



“What is law is not always what is justice.”



PROLOGUE

"Come on up now, boys", called Karin Gueffroy, waving a tattered chequered dishcloth from the small balcony of their second-floor apartment.

Twelve-year old Chris, his older brother Stefan, and Christian Gaudian, a school friend of Chris', were playing noisily in the small woodland area, just in front of their 1950's-constructed, but long-neglected run-down apartment block, where the balcony overlooked. They reluctantly obeyed Karin's direction and slowly dragged their feet up the steps to the little two-bedroom apartment, still arguing bitterly about the outcome of their game. Voices echoing in the narrow communal stairwell.

"Mum will kill you with those grass stains on your knees." Said Stefan.

"I don't care, they will wash out for sure. But I definitely shot you before you even saw me." Countered Chris.

"You know I don't like shooting games." Karin interjected as the boys came within earshot.

As they climbed up the stairs and within sight, hauling themselves hand-over-hand up the banisters, she took one despairing look at the state of Chris' trousers and told him to go and change into his clean pair, but to say 'goodbye' to some family friends first.

"Where are they going, mum? Overseas?" Chris asked.

The normally softly-spoken Karin remained typically silent, and their guests instantly seemed to find their own shoe-laces tremendously fascinating, as they shuffled their feet. Two short questions from a child had embarrassed them, almost – but not quite – to the point of shame.

"But when's our turn?" Whined Chris. "We never go anywhere. Bet they're going to America, aren't they? Mum?"

He dragged the last word out, voice rising and falling as he sung it.

"Chris, we will talk about this later. Please be a good boy and say goodbye to your friends."

The guilty looks on the faces of his neighbours told Chris all he needed to know when they finally met his youthful peering gaze. He may only have been a kid, but he wasn't a dumb kid. The parents patted his head, ruffling his still-sweaty mop of dark, untidy hair in the way of all grown-ups and their daughter Rachel solemnly



shook hands with both Chris and Christian. Teenage Stefan was bolder and gave Rachel a quick innocent peck on the cheek.

"Thanks so much for everything, Karin, you've all been such great neighbours and we'll miss you a great deal. Anything we can't physically carry with us we're leaving behind so feel free to go and help yourselves, though I doubt the boys will want any of Rachel's old clothes, and I'm afraid the pantry is almost empty. Here's the key."

The long-divorced Karin was grateful. Living as a single parent was tough in these times. Raising two adolescent sons alone was never an easy ask. Given the current political and social climate, it was even more difficult.

"If you can make some money selling the furniture, or even if it only becomes kindling for a fire, help yourself to as much as you want and take it all with our full blessing."

Karin waved them and Christian farewell, as he made an excuse to return to his house too, sensing that there was trouble brewing at the Gueffroys. He'd return some other day. This current situation would blow over, but if you can take refuge in a storm, he reasoned, it was probably wise to do so.

"Not fair!" Blustered Chris, when it was just the three of them left in the small apartment.

"We never do anything fun, never go anywhere interesting."

His greatest dream was to one day go on a permanent holiday to America, but for more reasons than one, that was simply going to be impossible. They couldn't just up stakes and leave here and that was final. One day he'd be mature enough to realise and appreciate it, a point Karin was desperately trying to reinforce and press upon him now.

One day.

Not today.

"Why not? *They* are, and they live in the same place as we do. If they can go, so can I. I have everything decided for me. We. Have everything decided for all of us. Day in, day out. From birth to death. It's not fair."

Pouted Chris, arms petulantly folded, mouth dragged down at the corners to form an almost comical inverse 'U' shape.

"You're too young to understand what is involved." Said Karin.

"No I'm not." Chris' impending teenage rebellion begun to seethe, bubbling up but remaining contained just below the surface.



"Take it easy." Warned Stefan.

