

The Rapture

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Extract

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Chapter One

That summer, the summer all the rules began to change, June seemed to last for a thousand years. The temperatures were merciless: thirty-eight, thirty-nine, then forty in the shade. It was heat to die in, to go nuts in, or to spawn. Old folk collapsed, dogs were cooked alive in cars, lovers couldn't keep their hands off each other. The sky pressed down like a furnace lid, shrinking the subsoil, cracking concrete, killing shrubs from the roots up. In the parched suburbs, ice-cream vans plinked their baby tunes into streets that sweated tar. Down at the harbour, the sea reflected the sun in tiny, barbaric mirrors. Asphyxiated, you longed for rain. It didn't come.

But other things came, seemingly at random. The teenage killer, Bethany Krall, was one of them. If I didn't know, back then, that turbulence obeys specific rules, I know it now.

During just about every one of those nights, I'd have dreams that were so vivid they felt digitally enhanced. Sometimes I could do more than just walk and run and jump. I could do cartwheels: I could practically fly. I'd be an acrobat, flinging my body across the empty air, then floating in the stratosphere like a Chagall maiden. Other times I'd find myself with Alex. He'd be throwing his head back to laugh, as if nothing had happened. Or we'd be having urgent sex, in a thrash of limbs. Or engaging in the other thing we'd so quickly become experts at: fighting. Viciously. Also as if nothing had happened.

Then I'd wake. I'd lie there, my upper body still sweating, the mail-order fan strafing the air across my naked skin, and let the

new day infiltrate in stages. The last stage, before I rose to wash and dress and fight my tangled hair, like someone emerging from a date-rape drugging, would be the one in which I'd dutifully count my blessings. This folksy little ritual stayed brief, because the way I saw it, they didn't add up to much.

When the skies finally broke, it felt biblical, megalomaniacal, as though orchestrated from on high by an irate Jehovah. On the coasts, cliffs subsided, tipping soil and rubble and silt on to the beaches, where they lodged in defiant heaps. Charcoal clouds erupted on the horizon and massed into precarious metropolises of air. Out at sea, beyond the grey stone bulwarks of the port, zigzags of lightning electrocuted the water, bringing poltergeist winds that sucked random objects up to whirl and dump. Passionate gusts punched at the sails of struggling boats and then headed inland, flattening corn, uprooting trees, smashing hop silos and storage barns, whisking up torn rubbish sacks that pirouetted in the sky like the ghostly spirits of retail folly. Maverick weather was becoming the norm across the globe: we'd all learned that by now, and we were already frustrated by its theatrical attention-seeking, the sheer woe of its extremes. Cause and effect. Get used to the way A leads to B. Get used to living in interesting times. Learn that nothing is random. Watch out for the tipping point. Look behind you: perhaps it's been and gone.

Psychic revolution, worlds upended, interrogations of the status quo, the eternal proximity of Hell: subjects close to my heart at this point. Popular wisdom declares that it's a mistake to make major changes in the wake of a catastrophic event in one's personal life. That you should stay close to your loved ones – or in their absence, to those best placed and most willing to hold your hand through the horror-show of your new, reconfigured life. So why, in the aftermath of my accident, had I so obstinately done the opposite? I was so sure, when I made it, that my decision to quit London was the right one, arrived at after a cool mental listing of the pros and cons. But my Chagall-maiden dreams and

the restlessness that infected me seemed evidence of another, less welcome possibility: that once again, I had banjaxed my own life – as thoroughly and as definitively as only a professional psychologist can. My brain, working overtime with denial, was a sick centrifuge operating at full tilt.

