When the Clouds Break

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Prologue

It was easy to please her. I knew how to make her happy and make her smile. This kept me calm. She was always there for me. She was the only one there for me…she made sure of that.

She kept me from danger, from those out to harm me. She was my life. My only problem was, that I can't remember any of it before her.

Chapter 1

The simplicity of habit

Sunday, March 6th

The day is Sunday. Lucy had packed one medium sized suitcase, two flight cases and her folio bag. The latter being her most important, with documents, notes, laptop and all accompanying stationery and gadgets. Not forgetting her two handbags, with one being an expensive ever-present black leather Prada one. The other being a larger more available design absent of any label. I'm not aware of what's in any of her bags, it's best if I'm very unaware. Undoubtably, she's packed her two compact umbrellas and taken her matching Armani hat and scarf.

She travels organised and has to have outfits that match her surroundings. Heaven knows what's in her wardrobes, from what she tells me, they're filled with designer two-piece suits, trousers, shirts, blouses, a few casual-but-smart clothes and shoes. I have my separate wardrobe. Lucy simply knows how to arrange parts of her big wardrobe ready for travel. It impresses me how organised she is.

Sometimes Lucy goes away for a conference or catches a flight to Belgium or Holland for a week, to work at our European offices. I have no clue what she does over there other than it's all very executive and necessary.

At 4pm she packs her cases in her car, taking both her coats as well, the reason being it's March and the weather could change. Not that I asked. She comes close to me, puts her arms around me, kisses me on the lips. It was a gentle moment. Everything about her was clean and fresh. Her long hair smelling almost fragranced. Her perfume only slightly evident. I hugged her tight.

"See you on Friday?" I asked her, along with "I love you!"

"Don't be so emotional, I've gone away before you know!" she replied, with that smooth voice. It's reassuring nature.

"I'll be waiting and won't be straying from my routine. It's what keeps me sane." I half-heartedly added as humour.

"Now listen to me. Keep yourself busy at home. Don't go out, and make sure you are punctual when leaving for work and coming back home okay?" she softly told me, while casually stroking my short hair, but with her head on my shoulder. The feeling of belonging was almost euphoric.

I just made a noise of agreeing with her. I didn't want this moment to end.

"Make sure you do things your way okay! No one comes in, and we keep the house clean. We like clean, don't we? Clean is good. It's what has got you through this. It's how I've helped you and protected you." Her voice caring and nurturing, as it's been when she's happy with me. Helping me.

She says her final goodbyes and leaves. Not wanting me to stand in an open door, waving. It was 4.10pm.

Monday, March 14th

The morning sunlight beamed through the persistent gaps surrounding the blinds. They're meant to be black-out, but sadly not living up to their name. It was after seven in the morning now; Monday morning. I knew she wasn't here. I could feel how the bed was empty on her side. Lucy hadn't called all week. It was something to do with a new client in Oxford.

I'm not too familiar with how her role works; she's made it clear over the years that I must not ask or involve myself in any way with her work. I am to concentrate on my job description as if my life depended on it. I am to consider the health consequences of taking on too much and not getting stressed. Most couples, she informed me, divulge every secret and method about their workplaces and job duties to their other halves, but not us. Most couples talk about workplace friends and colleagues, but not us. We should be a couple in an intimate, loving and trusting relationship, that only has each other…not anyone else. This is what she tells me, and I listen. It's important that I listen.

When Lucy left, last Sunday afternoon, I felt alone and scared. She said her goodbyes and left. That was 8 days ago. I check my phone for a message from her, and there isn't anything.

As I lie here, I think of when she left. I know she's coming home soon. She knows how important she is to me. She knows I can't function without her.

For a bizarre moment, I think of her car, a clean shiny black BMW 7 series. It is an up-to-date injection model, a year old now. It came straight from the factory to the dealership then to her. A company car. I'm not to know anything about it, I haven't even been in it, but when I had a few minutes at work, I brought up the specs and book price. She doesn't know.