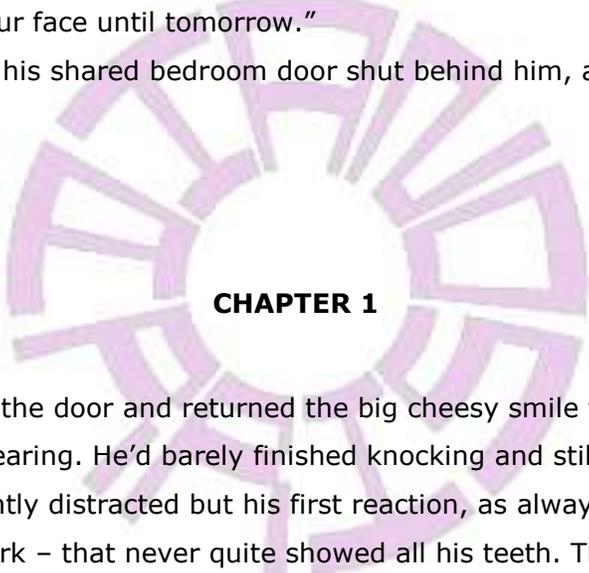
"No. Everyone always does the right thing." Chris exploded, breathing heavily.

"You're cowards! The both of you. So what if we leave our friends and our family behind. So what? We never see dad anyway. I barely even remember what he looks like. There's aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents we never hear from, and then our friends and neighbours vanish off the face of the earth or just up and leave and don't come back or send postcards or anything. I don't want to be forced to live like this anymore."

Karin's face was a thundercloud.

"Go to your room. This is my house and these are my rules. While you're living here, you are to abide by them. This topic is no longer open for discussion. I don't want to see your face until tomorrow."

Chris banged his shared bedroom door shut behind him, as hard as he could.



CHAPTER 1

Heidi opened the door and returned the big cheesy smile that her boyfriend Chris was already wearing. He'd barely finished knocking and still had a fist poised in mid-air. He was slightly distracted but his first reaction, as always, was that lopsided smile – almost a smirk – that never quite showed all his teeth. The sentiment behind it was true enough though.

"Come on in." She said.

Chris stepped over the threshold into her arms and kissed her. Holding her close, breathing in her exotic fragrant perfume and whispering in her ear,

"Perfume! Your mother is out tonight?"

"Mmm-hmm." Nodded Heidi into his shoulder. "She's at her sister's. She and my auntie will talk all night about nothing. We have the whole place to ourselves, such as it is."

"Perfect", Chris smiled.

They broke the embrace at length and Chris reached back around the front door to retrieve the bottle of red wine he'd left there. Heidi closed the door behind



him, then led him through to the spartan living room, where a table was already set for two. A single candle burned cheerily and classical music was playing quietly on the scratchy record player in the corner. From another room, flavours, delicious aromas came wafting in, permeating every corner of the room. Chris felt he had died and gone to olfactory heaven.

"Oh, honey, I said I would help you with things tonight. If not give you a hand with the cooking, set the table, something." Chris said, noticeably impressed with what she'd done with the décor. Heidi patted his chest and kissed him on the cheek.

"Sit. You've done so much over the past few weeks and you're not finished yet. You're always waiting on other people, so let me wait on you tonight. Tonight's going to be really special. Dinner's almost ready, and you're going to get one of my special massages later on. You could open up the wine and let it breathe for a few minutes, but other than that, just sit, relax and put your feet up. I'll take care of everything else."

He obeyed and she went back to the tiny kitchen, humming along with the music. It was a happy-sounding symphony, with a refrain he recognised. Without even noticing, he'd closed his eyes and was conducting an imaginary orchestra.

Asking a little more from the violins, and some restraint from the french horns, regaining composure very quickly on the one occasion the whole orchestra unexpectedly played the same bar twice. He pretended to turn the page of the score and shot a quick glare off-centre, to his left, at the concert-master, who must have been hiding somewhere on the makeshift dinner table, behind the pepper-grinder.

Carrying in the two entrées, Heidi laughed out loud at her maestro. Daydreaming. That was Chris all over. When you had his attention, those deep brown eyes of his would hold your gaze and he'd listen and respond attentively. Heidi appreciated the way that they could be out somewhere, yet amid all the hustle and bustle, he only had eyes and ears for her. But equally, Heidi loved it when he was like this – distracted, off-guard, natural. He'd make something of his life; be somebody some day. And she would be there, standing proudly alongside him. Not because there was nowhere else to go; simply because there was no other place she'd rather be.