In the mornings, the modest skyline of Hadport fizzles gently with coastal fog which, pierced by the first light, can take on a metaphysical cast. There's a spritz of bright air meeting water, of delicate chemical auras dancing around one another before mingling and ascending to the stratosphere. Conservative-minded angels, conscious of their celestial pension constraints and forced to relocate, might choose a town like this to spend their sunset years. So might my once energetic and cultured father, if he'd kept his marbles long enough to leaf through brochures about retirement complexes, instead of Alzheimerizing his way into a nursing home to spend his waking hours watching Cartoon Network and drooling into a plastic bib: as sorry an end for a former diplomat as can be imagined. If you venture out early enough you can taste the sharp tang of ozone in your mouth. *Decent parking*, my practical-minded, pre-la-la father would have said, if he'd accompanied me on my morning sorties along the gum-studded pavements of my new home town. *Useful in your situation, Gabrielle*. Later in the day, his high opinion might downgrade itself a notch. Hadport, being near the Channel Tunnel, has a high quota of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers: the bed-and-breakfast population, the shallow-rooted underclass about which the *Courier* opines on behalf of 'heritage citizens', who have graduated from compassion fatigue to a higher realm of pathological resentment which the paper's editorials refer to as justified indignation. As the day rolls itself out, the litter bins fill and then erupt with Starbucks beakers, gossip magazines, buckled beer-cans, burger cartons gaping open like polystyrene clams: the husks of what nourishes the British soul. With dusk come mangy foxes, slinking out to scavenge in the drilling heat.

In my new life, I spend most weekdays two kilometres outside town, beyond a network of clogged arterial roads and mini-roundabouts. Skirt the brownfield site along East Road, past the Sleepeeze warehouse, the Souls Harbour Apostolic Church, the fuel cell plant, and a construction rumoured to be generating a pioneer high-rise pig farm, turn right by the giant pylon which, from a certain angle, appears to straddle, rodeo-like, the World of Leather, and you'll spot a discreet signpost to my place of work.

Somebody should probably have taken a wrecker ball to it long ago. Built in the early twentieth century, the white mansion, seen through the electrified perimeter fence, resembles a decrepit cruise ship marooned amongst clusters of monkey puzzles, cypress and spiky palms: Edwardian, Gulf Stream trees. Once a hotel for convalescents prescribed sea air, its white-brick façade and scattered outbuildings are zigzagged with cracks like ancient marzipan. Wisteria and honeysuckle meander up wrought-iron balconies, trellises and gazebos blistered by rust. You might hope to find Sleeping Beauty in there, on display in a glass case, somewhere just beyond Reception. But instead, you'll be entering a museum display of dados, cornices and ceiling roses, barnacled to peeling plasterwork. The building manufactures its own air, air that has not quite caught up with the scented-candle culture of modern times. Forest Glade room freshener predominates, struggling to mask deeper strata of Toilet Duck, dry rot, and the sad-sweet chemical smell of psychic suffering.

Welcome to Oxsmith Adolescent Secure Psychiatric Hospital, home to a hundred of the most dangerous children in the country.

Among them, Bethany Krall.

From my ground-floor office, you can see a row of white turbines in the distance, rooted in the sea like elegant food-mixers. I admire the grace of their engineering, their slim discretion. I have thought about painting them but the urge is too theoretical, too distanced from the part of me that still functions. I often stare out at the horizon, mesmerised by their smoothly industrious response to the wind. Sometimes, when I have a very specific form

of cabin fever, I copy their movements, whirling my arms in rhythm – not to capture energy, but to release it. Glimpsing myself in a corner of the mirror, caught unawares, I'll notice my hair, my eyes, my mouth, the intense tilt of my face, but I know better than to set any store by my looks, such as they are. They've done me no good.

When I first encounter Bethany Krall I am two weeks into what has been billed as a six-month posting, filling in for Joy McConey, a psychotherapist who has left the institution on a sabbatical that I assume to be a euphemism for some unspoken disgrace. None of my new colleagues seems keen to discuss her. There's a high turnover in places that have a reputation for being human dustbins. Most of us are on flexible contracts. This is not a prestige appointment. There is talk of new cutbacks which could lead to Oxsmith closing for good. But raw from my enforced exclusion from what rehab called 'the cut and thrust', I can't afford to be choosy about my employment. In the absence of a long-term plan, part of my persuasive argument to myself, in deciding to resettle, is that a short-term strategy in a strange place is better than none, in a familiar one.

