

PAYBACK

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CHAPTER 1

AH, YOU HAVE COME FAR, Grasshopper. You have learned much. You have followed the hidden path, and you have grown wise. Well, wiser, anyway. Probably. A bit.

I know these things, Grasshopper, because if you hadn't grown wiser, then you wouldn't be reading this.

I like to think of it as a trail of breadcrumbs. I imagine you starting out: the first little crumb just after my funeral, I'd guess; then staggering along, crumb by measly crumb, until... Well, here you are.

Let me tell you, it hasn't been as easy for me to lay the trail as it has been for you to follow it. A note here, a vital clue there (under a flowerpot as it happens – but then you know that now, don't you?). And finally, at the very end of the trail, this, my last best chance to set the record straight. Believe me, guiding you to this point has been a challenge.

This is journey's end.

Where was I? Oh yes. Here we are, Grasshopper. You have followed the path I so carefully laid and then so cleverly hid. I'd like to think you've grown along the way, but perhaps that's a little optimistic.

Do you think you know it all now? Do you think you understand what I have done and why? Because, let us be honest with one another, Grasshopper, now that I am dead and gone, you have some seriously big decisions to make.

And, frankly, you still don't know the half of it.

Letter from Jake (excerpt, decrypted from laptop)

CHAPTER 2

IT SHOULD RAIN AT FUNERALS. There should be forests of black umbrellas. Drops should tap on canvas, cloth and coffin. The trees should drip water for the dead.

Of course, by the same token, the casket should be draped in the American flag, and FBI men in over-length raincoats should cruise the borders of the mourning masses and whisper sinister secrets into wrist-mikes. Somewhere on a distant rooftop, a police marksman should heft his rifle, then settle. Red leaves should swirl around the trees' numb feet.

OK, so I watch too much television. I'm a producer. It's an occupational hazard.

Jake, on the other hand, watched almost no TV at all, and didn't have a romantic bone in his body. He was to be cremated – indoors, and on a bright spring day. But then, if Jake had been at his own funeral, he'd have been the bloke outside making sure the drinks were all lined up for the party afterwards. Certainly, he wouldn't have sat piously in line, pretending to hang on David's every word.

David Carter: a friend of mine from our schooldays. Although now, he was less a friend than an ill-defined and distant feature of my social landscape – rarely thought about, even less frequently visited, unexplored but always there, as he had been for decades. When we left school, our closeness hadn't survived: he went to Oxford on a scholarship to read Theology, and I went to London on a bus to get a job. Jake went to Oxford too – naturally – but a couple of years earlier. Besides, David and he had moved in very different circles.

'Jake was not a believer,' David intoned, 'but he was, at bottom, a good man. We can take comfort from that. Surely it is more important to behave rightly than it is to pay lip service to a name or a creed.'

He smiled benignly at Michael and Ruth. Ruth avoided his gaze and glanced instead at me. I grimaced, helpless. Both of us knew that as far as Jake was concerned, lip service was something you paid a hooker for. False lip service was when she agreed terms, took the money, and did a runner. Ruth sniffed delicately, and looked away.

Michael glowered at the order of service, his head jiggling, struggling for control. His face was flushed above the frayed collar of his grey school blazer, and his near-black hair, more my colour than Jake's, was in disarray even though Ruth would surely have combed it before they came out. From time to time, he craned round, frowning, to study the small crowd scattered along the pews behind him. I felt sorry for him. He didn't know these people. A few of them might have seen him before – at his christening, say – but he was hardly likely to remember them. These were people who had no place in a ten year old's life. There were colleagues of Jake's from work, Ruth's oldest (but no longer best) friends, relatives too distant to have made an impact. Besides, Michael had troubles enough of his own.

He tried half-heartedly to pick at a scab on the side of his finger, but the gentle wobble of his arm made the task impossible. He jammed his hands between his knees, and concentrated on David's words. His ears went red.

The crematorium was half full. The mourners sat on simple blond pews, black and hunched, flapping their veils and handkerchiefs like bedraggled crows. Dad and Mum were next to Michael and Ruth, on the opposite side of the aisle from me. On my side, I was alone. The scent of lilies was strong enough to make me want to sneeze.

