

VACUUM

p a c k e d

robin
newbold

"Follows in the tradition of Bret Easton Ellis and Michel Houellebecq. You'll be dazed, appalled, intrigued." *Metro*

Vacuum-Packed

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For Kitcharoen

VACUUM-PACKED

ROBIN NEWBOLD

*And like all the boys in all the cities
I take the poison, take the pity
But he and I, we soon discovered
We'd take the pills to find each other*

Suede, *New Generation*

CHAPTER ONE

Jamie got back to his Tower Bridge council flat on another chill, lonely day and shut the door on a smell lingering somewhere between cheap cooking and urine. The remnants of last night's sex were still sadly there, hurriedly discarded clothes in a bundle on his bedroom floor, sticky stain on the sheets that was fading fast like the memory. He felt so empty he even thought briefly about calling the one-night stand (whom he'd already forgotten the name of) but then realised he'd deleted the phone number from his mobile and doubted the guy had given him genuine coordinates anyway.

He went to the kitchen, grabbed the third-full bottle of whisky and poured himself a more than liberal dose, desperate to shut out the winter cold. Jamie took a big swig and grimaced as it hit the pit of his stomach. He saw his answering machine winking as he moved into the hallway. One message; he hesitated as he hit "play".

"Aright babe, this is Pete, bell me when you get the chance. Good news!"

The message was shouted and Jamie thought he could discern a pub in the background. He imagined "Sweet" Pete — sweet as in everything was always "sweet as a nut" — with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other while his mobile was perched precariously between shoulder and ear, looking every inch the Cockney chan- cer.

Pete owned a record label and licensed his artists' recordings to the majors. He'd been auditioning new talent in the search for a "young male singer" and Jamie had got the job. Though the boy sensed it was more about his good looks and the fact that at nineteen he looked more like a fourteen-year-old than about his singing ability. The view was reinforced on their first meeting outside the auditioning hall, which took place in a City of London pub one weekday afternoon. The record company executive had made a pathetic drunken lunge at his new signing and then admitted to being an alcoholic by way of an apology.

He was beginning to seriously question how such a desperate man could help him but he dialled Pete's number anyway because he didn't have any better options.

“Hello, it’s Jamie.”

“All right,” wheezed Pete, clearly shouting above the background noise of another raucous bar, one that Jamie suspected he retired to in the afternoons all too frequently. “Yeah, good news as I said. We’ve been invited to my mate’s party tonight. He’s a big record producer and he’s holding a do down at his Sussex pad.”

“Okay,” he replied, a little too eagerly, being sold on the words “record” and “producer”.

“Can you meet me at the office ’bout seven?”

“Yeah.”

“Sweet as. Make sure you look pretty,” Pete said, hanging up and leaving the comment ringing in Jamie’s ear.

He sensed the record executive was desperate to make some kind of impression other than the wrong one since he’d already admitted in another moment of drunken candour that Ripe Records was earning the dubious distinction of being the label with a single hit.

Nevertheless, keen on making an entrance, Jamie showered, scrubbed and bathed himself in perfume. He chose the tightest of white Calvin Klein T-shirts, which he’d actually washed on a high temperature to shrink even further. He complemented the look with a pair of blue Levi’s that left little to the imagination and gazed at himself approvingly in the mirror with the sure knowledge he wouldn’t be his only admirer that evening.

The front door was locked when Jamie reached the inexplicably numbered 89-and-a-half Worship Street in the back end of Shoreditch, though Pete’s black Jaguar XJ12 was in the driveway. He impatiently rang the buzzer, imagining him slumped over in his office recovering from another drunken stupor.

After a few moments of silence with Jamie poised to hold down the buzzer again the intercom crackled into life: “Babe, I’ll be right there, I was just cleaning meself up.”

Pete came out of the door looking typically dishevelled. He thrust out his frail arms to grab the youngster and gave him a peck on the cheek. Jamie groaned inwardly as he smelled the booze on the man’s breath, which was barely masked by a haze of af-

tershaved. He looked accusingly into Pete's watery, bloodshot eyes and the record company man could only look away.

"You look lovely darling," he said, still avoiding eye contact.

"Cheers," replied Jamie, wishing he could say the same about his companion. Dressed in loafers, jeans and a crumpled polo shirt with his gin-coloured, thinning hair brushed back severely over his scalp he didn't give the impression of a record company executive; to his new employee he looked like he'd given up. They walked to the Jag in silence.

Pete glanced across at the boy as he turned the engine over, already having lit a cigarette. Jamie ignored the look and sat demurely as his boss nervously blew out heavy clouds of smoke.

"Don't mind me babe," he said as they turned onto the street, but Jamie saw the tears in his companion's sad eyes. "Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

They drove in virtual silence since Pete had turned up the stereo loud enough that it would make conversation almost impossible. Jamie sank back into the black leather seat, relieved at not having to make idle chitchat as he listened to the pumping nightclub soundtrack and averted his eyes from the desperate man just inches from him, the man that had promised so much.

They pulled up outside the impressive old country house. Expensive cars littered the sweeping gravel driveway and Jamie felt slightly daunted at what lay ahead of him, while Pete sat staring through the windscreen like he didn't want to move as the engine still ticked over and the music pounded.

"Are we getting out then?"

"I s'pose we should," said Pete, finally coming to. "We don't want to hold the party up."

Jamie felt his heart beating faster as they entered the house and moved into the cavernous hallway, the walls reverberating with a heavy bass beat. Pete knowingly led the way as large, sumptuously decorated rooms flashed by, the music getting louder. They finally came to a set of ornate double doors almost bursting with sound. The record executive flung them open for the boy to take in the decadent scene under subdued

lighting. It was as though every detail had been carefully considered and taken care of, he thought. The grand, smoky room was filled primarily by a white middle-aged male gathering who were sipping flutes of champagne, frantically refilled by scantily clad young waiters.

People flocked around Pete as though they'd known him forever but disappeared just as quickly, not even making time for Jamie, though he was aware he raised more than the odd eyebrow.

Introduced to many faces that were too old to be interesting he nevertheless felt relaxed as the music throbbed in his temples and gratefully accepted a glass of fizz thrust at him by some beautiful young thing.

It seemed as though Pete finally got disenchanted with standing on the sidelines and had collared a young man whom he was having a rather one-sided conversation with. He'd rudely failed to introduce Jamie to the guy, who he recognised as a member of a popular boy band. He stood on the fringes of the chatter feeling like a spare part, guzzling his champagne and glancing over at the handsome singer, trying to catch his attention.

"Hi, my name's Jim," he said eventually as he pointedly turned his back on Pete and addressed Jamie. "I'm from the boy band 999."

"I didn't know they were gay," Jamie shrieked facetiously.

"They're not," said Jim in his pronounced Liverpudlian accent. "Officially."

"Is it true they call you 'Jumbo' Jim?"

"You must have a subscription to *Smash Hits*, you daft lad," replied Jim, laughing as he unselfconsciously pulled Jamie to him, pecked him on the cheek and gave him a slap on the arse, oozing the confidence of a C-list celebrity.

Jamie was enjoying his brush with the almost famous but felt uncomfortable under the watchful gaze of Pete, who seemed to be eyeing him with a hateful and jealous leer.

"What's his problem?" he said discreetly, nodding over to indicate Pete.

"Oh, he's a bit of a joke in the industry now," replied Jim, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "The only artists he's concerned with are piss artists."

"I've just signed a bloody contract."

"Yeah, he told me you're the next big thing," Jim replied, laughing cruelly. "From

what I've heard he's got a mega cash flow problem and people are saying Ripe Records is about to go under."

"Why has he signed me then?"

"Look, Pete's well known as a big gambler and I think you're really his last throw of the dice," said the singer. "I've heard creditors saying he's in the red to the tune of thousands. I wouldn't expect paying if I was you."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Look, the old man is giving us the evil eye. I better be off," said Jim. "He's probably wondering what I'm telling you."

"See you later then."

He looked across at Pete, who was swaying from side to side, busy courting yet another refill when he'd obviously had more than enough already. Jamie resented him for driving Jim away, resented him for his desperation and fixed-on party smile, and hated him for being dumped at a party full of strangers and then set adrift.

"You're never going to make me famous, you're just a fucking fraud, an alcoholic!" he shouted at the record executive, who'd been busily in conversation with an older man.

Pete looked mortified, as though just one sentence was all it took to floor him, but he clumsily swung his arm and lashed out. He got lucky and his fist struck Jamie's eye. The boy was sent reeling backwards as the pain pierced through the haze of alcohol. He worriedly clutched the side of his face, feeling it swell immediately.

Pete stepped up again but was held back by the old man he'd been talking to as surrounding party guests hid behind champagne flutes as though unaware of the commotion.

Jamie looked at Pete, who was still being restrained, with utter contempt and spat in his face like he no longer existed, let alone mattered. Then he walked away and lost himself in the crowd, resolving never to see him again, though he had a horrible feeling he would.

Still stunned he felt a tug at his hand and turned around, pleased to see Jim, who sported a wide champagne smile. The singer pulled Jamie through the crowd and out of the cloying room.

"Don't worry about Pete. He likes pretty faces around but hasn't got a clue what

to do with 'em," said Jim as they ascended some stairs.

"Yeah, I've just realised how full of shit he really is," Jamie replied, laughing bitterly as he felt his swollen eye.

"One way or the other he's not going to be on the scene much longer."

They reached a small landing at the top of the house and the singer opened the door onto a dully-lit room with a double bed suggestively at the centre.

"Come on, they won't miss us for a while," said Jim as he pulled Jamie onto the bed. "I saw the way you was looking at me downstairs."

The boy was slightly taken aback by the forwardness and tried to kiss Jim for reassurance but found his head being pushed roughly down to the star's crotch. It didn't take long for him to indulge in what he knew every pubescent girl in the land had been aching to do — he unzipped the singer's jeans.

Once he'd come the star was seemingly oblivious to his companion and selfishly used the *en-suite* shower first. Jamie just sat on the bed, still dazed, as he listened to the cascading water from the bathroom.

