’s College in Cambridge....”

“And you want me to get close to this daughter and see what I can uncover.”

“Ben, I’m not going to lie to you, this could be dangerous and you have to answer to me and to no one else in this agency. I can give you leave of absence for as long as it takes. Let us say you want to broaden your knowledge and study Medicine with your brother. After all you are still eighteen and strictly speaking you should still be in university. Medicine is our best bet since you are already a law graduate and no one will buy into you suddenly wanting to repeat it as you already aced every topic in that department. Of course you will still be funded by us; medical knowledge

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would come in handy for anyone working in our field. Besides no one wants to see you leave the agency, and everyone recognises your high IQ and impressive potential, so they will agree to keep your wages with the understanding that you will eventually rejoin the agency even better qualified than before."

"I'm not much of a medical person but the first two years of Medicine are mainly academic, studying anatomy and physiology. Memorising facts should not be a problem and I'm sure that I can crack this in less than a year," Ben said enthusiastically.

"We can twist some arms so that you can go straight into second year Medicine. I'm sure that you will have no problem with memorizing the entire first year syllabus during the next two months. Cathy Carter has got some good friends in that year group. Unfortunately your brother isn't one of them, otherwise we would have hoped for an introduction from him. There is a particular student Jake, who will be in your year group who is very friendly with her and her family. His hands are definitely soiled."

"A medical student pushing drugs.....that doesn't quite fit," Ben mused.

"Jake is our enigma." Dave paused as he stood up and paced round the room looking for the right words to describe Jake.

"Up until the age of fifteen he was a very well mannered and thoughtful boy, very sporty and popular because of his numerous wins in every sport imaginable. He is brilliant academically too and his creativity, mental sharpness and hunger for success are well documented in all his school reports. You might say that he is an absolute all rounder striving for the very best. His mother is the only daughter of the Earl of Yorkley, a distant descendant to some British monarch, I can't remember exactly who. So you might say that he has a drop of royal blood in him too. The old Earl and his wife died in a plane crash when Jake was fourteen leaving him, but not their daughter, a substantial heritage and a title. His father is the shadow foreign secretary, John Snell, whose party were in power for a long time. Very impressive parentage and extremely wealthy too. But despite his title and all this Jake was very down to earth and liked by all, teachers and students."

"But that all changed," Ben prompted.

"Yes unfortunately it did. When Jake turned fifteen, some five years ago, his father's political party lost the election and his mother left her husband for an eighteen year old lad, just three years older than her own son. The affair and thousands of explicit pictures were published in the local paper and it is rumoured that she is still living in the States with her young lover."

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Dave sat down at his desk and drummed his fingers, deep in thought. He was sorry for the bright ambitious young Jake whose dysfunctional family life must have pushed him onto Carter's lap.

"Yes, that changed the boy overnight. He is still very bright and academically brilliant and unbelievably successful in all kinds of competitive sports, but he is now also mean and cunning and rotten to the very core. He became deeply involved with Carter and he is the brains behind the booming business in the last five years. How are the drugs shipped in and where is their hideout? His devious mind and shrewdness has so far made it impossible for us to pin him down. I just know that Carter's drug trade has flourished immensely but even though it has outgrown all boundaries there are still no loose ends for us to find, all thanks to Jake."

"What does his father have to say about his son's dirty hands?"

"So far I have no evidence that John is involved in any of this... I know he is but....who can prove it? He is Carter's partner in various legitimate businesses and their friendship goes back for years but....I don't know. The father is as shrewd as the son. We suspect that he was involved in some kind of bribery when he tried to cover up for his son on at least two occasions. Two years ago the eighteen year old Jake was caught having public and promiscuous sex with a group of prostitutes in broad daylight in a boat shed by the River Cam and then again in a department store changing room two months later. On both occasions Jake and the women were stoned out and they never bothered to be discreet, bringing forth a lot of complaints and witnesses. But somehow all charges were dropped after the witnesses failed to identify Jake or the women the next day."

"He sounds like an ideal friend to have." Ben laughed.