Jake's coffin was dark, brightly varnished and a little too ornate for my own plain tastes. I tried to picture him in there: my brother, his eyes dull and dark, his skin as grey and flaccid as a dishcloth. Jake, who had once told me ghost stories until I cried and then hugged me all night afterwards, who mocked and criticised at every opportunity but then stayed up with me watching the dawn over London, drinking shots of frozen vodka and playing the music of our youth, silently marvelling at how far we both were from home.

Jake, my protector, my mentor and tormentor. Gone.

I hauled my attention back to the service. David was in full flow.

'He had a wife, a lovely wife, and together they were blessed with Michael, a much-loved son, and a longed-for grandson to Miriam and Henry.' Another sugary smile, this time at my parents. 'Michael's arrival brought them closer to Jake than ever. The prodigal son

returned.' David swept an imaginary hair away from his ear, glanced down at his notes, and then gazed out at us with the wisdom of ages. 'There too,' he murmured, 'we find comfort.'

Dad was shrivelled up inside a dated suit, his collar too big for his neck. His hair drooped, and he had the sad eyes of a bewildered mouse. His hands were thin and spotted. Mum, of course, stared straight ahead, her blue gaze as bright and unthinking as a bird's. Poor Michael studied the order of service with desperate concentration, and tried, surreptitiously, to scratch his bum. His arm jerked about uncertainly.

David beamed at him, and then at me.

'In a moment, Jake's brother, Ben, will give the eulogy. But first, Michael is going to read *All Is Well*. It's a beautiful poem, chosen by Ruth, and I think it expresses perfectly a truth which I personally hold very close. "Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow," it tells us. "Life means all that it ever meant. All is well." It tells us that our loved ones are in a place nearby, the room next door, just around the corner.'

Suddenly, and to my genuine surprise, David seemed to grow about two inches. In moments, he lost ten years. Something clear and bright shone from him. He stepped away from the pulpit and stood before us all.

He said, 'We all have beliefs, whether or not we admit to them. We believe that Christ is Lord, or that Allah is merciful – or that after death there is nothing at all, absolutely nothing except the memories of those who survive.' He spread his hands to include us all. 'All of us here have different beliefs and feelings. We all live in different rooms. We're all only *human*. And yet here we are, all under the same roof, all human beings together.'

'As you listen to Michael, I want you to reflect on what binds us together at the deepest level. Forget the petty differences that lie between us. And, for those of you that do not wish to pray, listen with an opened mind as the Christians amongst us offer prayer. Listen to the spirit, if not the creed.'

He raised his arms. 'Let us pray.' A few people knelt. Michael shuffled to the edge of his seat, and flopped unsteadily to his knees. Mum stared straight ahead at something the rest of us couldn't see. I stayed sitting. So did Ruth and Dad. We bowed our heads and lived with the shame.

And as David droned a series of sentiments I could never accept; then as poor Michael trudged unsteadily towards the lectern; as Ruth smiled encouragingly at him through her tears; as he frowned at the paper in front of him and cleared his throat... quite suddenly I felt very, very angry. Angry with the poem, with David for believing in it, with Jake for dying. With myself. With anyone who could possibly believe that there was anything right about this. If there was a God, then he was a sadist. If we were all in different rooms, then poor Michael's was a prison with gradually narrowing walls. If Jake was waiting for us around some poetical corner, then how come Ruth was going home to an empty house?

And if we were all in different rooms, then which room hid the bastard who had killed my brother?

CHAPTER 3

CARS CAN BE UGLY, don't let people tell you otherwise. They look great in the adverts; less so when they are bearing down on you at two in the morning on a side street in Islington. But Jake was drunk, the police say, so perhaps he never saw how ugly a car can be. Perhaps he never even saw it, just staggered out into the road at exactly the wrong moment. Likewise, it's possible that the man driving the car had some very good pressing reason to drive straight on into the night (it was almost certainly a man; women generally don't do fifty down Islington's side streets in the middle of the night). The police say there must have been quite a dent in his bonnet: he was lucky the car kept going.

But by then the car would have been a hundred yards down the road, and the man would have been frantically smashing away the shattered fragments of his windscreen because Jake's body had whipped into it a fraction of a second after that car rammed into him. Then his head smacked into the edge of the car's roof, crumpling his skull like cardboard – and then he was airborne – fifteen, twenty feet, turning, broken – then falling. He landed head first. Milliseconds later, the vertebrae in his neck popped apart as his body crumpled down on top of it. A little later, the few organs that hadn't ruptured in the initial impact were shot through with shards of rib as his torso piled down onto the remains of his upper half.