On the way out Jim offered only the weakest of smiles. As Jamie entered the shower cubicle his stomach knotted in pain and he threw up from the drink and from the shock of the whole violent night. The vomit congealed around the drain and he pulled the showerhead from the wall to wash it all away. He grimaced as he caught sight of his bloated, discoloured eye in a wall-mounted mirror.

"Come on, there's someone I want you to meet," barked Jim, all businesslike as Jamie exited the shower. It was like the previous half hour had never happened.

He followed Jim reluctantly like a little lost child back to the function room. The chat seemed to have got louder and more excitable but it just made Jamie want to cower. In this room full of people he felt impossibly lonely and wondered, not for the first time, what he was doing in a cavernous space full of strangers who weren't interested in him because he wasn't a "somebody". He signalled hopefully to one of those he could always catch eye contact with and asked the waiter for yet another drink.

"Jamie, this is George, and vice versa," said Jim, introducing Jamie to a skinny, middle-aged, balding guy.

The man's pink dome, visibly sweating under the lights, gave him an unpleasantly greasy sheen. Jamie felt himself being eyed up and down as he watched George's

thin white lips chomping busily on a big cigar.

“Delighted to meet you,” he said, holding out a slender hand for Jamie to shake. A chunky Rolex sat ostentatiously on his puny wrist.

“Pleased to meet you too,” Jamie replied, but shyly averted his gaze as he felt George’s bulging eyes creep all over his body, mentally undressing and abusing him. He let out a nervous, pathetic laugh.

“Very pretty face,” said the immaculately dressed man with the skeletal-like face and accent that was impossible to place, as though he didn’t want to be pinpointed. His long, thin fingers brushed Jamie’s cheek and the heavy swelling around his eye.

“Just what you’re looking for, George. I’ve tested the goods,” said Jim, laughing casually.

“I’m in movies my dear. Your face definitely fits, and everything else by the looks,” said George, looking intently at Jamie and puffing up his ridiculously out of place cravat. “Here’s my card. Screen tests in the next two weeks. Do call me.”

Jamie shifted uncomfortably, nervously stroking the business card, but he made a point of putting it carefully into his wallet and promised to call, slightly star struck by the idea of films even though he realised it wouldn’t be anything warranting an Oscar nomination. George winked at the pair by way of goodbye, waving an arm in the air as he slunk back into the crowd.

Jim shrugged as Jamie looked at him forlornly, as if to say he’d done his duty of looking after the party’s leper; now it was someone else’s turn. The boy noticed Pete slumped in a corner passed out as people, his so-called friends, walked by without a second glance as though he wasn’t even there.

The singer turned his back on the boy like he was surplus to requirements as a procession of men approached him. Jamie doubted the young, handsome star wanted to admit to himself, let alone the world, he was gay, having seen the always joshing, football-loving lad on too numerous afternoon TV quiz shows trying to plug his group’s latest dirge.

Jamie felt a loathing rise up inside at his fellow partygoers but hated himself more for so desperately wanting to be a part of it. He thought Pete had been his key to the door, though now there was George. For the moment he decided to leave Jim and his attentive friends, who he felt wouldn’t even notice his disappearance, let alone care.

The boy strode purposefully through the great house and out into the stinging winter air, which he breathed in great gulps. He walked on down to the main road, leaving the lights and sound far behind. He stood by the side of the black tarmac thumbing a lift back to London, back to his home, wondering what lay ahead of him. Being a young, pretty boy alone at night he knew it wouldn't take long for someone to stop; they always did.

CHAPTER TWO

When Craig had called Gay Switchboard — the free gay advice service — the counsellor had been so nice to him that he'd felt like bursting into tears. The voice at the end of the line was so soothing, caring and calm, the antithesis of his own; he believed he sounded a broken man. Even going to the shop and asking for a pack of cigarettes was an ordeal. He sensed people could tell by his tone that he was suffering a life-threatening illness, that they could see right through him.

Craig had called Switchboard when he was coming out and it'd helped. For the lack of friends he turned to them again. Okay, he had friends, but there was no one he felt like discussing AIDS with. He thought mates were people you talked superficial fluff with.

Jamie had already rejected him because HIV positive just wasn't fashionable, though Craig knew he was better off without his boyfriend of six months. He could turn his back on most people like that without it coming back to haunt him, but it was his mum and her husband Bill he was worried about.

Craig approached Switchboard in desperation and it had saved him. The counsellor, who admitted he was HIV positive too, said that revealing your positive status was like coming out all over again but "without the happiness". He'd signed off one of their intense conversations with the simple but telling line: "You've got to be tough, fucking tough. That's my advice."

As Craig sat in his small, dreary studio and contemplated telling his mum and her husband, who'd been so good to him through the trials of coming out, he appreciated how prophetic the small words of advice had been. With coming out he felt a big sense of trepidation but there was also part of him that wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Being HIV positive was something completely and appallingly different. His world had fallen apart when the doctor had broken the news in that softly, softly fashion that was neither here nor there. Really, he was handed a death sentence at nineteen years of age, or that's how he thought at the time through the endless tears.

Over the course of a few weeks and with professional medical consultation he was made aware that combination therapies could prevent him getting sick for years and he'd managed to live by the cliché "one day at a time", though some days were worse than others. At least he'd stopped destroying himself and tried to see a future.

It was the end of autumn and the onset of winter, the latter part of October. They'd had an Indian summer and Craig had basked in those glorious deep-blue sky days like he'd never see the sun again, all too aware that winter was a long, dark shadow around the corner. The past week had seen bitterly cold winds and grey skies blow in from the north — Siberian weather, they said.

Nevertheless, on this Sunday in late October with the brown leaves cascading sadly from the trees, Craig had arranged to see his mum and her husband in Regent's Park. He couldn't face a confrontational style meeting and thought it would be somehow easier to tell them in a wide-open space. He guessed it might lessen the shock but knew bitterly from experience that nothing could ease the coming blow.

He checked himself in the bathroom mirror and acknowledged that he looked tired and drawn. Craig hoped his time away in the sun — he'd decided with the help of his counsellor to do what he'd always wanted to do and travel the world — would do its job of rejuvenating him.

He had managed to get out of bed even on the hardest days but was finding it exhausting to motivate himself. The boy had declared his HIV status to the NHS since he was a nurse and had been given the all-clear, though prevented from carrying out "high-risk procedures". He saw the newfound concern of his employers as intrusive because he'd already told them more than he wanted to about his life; saving up for his trip was the spur that kept him going.

Craig smiled at his image in the mirror but even that looked unconvincing as he pulled his coat protectively around his shoulders, bracing himself for the cold day. On his way out the front door he kicked at the pile of letters and newspapers that had gathered on his mat. He hadn't opened a letter or read a newspaper since the diagnosis. He really didn't know when he was going to be able to bring himself to do anything that required more effort than switching the "on" and "off" button of the TV.

Even though his legs felt leaden Craig closed the door resignedly behind him and headed for his afternoon rendezvous. It was a bitterly cold, blustery day, as he knew it

would be.

He'd planned to meet his mum and Bill in the ticket hall of Regent's Park Underground but as he sat on the Tube he hoped they'd get the wrong place and that they wouldn't be left waiting for him like he saw in his mind's eye. He imagined the couple so happy to see him, clinging to each other warmly in the cold with no idea what he was about to unleash on their contented life.

It was suffocating on the Underground, as always, yet Craig pulled his fleece around him. He'd felt a chilling cold since he'd sat in the whitewashed doctor's room and witnessed his world cave in.

He was uncharacteristically early when he arrived at the ticket hall, though only by a few minutes, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw his mum and Bill standing smiling over at him.

"Hi, how are you," she said cheerily, giving him one of her familiar embraces.

"Fine," he replied guardedly, already beginning to wonder how he could possibly bring himself to break the news. Rehearsing it over and over in his mind beforehand had clearly been no preparation.

"All right Craig, looking good as usual," said Bill, giving him a brief bear hug.

His mum's new husband was always tactile, always very welcoming (and Craig had once suspected too eager to please, but he knew better now). His strong London accent was strangely comforting but he wondered how Bill was going to cope too as they headed up the stairs and out into the street.

They crossed the busy main road where people drove purposefully by, heading for a destination, but all Craig could see ahead was uncertainty. He felt the icy wind biting at the exposed part of his face and pulled the fleece collar higher.

"Bloody freezing, isn't it?" his mum finally said as they walked three abreast, Craig in the middle.

"Yeah," he replied.

Having reached the park he noticed how the leaves were falling from the trees, how some stood skeletal-like, framed against the metal-grey sky, and felt the summer had died within himself too. Craig despaired at the way he was going to express his feel-

ings to his mum and her husband as they stood either side, just inches away.

When they entered the comforting warmth of the park's teashop Craig couldn't stop himself visibly shaking.

"Are you all right, love?" asked his mum with a look of concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just cold."

"Okay, you two sit down and I'll get the teas in," said Bill, rubbing his hands and smiling as he walked to the counter.

He soon returned with a tray of tea and three Jumbo Kit-Kats, his chubby face flushed red with the chill.

"There you go," Bill said. "That should warm us all up."

He laid the tray with the steaming cups on the table in the cheerless little café in which they were the only punters. A sullen teenage girl manned the counter. She'd been on her mobile from the time they'd entered.

A contemplative hush fell at the table, just the girl babbling into her phone and the whistling of a radio turned down low. Craig was forming the words on his tongue to spectacularly break the silence when his mum said, "So what have you been up to?"

It was just the type of meaningless crap she was so adept at trotting out to break an uncomfortable pause in conversation. He loved his mum but Craig felt with resentment that their encounters were becoming more and more superficial.

I've been thinking about dying for the last eight weeks, nothing much, he thought, but instead said, "Oh this and that, not a lot really but I'm thinking of traveling."

"That's nice. Where?"

"Australia, India, Thailand? I'm not completely sure yet," he said with a total lack of enthusiasm, staring into his teacup.

"Oh lovely."

"I've always wanted to go to those kind of places meself," said Bill ruefully. "Never had the time or the bloody money."