Amid the broken staplers, the withered spider plant and the old styrofoam coffee cups of Joy McConey's vacated office is a greetings card, the kind that's 'left blank for your personal message'. Inside, in small, frantic-looking handwriting, someone has stated, cryptically: *'To Joy. Who truly believed.'* Truly believed in what? God? An end to the grief in Israel and Iran? An inmate's psychotic fantasies? The signature is illegible. I am no great fan of spider plants. But something – my frail, inconsistent inner Buddha, perhaps – prevents me from taking life in a gratuitous fashion, even if it's low in the food chain. *Let the plant live. But don't encourage the fucking thing.* It seems that mould can grow on coffee despite a plastic lid. I pour the dregs on the pot's asbestoid soil, and chuck the cup into the bin to join Joy's card.

I am not a nice person.

I have gleaned this much from my fraught fellow-workers: I've been assigned Bethany Krall as one of my main cases because no one else wants to deal with her. As the newcomer, I have no choice in the matter. Bethany has been labelled intractable by everyone who has dealt with her so far, with the exception of Joy McConey, whose notes are not in the file – very possibly because she never wrote any. While I'm not nervous about having Bethany Krall on my list, I am not enthusiastic either. My perspective on physical violence has shifted since my accident. I now want to avoid it at all costs, and have taken every possible measure to do so, with the exception of having my strangulation-length hair cut short because I'm vain about it. But perhaps, with Bethany Krall on my list, I'll be visiting the hairdresser after all: according to the case-notes, my new charge is something of an extremist in the aggression department.

After ten years of dealing with criminally psychotic minors I am used to stories like Bethany Krall's, but the reports of her mother's murder still manage to stir up a familiar, heart-sinking queasiness, a kind of moral ache. The full-colour police photos are shocking enough to make me blink, redirect my gaze out of the window, and wonder what kind of person decides to opt for a career in forensic pathology. Apart from the turbines in the distance, there isn't much to comfort the eye. The shimmering tarmac of the deserted basketball court, a line of industrial-sized rubbish bins, and beyond the electrified perimeter fence, a vista that twangs a country-and-western chord of self-pity in me. For a brief moment, when I first arrived, I thought of putting a photo of Alex – Laughing Alpha Male at Roulette Wheel – next to my computer, alongside my family collection: Late Mother Squinting into Sun on Pebbled Beach, Brother Pierre with Post-Partum Wife and Male Twins, and Compos Mentis Father Fighting *Daily Telegraph* Crossword. But I stopped myself short. Why give myself a daily reminder of what I have in every other way laid to rest? Besides, there would be curiosity from colleagues, and my responses to their questions would seem either morbid or tasteless

or brutal depending on the pitch and roll of my mood. Memories of my past existence, and the future that came with it, can start as benign, Vaseline'd nostalgia vignettes. But they'll quickly ghost-train into malevolent *noir* shorts backlit by that great worst enemy of all victims of circumstance, hindsight. So for the sake of my own sanity, I apologise silently to Alex before burying him in the desk alongside my emergency bottle of Laphroaig and a little home-made flower-press given to me by a former patient who hanged himself with a clothes-line.

The happy drawer.

Before taking the lift up to the room christened, with creepy institutional earnestness, the Creativity Workshop, I go through the rest of Bethany Krall's file, setting aside the more detailed notes of her drug regimen and physical check-ups to glance at later. The facts are stark enough. Two years ago, on April 5th, during the Easter school holidays, Bethany Krall stabbed her mother Karen to death with a screwdriver in a frenzied and unexplained attack. At fourteen, Bethany Krall was small and underweight for her age. Remarkable, then, that her mother's savaging should have been so ferocious and sustained: the child had drawn huge strength from somewhere. But there was no question she had committed the murder: the house was locked from the inside and her fingerprints were all over the weapon. Bethany's father Leonard, an evangelical preacher, was away at a prophecy conference in Birmingham at the time, having left that morning. He had spoken to his wife and daughter separately just an hour before the tragedy, and reported that Karen was concerned about Bethany's loss of appetite, while Bethany herself had complained of severe headaches. Karen Krall had put the phone on the loudspeaker, and they had all prayed together. This was a family tradition.