Together with his life-long best friend Christian Gaudian, Chris had high hopes of the three of them forming a partnership with a view to opening a restaurant soon.

'Soon', of course, being a relative term. Christian was the brains, and would be the manager, the one diligently working behind the scenes. Chris, already a



waiter, would be the human face of the restaurant, leaving the day to day running, the hiring and firing, to Christian. That was fine by them both. As for Heidi, well, there wasn't *any* dish that she couldn't cook. On top of this, she had an excellent memory, could keep track of any number of recipes and dishes on the go at once, a talent she was exhibiting this evening.

Chris' memory was not bad, either. He would remember meals for a full table of eight – even if interrupted on his way back to the kitchen to deliver another order. He carried an order book and pen only out of courtesy. Had anyone insisted that he write the order down for them, he would of course oblige his diners, but usually he would just make a joke and say something along the lines of,

"The only thing I *can't* remember is the last time I needed to write the order down."

But, starting small was the key. They were all young and green, champing at the bit to get underway, yet each of them had the necessary patience to persist for the long haul. The difficult thing was to get things started. Take that first tentative step. And with no backers on the scene yet, and little capital, each and every financial decision would take careful consideration and planning.

Chris carefully replaced his air baton to the invisible music stand – well, he put the corkscrew back onto the table, and gave a deferential nod to his make-believe orchestra, though they played on just as well without him. He sat down and breathed in the watery vegetable soup. It was magnificent. Heidi was a great cook, had learned the requisite skills from her mother.

Under sufferance, he'd probably admit she got her good looks from her, too. Blonde and blue-eyed with a classic tall and slim European look, she was attentive in an old-fashioned way that he liked. Not that he was feeding her lines when he had come in, they were only young, hell, he wasn't even twenty-one yet, and she a year younger, but there was love and an unspoken bond.

He tasted the soup, and she was trying not to stare at him. Eyes half-closed, blowing on each spoonful to cool it, he was oblivious to her gaze. Heidi liked playing cards against Chris, he found it difficult to lie to her, even to bluff. His face said it long before his lips did.

"This is beautiful, Heids."

"And those juicy cuts of pork for main. I've been roasting it, with a little home-made apple sauce on the side. Gravy. Some mashed potatoes..."

"Wow, you've gone to so much trouble for our las-"



"Don't say it, Chris. It's not the last, it's just a special night." Heidi reached over, walked two fingers up his chest and pressed a finger to his lips. "Just you and I. No distractions, no intrusions."

"That's right. Tomorrow is another day, and the start of a new life."

"I still wish I could come along."

"Heids, we've talked this over already. It's too dangerous. Tomorrow is just Christian and I, testing the water. Things are changing here. Life has got to get better."

"Hey!" Heidi frowned, like a chastened schoolgirl.

"You know what I mean. Your mum has some nice stuff, sure it's expensive, but you won't believe what else is out there. And we'll be able to have access to it. Soon. Things are changing faster than either of us think. You'll see. It'll be fine. We'll make it."

"The odds are against it, Pumpkin."

"Can we not fight? Not tonight, please darling."

They finished their soup in silence, before Heidi rose to get the next course, taking Chris' scraped-clean bowl from him and kissing his other cheek.

She was singing along to the music again, always a good sign, thought Chris. He liked playing cards with Heidi, she always beat the pants off him – and not always in a figurative sense, but they could read each other. Little got her down but she didn't tend to let a matter drop until it had been talked through to her satisfaction.

"It's dangerous, you said so yourself just now, and, and... you know how I worry about you." Heidi called from the kitchen, as if that was the only way she could broach the subject again.

Her voice echoed slightly from amid the confined quarters. Even had she accepted Chris' assistance, the two of them would barely have squashed into such a cramped space. Crammed as it was, with kitchen utensils jostling for position amid an unruly clutter of kitsch.

Spice-bottles all designed to disguise the fact that almost every meal was comprised of the same basic staple ingredients. Three of the four hotplates causing pots to bubble away – fortunately she'd been able to take the soup off – only the three of them worked anyway.