I don't have a car, I go everywhere by public transport…train, tram or bus. The cost works out okay, compared to owning and maintaining a car anyway. Therefore, I have my own timetable and routine, to which I was encouraged to do for my own confidence. I memorised the timetables of my route, just so I

could make a mental note of how many buses and trains do not adhere to them. Not that I do talk to people (it terrifies me to have a conversation with anyone I don't know), but it may always be a topic of conversation if needed. Best to be prepared. Especially if the two men at the bus stop ever talk to me. One of them has a beard, and wears a bright red parka coat, which I think is too bright and shouldn't be allowed at all. I often have thoughts of both being pushed in the road and I witness the carnage that an articulated lorry would do to them. It's not good that I have these thoughts, my counsellor once said. I should learn to breathe…apparently. My counsellor told me plenty. He got me thinking clearly and precisely. Establishing a routine.

He was Lucy's idea and recommendation. She paid for it and arranged the appointments. Dr Karl Gantz. A very charming and friendly man. An office in the center of town, with sparsely filled cabinets and shelves, only with ornaments and a handful of psychology, homeopathy and reflexology books. Three A4 picture frames mounting, presumably, his qualifications were on the wall adjacent to the window.

Enough pondering, it's time I do my usual morning routine, as close as I can to the precise timetable that I set myself, and ensure the entire house is exactly how it should be, presentable and clean. This includes the bed, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, hallway and anywhere I (or Lucy) use before either of us leaves the house. My level of detail is critical and I often test myself when I come home and try to find anything out of place, not dusted or unclean. I pride myself on my assortment of cleaning products; disinfecting, anti-bacterial and each with differing floral notes. I once caught myself out one time, by finding out that I hadn't descaled the kettle in the set four weekly plan. I had let it go over by two further weeks, and my panic attack was rightly justified. I cannot bear to think of any surface that hasn't been disinfected in any way. I have three vacuums, one for upstairs, one for downstairs and one for the hallway, which I always use every morning before I leave; to get rid of my footsteps on the carpet. This particular vacuum is a folding cordless one that I put away behind the coat stand near the front door. This routine gives me assurance that things are more than in place, and if I have done everything else to my standard then this extra bit relaxes me. I also wipe the door handle and key hole before I go as well.

I do a thorough house clean, alternating room by room, every day. I've done this for the last eight days. I know every room has been thoroughly cleaned three times over, and all bed sheets have had their once weekly wash and iron. I even clean over the cushions. Nothing is exempt. It makes me feel incredibly proud that I'm in control.

Today I wear what I feel most comfortable in, navy trousers, a checked short sleeve shirt and comfortable brown wide fitting shoes. My coat is a black jacket, that is both smart/casual but windproof as well. Of course, Lucy picked out my wardrobe, it was for the best.

As I make my commute to work, on the 08.02 number 8 bus (fashionably 3 minutes late again), I wonder if she is going to call me today. I'm not allowed to call her. It's Monday and no one in work has asked last week if Lucy is alright. Not that anyone ever has asked me, they don't. But there is one person who has asked me before, Nick Powell the MD of CompServe Inc, he is Lucy's manager, and Lucy is the Marketing Director. I also work for CompServe Inc, but in the role of an IT Technician. My desk is in the rear of the building at ground level, in a once refurbished large office, but as time went by, the office accumulated a lot of spare parts, shelves, more servers upon servers, many noticeboards and a few posters.