If you had been there, you would have heard a squelch and a thump, then the sound of a damaged car roaring off into the night. Then you would have heard nothing at all, and the smeared remains of what had once been my brother would have been spread before you under the orange lights like black jam.

I can't help imagining the last shards of Jake's mind. Splinters of glass, tumbling away into the dark. Fading.

Reflecting?

Gone.

Road Traffic Accidents, the police call them. RTAs for short. They happen every day.

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The wine was revolting. Jake would have turned in his grave, if he'd had one. Instead, what was left of him was turning in a machine called a cremulator – a piece of information which had seemed fascinating during a drunken conversation with a friend three years before, but which I now wished I didn't possess. The cremulator is a rotating drum filled with steel balls. It would grind Jake's lumpy, burnt remains to a powder fine enough for scattering. Crematorium staff call it the crembola - a lucky dip for the dead.

The wine was Dad's choice – so were the catering arrangements in general – and it was too late to argue. It was Dad's house, it was Dad's son who had died, and the funeral was Dad's problem; the least he could do. So, three men and two women had arrived in a van and laid trestle tables out on the lawn with black paper cloths over them, and had arranged glasses and bottles on them, and over-stuffed sandwiches on crimped foil trays. Then they had retreated to the van to wait for us to finish. It was how Dad wanted it, and neither Ruth nor I had chosen to argue. We all cope in our own separate ways. It hardly mattered anyway.

The mourners milled on a sunlit lawn, and in a back room somewhere at the crem, Jake slowly tumbled into dust.

I sipped on joyless wine, and tried to toast his memory.

Ruth stood at the centre of a vague cloud of people, all making light conversation, waiting their turn to step in and offer sympathy. Her black dress was pencil-thin, making her seem taller than five-five, and emphasising the slender curve of her calves. Her hair was pulled back from her face, revealing skin that was pale over tight bones and white across the subtly bent bridge of her nose. When she smiled, she revealed snagged front teeth and the widening around her eyes spoke of warmth and sadness.

The woman she was talking to rubbed her arm, murmured something, and moved away. Another person took her place before I could take a single step in her direction. There was less than thirty feet of grass between us. It might as well have been an ocean.

Getting drunk would have been a blessing, but it wasn't an option. Instead, I was playing host. The habit dies hard. I stood at one end of the row of trestles, clutching a warm bottle and wondering which cluster of people to approach with the offer of a top-up. My own glass stood on the low window sill of the room that Jake and I had once slept in, half-full but not forgotten.

I sensed David rather than saw him. He was behind me. When I failed to turn, he sniffed delicately, and picked up a tray of sandwiches that were in my peripheral vision.

'Tuna?' he said.

If I had wanted a sandwich, I would already have taken one. If I had wanted to talk to him, I would already have turned. But if he had intended to take the hint, he would already have walked away. So I sighed, turned, and reached for a sandwich.

He smiled sadly.

'Lovely,' I said. 'Thanks.'

The sandwiches were packed so tightly together that I had to squash the bread on both sides to get one out. When I succeeded, half the filling flopped out of it back onto the tray.

Contact established, he put the tray back on the table, took one himself, and stood with me, surveying a ragged lawn spotted black with mourners.

'Amazing, isn't it?' David murmured.

I braced myself for a lecture about the afterlife, or about how hope springs eternal. I should have known better. Everything David says is sideways to what you expect. You only ever get the lecture when you think he wants to discuss what's for supper.

He pointed the sharp end of a tuna triangle at the crowd. 'The way we fall back on social conditioning,' he said. 'Like apes grooming each other.'

I could see his point. 'Reassurance,' I said.

His eyes creased with sorrowful amusement. 'We all need it.'

I found those eyes disturbingly clear. They shone with confidence, smiling compassionately at the world from a face so cleanly shaven that the skin was like burnished plastic. Yet for all his God-given certainty, there was something bitter in the twist of David's mouth. Perhaps it was that we both knew that he had never quite had *all* the answers. He knew all about the love of God, but the love of his fellow man had so far eluded him. I couldn't help him there – a fact that he had long ago resigned himself to. We both knew what it meant to be alone.

Ruth was talking to a man I didn't recognise, and it looked like he was just reaching the 'if there's anything I can do' stage. The conversation was clearly winding down – and for once, there didn't seem to be anybody hovering nearby waiting their turn. Except, of course, me.