Craig ignored Bill's comment and continued staring down into his mug. It was like he was in a dream watching himself from afar when he finally did open his mouth.

"I'm going because I'm HIV positive," he said as evenly as he could, his monotone masking the extreme emotion he was feeling. He held the table to prevent himself

from shaking. He felt like he'd slip to the floor if he didn't hold on.

"What?"

"Mum, I've tested positive for the human immunodeficiency virus — H-I-V." He spelled out for her as though reading from a medical textbook and for the first time he turned from his teacup to look at her. He wished he hadn't. She looked shattered and her eyes seemed filled with a lifetime's worth of tears.

"You can't be," she whispered pathetically, sliding her hand across the table to hold Craig's as tears rolled down her pallid cheeks.

"Mum I was tested, I'm positive but it's okay. They say I'm lucky, they caught me early."

"Lucky?" she spluttered. "But you're going to die."

"Karen!" reproached her husband.

Craig held his mum's cold, delicate hand more tightly in his selling her an optimistic story, the one he'd been sold and was so sceptical about. Yet he had nothing else to cling to.

"Mum, I might stay free of illness for ten years, and there are new drugs to treat AIDS. Combination therapies, wonder drugs they call them."

"We'll look after you mate, don't you worry about that," said Bill, patting Craig's hand and squeezing it sensitively.

Seeing the two of them looking on so concerned he already felt prostrate in a starched hospital bed, tied to a drip and relying on a concoction of chemicals simply to keep him breathing as the walls closed in, but he was still totally overwhelmed by their support.

Under their burning, compassionate gaze his façade finally cracked and he burst uncontrollably into tears. His mum came across and held him as he shook and sobbed, wiping his tears away as though he was a helpless child. Through it all Craig could still hear the counter girl babbling inconsequentially away on her phone and he wished her dead.

"Don't worry. We'll always be there for you," said his mum. "I'll always love you."

He looked up as the tears dried and saw Bill approaching with some more tea.

"I expect you'll need something stronger than that mate," he said as he put the tray down, and Craig could see the glimmer in his big, honest eyes.

“Yeah a lot stronger.”

They each sipped their tea for a few moments, none of them knowing what to say as Craig continued to cling to his mother.

“I don’t want to ask you any awkward questions, love, but what happens now?” she said, staring at the table in front of her as if it was too harrowing even to look at her own son.

“Well, my CD4 and viral load counts are okay, thank God, but eventually I’ll go on a course of therapy to prevent infection and protect my immune system,” he said slow and methodically despite his mum’s sobs. “I’ll be on a battery of drugs that I’ll have to take every few hours.”

He looked at both of them, Karen still staring at the table and Bill gazing numbly across at his wife.

“What about AIDS? What about getting sick? You look so bloody healthy,” she said, still refusing to catch her son’s eye.

The line about looking healthy stung him more than ever. He had been ill — a nasty fever — which prompted him to go to his GP, who’d suggested the HIV test in the first place. He’d tested positive but his antibodies soon fought off the fever like any healthy young man’s should. Craig even dared to think the diagnosis was wrong when soon after he recovered he looked in the mirror and was sickened at the image of well-being staring back. But as he stood and studied himself that day he wondered what horrifying problems he was going to be struck down with — if not immediately or even soon, then in the foreseeable future.

“People contract AIDS — auto immuno deficiency — when their T-cell count falls below a certain level. That’s when the immune system is fundamentally weakened, making the sufferer susceptible to secondary infections like PCP — a lung infection; Kaposi’s sarcoma — skin cancer; or, CMV — an infection that affects the eyes,” he said stoically. “That’s what kills in the end.”

His mum and Bill looked like someone had just died along with part of themselves. A mother burying her son shouldn’t happen to anyone — he knew that — but Craig also knew he had to be totally honest, so he continued as both of them openly wept.

“AIDS maybe ten or fifteen years down the line and as I said, even that is treat-

able with a combination of drugs. I hope I won't get sick before then."

"We'll always be here to look after you," said his mum.

"There are carers and AIDS hospices that look after the sick. Most of it is provided free by the social services," he replied hurriedly, already feeling the need to absolve his mother from what he knew would be a heavy and soul-destroying burden.

"Oh love, I'm so worried about you," she said, wailing and encasing Craig as he collapsed into sobs again too.

Bill was on hand, as always, smoothing down his wife's hair and offering soothing words. Even the waitress came over and asked whether everything was okay.

"Yes, everything is fine," said his mum. "Just a bit of a tearjerker, that's all."

"Oh," said the girl, and sloped off to the counter, phone clamped back to her ear.

They'd stopped crying at her approach and Craig's mum handed out the tissues she always carried in her handbag. They cleaned themselves up and composed themselves, though the boy noticed he was still shaking.

"Right," said Bill. "What shall we do? I feel like a drink, I don't know about anyone else?"

For want of any better suggestions they filed out of the café, all contemplating a different future. Hurrying through Regent's Park Craig kicked disconsolately at the dead, browning autumnal leaves as they headed past the imposing stucco houses. They all stayed close together as they walked but no one said a word, nothing but their breath visible on the frosty evening air.

Only a short distance was Camden's Parkway Tavern. As the trio entered the coarse interior of the pub Craig remembered enjoying the England football team's Euro '96 successes there not so long ago. He'd felt immortal then as Terry Venables' boys enjoyed the sweet taste of a 4-1 victory against a well-fancied Dutch side. He now tasted only bitterness and laughed sadly to himself at life's unpredictable twists and turns.

The pub looked uninviting, half-empty and all partied out after the weekend. At least it was warm and the three of them basked in it after the chilling afternoon.

"I'm really worried how your mum's going to cope," said Bill as they went up to the bar to get the drinks.

"I'm worried how I'm going to cope," Craig replied as Bill ordered. But it was like he hadn't heard Craig's comment or didn't want to hear as an unusually uncomfortable

silence settled between them.

He looked around the bar as the bored barman pulled the pints and felt more desolate than ever. London could seem like the loneliest place in the world sometimes. People hardly spoke to each other, Craig mused, as he sadly watched a group of men in the corner, distractedly sipping their pints and watching a Premiership game on a wall-mounted TV. Each was conspicuously alone and there was no other sound apart from the overexcited chatter of the commentator trying desperately to inject some life into the dregs of the weekend before it dissolved into Monday morning. Craig had work too. He'd so wanted to resign but he needed the money to travel.

The barman handed over the drinks and change with a curt "cheers mate" and they headed back to the table, Karen watching her son return with a renewed concern in her eyes.

"I'm all right," he said sitting down opposite her and taking a welcome gulp of his pint. "Really."

"I just worry."

Bill was watching the football, obviously wanting to disengage himself from any more intense conversation, and Craig couldn't blame him.

"How often do you think about it?" she said, almost whispering, already halfway down her glass of dry white.

"Too bloody often."

"I'm so sorry," she said finally. "How the hell did you get through those first few weeks?"

"Mum, I really don't know," he replied, almost convulsing with emotion.

"How about Jamie?" she asked tentatively, as though she already feared the answer.

"He's left me."

"Wanker," commented Bill.

"Yeah," said Craig, laughing. Bill always cheered him up even at his lowest ebb.

His mum noticeably never asked for more details. While she was totally okay about him being gay she was still amusingly queasy about the ins and outs of Craig's life.

"So when will you travel?" asked Bill.

“As soon as possible,” he replied. “I’m just saving as much as I can but I want to be gone before Christmas.”

“We can help you out,” said Bill, glancing at Karen for reassurance. “We’ve got a few quid spare at the moment.”

“If you’re sure that’s all right.”

“No problem,” Bill said, his face breaking into a beaming, infectious smile.

For the first time in weeks Craig felt genuinely glad to be alive, though overcome by the generosity and compassion he’d received from his closest family.

“I’ll get the drinks in,” he said, blinking back tears as he headed to the bar, holding his hand up to signal he didn’t need any help.

While he was at the counter he allowed himself to dream of the wonderful places he was going to be seeing in just a few weeks and felt just maybe things were going to be okay. He knew he needed blue skies and sunshine after the bleakness of the last couple of months.

As he walked back to their table and watched as they smiled up at him, Craig was so thankful not to be alone any more.

CHAPTER THREE

Jamie was jolted awake by the shrill ring of his alarm clock, which he leaned over and batted hard. It was a sickening reminder that he'd have to drag himself out of the warmth of his bed and meet Pete for the first time since their violent argument at the glittering house party. He looked in the bedroom mirror and grimaced in the half-light; his face still showed the ugly remnants of the black eye where the record producer had awkwardly swung his fist.

Jamie was full of hate this particular morning. He'd worked late the previous night at the trendy Saint Bar off Saint Martin's Lane in London's West End. The tips were good, particularly when he directed his sickly smile at the pissed businessmen, even if he did gob in their drinks on a regular basis. Though this was the trying season to be jolly, with hoards of falsely merry office workers on their Christmas junkets to be serviced. He had felt like putting rat poison in their turkey dinners but instead snorted some coke proffered by his friend Philippe to make himself feel superior.

Jamie walked past the multi-million pound façades of Broadgate where he supposed the City money men revelled in making the world go round. The sky was a deep, deep icy blue and he shivered as he continued on to dilapidated Shoreditch, contemplating the meeting with Pete and wondering what more there was to say.

Lost in thought, he came upon Worship Street sooner than he would have liked. In the distance the towers of Mammon glittered and sparkled, though Jamie had already experienced this street that lay very much in the shadows. He'd joined Pete one lunchtime in a couple of the seedy local pubs offering strippers for bored brokers and broken men. Everyone was on nodding terms with the record executive, sadly indicating just how much of a regular he was.

Jamie reached 89-and-a-half and went to press the buzzer when he noticed the front door oddly flapping open in the breeze. He entered the small reception, lit by a strip light that hummed cheaply; it hadn't seen a receptionist for some time so he con-

tinued on down a claustrophobic, dark hallway to Pete's office. He remembered how before their first meeting he'd been so excited and full of hope. Now he just felt numb. Even the handful of silver and gold-framed discs tacked to the walls seemed to have lost their lustre.