At ten-thirty that evening a neighbour heard violent screaming and raised the alarm, but by the time the police arrived Karen Krall was dead. They found her daughter curled on the floor next to her in a foetal position. In this photograph, you don't see

Bethany's face, but you see the part of her mother's that isn't blood-covered. The screwdriver is rammed deep into her left eye, its yellow plastic handle protruding. It has an odd jauntiness, like a dinner-fork stuck upright in a joint of meat cooked rare, and abandoned mid-meal. The pool of blood on the floor has developed the kind of skin that acrylic or emulsion paint will form. Another photograph, taken from above, shows an open waste bin containing, according to the notes, 'the charred remains of one King James Bible'. A physical examination immediately after the tragedy showed recent bruising on Bethany's body, particularly the upper arms, and damage to both wrists. From this it was concluded that a severe physical struggle had taken place.

On the next page is a happier portrait of the Kralls, taken a year before the family imploded. It shows a dark-haired, sharp-faced child, and on either side of her, the parents: a good-looking father and his pale, more meagre wife. They are all smiling widely – so widely, in Bethany's case, that the braces on her teeth take centre stage. Unhappiness takes many forms, I reflect. But happiness, or the semblance of it, can be as limited and unhelpful as the word 'cheese'. Bethany's teachers described her as highly intelligent but disturbed. Reading between the lines I suspect that like so many kids of her generation, she is a classic product of the last decade's 'interesting times', of its food shortages and mass riots and apocalyptically expanded Middle East war, and in her case, more specifically, of the Faith Wave that followed the global economic crash: preacher's strong-headed teenage daughter, who questioned the dominant role of fundamentalist Christianity in her life and rebelled. At school she was self-destructive, and had very possibly had sexual relationships with boys, but she paid attention in class, showing a particular aptitude for science, art and geography. There were no obvious signs of mental illness, though at the end of that spring term, in a staff meeting, concern was expressed that she seemed 'more unhappy than usual'.

I flick through to the next section, which is the attending

police psychiatrist's report. Dr Waxman's write-up is verbose, but the story it tells is straightforward enough. In the immediate wake of the murder, Bethany's coping mechanism was as brutal and efficient as a field amputation in time of war: she lost her memory. She did not deny committing the crime, but claimed to have no recollection of it, or what had provoked her to such drastic action. Nor would she speak to her father, when he returned, distraught, from his trip to Birmingham. Her refusal led to distressing scenes. 'Elective amnesia as a form of denial, or refuge, is not uncommon among those who have experienced trauma,' notes Waxman. 'This can be just as applicable to the perpetrator of a crime as to its victim.' On committing her to the care of Oxsmith, Waxman pronounced himself hopeful that she would make progress within the next few weeks and months, and moved on to his next case.

But Waxman's optimism about the beneficial effects of Oxsmith Adolescent Secure Psychiatric Hospital was misplaced. Two years into her institutionalisation, Bethany Krall had made four attempts on her own life and seriously attacked another patient. Her memory had returned, but she refused to speak about the murder or what triggered it. She began to starve herself and, after being diagnosed with acute depression, was given a panoply of mood-altering drugs, none of which proved effective in improving her morale. Bethany showed no interest in co-operating in therapy sessions, and remained largely mute. When she spoke, it was to express the belief that her heart was shrinking, her blood was poisoned, and she was 'rotting from the inside'. Increasingly experimental drug combinations were applied, some of which made her state of mind worse, and led to side-effects such as trembling, dribbling, lethargy and, in one instance, convulsions. She exhibited extreme disturbance, cutting herself frequently, and becoming dangerously underweight.

One day, in the wake of a severe thunderstorm during which she mutilated her throat with a plastic fork, Bethany insisted that she was dead, and that her body was slowly putrefying. To prove

that as a corpse she was unable to digest food, she stopped eating altogether. At this point, Cotard's syndrome – a nihilistic conviction that one's body has expired – was aired as a diagnosis, and after some discussions, it was agreed that she should undergo electroconvulsive therapy as a last-ditch resort.

