The Mercy Chair

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*To Joanne, who either instigated or supported all the stupid s**t I've done over the years.*

Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

Benjamin Franklin, 1735

It starts with the robber birds.

Black as gunpowder with grievous eyes. Wild and rattling cackles as they mob what has been unearthed. Puffing out ink-stained wings, squabbling for the choicest offerings. Tearing at flesh with cruel, pickaxe beaks, voracious appetites never sated.

Crows.

Nature's clean-up crew.

Dozens of them.

Enough for a murder . . .

Chapter 1

The hospital was old. A cathedral to the sick, built when eight-year-olds crawled up chimneys and a queen's empire was the largest the world had ever known. They called it a lunatic asylum then, now they said psychiatric hospital.

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

The man staring out of a high-arched, curtainless window wasn't thinking about the UK's mental health crisis though, he was thinking about the hospital's colour scheme. He was wondering if the paint on the corridor he was standing in had been chosen for its therapeutic qualities. He suspected not. It was institutional green, the type of colour not found anywhere in nature, and still smelled fresh and acrid. He thought it made the hospital seem more like a prison than a place of healing. Perhaps that was the point.

The corridor was empty and echoed as if it were a church. The chemical stink of wall-socket air fresheners soaked the still air; the linoleum floor was buffed to a shine. A fob-controlled navy double door blocked off one entrance, a steel security door the other. The corridor had three rooms and the man was waiting to be called into the middle one. None of the doors had handles.

There were no seats in this corridor, no waiting area with televisions and pot plants and magazines about idyllic lives in the Cotswolds, so the man stood. On the other side of the security door someone screamed and someone else shouted. Before long he could hear accents from all four corners of the country. He didn't turn away from the window. Screaming and shouting and crying and alarms were the hospital's soundtrack, an aria heard all day and all night.

And he knew no one would enter this corridor.

Not until it was time.

A crow flew into view. It wheeled overhead and landed on the hospital lawn. Two more joined it. The man watched their strong, scrawny feet scratch at the earth, searching for bugs and beetles and worms. He shuddered in revulsion. He had come to hate crows.

He turned his back on them and glanced at his watch. It was almost time. He removed his phone from his pocket to see if there were any urgent messages. But there was nothing. Not one. Not even a good luck text from his friend. Instead, he saw his face reflected in the black mirror. His eyes were red and gritty and puffed up, as if he'd slept on a plane. The hands holding the phone were heavily calloused, covered in scratches and smelled of the sea. He wondered if they would ever be clean again.

The door to the middle room opened. A shaven-headed man stepped out. He was wearing a royal blue tunic top with black trousers. He had a personal alarm clipped to his belt loop. Pulling the cord or pressing the red button would rush people to his location, like a police officer sending out an urgent assistance request.

A smaller man in a suit joined the shaven-headed man. He had the harried look all doctors seemed to have. 'Doctor Lang is ready to see you now,' he said.

For such a grand building, the room's décor was dreary and flavourless. The walls were cream, not green, but still screamed institution. The carpet tiles were brown and hardwearing; the empty bookcase was cheap with sagging shelves. Thank-you cards and hospital notices were Sellotaped to a red felt noticeboard. Doctor Lang was waiting for the man behind a large desk. A beige file and a box of tissues were the only things in front of her.

She rose to meet him. She was in her early thirties and was wearing a sleeveless, quilted green dress. She wore no makeup, and her long dark hair partly covered her face. The man wondered if she was shy. He then wondered if her shyness had hindered her career. Perhaps not; shy people were often the most empathetic, the easiest to talk to. People opened up to them.

They shook hands and introduced themselves.

'Do sit down,' she said.

'Thank you, Doctor Lang.'

'Please, I'd very much like it if you called me Clara.'

The man was from a generation that stood to shake hands. He wasn't about to call a doctor by their first name. It wouldn't be right. 'I'll do my best,' he said, before sinking into the seat on the opposite side of the desk. It was a heavy armchair and it looked out of place in a doctor's office. Doctor Lang's chair was the same.

