

That which was taken, by Alec McQuay.

The dinner table shook as Mrs Harris placed the turkey at the centre; its large, porcelain platter glistening with the succulent juices that spilled from the roasted bird and filled the air with the delicious scent of meat. Her husband's face split open in a broad smile as she passed him the carving knife and took her seat, sipping delicately at a glass of sparkling white wine as her husband began his traditional part of Christmas dinner. Wasting no time he separated the bird deftly into pieces with well practiced movements of his razor sharp blade, the children watching in awe as he dissected the bird with all the panache of a master butcher, inserting the blade into the joints of the legs and twisting it, dislocating them with a sucking *pop* before one precise movement separated the limb from the body. In less than a minute the bird was dismantled, sliced and arranged before them on its own plate, ready for homemade gravy and cranberry sauce to compliment the delicious poultry.

'I never know whether to be impressed or a little worried, Jake,' Mrs Harris said as her husband took his seat and the children started to load their plates. 'Sure you weren't a butcher in a previous life? Or maybe a serial killer?'

Jake chuckled and took up his own glass, filled to the brim with an expensive Tennessee Bourbon he purchased every year to enjoy over the holidays. 'I could tell you Jess,' he said, taking a small sip and relishing the heat as the liquor burned its way down his throat. 'But then I'd have to kill you. And cook you. And eat you.'

The children, two boys of ten years and a girl of five, looked over and laughed, their approval getting a huge wink from their indulgent father.

'Don't encourage him,' their mother said, rolling her eyes comically. 'It's bad enough without anyone else thinking he's funny. Now, this dinner is lacking something. Anyone know what that is?'

Both boys looked straight at their father, expecting a witty retort at any moment but finding none forthcoming. 'This is serious business,' he said as he looked back at them, each twin's disappointed face framed by a head of tight brown curls. 'So you've no idea then Joel? Andrew? Well that's no good is it? How about you, Kimberley? What should we all have that we haven't got?'

All eyes turned to the youngest of them, sat at the far end of the table opposite her father in a pink dress that mimicked the one worn by her favourite cartoon princess. Her blonde hair was pulled tight into a high ponytail and her face had been painted liberally using the toy makeup kit she had received in her Christmas stocking first thing that morning. The effect she was going for was that of a dainty princess but, as her father had somewhat uncharitably pointed out, she looked more like the bride at a demented clown's wedding. Chewing her way carefully through a morsel of turkey meat she considered the question, unashamedly taking her time now that the family's full attention was on her.

'We don't have our crowns on,' she said, taking her time but ultimately cutting to the heart of the issue in the vaguely irritating fashion that intelligent little girls often had.

‘Or our jokes!’ Joel piped up, followed quickly by ‘Or toys!’ from Andrew.

‘You’re right!’ Jake exclaimed, feigning horror at the thought of a Christmas dinner without ridiculous hats and jokes that only embarrassing parents would find amusing. ‘Well it’s a good job I bought some spare ones then isn’t it, or the whole dinner would have been ruined!’

‘Typical bloke,’ Mrs Harris chuckled as her husband reached behind himself to the cupboard where he’d hidden this year’s crackers. ‘I spend all of last night and this morning preparing a lovely dinner for you all, but it’d be ruined without a couple of quid’s worth of cheap crap you picked up from the garage. Honestly, how *would* we cope without your contribution?’

When Jake turned back he had a large blue container in his hands, decorated with bizarre symbols that looped across the lid, conveying a message in some strange and unknown language, and a pair of leering opera masks that frowned and grinned at the family as they peered at the box. ‘Weird looking, aren’t they?’ he enthused, holding them up for everyone to see. ‘I got them off a market stall a couple of months back. You know how I like to find weird crackers every year?’

His wife nodded. Oh god, did she know. Over the last few years he had purchased ridiculously expensive ones, incredibly cheap ones and everything in between, from the weird and the wonderful to the downright strange. Some had contained jewellery and small musical instruments, some the parts to make up a family board game while others had contained the usual assortment of plastic junk and easily broken puzzles along with the obligatory hat and groan inducing joke. One year they’d each received a small, rubber shrunken head in their cracker which the children had loved and she had found completely tasteless, which suited her husband and his tastes perfectly. In fact the only crackers he had ever avoided were those that contained a quote or “did you know?” in place of the joke, as those he considered to be completely missing the point and therefore utterly beneath contempt.