The heating was clearly switched on, as Jamie felt the sweat spring to his forehead, so he guessed someone was around. He knocked on Pete's door expecting to be beckoned inside but was met with silence. He knocked again, louder, nothing. He caught his breath as the stillness began to get to him but resolved that maybe his boss had passed out on booze or popped out to buy some cigarettes or simply forgotten the meeting.

Anxiously Jamie tried the door, expecting it to be locked, but it swung open freely. The first thing to hit him was the obscene, fetid smell of rotting meat that crawled up his nostrils. He instinctively put his hand to his nose and should have slammed the door shut but was instead transfixed by the horrific scene in a room that he'd never seen so still and silent, so infected by death.

Pete's body lay slumped forward over his desk, grotesquely naked, gouged wrists outstretched. Jamie's eyes followed a glorious fountain of gore thick and crimson up the white walls. The bureau was inundated with the blood that had cascaded onto the floor and the boy stepped back as though it threatened to flood over his shoes. The putrid butcher's shop stench, making him want to retch, was one he'd never forget.

"You fucking bastard," he shouted, then turned and ran as though fleeing for his life.

He was still sprinting as he turned onto Broadgate and past the elaborately decorated Christmas trees and the expensively suited City analysts.

Jamie got on the Tube at Liverpool Street and it was crowded with passengers but he didn't notice them. All he could see was Pete, or the twisted thing he'd become, wrists slashed open and blackened by blood. The image was burned into his mind like his brain had taken a photograph, one it would select at random all too often, he feared.

It was a cold day, the kind of cold that made the bones ache and the ears sting. It was as unforgiving and relentless as the wintry skies above but even though Jamie was tired and strung out he didn't want to go back to his empty flat and the half-empty bottle of whisky by his armchair. He didn't want to sit anaesthetised in front of some cheer-

ily awful sitcom and decided to stay out because he wanted company. Well he wanted sex, at least.

He reached K-Bar, another fashionably appointed gay den in central London that to him looked suspiciously like something out of an Ikea catalogue. The doorman mumbled something which could have been “good evening”, but just as likely “fuck you”, Jamie supposed as he tried to ignore the intrusion and crossed the threshold.

He headed to the dark pit of downstairs where men in suits had already gathered in front of a large video screen, no doubt trying to forget another mindless day, the type of existence Jamie was trying so hard to avoid.

There were a few stray Orientals around the bar since this was the place to come if you liked “rice”. Jamie didn’t. Many of the boys were strangely without drinks, most very young looking and some illegally so, he thought. He’d often witnessed how the Asians loitered, waiting for the men in suits to offer them drinks and, he guessed, the contents of their wallets.

He pushed his way through the strays at the bar. He had no time for Orientals; in fact he had little time for anyone. He caught the barman’s eye and ordered a gin and tonic, having to shout above the music into the boy’s ear. Jamie enjoyed getting so close to someone but the barman was the typical studied professional of a Soho boy and looked straight through him as he handed over the drink. An automatic smile played on the waiter’s pretty face as he delivered a silver tray of change but Jamie had already lost interest and guiltlessly pocketed the money.

He positioned himself in front of the screen as the videos poured out. Jamie enjoyed not having to think and let the alcohol seep into the dark recesses of his brain. But quickly bored he soon shifted his attention as some of the rent boys began to pair off with those old enough to be their fathers. He was vaguely concerned and imagined one of the men handing over a crumpled 20-pound note to a boy for his pain at the end of the night.

Instead of letting his imagination wander any further he took another swig of his drink, let the bitterness explode at the back of his throat and watched as a cute skinhead walked in. The boy had an angelic face, though his stance and scrappy clothes suggested he was anything but.

Buoyed by alcohol Jamie kept his eyes fixed on the lad now standing at the bar.

The skinhead could hardly fail to notice the attention and looked alive to any possibilities though he scowled back, which only made Jamie more interested. He continued to glance over at the boy at far too regular intervals.

Twenty minutes passed. Jamie was about to leave but stopped expectantly as he watched the skinhead saunter over. He didn't even want to talk to him but just wanted to taste the lush lips set in a strangely innocent looking face under an impossibly rough haircut.

"Don't look at me unless you wanna pay for it," said the boy, his face contorted by hate.

Jamie felt the embarrassing sting of tears in his eyes.

"Fuck you," he shouted back impotently, since the lad had already retreated to his spot at the bar and was smiling serenely as an elderly man offered him a drink.

Jamie swigged back his gin as quickly as possible, hoping no one else had watched his humiliation, even though he saw smiles playing wickedly on the lips of those around him. He elbowed his way past people in his haste to leave. The faceless doorman ushered him out and again mumbled something that could have been "good night", but was most probably "wanker", Jamie thought.

He almost fell onto the pavement outside, flushed with uncertainty and embarrassment. It was sleeting and small ice particles spiralled from the sky and struck his face. Even the cheerful Christmas decorations seemed to mock him as he hurried to Charing Cross Underground Station.

He sat on the Tube, enveloped in silence, face to face with commuters headed back to their suburbs, their televisions and their families, he guessed. Jamie stared out of the window and found the dark emptiness more fulfilling than the boring certainty of those around him.

He got off at Clapham Common, though the train was still full as it thundered towards the grey satellite town of Modern. The boy pulled his coat tight around himself as he ascended from the station and headed for the shadowy expanse of the common, tree-tops illuminated a dull orange by the urban street lamps.

It was still sleeting and Jamie could hear the cars swish by on the wet tarmac and the leaves rustle as he passed the dark tree line. The traffic noise soon gave way to other sounds, more human. There was a clump of bushes and he caught a glimpse of bare

white flesh writhing around behind the foliage as though the bushes offered some protection or gave some privacy to another snatched, desperate moment.

His expensively fashionable trainers had soaked through, his feet were cold and wet, and mud was splattered up his trousers, but Jamie stood under the cover of a tree, waiting. He lit a cigarette and watched the glowing tip, puffing out blue clouds of smoke in a bid to win some attention.

Finally a guy loomed out of the darkness. It scared Jamie but he stood his ground. A skinhead came into focus. His heart jumped but he knew it wasn't really the lad from the bar. Their eyes locked with intent and even though he could see the man was not convincingly attractive it was too late as a primitive lust took over.

Jamie threw his cigarette to the ground, offering a weak smile, and grabbed the guy around shoulders that were disappointingly fragile. They hopelessly clung to each other and awkwardly kissed. As a last resort he ignored his own limp penis, reached to the man's fly, undid the zip and as he went down thought of the boy in K.

The skinhead pushed Jamie away as he came, cleaned himself up and ambled off into the night as though nothing had happened. An older man who'd been watching them from the shadows emerged and smiled. Jamie grimaced and the man scuttled back into the darkness like a wounded animal.

He lit another cigarette and trudged sadly to the edge of the common, his appetite for sex numbed by the encounter. A man passed walking his dog and he fixed Jamie with a hateful stare.

"Fuckin' queer," he snarled.

Jamie knew better than to reply and just kept on walking and, as he increased his pace, felt more unsettled and lonelier than ever. He activated his voice mail only to be told by the cold computer-generated speech that there was one message. He groaned inwardly at his mum's mock cheerful tone, reminding him to come home for Christmas dinner — like he needed reminding. He was dreading it.

He got on the night-bus and squinted at the clinically bright light. His shoes and trousers were caked in mud and the assorted shift workers looked at him with disdain as if it was obvious what he'd been up to. Jamie skulked upstairs to avoid the judgmental eyes and lit another cigarette in spite of the "No Smoking" signs. It felt like him up against the world.

• • •

He'd actually intended to spend Christmas alone but his mum's invitation put his cold, empty flat into stark contrast with the central heating and a fridge full of food in Carshalton — another characterless London suburb — though he sensed it would be a difficult day. From past experience he knew to expect grandparents dribbling over their Christmas dinners and his parents with fixed grins and party hats as though enjoying themselves with their gay son.

His parents, Bob and Liz, had virtually disowned him when he was a baby. At the time they were both Royal Navy doctors and shipped him off to his grandmother rather than let the new arrival sink their glorious careers. Liz — because he was always instructed to call his parents formally by their Christian names — had even admitted to him that he'd been an “unplanned, unwanted pregnancy”.

Nevertheless they had gloried in his modest successes, GCSEs and the like; it reflected well on them but of course, as Jamie knew, it lied. They'd even made the concession of sending him to stage school after much badgering, but only because they'd felt guilty about deserting him for all of those years, the boy guessed.

When he came out as gay that was another story, how their middle-class “*Daily Mail*” sensibilities had struggled to cope. He was shunned by his father, who expressed revulsion about anal sex yet seemed fixated by it, while his mother, being dominated by her husband, also pleaded horror but felt duty-bound to meet her son at least once a month and at Christmas, as she claimed it was “good therapy”. To Jamie Liz could be as icy as the large diamond wedding ring on her cool, slender finger because she was so frightened of opening up and being herself.

Beneath the well-heeled façade of coffee mornings and church fêtes Jamie knew his parents were very unhappy with the monotony of their lives. He also knew that Bob, who masqueraded as a mild-mannered local GP, was quite violent and hit his wife on a regular basis, as often as he played golf.

He even remembered his dad giving him a black eye on his eighteenth birthday for crashing the car, Bob's pride and joy that he waxed every Sunday morning. Jamie moved out of the house soon afterwards and always felt sick going back to the scene of

his far from happy childhood.

Unsurprisingly he felt a familiarly jarring twinge as his old route to school flashed by while the cab wound its way towards his parents' house around roads boasting grass verges and double garages. It had never really felt like a home and he'd never felt comfortable in Carshalton, Jamie thought as he clutched more tightly at the last-minute presents in his hands.

The cab pulled up beside the semi framed by the finely trimmed conifers, his mum already at the door — glass in hand, smiling, nervous. Jamie quickly paid the driver and strode down the path, returning his mother's smile and giving her a peck on the cheek as he took in the whiff of alcohol. She shakily took the presents from him, smiled weakly again.

