The Surrogate

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Extract

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Part One

1

There was a knock at the door.

Claire Fielding and Julie Simpson looked at each other, surprised. Claire started to rise.

'You stay there,' said Julie. 'I'll get it.' She stood up from the sofa, crossed the living room. 'Probably Geraint, forgot something. Again.'

Claire smiled. 'Changed his mind about lending me his *Desperate Housewives* DVD.'

Julie laughed, left the room. Claire shifted a little to get comfortable, sat back and smiled. Looked around, taking in the presents on the coffee table. Babygros and clothes. Parenting books. Soft toys. And the cards. Claire had thought it would be bad luck to open them before the birth but the others had insisted so she had given in, her doubts soon forgotten.

She moved from side to side, tried to find a soft spot on the sofa, allow the springs to reach an accommodation with her huge, distended stomach. She patted the bulge. Smiled. Not much longer. She leaned forward, grunting with the effort, and picked up her glass of fizzy fruit drink. Took a mouthful, replaced the glass. Then a mini onion bhaji. She had heard such horror stories of women who couldn't eat

anything during pregnancy and were constantly sick. Not Claire. She was lucky. Probably too lucky. She patted her stomach, hoping it was all baby, knowing it wasn't. She wished she could be like one of those celebs like Posh or Angelina Jolie who got their figure back in about four days after having kids. They claimed it was all diet and exercise but she knew it must be surgery. Real life wasn't like that for Claire and she knew she would have to work at it. Still. That was the future. She would get her body back, then start a new life. Just her and her child.

She was no longer anxious or depressed. Tearful or bereft. That was all in the past and finished with, like those things had happened to someone else. It had been painful, yes, but it was worth it. So, so worth it.

Claire smiled. She might have felt happier in her life but she couldn't remember when. She certainly had not felt as happy as this for a long, long time.

Then she heard sounds from the hallway.

'Julie?'

Thumping on the walls and floor, bangs and scuffles. It sounded like someone was playing football or wrestling. Or fighting.

A shiver ran through Claire. *Oh no. God no. Not him, not now . . .*

'Julie . . .'

Claire's voice was more frantic this time, unable to hide the alarm at what she was hearing, who she imagined was responsible for the noise.

A final thump, then silence.

'Julie?'

No reply.

With great difficulty Claire managed to pull herself upright from the sofa. The speed with which she got up left her feeling slightly light-headed. She picked up her mobile

from the coffee table, left the room and stepped into the hallway. She had a good idea of who to expect there and was ready to call for help. Even the police if needs be. Anything to get rid of him.

She turned the corner. And stopped dead, her mouth open. Whatever she had been expecting, it wasn't the scene before her. No way could she have expected that. It was horrific. Too horrific for her mind to process. She couldn't take in what had happened.

Her eyes dropped to the floor and she saw Julie. Or what was left of her.

'Oh God . . .'

Then she saw the figure standing over her best friend and she began to understand. She knew that her own, ordinary life had stopped with the knock on the door. She was living through something else now. A horror film, perhaps. A nightmare.

The figure saw her. Smiled.

Claire saw the blade. Shining under the hallway light, blood dripping on to the carpet. She tried to run but her legs wouldn't work. She tried to scream but couldn't send the right signals from her brain to her mouth. She just dropped her mobile. Stood there, unable to move.

Then the figure was on her.

One punch and everything went black.

Claire opened her eyes, tried to sit up. But she couldn't move. Her arms, hands, back, nothing. Her eyes closed again. Even her eyelids felt heavy. Very heavy. She tried once more to force them apart, managed. But it was a struggle just to keep them open.

She could only look upwards. Not even from side to side. She recognised the ceiling of her bedroom. The overhead light was on, blinding her. She tried to blink the light away

but her heavy eyelids remained closed. She instinctively knew that wasn't good, so she forced them open, light or no light.

She tried to make out what was happening. A shadow was moving on the ceiling, large and looming, like something from an old black and white horror movie. Doing something out of her line of vision.