I've worked in this position for about 9 years, without any progression, to which I actually don't want anyway. My colleagues are the two Dave's. One being Dave Smith and the other being Dave Simpson. Everyone gets them mixed up. I memorised their ID numbers years ago, and they still find it amazing that I manage to place the correct bundles of mail on each applicable desk. The mere fact they each have a degree in computer science with an additional masters in IT…simply baffles me. Their biggest daily achievement is to see how far they can shoot elastic bands across the office at a rather worn movie poster of Twelve Monkeys, or looking at Auto Trader. The level of conversation is mostly juvenile; however, their work abilities and knowledge are invaluable. They've been here about two years. As has the IT manager, Eitan, he's been here about two and a half years. He is a really good man that hasn't pushed me at all for promotion out of my job. He seems to understand that I am comfortable and seems to leave me alone to get on with things. It's unusual as most staff who work in the building often ask for me, but always through Eitan first. I often do the work remotely or at their desk, when they are in a meeting or on lunch. I can't abide the small talk. I don't like talking to those that I don't know. Lucy reminds me sometimes that I shouldn't be talking to those I don't know; they would use me and lie to me. She makes me feel safe.

The bus reaches town and after continually looking at the floor, and charging my phone, I get off and take the same trusted route to work. Avoiding everything but my thoughts.

I enter the building using the same left-hand door that I always use, a habit that became a superstition I guess, and without following 99.9% of my colleagues, I venture through a door at the rear of the lobby and head downstairs to the

unglamorous IT department, or The Lab as the two Dave's like to call it. We have our own toilet facilities and a small canteen area, as well as a cloakroom with lockers. Of course, being only four of us, we don't find it necessary to use a padlock on our lockers. When I say we, I mean them. I've always had one and I like to know my box of Earl Grey tea bags and container of Columbian coffee are safe and well. The sugar and creamer/coffee whitener has to be locked up, that goes without saying, because who knows what germs lie on the spoons of strangers?

After logging on early (another helpful prompt from Lucy) I make myself a coffee in the clean and sanitized mug that I leave in my locker. Then it's a quick check up through emails, jobs pending, jobs being requested and a mental note made of what's in the diary for today.

"Good Morning Dave's" as they walk through the door in raucous laughter, presumably about a popular lady or a comedy show, or heaven forbid…football. Their response may have been said, so I'll take it as done.

"Good Morning Eitan" as he walks in, and am greeted by a smile, a nod and something that clearly wasn't English.

The day passes brilliantly. No surprises, no demands, no panic and the to-do list completed. All in all, productive and not a single word said to any living person. It couldn't have been better.

Finishing time comes, as I prefer to call it. I've heard the two Dave's call it knocking off time, but I don't do that. After packing up, tidying up and grabbing my coat I walk to the bus stop. That's when I got that nervous feeling about Lucy and wondering if she'd be back home. It dawned on me that I hadn't received a call from her, and she said she would have been back home on Friday evening. That didn't happen.

As it was now a week since I've seen her, and although I was pining for her voice, I wasn't allowed to contact her. I had her number memorised, both her work and personal mobiles, as she told me one night that it would be unprofessional to have her number in my phone. I never challenged her; it was safer not to.

Getting back home I found no car on the drive, the door lock position as it was and inside, everything as I left it, exactly as I left it. Almost sterile.

The evening passed uneventful, forever waiting for her car to pull up and key in the door. Simply spending the evening cleaning everything I possibly could clean, all surfaces, objects and utensils that I have or would touch. Nothing could be unclean. An unclean item or surface could be my enemy, is what she

told me repeatedly for at least the first two years. That logic included my family and friends at that time. None of them could be trusted. They wouldn't understand us, so it was best to treat them as unclean.

Tuesday, March 15th

The alarm went off suddenly, making me jump. It was the radio, her choice of station (Heart) and when I came to, I turned to look over, and she still wasn't there. My heart dropped and I got that feeling like I was unwell. I put my hand over to her side of the bed and lay with it there for a minute, wishing she was here. It wasn't going to change the fact that I had to get up and make the house and myself ready. So, the routine began.

By the time I was ready to leave (07.45) I made a quick check list of the house, including last night's cleaning, and remembered that I mixed a teaspoon in with the nice tea spoons, so went and corrected that. Taking the vacuum by the front door and vacuuming the carpet up to the door, then replacing it. Closing the door, I was satisfied that the house was to Lucy's level of standards, and I walked to get the trusted number 8 bus, with a short walk through the little park, the route only took me 6 minutes to the bus stop. There I would have theoretically 11 minutes to wait, but with the exception of human error, that could be brought down to about 9 minutes. 9 minutes that I would wait next to the two men, one with his red parka and a beard, and one with his hideous bright puffer jacket. The two that never seem to notice anything around them. There's a lot of waiting involved in public transport, it's completely the opposite to the timeframe of driving a car, where most always seem to chase time.