"Nice to see you," she said inanely.

"Yeah, you too," he replied as he walked into the front room where he knew his dad would be desperate to get the awkward introductions over with.

He hadn't seen Bob since last Christmas and he didn't miss him but went through the formalities and shook the outstretched hand. Jamie shrugged inwardly as he felt the cold clamminess and witnessed the impassive eyes.

"All right," Bob grunted.

"Yeah," he replied, laughing sadly to himself at the fact there was nothing to say even though they hadn't seen each other in twelve months.

Bob's face flushed with alcohol he ran his eyes over his son and Jamie could tell he didn't like what he saw because just as quickly his father's eyes reverted back to the television, already disinterested.

Liz thrust a beer in Jamie's hand, the Christmas movie sadly filling the void. He gratefully accepted the cold bottle, let the cool fizzy liquid slide down his throat in the warm and airless room. Picking at the nuts on the highly polished table he was dying for a cigarette but Bob wouldn't allow smoking in the house.

The Christmas tree lights busily buzzed on and off in the lifeless room. Bob kept his eyes glued to the TV and Jamie looked at Liz, who pointedly sat apart from her husband, a space yawning between them on the sofa. She put her hand up and nervously brushed her right eye and the boy could roughly discern the outline of a bruise. His mum caught his gaze and smiled shyly.

“What have you been up to?” she blurted out edgily.

“Oh, not a lot really. This and that.”

“It’s nice to see you,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“You too,” he said and found himself wanting to reach out and hug her, but he was worried about the reaction of his dad, who didn’t like any sign of affection.

“I better get on with the dinner,” she said, smiling nervously as she headed for the kitchen.

“Get us another beer love,” Bob barked at his wife.

“Okay dear.”

Silence fell once again, an embarrassing silence between strangers. The boy gazed at his dad but Bob steadfastly refused to return the look, seemingly frightened of being lured into conversation. Jamie knew he didn’t want to know about his life, a life centred on young men with hard, athletic bodies, but he’d suffered how Bob talked so reverently about his life in the Royal Navy — a life of “male bonding and discipline”, he’d enthused unhealthily often.

Jamie sometimes fantasised he’d had a shotgun when he lived in Carshalton because he’d wanted to end the misery for all of them. He often pictured his mum and dad with holes in the head — blood pumping into the deep-pile Axminster. The thought came into his mind again as he looked at Bob and realised how much he hated him.

He went upstairs to the toilet but it was an excuse to get away from the old man and peek at his bedroom. It was now an office for his dad, completely redecorated as though Jamie had never existed. He moved inside and closed the door, tracing the dimensions of the room where he grew up, where he remembered hearing the furious arguments as he cowered beneath the covers as Liz’s tears flowed for what seemed like forever. He also recalled having his first sexual fantasies there and looked around, sad; all the traces of his youth had disappeared under a glossy white paint, his presence deleted.

Jamie padded back down the stairs into the hallway, attention caught by a framed picture of his grinning parents. He stood between them aged about ten, tanned and smiling with a foreign sea glistening in the background, the perfect family. Liz quietly appeared over his shoulder, looked at the image and sighed.

“What?”

“It all seems so long ago,” she replied, turning her back on him and shaking her head.

He re-entered the front room and saw his grandparents had arrived. They looked almost identical, both placed in front of the television. There was a faint recognition in their eyes as Jamie said “hello” and he hugged each in turn but recoiled at the frail bodies and the unsettling smell of decay.

“Don’t worry love, dinner’s nearly ready,” Liz said as he looked over at his nan, who sat open-mouthed, oblivious.

The slow, well-rounded, monotonous voice of the Queen came from the television and the family turned reverently to the screen, lapping up the empty, detached words while Jamie excused himself to fetch another beer.

Following the address they all sat down to dinner and the sound of clinking plates and cutlery soon filled the silence. Jamie looked at his grandparents, who picked at their dinners as though in slow motion. His mother and father sat elbow to elbow with nothing to say to one another despite being married for over thirty years. They deserved each other, he thought, and was glad he was no longer a part of it because he knew he’d end up feeling sorry for Liz again, when she was mostly to blame for the hell she was in.

“Liz, I’ve got an appointment this evening,” he lied. “I’ll have to leave soon.”

“An appointment tonight?” questioned Bob rudely through a mouthful of food. “That’s convenient.”

“That’s all right Bob, he’s entitled to have a drink with his friends,” his mum said meekly. “You can take some turkey home; otherwise we’ll be eating it till the middle of January.”

“I’m on a diet.”

“A diet?” bellowed Bob. “For Christ’s sake you’re wasting away son.”

Jamie looked away from his dad’s accusing stare and noticed his grandparents still pecking at their food, wide-eyed and uncomprehending at what was going on around them.

“When will I see you again?” asked Liz.

“Just give me a call after New Year,” he replied, shovelling in the last of his food and preparing for a quick exit.

“Won’t you even stay for Christmas pudding?” Liz asked almost pleadingly. “We’ve got brandy butter.”

“He’s on a diet, remember,” said Bob derisively, not-so lightly tapping his wife on the side of the head.

“No I really better be off, I booked the cab for four-thirty. Thanks for everything.”

In some ways he loathed himself for the fact he despised his own family so much he would desert them on Christmas Day, but he was relieved when the taxi company phoned to tell them the driver was outside.

He hugged his grandparents and shook Bob’s hand without a word. Liz accompanied him to the front door and he kissed his mum and promised to call.

“Thanks again,” he said, but couldn’t stop himself looking into her bruised eye.

By the time Jamie reached the car he heard the front door being closed on him. He sadly stared out of the window as the landscape of his youth unravelled but was thankful to be going home, away from the immaculate grass verges and the Neighbourhood Watch.

Jamie had spent the last hour making himself look beautiful for the long night ahead. New Year’s Eve, a bit of post-Christmas hedonism after he’d had a bellyful of turkey and all the trimmings at his parents’ house. He’d hated that day and the long evening he’d spent at home in his flat mesmerised by the false jollity of the holiday television schedule — it just made him more depressed.

He was meeting his friend, Philippe, a fellow waiter at the Saint. They could have been rivals but Jamie was so in his thrall that he couldn’t bear to fight him. It wasn’t often he was outshone but the French boy was just so pretty that, by his own immodest admission, it encouraged people to do “unspeakable things” to him.

Philippe had revealed his father was a wealthy architect and provided him with a healthy allowance just to keep him away. Though as far as Jamie knew it simply helped the French boy fuel a far from healthy drug habit and funded an entourage of enthusiastic hangers on.

They’d slept together once but had been too wasted to do anything, clinging to each other’s finely sculptured torsos but waking up on separate sides of the bed. It never

happened again because Philippe craved older, hairier guys, father figures he'd said, but he was still a friend and Jamie didn't have many of those. He was determined to hang onto the French boy even though he knew the chemistry between them was mostly of the Class-A variety.

He checked himself in the mirror and was happy with the image staring back at him as he rolled a large joint. Jamie vainly blew out large clouds of smoke at the ceiling and felt relaxed for the first time in days, glad to be going out to forget about his life for a while.

Delighted when there was a knock on his door that wasn't the postman, or worse the Jehovah's Witnesses coming to save his soul, he skipped down the hallway to let his friend in.

"You tart," said Philippe, laughing, eyeing Jamie up and down.

"Look at little Miss Thing tonight," he replied, taking in an eyeful of the pumped body and chiselled features set off by innocent big brown eyes. "Dressed to kill, aren't we?"

Philippe gave his friend a peck on the cheek only so he could relieve him of the joint in his hand.

"Oi!" Jamie shouted as they wrestled playfully with each other into the hallway, the French boy kicking the front door shut and taking a puff of the joint through giggles.

"That's not glitter on your face is it? You slag," joshed Jamie in the "mockney" accent he'd perfected so well. He'd read in one of the style bibles it was cool to sound working class and even foreigners like Philippe indulged, though it sounded utterly absurd delivered with a European accent, as opposed to simply ridiculous. "If you get your head kicked in don't expect me to save you."

"I wasn't, you poof."

They moved into Jamie's unkempt living room, which reflected the turmoil of his life. Pizza boxes and fast food cartons littered most of the surfaces.

"This looks like an episode of Men Behaving Badly," said Philippe. "Why don't you hire a maid?"

That was the French lad's answer to everything: Buy his way out of trouble. Jamie ignored him and scooped a pile of old porn off of the sofa so his friend could sit down.

“Want a drink?”

“Could I see the drinks list?” replied Philippe with a stoned giggle, still waving the joint around.

“Well there’s whisky and Coke or whisky and Coke.”

“Er, whisky and Coke then,” said the French boy, laughing as though he’d delivered the funniest of one-liners.

Jamie rolled his eyes and walked to the kitchen to pour drinks for both of them. He heard Philippe switch on the TV as he plonked ice into the glasses.

“Stupid fag,” shouted the French boy.

“Yeah, he’s a wanker,” agreed Jamie as he returned with the drinks and saw the object of his friend’s abuse was camp comedian Julian Clarey. Even though he was gay it was just so in vogue to be homophobic since according to the glossies the “new lad” was king.

“How can you hate queens if you wear moisturizer?” said Philippe, laughing.

“Fuck off.”

“Hey, I slept with a girl the other day,” said the French boy. “She was delicious.”

“Whatever,” said Jamie, unmoved by his friend’s common claims to be a “fashionable” bisexual.

Philippe ignored the derision and continued flicking channels as he stubbed out the joint.

“Come on, let’s go,” said Jamie, swigging back the rest of his drink and snatching the remote from his friend.

Bored with each other already, the French boy sighed like a spoilt child as Jamie shooed him off the sofa and down the hallway.

They walked along the South Bank, both braced against the cold but buzzing from the whisky and the marijuana. Jamie loved wandering along the river, watching the reflection of London’s lights in the vast, muddy depths. He often wondered ruefully how he could be in a city of millions yet feel so lonely and he was glad to have Philippe by his side.

As they strolled up Embankment puffing on another joint they passed boisterous partygoers headed for an icy Trafalgar Square.