‘Right then, let’s pass these bad-boys around, hey? There’re six in here and only five of us so I’ll have to have an extra one with one of you so we don’t miss out on the joke. We wouldn’t want that now, would we, Julie?’

‘No dear,’ she replied, taking a large mouthful of wine and feigning despair for the amusement of the children. ‘I’m not sure my heart could take it.’

Jake slid his plate to one side and placed the box on the table in its place, savouring its unusual decorations and the unidentified but certainly foreign writing that circled the rim of the lid in gold-etched letters. ‘It almost looks magical, doesn’t it?’ he enthused. ‘And old! The guy only had one box left and he said he’d had them for years, but he wouldn’t go down on the price even a little bit.’

‘Well he could probably see that you really wanted them,’ Julie replied. ‘You can’t haggle when the seller knows he’s got you by the wallet at the beginning.’

‘Well, they weren’t that much really and he said they’re re-usable, but I’ll probably sell them after Christmas. Bloke said he’d consider buying them back as long as we

use them this year, not for the same price of course but you know, I shouldn't imagine the second hand cracker market is exactly booming.'

Taking hold of the octagonal lid almost reverently he looked up, smiling in turn at each of the children for dramatic effect, and then...

'Ow, FU-'

'Jake!' Julie interrupted, cutting off her husband's curse before the children could hear it and spend the rest of the holiday repeating it. 'Now what've you done?'

'Must've been a sharp edge on there somewhere, sliced right into my bloody thumb when I tried to open the box.'

'Hmm. Can't see anything,' Julie said, turning the dropped lid over and over in her hands. 'No blood either. You need a plaster or anything honey?'

Jake looked down at his hands in puzzlement, turning them over as he checked each individual digit one at a time. 'I... no, baby. I'm not bleeding. But I could have *sworn...*'

'That's happened to me at school dad,' Joel ventured. 'Put my hand into my bag and thought I'd got a bad paper cut but then there was nothing there. That hurts like heck too you know.'

The other children nodded sagely, their faces deadly serious as children's faces tend to be when imparting the most vital of information. Jake looked at his hands one last time and shrugged expansively, determining that he clearly hadn't cut himself at all and returning instead to his grand unveiling. Taking hold of the first cracker he drew it out slowly, surprised by the weight of it which seemed at odds with the lightness of the box when he had lifted it onto the table. Banishing the thought he held the cracker up to the light and smiled as he looked at it, knowing for certain that he had made the best purchase yet in this new family tradition of his. The cylinder was long and rigid, wrapped in a papery sheath that shimmered like mother of pearl and cast glittering points of light onto the faces of his intrigued family.

'They're beautiful, daddy,' Kimberley said, smiling widely and holding out her hands to take the first cracker. Her father obliged and then drew out the next, and the next, until everyone had one and the spare sat at the middle of the table, the box carefully discarded on the floor by his feet. Each was a different design with livid reds, greens and blues sparkling amid gold and silver, the tapered waist of each held secure with a curled length of ribbon so thin and delicate that it could have been spun from woven spider's silk. Holding them, Jake's family now looked complete and ready for dinner, the image of a proper Christmas that existed before only in his head now laid bare for all to see.

'Well I know they're lovely but they're not just for looking at,' he said, picking up his own cracker and offering one end to his wife. 'Come on, we'll do this bit as a family, just like we do every year!'

Every took up their own cracker and exchanged mocking looks of exasperation with Jake, but they all loved him for his Christmas spirit and the enthusiasm that he brought to the festivities. Taking hold of their own cracker and the end of the person's next to them they turned once more to their father and waited patiently, content to let him have his moment.

‘All together then in five... four... three... two... one...’

The crackers cracked with a report like gunfire, five sharp *bangs* in quick succession far louder and more impressive than any crackers they had seen before. As the paper hats and rolled pieces of paper tumbled out onto the table there was another *bang*, then another, followed by a cacophony of minute explosions that were clearly coming from the living room.

‘What the hell-‘

Kimberley screamed as the light bulb overhead exploded, scattering minute slivers of glass across the table, tainting the food and the poured drinks with needle-like splinters too small to be easily removed. Around the room the lit decorations began to fizzle and pop as their own bulbs and diodes overheated and broke down, every light in the house following suit in one final, massive *bang* that robbed the house of its Christmas cheer and littered the carpets with wickedly sharp barbs of multi-coloured glass.