Chapter 2

The lady in the lake

I crossed over the road, no traffic, and entered the gate to our community park. Admiring the handywork of the grounds man, and looking up into the nearby tree to see where the birdsong was coming from, when something hit me. The force of the blow from behind to the back of my knees was hard. I buckled straight away, almost falling, when I felt a brutal blow to the back of my head, and I collapsed in the direction I was headed; the floor. My head was the sound of a dull roar, and my eyes lost focus. The pain in my legs was excruciating, and

I knew I couldn't stand up, let alone run. I couldn't run. I couldn't run away. Terror set in. Fear was already in me.

I felt a blow to my side, I think it was a heavy boot, I could hear the swoosh of the leg, and the other foot keep balance. I looked up, and saw a track suit jacket, a shaved head, or maybe just really short hair. I saw a pair of trainers, not running ones. Then a blur and a painful blow in my face, I could feel my nose running warm and wet, I felt the pain of something break, I hope it was only my nose. I crouched into a fetal position, simply by instinct, and then I felt the hands grab my head, but I kept pulling against them, keeping my head inside my arms. Blow after blow after blow. My body was taking an unwanted huge amount of point force, blunt force if you like. Kick after kick. Punch after punch. The wooden bats were the most painful. The verbal abuse, the insults, them trying to expose my head, but I had to stay alive. That's how I was thinking. Nothing else mattered. Not even noise.

It wasn't one person, I couldn't tell, I couldn't see. I didn't want to see. I wanted it to stop. I wanted to cry.

The pain was instant. That's the only word I can describe any of this. I tried to scream but was silenced by the fear. I tried to breathe but suppressed by the unknown. The blows kept coming. Survival was the only option, not self-defense.

In an indescribable instant, I started to see things as if I was stood up, my feet planted in the middle of myself, watching this happen, looking at three men in casual but sports like clothing, kicking my body repeatedly, hitting it with baseball bats, yet one was a cricket bat. I recognised that. I also recognised the trainers one had on; I saw them earlier. I watched the blows, but my body felt numb. It was as if I was letting it happen. My vision seemed odd, and colours were starting to appear around my body, as if I went numb and I could feel the colour. I held out my arm and it had a red haze surrounding it. I was fascinated by my hand, the momentary trails of mist it left as I waved it. I looked at one man in the face, in the eyes, saw nothing but darkness. I reached out to protect myself from him and pushed. Nothing. I pushed again, but nothing. I felt a rage building in me, and I felt the overwhelming need to scream out in anger. It rose like a wave coming to shore, and with the same energy that pushes it further and further away from its soul, to crash into the rocks.

It was then that I saw him, a light surrounding him. His being appeared and walked calmly towards me. A gentle soft light emanating from what could only be his center, his heart. I could feel his presence, more than see it. I could sense the kindness and warmth. I could visualize his clothing, of…robes or

something. His long beard, his smile, his eyes. His eyes were soft yet dark. Not void of any soul like those attacking me. Suddenly, a flash of bright colours filled my eyes, and the pain returned. The blues, reds, yellows…orange, I remember orange. It all went and everything hurt, even my eyes. It was like the pain of a concentrated migraine, but all inside me. I lay still. I had to recollect what was happening, but I couldn't. I wanted to see Lucy's face, but I couldn't. I realised the blows had stopped, but I was frozen. I was held by absolute fear. Pinned down by a gigantic weight on top of me, and giving me nothing but panic and confusion to digest.