"Jake is extremely popular with the sophisticated upper-class girls because of his good looks, athletic achievements, wealth and title. He has a clique of male friends who are always ready to do his bidding because of the type of girls he attracts. Yes everyone wants to be within Jake's inner circle of friends which is mainly made up of the very rich and famous. Unfortunately you must befriend him and try to get close to Cathy who, as far as we can tell, has always been his greatest friend but never his lover. You will certainly be welcomed with open arms inside their group being from a rich and influential family yourself. You will of course be highly disliked by the rest of the middle-class level-headed students who are often intimidated by them."

"I think I can handle that." He was never particularly liked by any of his classmates who were often resentful of his young age, photographic

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memory and excellent grades. His brother and two sisters were his only friends because only they could understand the terrible price he had to pay for that high IQ.

“I was also told that Cathy has a soft spot for the handsomest young man on campus so I can see no problems for you really. You tick all the boxes. Your impressive memory will make our recommendation for one of the best universities justified, your family pedigree will help you with infiltrating the clique, your acting skills will help with blending in and your Hollywood good looks will help with warming your way into her heart. It sounds perfect.”

“It is. Now all I have to do is catch up with my reading and tell my brother that I will be moving in with him for the coming scholastic year.” He smiled as he took the big pile of medical books his boss had already prepared for him.

Ben scowled with annoyance as he entered the overcrowded pub. University was about to start in a week’s time and the city was bustling with students all returning for the start of the academic year. He hated crowded loud places but his brother had told him that this pub was where Cathy and her gang often gathered. He was keen to start his mission, the earlier he started the quicker he could retreat from the horribly claustrophobic student life he hated so much.

He had briefly explained his mission to his brother. All Nick needed to know was that this was a temporary situation and, if possible, he had to start dating Cathy. His brother had laughed, slapped him on his back and wished him luck. His opinion of the girl and her obnoxious group was way down at the bottom of the deepest ocean but he promised to try to help him whenever he could. Nonetheless he had refused to accompany him that night and Ben had to endure the torture by himself.

He looked around the room and immediately spotted the group. They were easily recognised by the air of superiority and contempt which very often went hand in hand with wealth and power. There were around twelve rowdy and elitist youngsters gathered around two joined up tables and they were dominating the whole place. The nucleus of the group seemed to be Jake. Ben could easily identify him as the ruggedly sporty young man Dave had shown him in various photographs.

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It was obvious that Jake hadn't gone through too much trouble to dress up for the evening. He was casually draped with an expensive looking but crumpled half open blue shirt that he almost certainly must have slept in the night before. His sandy coloured straight hair was all over the place and a two day stubble covered his otherwise handsome rugged features. But despite all this he was flanked on either side by two scantily but elegantly dressed beautiful women who were both fighting for his attention. He was leading the whole conversation and he would from time to time stop to kiss either one of the girls, or mentally strip any other good looking female who happened to pass by their table. His behaviour was highly offensive but no one objected, not even the girls themselves. If anything they encouraged his groping hands and discourteous stares.

He was exactly as Dave had described him, one of those leading alpha sporty males who possessed that primitive animal instinct to want to impregnate all the decent looking females in his vicinity. But there was another side to him too. Yes, Jake was certainly an enigma, his piercing blue eyes were very restless and sad and there was a lot of bottled up anger and energy inside him all ready to erupt to the surface. He was not happy with life...or the outer shell he had created for himself. Perhaps deep within him there was still a small hint of his previous decent life, the life before drugs, alcohol and promiscuous sex.

Ben spent the first fifteen minutes observing their behaviour. He would hate being part of that group, it would go against all his reclusive tendencies, but he had no choice. He adjusted his brooding scowl and fixed that perfect smile, the one that usually attracted women like bees to a honey pot. He wondered if Jake would consider him as a potential threat to his usual dominance in the female world. Who would win the territory in a stag fight; the clean shaven, elegant and stylish, chiselled featured stag or the rough and rugged, strong and sporty one? But he had no intention of competing with Jake; he just wanted Cathy, the girl he apparently was not interested in sexually.