“Watch out for the bridge and tunnel crowd,” said Philippe as the suburbanites

swayed by, beer cans seemingly glued to their fists.

“Sad bastards,” whispered Jamie, looking at the blokes who were more often than not all hair-gel and earrings, while their girlfriends invariably had big hair and were garishly dressed head to toe in what he guessed was Top Shop.

“This country’s gone to the dogs.”

“Shut up, you sound just like my dad,” said Jamie, laughing as he inhaled the last remnants of the joint.

They slowed down around the grim, drug-addled shadows of Centre Point and stopped at a shop window, desperately trying to see their reflections so they could fix their hair and look perfect for the club crowd. There were a couple of beggars shivering in a doorway nearby looking across pleadingly for change but the two ignored them and carried on tousling their hair.

As they approached The End nightclub both winced at the snaking queue but nonchalantly approached the doorman from the left-hand side. They exchanged pleasantries with him, a very good friend of Philippe’s, and were whisked inside laughing quietly at the long, shivering line as they went.

“Peasants,” said Philippe as they descended into the glamorous bowels of the club like supermodels.

Jamie was still laughing when he said, “You must have slept with all the doormen in London.”

“That’s my secret honey,” said the French boy, clicking his fingers and removing a vintage leather jacket. He virtually threw it at the girl behind the coat check.

Jamie discarded his coat in similar fashion and they both stood poised in their almost matching sleeveless tops, Philippe’s only distinguished by a funky logo on the front that he told everyone he’d designed himself.

Their virtually identical buffed bodies bumped each other as they moved excitedly to the heavy double doors and the fabulous sound and light show the other side, the floor beneath their feet reverberating with the beat. Jamie and Philippe shot each other a grin as they sashayed through in tandem, determined to make an entrance.

“Do you know where to shop?” yelled Philippe above some euphoric trance anthem.

“Are you joking? I’ve got a loyalty card,” Jamie replied, laughing. “Yeah, I know

the dealers, it's good stuff."

They both lit cigarettes almost simultaneously as they headed to the immaculately lit bar and approached the attitude-laden beauty who was meant to be serving but, thought Jamie, was far more interested in looking pretty.

"Two gin and tonics," he shouted across.

The expressionless barman said something inaudible and busied himself making the drinks. He virtually slammed the tumblers on the counter as Jamie handed over a ten-pound note. He received miniscule change that looked even more worthless since it was handed over on the obligatory silver platter.

He turned around and handed the drink to Philippe, who he noted was already scanning the club for a possible mate. Jamie still couldn't help feeling a tinge of jealousy even though it had been so long since they'd slept together, but he tried to trash it from his mind as he spotted one of the dealers hovering conspicuously at the edge of the dance floor.

As Jamie approached the guy eyeballed him and waved him across to a quieter, gloomier corner of the club.

"All right mate, what you after?" he said in that busy, business-like East End manner as though he was selling fruit and veg from a barrow.

Jamie looked at the chubby youngster in front of him and was reminded of one of comedian Harry Enfield's shiftier caricatures. He didn't know what to say to the vision in cargo pants and Stüssy T-shirt and, intimidated by the guy's easy charm, simply placed his order.

The dealer nodded and indiscreetly held up his podgy fingers to indicate a figure. Jamie thrust the notes into a grubby hand decorated with sovereign rings and received the pills in a plastic bag.

"Appy New Year, mate," he said above the music. "But don't look at me like that again."

"What?" said Jamie, swiping the bag.

"I know you're a shirtlifter," he said. "Just watch yourself."

Wordlessly Jamie turned his back, gripping tighter to the bag, but he could still hear the dealer's cruel laughter as he tried to lose himself in the gathering crowd, vaguely unsettled.

His mood improved once he'd found Philippe and they swallowed their pills and waited for it to kick in before they could start enjoying themselves.

The pair sought out one of the huge speakers and stood in front of it, as though bees to honey. People were beginning to jam the dance floor and the excitement was rising as the music got harder, more out of control. Jamie spotted one of the "superstar" DJs gazing enthusiastically down from his decks as though tending his flock.

He was beginning to feel the rhythm lift him up when a well-built guy who was sweating heavily put his arms around him and lay on Jamie's chest like a dead weight. Peering into the stranger's eyes he asked his name but the man just stared ahead as if he wasn't there and spun back into the chaos.

He looked across at Philippe, whose hard, muscular silhouette was picked out so artistically by the strobe lights, but the French boy's blank gaze pierced straight through him. Jamie felt himself joining the ranks of the anaesthetised too as colour and sound swirled in his head and he began to dance free and uninhibited.

Finally he dragged himself away from the dance floor and ordered a bottle of water from the bar. He swallowed it down in big gulps, amazed at how good it tasted. Still clinging to the water bottle Jamie headed for the chill-out room, vaguely nodding at other clubbers as they walked by.

He sat with many others in a kind of respectful silence watching a bank of equally mute TV screens spewing out MTV. Jamie discreetly lit a small joint and watched as the smoke crawled to the ceiling amid the stillness.

His heart skipped a beat when Philippe walked in and came and put an arm around his shoulder, though neither knew what to say to one another. He handed over the joint to his friend but, coming down, felt cold and empty in the cocoon of the club as he sensed the day had already dawned and feared the glare of morning that awaited them.

Outside in Holborn they passed the homeless who were comatose in icy doorways, though the boys didn't seem to notice and Jamie certainly was too high to care. The beat still pulsed in his ears as his eyes adjusted to daylight but the morning, heralding a new year, was as grey and empty as he felt.

“So what are your resolutions?” asked Philippe as they headed down Charing Cross Road and into Soho.

“I’m going to give up drinking, drugs and smoking. And I’m going to become a monk,” Jamie replied, and they both exploded into giggles, oblivious as another beggar shambled by.

Jamie noticed the muscle boys gathered around Compton Café spilling out onto the pavement, getting their coffee buzz before undoubtedly heading to another club, and he just hated them. He knew he’d become part of the scene too but as he watched the group offset nervous exhaustion with pearly grins and monotonous, neurotic chatter he couldn’t suppress a large yawn. Even their perma-tans looked decidedly jaded, he thought.

Luckily the pair managed to grab a table inside and sat in silence as they sipped their coffee and smoked their cigarettes. Jamie wished he could get Philippe back into bed again, to have that hard, muscular body climb all over him, but he noticed the French boy was already eyeing up a man on the adjoining table.

“Oh, who caught your eye then?” he said bitchily.

“Do you mind if I talk to him?”

“Course not,” spat Jamie.

“Oh, just get over yourself honey.”

Looking at the spot vacated by Philippe, who already had an arm around his bulky, shaven-headed admirer, Jamie felt a tap on his shoulder. Hopeful as he turned around, he felt utterly desolate when he looked up at the tall, balding man with the bulbous eyes boring into him from above, his pink dome reflecting the café’s glare.

“Hi, remember me?” the man said in a familiar but expressionless drawl.

Jamie couldn’t recall the name but he knew he’d met him at the party and an image of Pete flashed horribly into his mind.

“Yeah,” he said, hoping he wouldn’t have to make conversation with this odd guy, a mismatch of cool and totally eccentric, the so-called filmmaker with the overpowering perfume and obscene breath.

“George,” he said, getting down on his haunches and freaking out Jamie by meeting him at eye level. “Shame about Pete but I’m still on the look out for new talent. I guess you’re out of a job.”

“Look I’ll give you a call, I’ve got your card,” he said, flinching as the man’s unforgiving stare crawled all over him.

“Tell you what, screen test next Wednesday afternoon at three o’clock.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” said George, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

“Okay,” replied Jamie resignedly; he could do with the money.

“See you next Wednesday then, and stay pretty,” he said, brushing a long, bony hand across the boy’s cheek, but just as abruptly got up and turned on his heels, waving an arm in the air as he went.

Alone again, Jamie stared blankly into his cappuccino and realised he had no plans for the rest of the day, a day that stretched out relentlessly ahead of him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Craig arrived in the 1970's nightmare of orange and brown plastic that was Bangkok's Don Muang airport. He shivered in the icy air conditioning as he shuffled through the murky labyrinth of corridors with many signs welcoming him to the "Land of Smiles."

He didn't see too many smiles as he stood and waited nervously by the frayed plastic luggage carousel, wondering what lay outside of the hermetically sealed concrete monstrosity of the airport — wondering how a city of almost ten million people stewing in tropical heat would look and feel.

Other passengers stood next to him that he recognised from the excruciatingly long flight where they'd been packed in like animals in transit. Craig sensed the fetid smell of the cramped pressurised cabin still clinging to his clothes and felt the cheap airline food lying uncomfortably in his stomach as he anxiously waited to experience the sights and sounds of Bangkok.

Stepping outside of the terminal building he was engulfed by the heat and the acrid smell of exhaust smoke.

"I take you Bangkok, good price," barked a man into his ear, grabbing his arm.

Immediately on the defensive he stepped back, struggling under the weight of his backpack, but the taxi driver gesticulating in front of him with the craggy old face disarmed him with a wide smile that revealed an array of crooked, yellow teeth. *Welcome to Bangkok*, he thought as he slung his awkward bag into the back of an aging Toyota painted a tacky yellow and green.

"Where you go?" the driver said from the front seat.

"Malaysia Hotel," Craig pronounced slowly and was relieved by the old man's curt nod, which presumably meant he knew where he was going, though he annoyingly repeated the name of the hotel to himself several times over.

As they left the airport for the expressway Craig was apprehensive at how alien everything felt. He caught a look at himself in the rearview mirror. It was if some white

ghost was staring back at him amid the radiant landscape. The orange disc of the early morning sun was shrouded by sooty clouds of pollution, while underneath lay a swirling chaos of cars and trucks. Craig already noticed a vivid, crazed energy, as though people had been told there was no tomorrow.