I lay still, for a time that seemed an eternity. The ordeal had taken my concept of time away from my senses. My primary concern was survival. They could be stood there, watching me, waiting for me to show my face. I couldn't do it. All noise seemed to be a constant hum in my ears, as well as through my entire body, it was a dull noise echoing inside me. I could feel the pain, the absolute paralysing agony that instantly gave me the realisation that any movement was a bad idea.

Then, from nowhere, hands touched me, and I tried to recoil in sheer terror. I tried to scream. I tried and it hurt. I cried. It was the only thing left that didn't cause me any further pain. I just wanted it to stop. I cried out loud, I managed it, I screamed for my life. The pain was doubling in intensity. My vision was a mixture of cloudy and blurry. Those hands were touching me, survival was what I wanted, I didn't want to die. I wanted to live.

A dull voice was talking, my ears had lost something. My hearing was both a dull roar and a high-pitched ringing. I could almost distinguish a voice; a man's voice. Sounding urgent and threatening. I felt myself being moved and a motion of lifting, the pain was incredible with each movement. I wanted to stay in my curled-up position but I was being pulled out of it. I could sense motion, and some noise, some high frequency noise. Shouting, lots of voices. A sense of confusion, but a sense of relief alongside. I was no longer being beaten. It was a feeling I've felt before. Only now, I felt very scared, and I realised that I was alone. Very alone.

The voice beside me kept me from falling asleep. I wanted sleep. If sleep meant I could escape this torture, then I would sleep for a hundred years. I was so tired. The man's voice was constant, I wanted to yell and silence it, but my efforts were no use, I could tell. I felt trapped inside a bag, surrounded by water, with no idea how to escape…or to breathe. With every effort or kick of my legs, flailing of my arms, I felt myself falling deeper. Within this drowning fate, the most beautiful woman swam by, the hair of golden silk and the allure of heavenly wealth, all encapsulated with the eyes of innocence. The pull

towards her was incredible, she was beauty herself. Yet I failed in escaping this sealed impenetrable layer that only drew me further down. That voice calling, yet becoming ever more distant, like an ever-long rope that feels no longer tied, and is becoming looser to pull on. The urgent loud voice fading. My senses slowly accepting this beautiful woman swimming in front of me, her dress clinging to her, revealing. The more I swim to her, the more she swims away, gesturing me to follow.

Her body became brighter, or everything became lighter. A soft beam of light slowly made its path towards her, leaving a bed of roses at every elongation it makes to her. Suddenly her entire body glowing, seemingly a display of religious divinity. Then her eyes, they disappear. Neither there nor not there. She becomes a vision of uncertainty. Within this show of light, a gentle hand takes mine, and I turn, but no one is there. The hand leads me away, not in any direction, but away. I look back and the beautiful creature that was, now becoming an image in the distance, slowly burning and forever staring…with those voids that were once the most beguiling of eyes. I follow the hand, looking at the arm, the fabric of the clothing. I see, I see…nothing, as if I'm not meant to. That voice again, there it is. That same voice, that annoying ever present bloody tone of voice, getting louder and closer.

A crash, a jolt, like I've broke through the surface of ice from underneath, and feeling air in my lungs for what seemed an eternity. I open my eyes, but it's blurry, I can't see. I breathe like I'm breathing for the first time. A pain shoots up my spine and darts in every direction and causes me to scream in agony. Hands grab my head, I hear a woman's voice now, and I also hear that male voice. That voice that I want to slap and shout at. That frustrating tone that has denied me to rest. Then it goes quiet and I hear noises of electrical beeps and whirring. I don't understand what's happening.

"Hello, Sir…Hello, are you ok?" said the female voice

"Mate, are you with me?" asked the male voice, "Can you move your right hand?"

What kind of question is that?

"Sir, I need you to move your right hand for me, can you do that?"

"Mate, if you don't do it, I'm going to do it for you and will hurt"

What the hell? Of course I can move my arm, I can move anything I want to. What the hell is this place? Where am I? Why do I feel like I'm tied up and my head is between two vice-like jaws?