'I'm sorry you've had to drag yourself all the way here,' she said. 'I'd have preferred somewhere more suitable, but I have patients to see here today, and it wasn't possible to get away.'

'It was no hardship. It's a nice drive and my boss is happy I'm finally taking the time to do this.'

'Were you waiting long?'

'Twenty minutes, but I was early.'

'And I must apologise for this office,' she said, gesturing around the room. 'It's not mine, I'm just borrowing it for the day. I understand it's about to be decorated, which is why it's almost empty. I see my other patients on the ward but, as you're not a resident here, I thought we might benefit from somewhere less pressurised. It can get a bit lively on the other side of the door.'

'I can imagine,' the man said.

'We'll find somewhere more suitable for our next session. Today is really about getting to know each other.'

'OK.'

Doctor Lang smiled. 'So, like I said, my name's Clara and although I have a PhD, I'm not a medical doctor; I'm a trauma therapist. I'm experienced in CBT, somatic experiencing, sensorimotor psychotherapy, eye-movement desensitisation and reprocessing therapy, sometimes called EMDR, and all the other major disciplines. And, while I don't need you to understand what all that medical gobbledegook means, I *do* need you to understand one thing.'

'What's that?'

'I know what I'm doing.'

She opened the file on the desk. The man could see handwritten

and typed notes, held together with plastic-ended treasury tags. He saw photographs of his injuries, particularly his eye socket. He winced at the memory.

'Shall we begin?' Doctor Lang asked.

The man shrugged.

She offered a sympathetic smile. 'As you know, your employer made this referral after some concerning behaviour at work—'

'I made one mistake,' he cut in. '"Concerning behaviour" is a stretch.'

'Nevertheless, they saw fit to pay for three sessions in advance. What does that tell you?'

The man didn't answer. Doctor Lang removed a slim document from the file.

'This is the self-assessment form you completed,' she said. 'I would like to thank you for being so candid. Not everyone is.' She tapped the document with her fingers. Her nails were short and unvarnished. 'This is a good place to start.'

'If I'm doing this, I'm doing it right,' the man said.

'So why don't we dive in at the deep end? I understand you're still having headaches?'

The man touched the thick, lumpy scar tissue around his eye socket. 'I am, although I don't know if that's because of my injury or because I'm not sleeping.'

'Probably a bit of both,' Doctor Lang said. 'But not sleeping will exacerbate the head trauma.' She checked the file. 'It says here you've refused zopiclone.'

'I have.'

'Why is that? It's commonly prescribed for patients with sleeping difficulties.'

The man didn't respond.

'Are you self-medicating? Is that why you refused it?'

'Self-medicating?'

'Excessive alcohol, depressants such as benzodiazepines or barbiturates. Maybe even heroin. Someone as resourceful as you would have no problem securing something to help him sleep.'

The man smiled. 'I'm not self-medicating, Doctor Lang,' he said.

'Then why won't you take zopiclone?'

A knock on the door made the man turn. The shaven-headed man entered the room. He was holding a tray. 'Got tea for you,' he said.

He put two disposable cups and a paper medicine dispenser filled with sugar lumps on the desk. He left the room and shut the door behind him. The man picked up one of the cups and took a sip. He grimaced. The tea was lukewarm. Doctor Lang studied him over the rim of hers. If she'd noticed anything about the tea's temperature, she kept it to herself.

'What happens when you try to sleep?' she asked.

'I lie awake until morning.'

'And yet you still refuse common medications.'

'I do.'

'You don't *want* to go to sleep, do you?' Doctor Lang said.

After a few moments the man shook his head.

'Because when you sleep, you see things you don't like?'

He nodded.

'Nightmares?'

He nodded again.

'What is it you see?'

He didn't answer. He put his hands in his lap and looked at them.

'What is it you see when you close your eyes?' Doctor Lang urged.

The man looked up. His eyes were haunted and wet.