‘Keep away from the food! In fact, don't touch anything until we're sure it's safe. What the bloody hell was that, Jake?’

‘Must have been a power spike or something,’ he replied, carefully brushing his fingers through his hair to detect any pieces of glass. ‘We'll salvage dinner sweetheart, you always overcook so we'll just have to have boxing day dinner today, alright? First things first I'll go and check the fuses, then I'll go get shoes for the kids. Don't want those little feet getting all cut up now do we?’

‘But... but what about the crackers?’

Both parents turned to Kimberley and smiled, her bottom lip trembling as her parents both leaned over and kissed her affectionately on the head. ‘There are more important things than my silly tradition sweetheart,’ Jake said. ‘We'll get the house cleaned up and get Christmas day back on track first, then we'll do all of this at dinner time, ok? It'll be nice this way around, you'll see. No-one ever said we *had* to have Christmas dinner at lunch time.’

It took two hours of solid vacuuming, sweeping and tidying to get the house safe for the children to play in, with every bed needing to be stripped, every carpet picked over and every soft furnishing vigorously checked and double checked before they could be allowed out to play. Spare bulbs were in ready supply but most of the electric Christmas ornaments were ruined or rendered immobile by the sudden rush of power; the Christmas tree itself now gloomy and sad with its two hundred fairy bulbs jutting like broken bottles from within the cheerful, flower shaped holders. In the end the tree had been moved into the conservatory to be dealt with later, the thought of

vacuuming and cleaning a tree being too much for either Jake or Julie to handle at that point. Where possible they pushed jobs to one side for later once the children were sleeping, making the house as safe as possible without derailing their Christmas any more than they absolutely had to. Soon enough the children were playing happily with their toys and the whole issue was pushed to the back of their minds in a tornado of shredded wrapping paper, the fright and inconvenience lost beneath the joyful laughter of three siblings playing nicely together.

‘Heart warming, isn’t it?’ Julie said as she proudly watched both of her sons accepting plastic cupcakes from their sister and her new kitchen set. ‘I know it sounds cheesy but-‘

‘But it’s all about family. Yeah I know what you mean, when you’re small it’s all about presents and that feeling in your stomach you get, and you think you’re parents are daft for sitting there smiling and watching you play. Mum and Dad always said “you’ll see what I mean when you’ve got kids of your own” and I thought they were insane, but they were spot on. None of this chaos matters compared to spending today with all of you. Not the lights or the food, or even the crackers.’

‘Speaking of which, what did you do with the crackers?’

‘I didn’t do anything with them. They’re still on the ta... ble?’

The table was clear and pristine, every trace of the failed lunch and the associated mess removed, though neither parent could remember having done so. The only thing that remained was the box of crackers, its lid replaced as though it had never been removed.

‘Did you do this?’ Jake asked, looking under the table to find the crackers themselves. ‘I could have sworn it was still trashed-‘

‘Jake. Jake stand up a minute.’

Careful not to bang his head on the table, Jake emerged and stood to find his wife staring at him questioningly, holding out a Christmas cracker in one slightly trembling hand. It was red and green and sparkled even without a light to reflect off it, identical to the one Jake had pulled earlier that day. Only it could not have been the same one. That was impossible. The paper on every one of them had torn when they pulled them. ‘What the hell, Jake?’

‘That must be the spare one, remember? There were six in the box and only five... of...’

Julie tipped the box upside down and cast the other five crackers onto the table, every one of them brand new and perfectly intact as though never having left their box before. ‘This had better not be one of your jokes. If this is some little gag you’ve cooked up it isn’t funny, and it won’t get funnier if you try and keep it going.’

‘This wasn’t me,’ Jake replied, turning the crackers over in his hands, his face slowly turning pale as he carefully examined every one of them. ‘One of the kids?’

‘They’ve been playing in the front room ever since we took them out of here. And why would they?’

Jake took hold of a cracker and pulled it, receiving the expected sharp *crack* as the minute explosive went off and the present inside tumbled out with a loud *thud*. Dropping the cracker he reached down and took up the gift, holding it up to the light of the single small window and marvelling as the light shone through. ‘It’s a snowglobe... a bloody good one too. Here, take a look at that.’