I move my right hand, just to shut them both up, and it seemed to have done the trick. I realise that if anyone wants to hurt me further, they wouldn't be calling me Sir. With this thought, I then decide whether I can trust these strangers, but no one is hitting me here, so I go one further, and I go to make a thumbs-up with my right hand, but it seems awkward to do so, so I just attempt.

"Oh for god's sake you absolute wanker, I could bloody well hug you, you son of a bitch" came the response from the male voice, followed by a really big sigh and then laughter.

"Sir, whatever you do, do not move, you've been involved in a serious incident and for your own sakes, just please stay with us, okay?" came the more professional female voice.

"Mate, I'm going to ask you a few very important questions, firstly, can you talk?"

Can I talk? What a ludicrous start to a conversation. Of course I can talk. I only wish you would actually stop.

I slowly go to open my mouth, and for a short moment, the pain is so sharp that it causes me to groan.

"Take it slowly sir, very slowly" came the female voice.

"I…I…my name is…" I tried to say the simplest of things, but why was it so hard?

You know your name, just say it. You can't remember it can you? You must know it begins with a K. Come on, go through a list. Kevin, no, Kelvin, no, Kalvin, no, Keiron, no…I mean yes. It feels right. Yes, it must be.

I could feel the waiting, as I tried to connect my thoughts with my speech.

"Keiron" I quietly and somehow managed to say.

"Hi Keiron mate, my name is Gavin and this with me is…"

"Bethany, and I'm a nurse, and you're here at the QE Hospital, do you understand Kieron?" she interjected quickly.

Did I understand? I don't know. That's the truth. I don't know what is happening to me.

"Bethany, I'm going to fetch Dr Evans, keep an eye on him, okay? I'll try not to be more than five minutes" was all I heard.

I knew she was there; I could hear the shuffling. Her breathing sounded really loud. It went silent for what seemed a while, and I started to hear the noise of

what presumably were other patients and various people walking around. I took as many deep breaths as I could, without my entire ribcage feeling like its exploding, and I tried to recollect how I got here. It wasn't as straight forward as it seemed. It was as if something was stopping me from knowing. Eventually I remembered that I only gave my first name, and it would help if they knew more. I don't know where my wallet is, so I slowly tried to say out loud;

"Keiron…Richards"

The footsteps stopped. The breathing stopped.

"Kieron, did you just give me your full name? Don't worry, don't answer, I'll tell them okay, so they don't have to bother you" Bethany the Nurse said. I struggled but I think I managed to give a thumbs-up again. I don't know why it feels almost impossible to communicate.

"Kieron, listen to me carefully okay, you're in a bad way, and shortly there's going to be a lot of people here who all want answers. Some of them are doctors, some are police and some are just not allowed to be here. So, it's my job to watch you and if you call out my name at any point, I'll think of it as you're asking for help and I will stop everything" she informed me quietly "But I will make sure, the important questions are asked first" Bethany added.

Holy Shit it hurts everywhere is pretty much all I can think of as priority right now.

For some reason, as I couldn't recollect properly, I tried to answer all these oncoming questions myself. I couldn't. It was scary. Had I lost my composure in here? Had I lost all sense of trust? I would never walk in to a hospital voluntarily, never. Everything bad happened here. Men who were liars and women who couldn't be trusted with the truth worked in these places. They'll want my details, my address, my phone number, my work details. They will ask questions that I don't want to answer. They won't know. I lay there, incapable of moving, and also incapable of seeing anything. My vision switching between blurry to darkness. How the hell could I explain that to anyone?

Sure enough, the doctors came, the important questions came, and so did the topic of next of kin. This urge of not trusting anyone was growing inside me. What if someone here was connected to how this happened? What if someone was watching me?

The pain wasn't so intense now, it was subsiding thankfully. The feeling of exhaustion grew. The need for sleep was inescapable.

"Keiron, I'm Dr Evans. Let me start by clearing up a few things please. Firstly, you're under my care and I will do all I can to help you get better and ensure