Claire remembered what had happened. The figure in the hall, the attack. And Julie. *Julie . . .*

She opened her mouth, tried to scream. No sound at all came out. A wave of panic passed through her. She had been paralysed in some way. Drugged. She felt her eyes close again. Forced them open once more. It was a struggle, the biggest of her life, but she couldn't allow them to close. She knew now that if she did, she would be dead.

She tried to move her lips, make sounds, call for help. Nothing. No matter how loudly she screamed in her head – and it felt like she was screaming all the time now – all that trickled out of her mouth was a puppy-like whimper.

She saw the shadow on the ceiling move closer to her.

No, don't . . . get off me, get away from me, don't touch me, don't touch me . . .

Useless. Just made her head hurt, her inner ear trill.

Claire felt her eyelids being pulled down again, fought to push them up. It was getting harder each time. As was breathing, her lungs slowing with each poisoned breath she took. Panic and fear only helped her heart to speed-pump the crippling drug round her body. She knew she didn't have long.

Somebody help . . . please . . . just break down the door, help . . .

The shadow of the figure now loomed above her, blocking out the overhead light. Claire felt confusion on top of fear and panic: who were they? Why were they doing this?

Then she saw the scalpel. And she knew.

Not my baby . . . please, not my baby . . .

The figure bent over her, light glinting along the scalpel's razor-edged blade.

No . . . help me, oh God, help me . . .

Began to cut.

Claire felt nothing. Saw only the intruder's grotesque shadow thrown across the ceiling, the light exaggerating the sawing motion of the arm.

God, no, please . . . please someone, help me, help me, no . . .

Eventually the figure straightened up. Stood over Claire. Smiled. Something in its hand, red and dripping.

No . . .

Another smile and the red, dripping thing was taken from her sight. Claire couldn't scream or move. She couldn't even cry.

The shadow moved towards the door and was gone. Claire was left alone, screaming and shouting in her head. She tried to pull her arms up, move her legs. No good. It was too much effort. Even breathing was too much effort.

She felt her lungs slow down. Her eyelids close. She could hear the pump of blood round her body slowing down, down . . .

She tried one last time to fight it but it was no use. Her body was closing down. And she was powerless to stop it.

Her lungs stopped inflating, her heart stopped beating.

Her eyes closed for the final time.

2

'Oh my God . . .'

Detective Inspector Philip Brennan, Chief Investigating Officer with the Major Incident Squad, donned surgical gloves, pulled the hood of his pristine crinkling paper suit over his head and stood on the threshold of hell. He knew that when he pulled back the yellow crime-scene tape and entered, he would be crossing a line between order and chaos. Between life and death.

He lifted the tape, stepped inside. *So much blood* . . .

'Jesus . . .'

The tape fell back into place, the line crossed. No going back now. He took in the scene before him and knew he would never leave this apartment, mentally or emotionally, until he had found who had done this. And perhaps not even then.

The hallway looked like an abattoir. Covered in so much blood, as if several litres of red paint had been dropped from a great height, splashing up the walls and over the floor like a grisly action painting, fading to brown as it dried. But paint didn't smell like that. Like dirty copper and rancid meat. He tried breathing though his mouth. Felt it on his tongue. Tasting as bad as it smelled. Sweat prickled his body, adding to his discomfort.

'Can someone turn the heating off?' he shouted.

Other white-suited individuals moved about the apartment. Intense, focused. He noticed that a few of them were carrying paper bags, some full. They were issued in extreme cases to catch any vomit that might contaminate the crime scene. One of the officers acknowledged his request, went to find the thermostat.

The body still lay in the hallway, ready to be stretchered off to the mortuary for autopsy. The SOCOs had finished extracting every last piece of information from the scene but had left the body in place so Phil could examine it, find something to kick-start his investigation.

He looked down, swallowed hard. A woman was lying there, her torso twisted, her arms outstretched and grasping, as if she had been trying to hang on to the last breath as it left her body. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. A vicious slash had taken out both jugular vein and artery on either side of her neck. He could see she had struggled by the patterns made by her arms in the blood on the wooden floor. Like bloodied angel's wings.

Phil looked to a SOCO officer standing beside him.

'Okay if I cross?'

The SOCO nodded. 'Think we're done with this one. Got everything we need.'