'Listen, David –' I said.

At the same time, he said, 'There's someone I'd like you to –'

We both stopped.

'Go on,' he said, his voice uneasy.

'No, you...' I muttered. 'Well, OK. I was just going to say –'

My mother screamed, a shrill panting howl that turned everyone's head. A woman was backing away from her, the woman who had been talking to Ruth earlier. She had her hands up in front of her and she was mouthing to Mum that she was sorry. Then, aware of the staring crowd, she stopped, and faced us all. 'I didn't do anything,' she said. 'Really. I just –'

I looked round for Dad. He was with a small group of City-types under the sycamore. He glared at me desperately; clearly, he had reached his limit. I wasn't surprised. I couldn't have lived with Mum like this for a millisecond. She should have been in a home.

David placed a hand on my shoulder, too gently for comfort. 'I think you'd better go, Ben.'

Mum was still screaming. Ruth was already talking to someone else. I groaned, and hurried over.

The woman intercepted me, and crabbed along next to me as I walked. 'I just put my drink down on her table,' she gabbled. 'There wasn't anywhere else – no other tables, I mean, not nearby.'

It was true enough. Aside from the trestles with the drinks and food on them, Mum had the only table, and sat at it in the only chair. She wasn't much good on her feet; and besides, it discouraged her from wandering.

'I didn't try to *talk* to her or anything,' the woman said.

'It's OK,' I said tersely. 'Thank you.'

Mum's eyes were wild. Her hands rubbed up and down on her thighs, pulling her tweed skirt a little higher with every stroke.

I injected as much cheerfulness into my voice as I could muster. 'Hello Mummy, are you OK?'

Her head jerked. She stopped screaming, and she fixed me with a blue stare. I crouched in front of her and placed my hands over hers, gently pressing until the rubbing ceased. 'It's all right, Mum, it was just a mistake, it's over now.'

Her face held as much expression as a baby's, intense and utterly blank. 'Where's Jake?' she said. There was an edge of panic in her voice.

I let go of her hands and tugged her skirt back into place, avoiding her eyes.

'Jake's dead, Mum. There was an accident.'

'You're not Jake. Where's Jake?'

I reached out to touch her arm. 'Mum –'

She pushed me away. '*Where's Jake?*'

I picked up the glass of water Dad had left for her. 'Come on, Mum, have a bit to drink. Do you think we should get you into the shade?'

'Weather, weather, always the weather. I don't *want* a drink,' she said.

She craned forwards towards the glass, her lips groping for the rim. I tipped in some water gently, and used my handkerchief to mop the spills from her chin. By the time she had finished drinking, my knees were hurting. I straightened up. I tried to smooth her wiry grey hair – it was long these days, and in total disarray, because she refused to let anyone cut it. She knocked my hand away.

'Where's my baby? They're going to kill my baby.'

Her voice was painfully loud. People were staring. On the far side of the garden, Dad seized his opportunity and excused himself from the group he had been talking to. He began to shuffle towards me. I was shocked at how old he seemed, how tired.

Mum stared up at me. Her head was unsteady, and her lips quivered. Spittle had collected at the corners of her mouth. Water filmed her eyes.

I smiled at her as warmly as I could. 'Love you, Mum.'

This time, she let me stroke her hair.

'They want to kill Jake,' she said. 'There's a letter in the paper.'

When Dad arrived, she seized his trouser leg, and kneaded the thin cloth, fondly.

'Jake! My baby!'

Dad ignored me. He fumbled for her hand, and gripped it tight.

'That's right, Mim. Jake's here. He's just getting a drink, then he'll come over and give you a nice big hug.'

She gazed up at him, a red face framed in chaotic grey. She nodded.

'The people from the papers are going to kill him. But I'm going to write a letter.'

'That's right, darling.' He smiled down, weighing her gnarled hand in his.

'Yes,' she said complacently. For a moment, I thought I detected a spark of something in her eyes. Then she stared at me again. 'Where's Jake?'

And as Dad knelt to explain to her yet again, I gripped his shoulder briefly and moved away. There's only so much you can bear.