Julie shuddered as she stared down at the toy, though she wasn’t immediately certain as to why. Within the liquid filled dome was a miniature town square lined with tiny people, each of them intricately carved from what could have been plastic or even wood, their individual faces just about discernable even at such a tiny scale. They were arranged like a choir, their mouths open wide and tiny song books clutched in their mitten clad hands, all facing a lectern on which sat a box identical to the one that had contained the crackers. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she finally managed. ‘But it’s bloody creepy. Ever heard of the uncanny valley principle?’

Jake nodded. The replica people were so very nearly human and yet slightly wrong, turning what should have been a warm and inviting scene into one that he couldn’t quite help finding repulsive. ‘I don’t think we’ll be keeping that on the mantelpiece but it’s still pretty cool. Can’t help feeling sorry for whoever made it really, they’ve done a brilliant job but I don’t like looking at it. It’s almost as if they’re staring back at you...’

A loud noise from the living room drew Jake’s attention, a sharp *crack* as of plastic snapping that usually meant that one of the toys had reached an early grave.

‘Back in a second, I’d better go check that out.’

He walked out of the dining room and over to the children, fully expecting to find one of them in tears and one of the multitude of new toys split and broken upon the floor. But when he arrived they were sat playing as they had been before, getting long perfectly well and deeply focussed upon whatever Kimberley was holding.

‘Wow, it’s all weird and old looking,’ Joel said.

‘Can I have a go when you’re done, Kimmy?’

‘I only just got it Andy, you’ve got to let me play first.’

Andrew huffed and sat back with his arms folded. ‘Fine, it’s your toy. What is it though? Looks like it’s supposed to spin but that bit at the bottom looks really sharp. Mind your fingers...’

Jake knelt down and ruffled the boys’ hair, glancing over the shoulder’s to see what had so enthralled all three of his children. ‘It’s called a dreidel,’ he said. ‘Or at least I think it’s supposed to look like one. They’re part of the Hanukkah celebrations, only

they're only meant to have four sides and this one has five. Have you tried giving it a spin?'

'I don't know if I should,' Kimberley replied. 'It's very sharp at the bottom and I think it might damage the carpet if I'm not careful. You and mum told me I've got to be careful not to damage the carpet.'

'Well I'm here to keep an eye on you,' Jake replied, seeing that the bottom was only slightly tapered and would not be likely to hurt anyone. 'Give it a quick spin and see how it handles.'

With her father's permission Kimberley carefully set it down, leaning forward and taking hold of the handle with her thumb and index finger. It was only when she shifted forward to give it a spin that Jake noticed the sparkling white paper on the floor behind her.

'Kimberley... where did that spinning top come from?'

She looked up quizzically as she released the spinner, not answering her father as her brothers' eyes fixed upon the toy. It spun rapidly and perfectly upright, hardly wobbling at all and not seeming to slow until several seconds later when it fell, solidly and with a surprisingly loud *thud* as though someone had taken it in their hand and slammed it down on one side.

A moment later, they heard a scream.

'Julie?' Jake yelled as he shot to his feet, tearing across the living room to where he had left his beloved wife. 'What's the matter? What happened?'

His heart sank as he entered the dining room. Julie was gone, no trace of her to be found and no reply coming when he called out to her. Her scream had been intense but brief, an ear-splitting yelp as though some unknown calamity befell her before she disappeared. He wanted to tear the house apart to find her but he was stuck fast, staring in horrified fascination at the dining table. The box had been unfolded, lying now like a gaming board with six rectangular quadrants surrounding a hexagonal centre. The snowglobe sat in the very middle like a glaring eye, its miniscule choir singing noiselessly within their watery cell while the crackers lay in a circle around the board, one for each quadrant, including the torn remnants of his own cracker and with the white cracker lying discarded at the very top.

'Kimberley!' he yelled, not taking his eye off the table for a moment. 'Kimberley I need you in the dining room *right now!* You boys too, I want you all right where I can see you.'

The children arrived a moment later, shuffling in the way children do when their parents call for them unexpectedly.

'Kimberley when did you put that cracker there? The one you had in the front room a minute ago. Tell me how it got in here.'

‘The lady took it,’ Joel piped up, being the oldest by dint of a few minutes and so voting himself in as spokesman. ‘She said she needed it before she could leave.’

Jake turned to his son and frowned. ‘What lady? There’s a lady in the house now? Where the hell is your mum?’

‘Gone,’ all three said as one, their voices combining into one single, awful sound.