'Crows,' Detective Sergeant Washington Poe whispered. 'When I go to sleep, I see crows.'

Chapter 2

'Crows?' Doctor Lang said. 'You're having nightmares about crows?'

Poe nodded.

'Is this a childhood thing, or something more recent?'

'Recent. Just a few months.'

'You've been through a traumatic experience, Sergeant . . . Look, can I call you Washington? Sergeant Poe is far too formal.'

'Of course.'

'You've been through a traumatic experience, Washington,' she said. 'I've read the case summary and, in my entire career, this is by far the most horrific thing I've read about. People died in front of you. *You* nearly died. Nightmares can be the mind's way of making sense of things and crows have long been associated with loss. In some cultures they are mediator animals between life and death.'

'So I've been told.'

'And some therapists might try to palm you off with a clichéd diagnosis about how the nightmares are your way of coping with what you've been through. They'll tell you that crows are a manifestation of the parts of the case you were unable to control. That your nightmares are little more than an unconscious defence mechanism.'

'If you say so, Doc.'

Doctor Lang smiled. She had a nice smile. It lit up her face. 'But I think you're far too pragmatic to entertain fanciful ideas like Freudian displacement. I don't think you've been redirecting a negative emotion from its original source on to a less threatening recipient.' She put her hand on the file. 'If you've been having nightmares about crows, I think it's likely crows played a significant role in what happened. Literally, not figuratively.'

Poe's spine stiffened as if it had received a blast of electricity.

'And I find this odd, Washington,' she continued.

'You do? Why?'

'Because I've read this file cover to cover and, not only is there no mention of crows, I don't believe you saw anything that might have attracted them. I know crows are attracted to carrion, but by the time you arrived at the Lightning Tree the dead man had been removed. And everything else happened indoors.'

Doctor Lang picked up the file.

'And because the activity log has no gaps, it means if you *did* encounter crows, it must have been before this case started. Am I right?'

Poe said nothing.

'It would have seemed insignificant at the time,' she continued. 'It might not have even registered.'

'Then why do I see them in my dreams?' Poe asked.

'The unconscious mind is a complex beast, Washington. It can make leaps our *conscious* mind doesn't have the bandwidth for. It processes information differently. You can't see it yet, but right now, in your mind, crows are the catalyst for everything that followed.'

'So this is me now, is it?' Poe said. 'Every time I go to sleep, I'm going to wake up terrified and screaming.'

'No, your mind will heal. At the minute the traumatic memory isn't stored properly. It's unprocessed and that means it's easily accessible, easily triggered. We can fix this, but we need to take the first step together.'

'Which is?'

'We need to distinguish between the external threats that demand action and the internal threats that are causing this overwhelming, paralysing fear. In other words, you need to be able to dream of crows without reliving what happened.'

'And how do we do that?'

'Initially, by talking.'

'I'm a man, I'm in my forties and I'm a police officer,' Poe said. 'I don't talk about my feelings.'

'And I don't want you to talk about your feelings. The last thing I want you doing is talking about your feelings. This is about getting

to know your history, the kind of difficulties you're experiencing. We'll then target the distressing memories.'

'With what?'

'We'll come to that later, but nothing that will make you uncomfortable.'

Poe wasn't convinced. It must have shown.

'Do you trust me, Washington?'

'You come highly recommended.'

'That's not what I asked.'

'Trust is earned.'

'Spoken like a true police officer. Why don't you let me start earning your trust now?'

'I have to do something,' Poe admitted. 'I can't go on like this.'

'Good man,' Doctor Lang said. She turned to the activity log at the front of the file. 'It says here the case officially began when you were asked to consult on the Lightning Tree murder,' she said. 'But why don't you tell me when it *really* started? Why don't you tell me about the crows?'

Poe looked at his empty cup. He wondered if he could get another tea. His mouth had gone dry. 'It's true that I encountered some crows,' he said. 'But this whole thing began a few hours earlier with another hooligan of the British countryside.'

'Oh?'

'What do you know about badgers, Doctor Lang?'

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