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When Jake and I were young we had our own secret garden. It nestled away in one corner of the garden proper, behind a high beech hedge. It wasn't much: a shed with a green felt roof, a metal swing that hung on rods instead of chains, a small apple tree, and a compost heap in the corner. You could climb from the tree onto the roof of the shed and pelt whoever was on the swing with rotten apples. In summer, you could run straight at the hedge, leap into it, and it

would bounce you straight back out. We hid there, sulked there, had wars there. On sunny days, we lay together on the roof, basking on the baking felt. When Jake was eight, it was here that he kissed Sophie Harriot, because I dared him.

Michael was on the swing, rocking it back and forth, heels then toes. The rods twisted and creaked as he swung, dropping flakes of rust. The swing's flat feet lifted from the ground revealing pressed squares of earth, glistening with worm-trails.

He ignored me. His toes scuffed the grass at the edges of the muddy trench beneath the swing.

'Hi,' I said at last.

He shrugged and said nothing. I couldn't really blame him. He had just watched a bunch of strangers show more grief for his father than he was able to show himself. At ten, you simply can't. How can the full monstrosity of death fit into such a young mind? For Michael, Jake's death would be a series of small absences and moments of alienation, moments when all you could do was sit on a swing and scuff back and forth in your best black shoes. Then one day it would hit him. The sum of all those moments, the horror, the injustice. Grief. When it came, I suspected that Michael would be more lost than he could possibly imagine.

I stifled an urge to go and find David. I wanted to drag him back here, push his shining face towards Michael, and demand that he explain. Go on, David. Tell Michael why your God thought killing Jake was a good idea. Tell him why God doesn't want him to have a Daddy any more. Tell him it's all for the best.

Instead, I sniffed loudly, hoping that somehow it might break the ice, and said, 'Not much fun, eh?'

Michael kicked at a tussock. The effort jerked him round on the swing, and for a moment I thought he might fall. Then he stabilised, and began twisting the swing from side to side. The toes of his shoes dug into the mud, twisting out gouts.

'Gramps wanted me to do the drinks,' he said after a while. 'Only, Mum said no.'

I thought about this for a moment. 'Well, if you're bored, maybe we could do the drinks together.'

'Nah.'

'Fair enough.'

We both let silence fall. Somewhere, there was birdsong.

'Anyway, it's Mike,' he said at last.

I frowned. 'Hmm? What?'

'Everyone calls me Mike. 'Cept Mum and Dad.' Carefully, I ignored the thought we were both thinking: *No Dad now, just Mum.* 'Forget it,' he muttered.

I nodded, and stayed exactly where I was. I said, 'I'm going to miss him.'

He sniffed. 'Yeah.'

The supports heaved up and down and the whole frame warped and creaked.

Reluctantly, I decided that this was his world now, not mine. Who was I to intrude? I pushed myself upright, and went over to him, squeezing his shoulder.

'I'll leave you to it.'

He nodded, and I headed for the gap in the hedge. I was almost gone before he called after me.

'He wrote you a letter.'

I stopped and frowned back at him. 'A letter? Who?'

Michael pouted at the ground, and said nothing.

'Michael –'

'Mike.'

'Sorry. What do you mean, a letter?'

He kicked at the base of the post, scraped at the paint with his toe-cap. 'Dad,' he explained. 'He wrote you a letter. Said it was a secret. Said to pretend we were spies and it was, like, dead secret. Not to tell 'cept for emergencies.'

If he had been looking at me, he would have seen a succession of confused thoughts clamber slowly over my face. 'What... When you say...'

'Said I had to pretend he'd never told me. Unless something happened. Said he knew he could trust me.'

His lip trembled at that, and he blinked hard. I had no idea what to say. This must have been some game they played, innocent at the time, but enough to hurt Michael now.

'He was right,' I offered gently. 'To trust you. He loved you. He was very proud of you.'
Michael scraped his teeth over his lower lip.

'What sort of letter?' I prompted.

He shrugged. 'Said it was best forgotten. Said if you wanted to keep something secret, the best thing was to give it to someone who'd forget it, like they never even knew it was there. Said you'd know what he meant.'

I *didn't* know what he'd meant, and I resented it. Perhaps Jake had concocted a new sport, getting closer to his son by ganging up on me: let's play spy versus spy with Uncle Ben, only don't tell him. They probably had codes and secret signs, and dead letter drops in the airing cupboard. And now, talking about it was the closest Michael could get to saying that he missed his dad.

'Michael – Mike – I'm so sorry.'