Were any windows present in the kitchen, they would only have overlooked more uniform utilitarian apartment buildings stretching to the horizon on all sides,



but, as it was, the room too-easily filled with steam and Heidi used any excuse to try to dodge it.

"Dangerous? That's precisely why we – I – can't risk you until we know for sure that we can get in and out safely. It's not forever. Your turn if all goes well is next week. A plan is a plan but you only know how good it is once you put it into action. We've got to make sure we've dotted every 'j' and crossed every 'f'. Only then will I consider putting you in any kind of risk too." Explained Chris, tenderly.

At this, Heidi stuck her head back around the door from the kitchen.

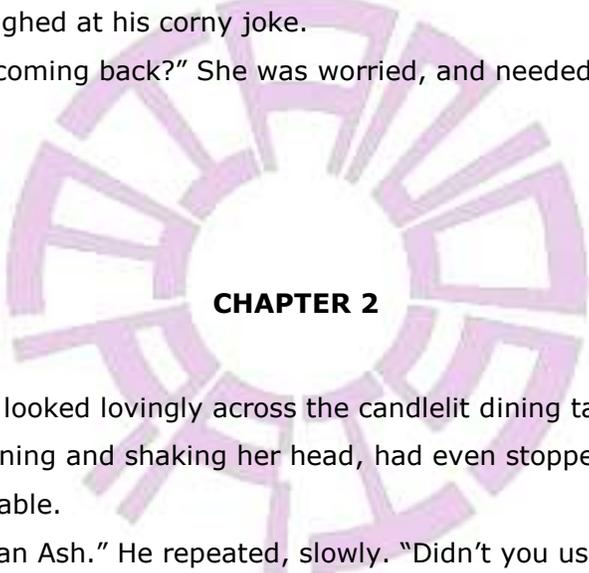
"Isn't that dotted 'i's" and 'crossed 't's'?" She asked.

"Yeah, same thing". Chris responded, scratching absently at some congealed wax that had dripped from the candle onto the home-made tatted lace doily beneath.

"We just have to make sure *it* is perfect."

They both laughed at his corny joke.

But, you *are* coming back?" She was worried, and needed the reassurance.



CHAPTER 2

Bevan Martin looked lovingly across the candlelit dining table, at his wife Sarah. She was frowning and shaking her head, had even stopped playing footsies with him under the table.

"Walter Lachlan Ash." He repeated, slowly. "Didn't you used to work with a guy named Walter Ash?"

"Don't know about the Lachlan, but, yeah. It was a long while ago, though."

"Didn't he move out this a-way?"

"I'm not quite sure where he wound up." Replied Sarah, puzzled. "Besides, it's not an uncommon name. Why, what's he done?"

"He died, from a mystery illness."

"Oh."

She made the universal sympathetic sound of someone exposed to bad news that doesn't relate directly to themselves.

"Mystery illness, my foot, not even thirty-five years old. Here we are in 'Frisco, where the women are women, and half of the men are, too. "



"Honey, stop. We're on our holidays." Laughed Sarah. "Can't you be a little less morbid than to read the obituary pages, and on our second wedding anniversary, too? Come on, let's get out of here and go for a walk, the sun will look beautiful, setting over the bridge and water."

She slapped at him, playfully.

Bevan readily agreed, closing and folding the 'San Francisco Tribune', giving it no more than a second thought, and they left their hotel room, hand in hand, to take an afternoon stroll.

The path was rockier than either expected, with boulders of all sizes making the going difficult. While they were able to see the Golden Gate Bridge at dusk, they were too late to reach there by the time the sun had set. Standing in the resulting shadows until night had fallen, they watched the traffic thin out on the bridge, before the evening rush set in.

Hunger, and not necessarily for food, drove them back toward the hotel, but, while scrambling over a boulder, Sarah briefly lost her balance. Windmilling her arms to regain her footing, she slipped and stepped heavily. Treading onto a discarded hypodermic syringe that had wedged, point up, between two rocks.

They were not to know that this otherwise scenic path was a favourite hangout for drug addicts once the sun and tourists vanished. Like the paper and plastic wrappers, aluminium cans, bottles and other rubbish, the occasional needle was left behind, half-buried, for someone else to deal with.