‘What do you mean she’s gone? Did you see her go?’

‘The lady told us. When a door closes a window opens, and that which was taken may return.’

‘Stop doing that. Stop it right now.’

‘The rules are simple, use what’s given. When it’s your turn you will know. If you don’t they’re gone forever, standing screaming in the snow.’

‘I said stop it *right now!*’

Jake turned and swept his arm across the table, sending the snowglobe rolling over the edge of the table and onto the floor. But as he turned back there was a loud *thud* and he found it back where he had left it, only now another two crackers were gone.

‘What in the... where are those crackers? Give them back to me now, whatever you do, don’t pull them...’

A pair of loud bangs rang out from upstairs and Jake was off once more, his children no longer standing where they had been and a horrible sense of certainty rising in his chest. He already knew what he would find as he threw open Kimberley’s door, but he forced himself to look. Sure enough there were two more crackers lying torn open on the ground and two new toys in the hands of his children. In Joel’s hand was a large, heavy looking medallion that he was turning slowly over in his fingers, while Andrew had a large dice that he was poised to roll across the carpet.

‘No,’ Jake gasped, diving forwards to snatch them up. ‘Don’t use them! For Christ’s sake don’t use them!’

He was too late. The coin flipped into the air and the die tumbled across the floor, clacking solidly as it ricocheted across the floorboards and came to a halt against the skirting. The coin slammed down to the floor beside it with a frowning opera mask displayed on the visible face; the dice having a series of unintelligible squiggles that meant nothing to Jake. He had only lost sight of them for a moment, a fraction of a second as his eyes flicked unbidden towards the toys, but that was more than enough. When he looked back both of the boys were gone, only the medallion and the fallen dice remaining as proof that they had been in the room at all.

‘Oh no, not my boys,’ Jake mumbled, tears burning hot in his eyes as the horror sank in. ‘Please, please give them back to me! Please! Give them back!’

‘They can’t hear you daddy,’ Kimberley said, smiling beatifically up at him from the corner where she was sat. ‘They’re much too far away for that sort of thing. You need to hurry up and take your turn so we can get them back again, or they’ll be standing in the snow forever.’

Jake stumbled to his feet and ran to his daughter, taking hold of her by the shoulders and staring deep into her sparkling eyes. ‘Where have they gone, Kimmy? Did the woman tell you what was happening? You have to tell me everything you know!’

Kimberley smiled and kissed her father on the end of the nose, then beckoned over his shoulder with a nod. ‘They can go free now, daddy. It’s one in, one out. A door closes and a window opens, and that which was taken may return.’

Jake spun around and gasped in shock, falling onto his backside as two soot stained children glared at him from the doorway through red-rimmed eyes. ‘Who the hell are you?’ he hissed, struggling to his feet. ‘And what have you done to my children?’

The two figures stared back. They were each around the twins’ age; a young boy and a young girl in worn but modern clothing that seemed recently smeared with dirt. For several moments there was silence, but as Jake began to repeat his demand they opened their mouths as wide as they could and screamed, growing louder and louder until Jake was forced to throw his hands over his ears to keep his eardrums from bursting. The pain in his head was incredible, his eyeballs twitching spasmodically within their sockets and his teeth aching as the pitch and volume increased, the agony sending his vision out of focus and disrupting his balance. Jake collapsed to his knees and screwed his eyes shut as tightly as possible, willing them to stop screaming as he roared out in pain. He felt his stomach lurching and his head begin to spin, all sense of reality lost to him as he collapsed into a foetal ball of suffering from which he could not escape. For what felt like hours he lay there thrashing and kicking, fighting with every bit of strength he had to remain conscious, ever aware that his daughter was completely unprotected while he struggled against the noise. As suddenly as it had begun the screaming ceased, instantly taking the pain and disorientation with it. So profound was the change that it almost felt like an illusion, as if the children had never been there and the screaming was a mere figment of the imagination. But with its departure Jake’s children and wife were still missing, had still been taken from him, and he had no doubt at all that this nightmare was completely real.

‘We have to leave,’ he said to Kimberley, relieved to find her sitting unharmed where he had left her. ‘You need to grab a few things in a bag and we have to get out of here. We’ll go to your Nan’s and we’ll phone the police. They’ll know how to help us. They’ll know what’s going on here...’