'Where's my baby? You aren't Jake!' Mum's voice rang shrill across the garden.

I groaned. 'I'd better...'

Michael nodded, without looking up.

I left him, and headed back into the public glare. All of them were trying politely to ignore the latest crisis. This time, it was Dad's fault. He was trying to give Mum a drink.

'Come on, Mim, not now. We don't want a scene. Talk about it later, yes? You're thirsty, aren't you? Yes. It's hot today.'

Actually, it wasn't hot any more. Small gusts of cold wind had set the trees around the garden nodding. Women cleared stray hair from their faces. The sky was grey now. Perhaps Jake would get rain at his funeral after all.

Mum batted Dad's arm away, and the glass went flying.

'They're going to kill him!' she screamed. 'The people from the papers. There's a letter in the papers!'

I was slow on the uptake. I was more aware of the social discomfort of the situation. Why would I listen to the ramblings of a demented old lady?

'Papers!' Mum yelled. 'There's a letter in the papers! Why won't you *listen*?'

It was only as I helplessly watched Dad try to calm her, knowing that if I tried to help it would probably only make things worse, that Mum's mad screams began to make an insane kind of sense.

Michael, telling me Jake had left me a letter.

It's in the papers. Listen to me!

A letter so secret that he could only entrust it to someone he knew would forget.

They're going to kill him!

Dad was trying to coax Mum to stand. Perhaps he hoped to persuade her to take a rest; it was obvious she needed it. I should have gone over to help, for his sake if not for hers. I didn't. Instead, I thought, hard.

I remembered Jake, drunk one evening for a change, telling me that Mum and Dad had copies of a few important papers just in case his house burned down, and that I should too, everyone should. If ever anything happened, he'd said, that would be the place to look. Listen, Ben, it's important. That's where you look.

I had nodded wisely, and moved the conversation on. We were drunk. Who cared?

Now, though, I was stone cold sober.

There was a letter in the papers.

I strode across the lawn towards the house.

CHAPTER 4

THE STUDY WAS DARK, even on the brightest days. It was in the oldest part of the house, the original farm cottage, a few cramped rooms with uneven floors and walls. In the study, a single tiny window set in a deep crevice admitted a thin trickle of light. The fact that they had painted it dark red didn't help. The window was too low. Through it, I could see the legs of my fellow mourners, and a few glasses, empty and toppled. The white wine would have soaked into the grass. The worms would be on an unexpected and probably unwelcome high.

In my hand was a letter from my dead brother Jake.

Dear Ben,

Not so stupid after all, eh! You found it! Welcome! This is where it all begins.

This is the first clue in... let's call it a treasure hunt, shall we? The last clue is another letter (if you're smart enough to work out how to read it), and beyond that? Well, if this was a treasure hunt, it would be treasure, wouldn't it? So why don't we leave it at that? Good. OK. Sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.

First of all, let me just say that I'm sorry for calling you a muppet.

I realise that you didn't know I used to call you a muppet – but truth will out. Now that I'm safely beyond reprisal I'm glad to get the miserable secret off my chest. In my defence, I only ever said it because you are a muppet. I'm sure you understand.

Well, you're reading this, so either I'm dead or you're unbelievably nosey – in which case, piss off.

Still here? Good. Here's the important bit.

Someone killed me, Ben. Unless it was flu or something, someone killed me.

These are dangerous people, what with killing me and all, so don't even think about finding them yourself. Not that you could. And unless you found me with my head and hands cut off, weighted down in a pond full of piranhas, you're not going to get much mileage out of the police, are you? Keep the police out of it.

Really, Ben. I mean it. No police.

Talk to Memet, only to Memet. Then walk away. Believe me, it's the right thing to do. Not that you'll do it. I know you, Ben. I predict a challenging time ahead.

Be good to Ruth and Michael. I love them both, and you should, as well. I love you, too. Really. Even after everything.

Even though you're a muppet.

Jake

I stared out of the window, fingering the letter as though another message was hidden there in Braille. A single sheet of A4, typed – even the signature. But it was his voice, his attitude. It was very like talking to him in person, his tone balanced somewhere between affection and contempt, the way he had of forestalling all possible objection whilst leaving you still unclear of his point or purpose. The energy. The fun.

Someone killed me.