Despite the small, deep puncture wound, which had barely even bled, Bevan had at the time suggested the sensible thing. He'd quickly bundled Sarah and the needle into a taxi, and off to a local clinic. Within an hour, she had received a tetanus shot, from a doctor wearing a stethoscope and starched white lab coat over the top of a loud Hawaiian shirt.

California.

Bevan was half-expecting him to greet them with a cheery "What seems to be the problemo, dudes?"

The attire seemed casual, but his professional demeanour was not. He moved quickly, decisively, labelling the syringe and putting it to one side. Reassuring his worried patient and her troubled husband at every step.

"Of course this is just routine. We'll run all the blood tests to analyse the contents. Who can put a cost on peace of mind? But, don't worry. The probability of something like Hepatitis infecting you from an accidental needlestick injury like that



is less than 30% for Hepatitis B; and not even 10% for Hep C". He'd even used the abbreviation, to try to put them at ease.

"And, a much, *much* smaller risk that something worse could have survived in that syringe."

Dude.

He didn't mention what the 'something worse' was, but he didn't have to. The allusion was plain enough. He'd almost let them leave the office before reminding them for a third time that they should make time to see someone else once they'd finished having fun on their holidays and gotten back into 'normal mundanity'. Very professional once he had that crisp lab coat on, but, spying the bulky futuristic pager clipped to his belt, Bevan could not help but wonder whether it went off, not only during an emergency, but also every time the surf was up too.

Bevan and Sarah laughed about the surfer doctor with his sun-bleached hair long after the holiday. It was about the only positive thing there was to laugh about from that short break. While it wasn't possible to ascertain that anyone's other than Sarah's blood was in the syringe, caution and common sense still prevailed. After they had returned home from the holiday, Sarah went to see their normal family doctor straight away, and made another appointment for ten weeks' time.

CHAPTER 3

Beautiful, with thick strawberry-blonde curls framing her face tonight, Heidi was wearing a concerned expression, had a voice timbre to match, and that was endearing to be sure. 'Clingy' was the wrong word. They'd been together just over a year and they were a good match. The standard tiffs, to be sure, but it just made the bond between them stronger every time they cleared up a disagreement or clarified where they stood on a given subject. Heidi blinked a tiny tear away that had briefly and subconsciously formed in the corner of her eye, and retreated quickly back into the mental safety afforded her by the kitchen.

"Of course. We've discussed it and I've made Christian promise that it's the three of us doing this. In it together for the long haul. But neither of us can do it unless you're willing to believe in us. There's simply too much at stake. All our plans



revolve around the three of us. All of *my* future plans revolve around you and me. Believe in me, Heidi."

"Of course I believe in you."

"Cindi – you're my strength."

"I don't feel very strong."

"Well, *I* feel very hungry."

With a laugh and a flourish, she swept back into the lounge room alcove she'd set up, proudly carrying the two steaming plates. This house, well, apartment, had no formal dining room, and eating in the kitchen seemed too stiff, too formal, and would probably prove way too cramped to boot. This was meant to be a nice, romantic dinner. The last one they'd have in these drab surroundings if all went well.

They'd be classed as fugitives for a while and would have to live accordingly until the heat had died down. Chris knew full-well that any kind of long-term plan requires immediate changes to prepare for it. No matter how severe those changes were, if the rewards were great enough, any sacrifice necessary to be endured would be trifling in comparison.

On the other hand, if it all went badly, and Christian and Chris were caught – Heidi didn't want to think about it, and obviously Chris didn't either. It was the wrong thing to be talking about, or even considering tonight.

Into his third mouthful, though, it was obvious both had little else on their minds.

"We'll be fast. In, out and away. You know Christian. They won't even see us coming." Bragged Chris. "It's all sorted out, and we're itching and ready to go. Tomorrow."

"You have to promise me you'll come back in one piece."

"You know I'm not in the position where I can make that kind of promise, Cindi. That's just not fair. There are too many factors that are beyond my – beyond *our* control." Said Chris, and softened.

"Nothing in this life is guaranteed. You know that. I'm not prepared to risk you until we know it's safe."

"It won't ever be safe – properly safe, I mean." Heidi countered.