The results are described as 'dramatic'. Bethany began to eat, talk and respond more positively to therapy. Although she experienced some of the usual after-effects of ECT such as short-term memory loss and disorientation in the immediate wake of each session, the psychiatrists judged the treatment to be an unmitigated success. Bethany herself said she felt 'more alive', and insisted she experienced the ECT interventions as positive – despite the fact that she was anaesthetised throughout and could have no recollection of them. But weirdness is relative in the territory occupied by the mentally deranged. Anything can manifest itself and, with the skewed anti-logic of anxiety dreams, it does: tins of mango slices containing encoded messages from the Office for National Statistics, a conviction that your skeleton will dissolve if you think about sex, a grouting phobia. A junior arsonist I dealt with once, who could cite the chemical compound of every flammable gas known to man, insisted on keeping his mouth open to avoid getting lockjaw. He'd sleep with a wedge of pillow clamped between his teeth as though his life depended on it. Life's rich tapestry, Dad would have said, in his bridge-and-crossword days, before Cartoon Network and the drool-bib took over the show.

Since March, after an initial five weeks of weekly sessions, Bethany's shock therapy has been administered on average once a month, as a maintenance dose, by one Dr Ehmet, whom I have not yet met, though I once caught sight of the back of his head and noted that he could do with a haircut. But effective though the ECT has been, Bethany's refusal to discuss her parents and the catastrophic event that brought her here continues. What prompted her to attack and murder her mother with a screwdriver one April evening remains a mystery. Therapeutically, I am not

sure how much this matters. Psychological principle has it that buried traumas must be exhumed and dealt with before a patient can move on. But I am less and less convinced by this reasoning. If there was a pill that could suppress horror, I would take it myself, and wipe out the last two years of my life. The brain is as uncharted and unfathomable as the sea, and as capricious. But it is also wise enough to do what's required to keep a body going. Who says that for Bethany Krall, forensically analysing what she did to her mother, and why, will do any good? Sensing this on some level, might she be using the ECT as a means of obliterating a crucial section of autobiographical memory?

Aware of the time, I skim quickly through the rest, which includes a further note, added by Oxsmith's principal psychiatrist, Dr Sheldon-Gray, at a later date. *The patient's father, Leonard Krall, has declined to see Bethany in Oxsmith. Therapeutically speaking, this may be to Bethany's advantage, as his explanation for his wife's murder is that Bethany was 'possessed by evil'.*

I too have a problem with words like evil. When my mother died, my father sent me to a Catholic girls' boarding school, a place of unshakeable Bible certainties – certainties to which a man like Krall, and the millions like him who converted during the Faith Wave, can be no stranger. Living by such certainties, he knows that the only explanation for Bethany's violence is nothing earthly, such as pain or revenge or anger or simply a chemical imbalance in the brain, but a 'visit' from a notion. True faith, the kind of faith that is described as 'burning', carries its own aura. A sort of righteous chutzpah. You see them on their mass marches, their faces illuminated from deep within. That conviction, that passion, that energy: you can envy it.

When I arrive in the studio for my meeting with Bethany a thickset male nurse is already there, talking on his mobile, deep in an elaborate technical discussion about shift schedules. I've heard that Rafik is tough and alert – but his with-you-in-a-minute gesture doesn't inspire confidence. Despite having spent much of the last few months devising and practising new physical defence strategies

involving the grabbing and twisting of vulnerable body parts and the strategic hurling of objects, I feel permanently vulnerable, a moving target. The notes have just told me that in December last year, Bethany Krall bit the ear off a boy who sexually attacked her. She chewed it up so badly it couldn't be reattached.

Marvellous. Bring her on.

Then suddenly – far too suddenly – a huge escorting nurse with tattooed arms has done just that. The door has opened and a dark streak of a girl has walked right up to me. And already she's too close. You never get used to everyone being taller than you, to seeing them from the wrong angle. She should step back a bit. But she doesn't. Rafik exchanges grunts with his mountainous colleague, who nods at me as if to say *package delivered*, and leaves. I could shift again, but I don't want to risk it. She'd know what it meant.

Bethany Krall is small, bird-boned and underdeveloped for a sixteen-year-old. On her head, a tangled mass of dark hair like a child's angry scribble. Self-harm being an ever-popular hobby among the female patients at Oxsmith, her bare arms reveal the usual welter of cigarette burns and crosswise slashes, some old, some more recent.

'Hallelujah. The new psychiatrist.' Her voice is babyish for her age but oddly hoarse, as though someone has scrubbed the inside of her throat with a chemical abrasive.