'Photos?'

The SOCO nodded again.

Phil stepped over the body, careful not to track blood into any other room. The bedroom door was open. He walked towards it, looked in. And felt his stomach pitch and roll.

'Oh God, this is a bad one . . .'

A white-suited silhouette heard Phil's voice, detached himself from a group of similarly dressed figures at the end of the hall, came to join him in the doorway. 'Like we ever get good ones?'

'Not as bad as this . . .' The smell was stronger here. He couldn't describe it; it was life, it was death, it was everything the human body was. It was something he had smelled before. It was something he knew he would never forget.

As he looked at the body on the bed, he felt his chest constrict, his arms shake. No. This was no time for a panic attack. He breathed deeply through his mouth, forced his emotions down, his breathing back to normal. React as a copper, he told himself; it's up to you to make order out of this chaos.

Detective Sergeant Clayton Thompson, one of Phil's team. Tall and in good shape, the white of his hood emphasising his tanned features, his usually self-confident, even cocky, smile replaced by a frown of concentration. 'Should have waited for you to turn up before going in, boss. Sorry.'

Phil always made a point of assembling his team at any crime scene. Entering together got them pooling their initial responses, sharing their theories, working towards a common conclusion. He was slightly annoyed that Clayton hadn't waited for him, but given the severity of the situation, it was understandable.

'Where's Anni?' he asked.

In response to his question a head poked round the frame of the bathroom door.

'Here, boss.' Detective Constable Anni Hepburn was small, trim, with variably coloured spiked hair that always contrasted with her dark skin. The strands poking out of her white hood were today mostly blonde. She gave a quick glance to Clayton. 'Sorry, we should have waited for you, but Forensics said—'

Phil held up a hand. 'We're all here now. Let's get going.'

A look passed between Clayton and Anni. Quick, then gone. Phil caught it, couldn't read it but hoped it wasn't what he thought it was. He always felt slightly jealous at the

amount of female attention Clayton attracted, and he knew the DS often did plenty about it. But not with members of his own team. Not with Anni. Still, now wasn't the time to think about that. They had work to do.

He turned back to the room, took in the scene before him. Forensics had set up their arc lamps, shining down on the bed, lending the central tableau an unreal air, as if it was a film or a stage set. They moved about in the light in hushed, almost reverential silence, kneeling, bending, peering closely at what was before them, scraping and bagging, sampling and storing. Like stage management or props making final adjustments.

Or supplicants before a sacrificial altar, thought Phil. A woman lay on the bed, spreadeagled and naked, wrists and ankles tied to the metal frame. Her stomach had been cut open and her eyes had rolled back in her head as if in witness to something only she could see.

Phil swallowed hard. The one in the hall had been bad enough. This one threatened to reacquaint him with the cup of coffee and two slices of wholemeal toast and Marmite he had had for breakfast. Just what he needed on a Tuesday morning.

'Jesus,' said Clayton.

'I mean, this is Colchester,' said Anni, shaking her head. The other two looked at her. She was visibly shaken. 'Things like this don't happen here. What the hell's going on?'

Clayton was ready with a retort. Phil sensed his two officers were starting to develop unprofessional responses. He had to keep them focused. 'Right,' he said. 'What do we know?'

Anni snapped back into work mode, pushed a hand down her paper suit, withdrew a notebook, flipped it open. Phil took a grim pride in the fact that she had recovered so quickly, that she was professional enough to work through it.

'The flat belongs to Claire Fielding,' she said. 'Primary school teacher, works out Lexden way.'

Phil nodded, eyes still on the bed. 'Boyfriend? Husband?'

'Boyfriend. We checked her phone and diary and we think we've got a name. Ryan Brotherton. Want me to look into it?'

'Let's get sorted here first. Any idea who's in the hall?'

'Julie Simpson,' said Clayton. 'Another teacher, works with Claire Fielding. It was her husband who contacted us.'

'Because she didn't go home last night?' asked Phil.

'Yeah,' said Clayton. 'He called us when she didn't come back. This was well after midnight. Apparently there was some kind of get-together here last night. He'd tried phoning and got no reply. Not the kind to be out on a bender, apparently.'