"Someone has to be the guinea pig."

"You won't risk me, but you're willing to risk Christian?"

"It's a plan that he and I came up with together, and, to be honest, he's done most of the sourcing for exact details and to get the tools we need. He knows the



schedules, guard movements and everything else. You wouldn't believe the depth of detail that he's gone to – he even researched and got his hands on radios, tide charts and even a wealth of information about the phases of the moon."

"Isn't that going to the extreme, even for him? You know, just a little?" Asked Heidi, frowning.

"It's all part of being adequately prepared." Quoted Chris, from *'The Gospel According to Gaudian'*.

No self-respecting would-be Christian should ever be caught without it.

"I wouldn't have got this far without him, and now we've got to do it, or die trying."

"Don't be melodramatic."

"You know what I mean. It will be like crossing the road, a walk in the park. In fact," Chris was almost daydreaming again. "That's all it is."

"A big, wide, dangerous road full of speeding trucks, with your names welded to the front bumper bars, doped-up homicidal lunatics laughing maniacally from behind the steering-wheel."

Heidi frowned, her normally crystal clear blue eyes clouding briefly from her concern for these two men she cared about so much.

"Crossing the street." Chris decided.

Two young men, stretching their legs. We're just out for an evening stroll if anyone accosts us. Christian could pass for a tradesman. He could bluff anyone and had the skills to get him out (or talk his way out) of just about any situation he found himself in. Chris could be an apprentice. That would explain away the tools. They were going to work, to answer an emergency call. People went that way all the time. There was nothing suspicious about two filthy dirty workmen, dressed completely head to toe in black, in that particular area, walking around late on a moonless Sunday night with backpacks and hands full of unusual heavy-duty tools.

He was having a difficult time convincing himself all of a sudden. No wonder Heidi was proving a hard nut to crack. Heidi looked back from his plate to her own. Neither had managed to finish their meals.

Trepidation had consumed their hunger.

"It's not you, honey, this food's great. Delicious. I should know. The head chef at my restaurant couldn't hold a candle to your skill. It's just, I've got..."



His flattery caused her to blush, pale skin glowing crimson on a face that rarely wore much make-up. Tonight was a subtle earthy lipstick and a touch of concealer on her just-beyond teenage skin.

“Other things on your mind. I know, Pumpkin.” Smiled Heidi.

She knew that he was exaggerating. Still, there was more than just a grain of truth in it. She truly was a fabulous cook and it would be a sound business decision to have Heidi Gorke, head chef; rather than Chris Gueffroy’s girlfriend, head chef. She’d more than do justice to being in complete control and having final say in the kitchen of any future restaurant he would take a share of, and attach a shingle to.

Heidi reached over and deftly undid the top button of his shirt. That was in her mind anyway. He caught her hand as she almost bumped the now-empty bottle of wine, and gently steered her draping sleeve away from the flickering candle, which had burned much lower now. Chris kissed her fingers and she giggled.

“I’m a bittle lit drunk.” Heidi smiled, then frowned briefly, trying to work out what she’d said.

“I think. Time for desert?”

Chris nodded, still holding her hand. He blew the candle out and led her by the hand from the lounge room to her bedroom, familiar with the route.

“The dishes can wait, and I believe that there was some talk of a massage?”

“A special, unmissable one, I promise you’ll never, ever forget.”

CHAPTER 4

Heidi awoke with a start, alone in her bed. The darkness was almost complete, distant streetlights and the tiny sliver of the all-but new moon shining weakly in through her window. A light breeze fluttering the tattered fading curtains. A dog barked in the distance, but it wasn’t that noise that had awoken her, no.

It was her subconscious streaming graphic images inside her mind. Scenes she couldn’t blink to shut out, or turn her gaze away from.

Without a bedside clock, she guessed it was about four in the morning, based on the position of the stars she could see in the sky.



"Rubbish." She thought. "I don't know *anyone* who can tell time by the stars. Except maybe Christian."