'Good to meet you, Bethany,' I say, manoeuvring myself to offer a handshake. 'I'm actually a therapist rather than a doctor.'

'Same shit, different asshole,' she declares, not taking my hand. Like me, she's wearing black: the garb of mourning. Does she still believe, on some level, that she has died?

'Gabrielle Fox. I'm new here, I've taken over from Joy McConney.'

'I always start by giving you guys the benefit of the doubt. That means ten stars out of ten to begin with,' she says, assessing my wheelchair. 'But you get an extra one for being a spaz. Positive discrimination, yeah? So you're starting with eleven.' The notes

mentioned she was articulate but I'm still surprised. You come across it so little in this kind of place.

'Ten's fine, Bethany. In fact, very generous of you. I specialise in art therapy. Subscribing to the theory that art's a good way of expressing feelings when words fail.'

Her eyes are dark, feline, heavily outlined in kohl. Sallow, olive skin, a narrow, asymmetrical face: she's what you'd call striking rather than pretty. Or jailbait. Her hair looks matted beyond redemption. She seems a far cry from the girl in the family photo. Has she spent the last two years soaking up the institution's own brand of teen culture, or is this attitude intrinsic? In either case, she behaves like she's up for a fight, and she looks like trouble, and she sounds like trouble – but then most of them do, one way or another. Preliminary assessment: she's more intelligent and more verbal than most, but otherwise, so far, so normal.

'The bottom line is, I'm here to help you, and encourage you to express whatever you want to express here in the –' I am unable to say Creativity Workshop: it gets stuck in my throat. 'Here in this studio. Whatever it is. No limits. It's an exploration. Sometimes it can take you to dark places. But I'm on your side.'

'A spaz who patronises me. Great. Great to have you on my side in *dark places*. Psychobabbling away.'

'I'm just someone to talk to. Or if you don't want to talk, I'm here to supply you with paper and art materials. Not everything works in words. No matter how big your vocabulary.'

She waggles two fingers at her opened mouth to indicate disgust. 'You're down to five. I can see you don't belong here.' She looks at me levelly. 'So perhaps you should just wheel yourself off into the sunset in that spazmobile of yours. Before something bad happens.' She circles the chair, then stops behind me, and leans down to whisper in my ear. 'So you've taken over from Joy. Tragic Joy. I guess you've heard all about the distressing way she left?' Her knowing use of cliché strikes me as a possible clue to her

inner clockwork. She speaks as though her life is an object held at a distance, a source of amusement – a fiction rather than a reality. ‘I warned her about what would happen. I warned her.’

I’m snared by this, as she intends, but I know better than to show an interest in my predecessor, so I gesture at the walls. ‘Is any of this work here yours?’

There is a game you can play: match the artwork to the wacko. But having spent time – more time than I ever intended – in casinos, amongst roulette wheels and backgammon tables and stacked chips, I know that it’s too much like poker, another pastime it’s wise not to indulge in.

‘Yeah, Joy was tragic but you’re tragic too, I guess,’ she continues, ignoring my question. ‘I mean, you bother with make-up, when no one’s going to take a second look, are they, no matter how hot you are, right? Unless they’re some sort of perv. No offence. But hey, Spaz. Reality check.’

If you show them an abusive word has got to you, they know they’ve won. And then they can do anything. And they will. ‘I asked if you’d done any of the work here,’ I say lightly. ‘And you can call me Gabrielle.’

‘You mean these great masterpieces?’

She glances around with disdain. The artwork features the usual range of motifs: flowers, anarchic fuck-the-system graffiti, graveyards, jungle animals, bulging breasts and engorged phal-luses. But there are some oddities too. One of the kids, a skinny twelve-year-old boy who helped his father murder his sister in the name of family honour, has been constructing a huge papier mâché hot-air balloon, striped blue and white, which hangs from the ceiling above us like a big light bulb. It is an enterprising, ambitious, hopeful and joyous balloon, a balloon that is more whole in spirit than the boy who made it. It’s both consoling and intriguing, that art can do that. Look at a pickled brain, and you’ll see a putty-grey bolus, lumpy and naked as an exposed mollusc. But there’s space inside for a thousand worlds, none of which need be remotely compatible.