'Not on a school night, anyway,' said Anni.

'Has he given a statement?' said Phil.

Clayton nodded. 'Over the phone. Bit distraught.'

'Right. We'll talk to him again later.'

Anni looked at him, worry in her eyes. 'There's, erm . . . there's something else.'

She turned, gestured to the living room. Phil, glad of the excuse to not look at Claire Fielding's body any more, followed her, stopping at the entrance to the living room. He looked inside, instinctively trying to get some idea of her life, her personality. The person she used to be.

The room was tastefully furnished, clearly on a budget, but small flourishes and touches of individuality indicated that the budget had been used creatively. With books and CDs, foreign ornaments and framed photos, it spoke of a rich, full life. But something stood out.

On the coffee table were empty and half-empty bottles of wine, white and red, a sparkling soft drink and several glasses. In amongst the glasses and bottles was the detritus of opened presents. Boxes, bags, gift wrap, tissue paper. The

presents were there too. Toys, both soft and primary-coloured plastic. All-in-one Babygros, shawls, hats, jumpers, socks, shoes.

'This get-together . . .' Anni said.

'Oh Christ . . .' said Phil. He was aware of Anni looking at him, gauging his reaction, but couldn't look at her or Clayton yet. His pulse began to quicken. He tried to ignore it.

'You'll see one of them wasn't drinking,' said a voice from the bedroom.

The three of them turned. Nick Lines, the pathologist, was straightening up from the bed, peering over the tops of his glasses at Phil. He was a tall, shaven-head, hook-nosed, slightly cadaverous man, with graveyard looks and a gallows humour to match. He always looked excited at a crime scene, Phil thought. As much as he ever looked excited at anything. Lines took his glasses off, looked at Phil. 'I'm guessing that's because, as far as I can make out from an initial examination, she was pregnant.'

Phil stared with renewed horror at the slit stomach. He didn't dare voice the question that all three of them were thinking. 'Shit,' was all he could say.

'Quite,' said Lines, his voice like Nick Cave's more miserable brother. 'She was pregnant. And before you ask, the answer's no. There's no sign of it. Anywhere in the flat. Once we realised what condition she had been in, that was the first thing we did.'

Phil felt his heart beating faster, his pulse racing; tried to calm it down. He would be no good to the investigation in that frame of mind. He turned to the pathologist, his voice urgent.

'What have you got, Nick?'

'Well, as I said, this is only preliminary; don't hold me to any of it. The obvious stuff first. Broken nose, bruising. She

was punched in the face. Hard. It looks like she's been injected with something at the back of her neck. Then again at the base of her spine. Obviously I don't know what it is yet but I'd hazard a guess that it was something to paralyse her.'

'And the . . . the cutting?'

Nick Lines shrugged. 'Carried out with a modicum of skill, it would seem. The one in the hall, they knew which arteries to go for. Likewise here. They had a fair idea of what they were doing.'

'Time of death?'

'Hard to say at present. Late last night. Eleven-ish? Sometime round then. Between ten and two, I'd say.'

'Any sign of sexual activity?'

A faint smile played on Lines' lips. Phil knew it was his way of displaying irritation at being asked so many initial questions. 'As Chairman Mao said when asked how effective he thought the French Revolution had been, it's just too early to tell.'

'Any clues as to who could have done this?' said Clayton.

Lines sighed. 'I just tell you how they died. It's up to you to find out why.'

'I meant what kind of person,' Clayton said, clearly hurt by the response. 'Build an' that.'

'Nothing yet.'

'How far gone was she?' asked Anni.

'Very well advanced, I'd say.'

'But how far?'

He gave her a professionally contemptuous look, clearly getting irritated. 'I'm a pathologist, not a clairvoyant.'

'And we've got jobs to do as well,' said Phil, matching Lines' irritation with his own. 'Would this baby be dead by now, or is there a chance it could still be alive?'

Nick Lines looked back at the body on the bed rather

than directly at Phil. 'Judging from the condition of her womb, I'd say almost full term. Only weeks away.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning yes. There's every chance that this baby is still alive.'