My first thought was that he had gone mad. This was a paranoid fantasy. He had gone to ridiculous lengths to leave me a letter, and the letter made ridiculous claims. He had died, drunk and unaware and on the wrong side of town: what demons had he been running from? What could be so bad that he hadn't even seen the car coming? But I quickly realised that I was being unfair to him. The letter didn't sound mad, and Jake was one of the most level-headed people imaginable. He had always known exactly what he was doing. He was harsh,

yes; and mischievous, and cynical and unreliable; but mad? No. Besides, it *hadn't* been 'flu or something', it had been a car, driven at lunatic speed by a man who chose not to stop. The trouble was that to believe him just seemed... silly. His letter implied some sinister plot, larger forces. 'Dangerous people,' he said. But dangerous people don't come calling on middle class families living in the posh part of Putney.

Jake had thought they would, though; and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that he was sane – misguided perhaps, but sane. His charming jibe about me being a muppet was the perfect example. It showed a familiar mix of forethought and meanness, dressed up as comedy. It was just like him to wait until there was no possibility of a comeback. Even more typical, he had ensured triple pleasure for himself. The insult itself, the knowledge that it would leave me impotent, and the delight he'd surely taken every time he saw me, knowing that the deed was already done, and I didn't yet know.

That was how he worked. Everything had a purpose, mostly selfish, often cruel, and generally involving yanking my chain. For a moment I was tempted to dismiss the whole thing as a prank. Maybe this Memet I was supposed to talk to would hand me another note: *Ha ha, got you. Who's a silly muppet then?* But even Jake wasn't that insensitive, surely; and I found it hard to believe that he'd have had the time and energy for such a tasteless joke.

Reluctantly, I concluded that whether the letter was accurate or not, Jake *believed* it was. He had left this for me in fear for his life. Then, weeks or months later, he had stumbled out onto a road in the middle of the night. Most likely it was an accident. Even so, Jake had foreseen his own death. And that meant I couldn't possibly ignore it.

I would have to talk to Memet.

Unfortunately, I had no idea who Memet was.

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By the time I went back outside, it had begun to cloud over in earnest. A sullen grey sky hung low over the trees. Something cold brushed my face: a raindrop, perhaps, though it was too soft for me to be sure. The mourners stood in clumps, nursing the remains of their drinks. The caterers had emerged from their van, and now hovered at a respectful distance.

If Memet was here, I didn't have long to find him.

No one had heard of him. Some folk shrugged, others smiled to hide their confusion.

Jake had always kept the various sections of his life separate from each other. His friends were rarely allowed to meet. City dealer friends, it seemed, couldn't be trusted not to foul up a conversation with his Sunday drinking chums. The rugby crowd never socialised with the golfers. Looking about me, I wondered if maybe Jake had had a point. The city types, identifiable by their sharp dress and the high polish on their shoes, formed their own knots apart from the others, as though they belonged in a separate, better world. They stood in short arcs gazing outwards, exchanging observations from the sides of their mouths, smiling perfect smiles. I knew some of their names, and where they fitted into Jake's life, but that was all. As people, I didn't really know them at all.

It was embarrassing. I felt as though I had to offer an explanation for why I was looking for Memet. I settled on the idea that Memet had promised someone a lift home, and now no one could find him. But of course, everyone I spoke to seemed to think that I was suggesting that it was time to leave. They looked at their watches, muttered politely that they hadn't realised how late it was. Groups began to break up, and people trickled towards Dad and Ruth to say goodbye.

As the crowd cleared, I noticed a man I didn't recognise, standing alone by the front porch. He was a little hunched, as though he was already shielding himself from the coming rain. He surveyed proceedings with heavy-lidded eyes. I remembered him from the crematorium. The door had banged just as David began the ceremony; I had glanced back and caught a glimpse of him settling uncomfortably on the end of an over-full pew. His face was long and narrow. A crescent nose scythed out of it. His eyes were set too deep for me to tell their colour, and disturbingly close together. He had pale skin, thin lips, a sensitive mouth. He caught my eyes and smiled slowly, as though smiling was unfamiliar to him – and as though he was expecting me. Bingo. I walked across.

As soon as I was close enough, I stretched out a hand. 'Memet,' I said.

He took my hand, but the smile left his face. 'Fyodor,' he said. 'Not Memet. Sorry.' His tone was oddly sorrowful, and his upper-crust English accent was tinged with what I took to be Russian. He shook his head, 'I know no one called Memet.' The corners of his eyes twitched. 'Nor, I assume, do you.'