They careened onto an elevated highway and the sprawling cityscape came into view on all sides. Multi-lane roads peeled off in every direction, dominated by cars, hundreds and thousands of them, shimmering in the heat. Huge advertising billboards flashed by plying all-too-familiar names like Coke and Pizza Hut, while an imposing effigy of Madonna stood like some blonde goddess — brands and images that promised to improve everybody's lives but proved a gaudy representation of capitalist garbage, he thought. Still more adverts sold the traditional culture of Thailand “sponsored by Sony” and set Craig laughing bitterly at so much Eastern promise vacuum-packed for Western consumption.

The concrete nightmare stretched as far as his eye could see, spilling over everything in its wake and dwarfing what he'd read about and so hoped to witness — the authentic and traditional Asia. What he saw instead were centuries-old temples with their attendant ancient rites set uncomfortably in a standardised, globalised urban centre.

Though as they finally left the highway — the driver belying his age by obliviously singing along to some high-energy Thai pop trash — Craig was engrossed in the minutiae of street life: The roadside stalls belching smoke, the ear splitting motorbikes weaving precariously in and out of traffic with whole families seemingly on board and the tawdry *tuk-tuks* buzz-sawing their way along. He felt exhilarated by the contrasts, the monotony of the physical landscape against the very human riot of colour and life. It was as though there was a new possibility around every corner, a city that attacked all the senses.

Arriving at the hotel, another relic of 1960's breeze-block, he fumbled around in his wallet deciphering the odd coloured notes as he calculated the right amount of Thai *baht*.

Craig walked into reception lugging his backpack. Like most of the city he'd witnessed so far, it certainly wasn't easy on the eye. At least the receptionist looked mildly pleased to see him, as did several boys skulking around the lobby who he couldn't help

but notice smiling at him despite his jet lag and general disorientation.

He'd read from his *Lonely Planet* that the Malaysia was a remnant of the Vietnam War and had played host to American troops on R&R. The hotel thrived on prostitution, both sexes, and supported the local constabulary with oodles of protection money (according to his guidebook), so a blind eye was turned in all the right places.

He sensed it was an establishment where anything went, which explained the elderly clientele he glimpsed in the coffee shop, several of whom were sitting with boys who looked like they should have been at school. And it explained the boy who immediately followed him up to his room and asked him for sex. Craig declined.

The room looked like it had enjoyed — for want of a better word — a makeover in the 1970s. The brown clunky furniture, green linoleum and gargantuan air-conditioning unit were a giveaway. Nevertheless he lay down on the blue acrylic blankets and felt thrilled by the distance between him and home, at how far he had come.

As he flitted in and out of consciousness on the bed he thought of the day before when he'd left London. He'd been looking out of the grimy windows of the early morning Tube as it ground its way past the grey commuter army. Sitting there with his backpack, Heathrow-bound, he was glad not to be a part of it but he also feared being stigmatised — put in a little box with a label on: "Person With AIDS."

It may have no longer been a death sentence but a shadow that he couldn't quite shake had descended over his life when he'd been diagnosed. That day he'd stood outside the clinic shaking, mobile phone in hand, wondering who he could possibly call.

What was burned into his mind was when he'd told Jamie he was positive. He'd let his boyfriend tentatively into his Camden studio-flat even though he had actually arranged the meeting. Jamie was over an hour late (he always was) and his immaculate, manicured appearance clashed horribly with the way Craig looked and felt.

It was as though he was looking at something he could never possess again and Jamie's self-confidence and posture made him feel so destroyed. They kissed but unfeelingly as he saw Jamie wince at his four-day beard growth and eye the messy flat with suspicion. Craig had always been very meticulous and clean.

"What the hell happened? This looks like the Third World War."

Craig sat down opposite and looked his boyfriend in the eye, knowing he must have seemed drawn and anxious.

“You look terrible,” continued Jamie derisively, in his usual off-hand manner.

“I’m ill,” said Craig bluntly, and he could see in his boyfriend’s face and in the way he edged slightly away from him that he knew. “I’m HIV positive.”

Jamie started crying slowly at first but descended into uncontrollable sobs. Craig just felt numb as he moved from the armchair to the sofa and tried to comfort his boyfriend, but was nudged away. He tried again to put an arm around him but this time Jamie aggressively pushed him off. It was then Craig realised he was crying for himself. He’d always been totally selfish.

They were still nose to nose on the sofa but Craig felt all the intimacy had evaporated. He could sense that Jamie was consumed by rage and hatred. He’d stopped crying and just stared wildly at his boyfriend.

“How? We’ve always been safe!”

“I don’t know,” said Craig as he shrank from the outright aggression in Jamie’s voice and felt the weight of his accusing gaze.

“What do you mean, you don’t fucking know?” screamed Jamie. “How many have there been?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re pathetic,” snorted Jamie hatefully as Craig just looked down at the floor longing to be held, disbelieving at how someone, this someone, his boyfriend, could be so utterly devoid of sympathy and so full of venom.

“What about me?” Jamie shouted. “Didn’t you think of me when you were sleeping around?”

“It was nothing. It didn’t mean anything,” replied Craig, finding a voice from somewhere. “We agreed on an open relationship.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t agree that we’d be unsafe,” said Jamie incredulously. “You’ve fucked everything up.”

“I know.”

“We’re over,” said Jamie without a shred of emotion — making it sound all the more cruel — failing to look his boyfriend in the eye and keeping his distance like he now regarded Craig as soiled goods.

Silence fell after the words that had cut him to his marrow. Even though Craig had seen it coming he’d held out hope that Jamie would take him in his arms and tell

him not to worry, that everything would be all right. But as he closed his eyes and sank back into the sofa he listened to Jamie getting up and zipping his coat, preparing to leave. Preparing to desert him in his own private hell.

Even as he heard the front door slam that day and Jamie walking out of his life for good he still couldn't quite believe what had happened. He sat there and cried all afternoon, enveloped in darkness as the evening fell.

Drifting off to sleep on a Bangkok hotel bed with such bleak images in his mind, Craig felt a warming sense of triumph that he'd somehow survived.

He woke with a start, groggy and soaked in sweat, transfixed by the unfamiliar surroundings. Everything was out of place relative to his room in London and he felt totally bewildered, like all the certainties had been removed. But it wasn't a feeling he shrank from. He felt exhilarated by a totally new environment just outside his window and wanted to explore.

Craig flapped open the curtains he'd drawn on arriving and immediately covered his eyes as the sheer brightness dazzled him. It was clearly still daytime, even though he really didn't have a clue what time it was. The watch on his wrist was still stuck on London time.

As his eyes focused he saw through the white-hot sheen of the Bangkok afternoon and took in the view of the swimming pool below, a blue rectangle encased in concrete with a couple of palm trees the opposite end, presumably to give an impression of the exotic. Two tanned boys played languidly in the water, teenagers, maybe even twentysomethings, thought Craig; but they acted like kids as they splashed at one another, their bodies convulsed by giggles. They were being watched intently by a couple of elderly gentlemen at the side of the pool, he noticed, both lying like beached whales on loungers. Even from a distance they looked flushed and sweaty in the tropical sun, pot bellies spilling grotesquely onto their laps. When the boys began to splash the retirees it dawned on Craig that the foursome probably made up a very odd two couples. He let the curtain flap shut and sat back on the bed.

Not feeling particularly hungry, stomach still confused about what time of day it was, he opened the fridge door and grabbed a Kit-Kat and a Coke, like he could have

done anywhere else in the world, needing the sugar buzz. Then he rummaged around in his bag for the Bangkok street map. As he laid it out he remembered looking at it in his Camden bed-sit and being disturbed by the enormity of streets and the number of indecipherable, alien place names.

As soon as he stepped from the icy, air-conditioned lobby of the hotel he was assaulted by the intensity of the light and heat. He put on his shades as the sun glinted fiercely from the surrounding concrete and off the constant metallic stream of cars, the belching traffic leaving him with a bitter, chemical taste in his mouth.

Sweat already pumped from his temples as he walked along the road looking to hail a cab. It didn't take long for a pale, blond figure to capture attention, an albino walking against a brilliant backdrop. The motorbike-taxi drivers sitting idly on the opposite side of the road in garish red-satin waistcoats collectively rose from their slumber and shouted over a chorus of "Hey you, where you go?"

He kept walking but felt uncomfortable, as though the eyes of the world were watching his every move, waiting for him to stumble. He liked London for its ability to lend an air of anonymity but it was already clear Bangkok wouldn't provide the same cover.

A *tuk-tuk* pulled up noisily beside him, its engine thrumming a strange tune. He looked at the driver who grinned easily over at him, his tan face impossibly dark.

"Where you go, mister?" he asked in broken, singsong English. "Good price."

"Er, Lumpini Park," Craig said hesitantly, wondering if he'd pronounced it right.

"One hundred *baht*," replied the driver, whose smile had disappeared like a light being snapped off. He held up ten fingers to emphasise the figure.

Craig, not knowing the scale of things, nodded meekly in agreement and climbed in the back of what he found to be a smoky, deafening but fascinating vehicle — almost a metaphor for the city itself.

They careered along, expertly zigzagging in and out the path of other vehicles that seemed slow and cumbersome in comparison. He saw the driver looking at him slyly in the mirror as he mischievously accelerated out of a sharp turn like he was operating some kind of fairground thrill. Craig smiled at the driver, enjoying his sense of fun, as he dropped him outside the gates of the park. He pocketed the money and sped

off with a big grin on his face and it was then the English boy realised he'd been fleeced.

He was clearly in the central business district since above the treeline Craig could see the logos of Standard & Chartered and HSBC glinting like apparitions in the smog atop skyscrapers of glass and steel. Ground level was choked with the grime of the developing world as he stepped by people obviously scraping a living in the shadow of the monuments to the dollar and the yen.

Smoke curled from an ashen looking grill, tended by a comically skinny old man, some indescribable meat blistering on top. As Craig passed he couldn't help but put his hand to his nose as an intense smell crawled up his nostrils. He shook his head slightly and nodded in wonderment as the totally strange bombarded his senses.

Craig only stopped at the gates to the park itself as an old rotund gentleman, belly unselfconsciously flopping below his naked torso, stood watch over a polystyrene box filled with blocks of ice with cans of soft drink floating mysteriously beneath the surface like multi-coloured tropical fish. He pulled out a Coke.