‘They’ll never believe you,’ she replied. ‘You know that, don’t you? It’s one in, one out! A door closes-’

‘And a window opens, and that which was taken may return. Why do you keep saying that?’

‘Why because it’s true, silly! You’ve got to play the game to win, but you can’t stop now you’ve started.’

‘But I didn’t know!’ he yelled, tearing at his hair with both hands. ‘I didn’t want to play a game with my family’s lives! I just wanted to make everyone smile at Christmas!’

Kimberley smiled wickedly, baring teeth that seemed elongated and sharpened in the thin light of her bedroom. ‘Then *you* should have asked more questions. *You* should have asked what the inscription meant. *You* should have made certain you weren’t putting your family in danger, but just like the others you saw only what you wanted to see. Men like you believe they are fathers and protectors, but you are nothing but eyeless fools. Play the game now, Jake. Play for the lives of your family. The rules are simple, use what’s given. When it’s your turn you will know. If you don’t they’re gone forever, standing screaming in the snow.’

‘Get out of my daughter!’

Jake lunged forwards and shook her, yelling furiously as she whooped and cackled in his face. With a strength far beyond her miniscule frame she sank her fingernails into his arms until she drew blood, laughing and tearing at her father as he struggled to overpower her. ‘You’ll lose her you know, *daddy*. You’ll lose her if you’re not prepared to play for her. *You* started this, only you can end it. Only two left now, but which one? Which one which one which one which one? If you pull the wrong one you’ll be lost and she’ll be alone. Well, that’s not true. She won’t ever be alone. She’ll have *me*...’

Jake cried out in frustration, barely managing to stop himself from punching the laughing daemon in the face. With a grunt of effort he shoved his daughter roughly to the side and sprinted out of the room, tore across the landing and half jumped, half fell down the stairs, crashing into the dining room a few seconds later. Everything was as he’d left it save for the two newly opened crackers on the table, leaving only two behind from which he now had to choose. There was nothing to choose between them, each different but neither one hinting as to whether its contents would doom him or his daughter to incarceration within the bizarre prison in the centre. He let his eyes wander over to the snowglobe, glaring at the hateful thing as he searched within it for some sort of answer to his conundrum, but there was nothing to aid him. All that was there was the choir, singing or screaming in the depths as he battled with himself for the answer. With a grim certainty he knew that if he were to look closely enough there were three new residents in there, each as horribly lifelike as the others but far more disturbing now he knew the truth. He had to decide and decide fast if he was to get his family back, but he knew that it all came down to chance. Snatching up the nearest cracker he pulled it and cast it to one side, taking up the fallen toy in one hand and holding it up for a closer look. It was a simple decision spinner, a thin circle of brass with a spinning arrow at the centre. The circle was split in half with a single black line and on either side there was a name; Jake on one side and Kimberley on the other.

‘Damn you for making me do this,’ he hissed, drawing back his index finger to flick the arrow. ‘Damn you.’

The arrow spun rapidly, blurring the names beneath as it went. Jake watched anxiously for the result for several minutes as the arrow refused to slow, instead

maintaining an impossibly steady pace no matter which way he tipped the spinner, even when he held it upside down or completely on its side.

‘Why won’t you stop?’ he muttered, voice croaking with grief at what he was being forced to do.

‘Haven’t you decided yet, daddy? Honestly, it isn’t all that hard. All you have to do is decide who gets to be trapped in the snow screaming with mummy, Joel and Andrew. Is it you, or is it me? It’s one in, one out you know.’

‘I know you’re not my daughter, bitch,’ he snarled, throwing the spinner onto the table and rounding on the apparition.

‘Well how remarkably astute of you. I could peel back this pretty face if you’d rather, if you’re offended by my appearance I mean. Just you say the word and I’ll skin her like a deer, though I think that would be very selfish of you. Can’t we just pretend? You’re no fun at all when you’re like this, you know. It makes me want to hurt myself.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Jake said. ‘Don’t you dare hurt her, whatever the hell you are. Just give me a second. I have to choose? So it isn’t random, it’s a choice. But why did the boys choose each other? And why did Kimmy choose her mum?’

Kimberley smiled that razor-edge grin once again. ‘Oh they knew *who* they were choosing, but who says they knew *why* they were choosing them? Only the last one gets to know that, and that’s you! Aren’t you the lucky one? Now hurry up and *choose*.’

‘But how can I? If I choose her she’s stuck in there, but if I choose myself...’