'Someone said he was looking for a lift,' I said distractedly, staring round at the remaining mourners. None of them looked like a Memet. Most of them, I knew. The strangers had already made their excuses and left.

Fyodor shrugged. 'Sorry,' he said. 'David and I could give him a ride when you find him. He lives in London, yes?'

David was hurrying towards us. My heart sank.

'Er...' I muttered, confused. 'Oh. Yes. I think so. So you and David know each other.'

Fyodor favoured me with another slow smile. 'We're friends,' he said.

David arrived, beaming. 'You've met. Good, good. Ben, this is Fyodor; Fyodor, Ben.'

Fyodor laughed and put a hand on David's shoulder. 'Yes,' he said gently. 'We know.' David blushed. Fyodor offered me his hand, and we shook again. 'We should go,' he said. He gestured at the almost-empty lawn. 'But I'm glad to have met you at last. David talks about you.' Another cold smile. 'He is very fond. By the way, please accept my sympathy. Jake was a good man.'

That startled me. 'You knew him?'

He shrugged. 'A little.'

The handshake had gone on uncomfortably long. I mumbled something about being glad he could come, and disengaged.

Fyodor took the hint. 'We should be going, David, don't you think?'

David looked startled. 'What? Oh. Yes. Just give me a moment with Ben, would you?'

Fyodor nodded gravely, and moved away.

When David turned back to me, there was something urgent in his expression. 'He's a friend,' he babbled. 'I mean, we're close, but – well, you know. But we've got a lot in common, and he understands my work, and he's kind – generous, actually. You know, at the church, he's helped set up –'

I cut across him. 'David, I'm sure he's great. Maybe we can all meet up in London sometime, talk properly. OK?'

David looked uncertain, but he nodded. Belatedly, I recognised his expression. He wanted my approval, and he knew I would have no interest in giving it; our relationship meant far more to him than it did to me.

I gave him an uneasy hug, thanked him for the service, then stood mutely with Dad and Ruth, watching the last mourners walk down the short drive and out onto the road to find their cars. David and Fyodor walked a discreet two feet apart. Just before they turned out of sight, David glanced back and gave a tight little wave, his features drawn into an anxious frown.

Dad raised a hand in final farewell, then we were alone. 'Best get inside,' he said.

The sky was heavy now, and a cold wind pressed against the trees. Before Ruth turned to follow Dad inside, I caught her arm. 'Ruth, was there anyone called Memet here?' She looked confused. 'Someone said he needed a lift,' I explained.

Ruth started bleakly at the empty lawn. Instead of answering me, she said, 'Did you know, Ben, that not one person came from AG?'

Jake was a dealer at AG Trading, one of a hundred or so 'players' in the base metals market. It was a comparatively small outfit. Jake was one of three dealers, buying and selling tin, copper, zinc and lead, or financial instruments based on them. As far as I could see, the job mainly consisted of taking outrageous gambles, and shouting a lot. His clients were mining companies, electronics manufacturers, defence contractors. His job was to ensure that whenever they needed to buy or sell, they picked up the phone to him before his competitors. Tens of billions of dollars changed hands every day.

'They sent flowers,' Ruth said bitterly. '*From everyone at AG*, the tag said. Apparently they reckoned it was more important to track aluminium forwards than pay their respects in person.' I wanted to hug her, but she looked as though she'd kill anyone who tried. She shook her head, dazed. 'Not one of them.'

'Listen, Ruth, do you know someone called Memet?' I blurted.

She sighed wearily, and pointed at the deserted lawn. 'Doesn't matter. Whoever he is, he doesn't need a lift any more, does he?'

She turned and walked away across the bright grass, a small figure in black, a little too skinny and far too much too alone.

Mum was in the sitting room. I perched on the arm of her chair.

'Hi Mum. Everything OK?'

Unsteadily, she swung her head to study me. 'Where's Jake?'

I took her hand. 'It's all right,' I said. 'He's running late. He said to say he loves you.'

She considered this. Her watery eyes reddened, and her lower lip wobbled. Then she cupped my face in her hands. 'Good boy,' she said. For a moment, despite my exhaustion, I felt a connection. Mum nodded earnestly. 'Yes. Jake's a good boy,' she said. 'There's a letter about him in the papers.'

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