"Twenty *baht*," said the man, not looking at him, as though totally disinterested.

Craig fiddled interminably in his wallet but the man stood patiently like he had all the time in the world. Eventually he located the green 20-*baht* note, handed it over and was on his way into the lush confines of the park and away from the concrete and noise.

As he walked around he came across a number of pagodas and gazebos that spoke of a genteel Oriental elegance, which also signalled another world, a different way of doing things. Siamese cats, dozens of them, wandered by and were a picture of studied indifference to people intruding on their turf.

It was a Saturday afternoon and even though it was the other side of the world people did Saturday things. Craig noticed the families, lovers and loners going about their weekend business.

He sat close to some old Thai men smoking and playing chess. They looked so content, like they'd been there forever. He felt relaxed just watching, the stress of a hectic flight eased from his shoulders as he enjoyed the lull of the late afternoon. Descending into a nap he only felt the electric thrill of being so far from home.

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Craig was rudely awoken by a booming disco thud, though comfortingly the men playing chess next to him were still engrossed in their game and their cigarettes, oblivious. He spied the clocktower that read five o'clock and then looked in the direction of the sound, wiping the sleep from his eyes. On the manicured lawn was a straggly group, men and women of various ages in suitably sporty attire, swivelling their hips in time to the loud techno beat.

Craig laughed to himself as he watched the mass outbreak of fitness freaks. In the relative cool of the evening, he also noticed joggers going round and round. It was not the preserve of the young as in the West, but all ages, shapes and sizes. A colourful parade of a cross-section of city society sprinted or shuffled its way past his eyes.

As the clock struck six the trashy music gave way to the sombre tones of what he guessed to be the national anthem played over a crackly public address system. Craig saw that the old chess players had left, while the aerobics crowd stood dutifully to attention.

The light began to fade shortly after and people dispersed quickly but Craig was aware of an attractive young girl that had recently sat on a bench close to his. He caught her eye and she gave him a shy smile — crimson painted lips almost luminous in the dusk. She looked Thai but unusually had an outlandish bleached blonde shock of hair.

The distant sound of thunder from the traffic on Rama IV and Wireless roads made the park seem like an oasis of tranquillity amid the evening chaos. But Craig sensed they weren't the only ones loitering as the darkness gathered and the street lamps came on, an orange glow illuminating the comings and goings bathed in a deceptive silence. He watched, fascinated but wary, as a more sporadic procession replaced the joggers, not fitness freaks but fanatics of a different kind. And all the while the girl to the left sat, waiting.

A young Westerner in a business suit strolled past, looking to right and then left, looking for something. A middle-aged Thai man in a muddy-brown safari suit followed at a measured distance, obviously searching for company. A few minutes went by and a thin, nervous looking clerical type scurried past. Craig's eyes followed him as he headed towards one of the little open pavilions. Two Thai-Chinese septuagenarians wandered around for a bit, deep in conversation, before splitting up to sit on benches a few metres

apart. A fashionably dressed guy in his early 20s, complete with *de rigueur* miniscule backpack, sat close by eyeing every passing man.

However, Craig was drawn to the girl sitting inches away. He felt he should have walked off and left half an hour before but was intrigued and he couldn't help glancing across. She finally met his insistent gaze with a beaming smile and covered the short distance between them. His heart began beating faster as she placed a hand ever so lightly on his thigh.

It was a short bench and they were almost touching as Craig looked into her unblemished, coffee-coloured face. She was remarkably beautiful, almost too perfect, he thought.

"Hi, my name is Natasha," she growled.

The voice was deep and rasping, so incongruous with the feminine vision in front of him he almost did a double take. And the name Natasha sounded like something out of a dated American porn movie. But he let her oversized hand continue to rest in his lap and focused on the blood-red lips beckoning him.

"Where you from?" she asked in pidgin English, hand still clamped to his thigh.

"England," he said, but was aware she wasn't really listening to his answers as she breathed her high, sweet whisky breath all over him.

Craig looked at the long legs and the skimpy shorts, the crop top and the pert breasts and felt intoxicated by her, by the heat and by Bangkok.

"Can I go your room?"

"Yeah," he said, after a pause.

"Where you stay baby?"

"The Malaysia Hotel," Craig replied, and Natasha let out a high, carefree laugh betraying the deep voice and the man inside.

"What's your name?"

"Craig, pleased to meet you," he said, holding out a hand for her to shake in a comical show of formality. She lifted the hand lightly and kissed it, at which they both giggled.

"Let's go," said Natasha, her tone hardening as though there was business to attend to.

"Don't you want to sit here and talk?" pleaded Craig, wary of what he'd agreed to

even though he feared there was little else to say.

“Don’t worry, I want to steal your heart, not your wallet,” said Natasha, laughing again and seemingly desperate to put Craig at ease. “Let’s go.”

“Okay,” he said, looking into her brown, doleful eyes but still not entirely convinced.

She locked her arm into his and hauled him from the bench with masculine strength. As they headed for the exit Craig felt eyes watching them and wondered whether the stares had been disapproving, warning or both.

He sighed inwardly as Natasha immediately hailed a cab but in a way he was relieved to have company. He didn’t even know in which direction the hotel lay and darkness had fallen.

Natasha let him get into the taxi first and was right behind as he climbed onto the back seat. She said something in Thai to the driver. Craig, hearing “Malaysia Hotel,” began to relax but became aware of the overwhelming smell of perfume in the enclosed space. Even the old driver up front began coughing and noticeably snapped up the air conditioning.

“Are you gay?” she asked, massaging his inner thigh.

“Yeah,” said Craig. “Are you?”

“No, I’m all woman.”

“I can see that,” he replied, laughing.

“You know, whatever you like in Thailand you can get,” Natasha said after a pause, looking at Craig seriously for the first time. “With this,” she spat and waved a sheaf of money in his face.

Oddly her tone changed from aggressive to serene within seconds as she started to stroke the back of his neck. Craig sensed the storm rumbling beneath the surface had already passed.

“Where are you from in Thailand?”

“I stay in Samui but I came to Bangkok for short time with my boyfriend,” Natasha said, voice full of angst again.

“Your boyfriend?”

“Yes, German man but him no good,” she continued, looking on the verge of tears. “He met a younger boy.”

Craig kept quiet but wondered whether the performance was for his benefit as thankfully they pulled up outside the hotel. It meant no more awkward silences or in-delicate questions, he thought, at least until they reached the room.

He went to get his key from the woman at reception. Natasha stood next to him, all big hair and jangling bracelets like she was a Hollywood movie starlet. But in the harsh light of the hotel lobby he feared it looked like what it was, another cheap transaction, and Craig wanted it to end as soon as possible. The receptionist's face behind the counter was set in stone as she handed over the key, not even deeming to look at his guest.

The lift comprised the dimensions of a large coffin and was claustrophobic considering the number of newly acquainted strangers it likely held — maybe that was the point, Craig thought as he looked at Natasha. She looked back, expressionless. Neither had spoken since they'd entered the hotel, even though the English boy was racking his brain for something to say, anything.

As he unlocked his room the silence seemed to sheathe the pair with a new intensity. Craig regretted everything as he shut the door and locked it behind them with a finality that disturbed him.

“I take shower,” said Natasha, all semblance of charm drained from her voice.

Craig slumped down on the bed, clicked on MTV, but listened to the unwelcome intrusion in his bathroom. He switched off the light and let the flickering images fill the room.

The Thai came out of the toilet, her body covered by a towel. She didn't look at Craig as she handed him a clean one, instead transfixed by the images on the television. She took the remote control, lay on the bed and turned the volume up as he walked resignedly to the shower.

When Craig returned to the bedroom with just a towel wrapped around his waist she was still staring at the TV and he didn't know where to start. He needn't have worried, for as soon as he hit the mattress Natasha was all over him, gnawing at his flesh, hands everywhere as her blonde hair fell irritatingly into his face.

It seemed like she was in a hurry when she bent down and breathed warmly into his ear: “Fuck me, baby.” They hadn't even kissed.

She discarded the towel to reveal a small thong that barely concealed her man-

hood despite the lengths she'd obviously gone to. Natasha quickly turned over on her stomach and pulled the panties down to reveal her naked arse, handing a condom to him as if it had appeared by magic.

Craig thrust in hard and thought of Jamie briefly, the last time he'd had sex. He tried to lose himself, rapt by the TV, as he moved rhythmically on top of her, not looking down. He pushed harder and harder, more violently as the angst and tension burned away. Natasha groaned as she too stared open-mouthed at the TV. The shrill of her mobile phone in the background — “Can't Take My Eyes Off of You” — made Craig feel an irrational savagery towards her.

He pulled out as he came, walked to the bathroom and ditched the condom sadly in the toilet bowl. When he returned Natasha's face was illuminated by the strange blue glow of her mobile. On noticing Craig she smiled as if caught out, quickly ended the conversation — which he noted had been in English — and moved to the mini-bar where she pulled out a bottle of Sang Thip whisky and waved it at him.

“You like whisky?” she asked, all sweet smiles again as she began pouring two large glasses.

Grabbing the bag of ice from the freezer she smashed it violently on the linoleum floor with total disregard for the room below. Natasha then topped up the glasses with Coke, handing one to Craig.

They sat perched on the bed drinking, Natasha aimlessly flicking through channels. It had a kind of hypnotic effect for the English boy as he lay back and closed his eyes. He felt the sound of the TV getting more and more distant, then silence.

Craig woke feeling his temples throbbing with a hangover. It was still dark apart from the light from the TV flickering noiselessly in the corner. He looked at the indent next to him on the bed and it was clear the Thai had gone. His head ached more intensely as he looked over at the counter where he'd left his wallet. It took all his energy just to get up but he knew as he opened it that it would be empty.

“Shit,” he said, holding his head as he calculated a loss of about 100 pounds.

The money had disappeared into the Bangkok night along with Natasha — all she'd left behind was the smell of her cheap perfume, he thought ruefully.