He made his way to the side of the bar closest to their table and ordered a drink. As he had expected he was soon being eyed up by most females in the room and some even went up and introduced themselves. In these circumstances he would normally grunt and move away preferring to shut himself alone in his own sanctuary. But that day he put on his acting mask and shoved his introvert tendencies away as he chatted amiably flashing his irresistible smile and flirting outrageously.

It took less than an hour for Cathy to edge her way to his side of the bar. He easily recognised her by her tall slender figure and gorgeous fair hair

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dangling down to her waist. At least she was a very pleasant sight to look at...not his type...but nevertheless very pretty and seductive. He might even enjoy his mission.

"Hello, you must be Josh Blake's son. You are your father's splitting image...but you look nothing like your brother Nick," she said as she leaned against him. Ben could see the daze in her eyes and the flirting posture she adopted as she gave him a full view of her cleavage. My, he was good. He had not expected such an easy conquest. He would have bet on a week but never an hour. He could just imagine his brother laughing his head off when he told him everything that night.

"Yes, I'm the irresistible gorgeous brother, but you must admit he is not so bad looking himself. And you are...?"

"Cathy Carter, second year Law student at St. Joseph's."

"Damn, I knew that I should have taken Law instead of Medicine. Are all the pretty ones into Law?" He flashed his smile and casually placed his hands on her hips as he drew her closer to him. That was it, Cathy was hooked for life, and all he had to do was to keep up his extrovert act. He did not even have to befriend Jake. She was not letting him out of her tight clasp. There was that mad possessive look in her eyes as she steered him away from other advancing predators.

Within the next hour they were in each other's arms kissing passionately in a forgotten corner of the pub. She obviously gave great importance to the physical side of a relationship and didn't think much about intellectual conversation, their verbal exchange having been very frugal and superficial. She soon wanted something more intimate but she still lived with her strict parents in their family mansion just outside Cambridge.

"Let's go to your place," she suggested.

"My brother is there," came his lame excuse.

She looked at him in surprise. He should have grabbed her invitation. "What about my car?" she whispered seductively in his neck. Gosh she was fast! Wasn't it enough that he had his hands all over her curves when he had known her for just over an hour? What happened to good old fashioned sex for true love?

"Too cold." Now that was an even stupider excuse. But he hastily covered his lapse with overzealous kissing and groping beneath her dress because that was what she wanted him to do. He half expected the pub landlord to take him by the collar and kick him out. He probably would have, hadn't Cathy been one of his loyal customers. He was out of his depth

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here. If he was behaving this way on their first evening what will he be expected to do when their friendship matured? He had no intention of sleeping with her just to solve the case. He had firm morals and that was the line he would never cross, no matter how pretty and willing she might be. He just had to keep her satisfied and unsuspecting and wriggle his way out every time.

But she seemed determined to give him a very memorable evening. She was not going to give up Josh Blake's son so easily. She had asked about his father's successful Hollywood career at least a dozen times in the space of one hour in between kisses and inappropriate caresses. He was horrified when she slid under the table. He looked around the pub but no one was looking their way and she seemed to be hidden beneath the sweeping tablecloth. This was not an evening a shy introvert would normally relish. He was going way too fast for someone who had never kissed or dated.

He sat back and closed his eyes and thought of the black haired, blue eyed girl that had constantly invaded his thoughts these past six months wishing that it was her under the table unzipping his jeans. He finally shrugged and slid further down his seat, adjusting his position and making it easier for her. He reached down beneath the tablecloth and slowly slid his fingers through her silken fair hair, pulling her face closer to him, she was insisting and she was far *too* good to refuse. This was only a bit of playing around and misbehaving, he will just have to make sure that they always remain in public places. That way he would never be tempted to go the whole way because that would complicate things and make the whole situation sticky and messy.

But yes she was very good...she must have done this before, perhaps here in this pub beneath the tablecloth. This was definitely worth the previous boring and empty one hour...He could think of nothing else but his own intense gratification. He might as well enjoy the rest of the evening.