‘Then she’s stuck out here with me and you might never free your family. Isn’t that dreadful? Perhaps next Christmas you could buy your family a puppy instead of an eternity of torture, but don’t let me influence you. This is your decision, *daddy*. I’m not going to make it for you.’

Jake stared at the spinner for hours, the revolving arrow never once deviating from its course or showing any signs of stopping on its own. Kimberley sat and watched him intently as he wracked his brains for the answer, sometimes whistling or humming a tune as he laboured over his decision, sometimes reminding him of what hung in the balance.

‘Please forgive me,’ he said eventually, turning to his daughter with a face wet with tears and eyes so red it was as though they had not blinked in days. ‘It’s the only way to get you all back. I’d go in your place if I could but... but I can’t.’

Kimberley began to clap slowly as he walked over to the spinner and picked it up, placing it back on the table and watching the arrow turn for a few more seconds. ‘Do I tell it to stop or use my hand? I don’t understand how this works.’

‘Oh you’ve got to make a physical choice,’ Kimberley replied sweetly. ‘Stop it however you like as long as it’s with your body. Magic’s a very physical thing, you know. All about flesh, all about blood. Bone too, that’s what the dice is made from. Oh don’t look so horrified, it’s animal bone, not that I can see why that would make a difference. It’s just calcium after all.’

‘Then I choose Kimberley to go into the snowglobe,’ Jake said, his voice hoarse and trembling slightly at what he had to do. ‘Please baby, if you can hear me, I want you to forgive me. I hope you can find it in your hearts to do that, all three of you. Your daddy loves you very, very much.’

He brought his hand down hard, slamming it down on top of the arrow and ending its impossible spinning. He flinched as he felt the slender strip of brass cut into his palm, but he thought little of it. That brief moment of pain was as nothing compared to the dull aching in his chest and the burning in his eyes from the salty tears he was weeping for his family.

‘It is done,’ Kimberley said, standing and skipping over to the table. ‘If it helps that was the longest wait I’ve ever had, you usually end up with a rash decision and that’s about it. Come now, lift your hand up. I have to *see* the result for it to count. Oh... oh well... that’s interesting. That’s never happened before...’

Jake’s eyes widened in terror as he lifted his hand and peered down at the spinner. He knew he had timed it correctly, would have sworn that it was pointing at Kimberley’s name when it stopped, but there was no arguing with the result. The arrow had stopped dead on the line between the two names and would no longer move, fixed by an arcane power into the precise position where it had stopped.

‘But that’s impossible,’ he began. ‘I was certain... I was sure it was pointing at...’

Kimberley swayed and collapsed to the floor in a heap, the air around her boiling with heat haze as the spirit left her body and prepared to take its toll. There was a dull flash on the other side of the table as two figures appeared, a man and a woman, each of them baring a striking resemblance to the two children that had passed through Kimberley’s bedroom that afternoon on their way back from wherever they had been imprisoned. They looked back at Jake and smiled sadly, then looked away and refused to meet his gaze again. Taking each others hands they walked out of the dining room and left the house, closing the door quietly behind them as they made good their own escape. Somewhere out there they had children and a sister waiting for them and they would waste no time beginning to look for them. Their torment was at an end while Jake’s was only now beginning, but they spared him not a second glance and only the smallest measure of sympathy.

‘*Come now,*’ the spirit hissed, a fetid waft of warm air blowing over Jake and Kimberley as their captor spoke. ‘*The choir awaits your voices.*’

Dozens of tiny eyes watched as the man approached, his filthy hands filling the sky as he lifted the snowglobe and peered down on them. Their silent screams intensified as

he leered and smiled, running a sickly tongue over his broken teeth. Moments later they were plunged back into utter darkness as their cardboard prison wrapped itself around them like the unhinged jaws of a snake, drawing them inwards and sealing them within.

A moment later he was gone, taking Jake and his family with him to begin the long wait for the next year. Perhaps next year would be the last, but perhaps not. Perhaps the last year would never come. But still he hoped and he waited, humming along to the choir's tune as December drew near and he made his way back to the market to wait for his next customer. Maybe he should warn them this time, maybe they would understand and want to help, but he could not risk it. It was one in, one out, and one day maybe *they* would be the ones that got to go home. Until then he would watch and he would wait, and the wheel would keep on turning.

Perhaps, one day, that which was taken would be returned.