He knew some odd things. Christian Gaudian forever had his head in some sort of technical manual or was dismantling or reassembling some device. Motors, radios – whatever he could get his hands on, which wasn't much, admittedly. This didn't stop his voracious search for knowledge and fascination with all things technical. He'd pulled a doll apart she'd once treasured as a child – just to see how it worked, the 'mama' voice mesmerising him. Destroyed her precious childhood memories, for the sake of his insatiable curiosity.

Goosebumps running along her arms and remembering she was clad only in a very thin negligee made Heidi realise how cold – and alone – she was. The sun was still several hours away from rising. On the pillow beside her, rather than the man she was hoping to see, lay a lone red rose from him instead. The darling. He had a lot to do today, and she didn't think badly of him for not being there for her when she woke up. The rose would be as much an apology as a gift of love.

What was she dreaming again? The dream, and thankfully with it the frightened panicked gooseflesh were fading, but it was so vivid, that it as though she was an active yet unwilling participant in an action film.

Discovery, sirens wailing. A car backfiring – or was it a gunshot? Vicious, barking dogs. One of the massive Alsatians was chasing Christian through a muddy field, closing in with incredible speed. Why wasn't Christian running faster? Something seemed to be slowing him down, holding him back. The dog knocked him over with a well-timed leap into the small of his back, and Christian hit the deck, face-first, mud spraying out in all directions. One of the guards, puffing, ran up to the prostrate Christian, who was too frightened to move.

All three were exhaling steam from the exertion, like it were some bizarre rainy Turkish bath. Christian had to twist to keep the snarling dog's face mere inches from his own. Growling and ready to bite him, should he move a muscle. With the guards' still-smoking Kalashnikov AK-47 machine gun loaded, ready, and pointed at Christian's face for good measure.

Definitely not a car backfiring, then.

That's what had woken her up, and explained the beads of perspiration on her forehead. She was dreaming about Christian. Why? Tonight of all nights, she should have another man on her mind. It was a nice relaxed evening she'd spent with Chris. Privacy, good food, good company and good wine.



Especially the good company.

Heidi closed her eyes, picked up the rose and breathed in its gentle fragrance. It was happily easy for images of Chris to flood back into her mind, until she was almost drowning in her reminiscing.

Those boys.

The two of them were funny, though. So close they even shared the same initials.

Christian was into all things mechanical and electronic, while Chris was the dreamer of the two of them – indeed, of Chris and Heidi, he did enough dreaming for them both. Once he'd had his mind set on something, well, that would be that. He'd come up with the idea and together, he and Christian would make it work. His tenacity assured he rarely failed to see a dream through to fruition.

She'd known of him for years, a friend of a friend, neighbour of a friend, something like that. Neither could be sure of exactly how or where they had first actually met one another. Heidi would see Chris from time to time, here and there. They'd usually chat, small talk. Her aware that he wanted more than friendship, with her initially resisting. He pursued her until she was willingly worn down and kissed him out of the blue one day.

That was a little over a year ago. New years'. That was the night – and the mutual friends' party – where she'd gone to with some trepidation, expecting him to spend the whole night hovering over her, making a big fuss of her, embarrassing her with a lavish show of attention.

But he didn't.

He ignored her. The whole night, didn't say a word to Heidi. And worse than that, he didn't seem to suffer at all for it. He appeared to be having a great time, mingling and joking with everyone else. While she wasn't jealous – she didn't have anything to be jealous about – she could sense a potential opportunity slipping away from her. So she made the decision that in retrospect was easy.

A choice that she should have made much sooner.

As all eyes turned to the clock, unaware of its significance when the hands met, pointing straight up. It lazily struck twelve, while pandemonium ensued. No-one other than the clock saw Heidi walk up behind Chris, and tap him on the shoulder. He turned around to see her crystal clear blue eyes gazing deeply into his soul. In heels, she was the same height as him. Elegant party dress showing a hint of cleavage that she thought he could not help but notice.



To her chagrin, evidently not.

"Try to ignore this." Heidi had said. "Happy New Year."

Before he could respond, her arms were around his neck and she was kissing him gently. She had gone, not even one whole night without his caring attentiveness, and decided that it was better to be with him than without. In the background, everyone else was either likewise kissing each other or cheering, slapping one another on the back, welcoming in the new year, each in their own way. For such a public place and occasion, it was for Chris and Heidi, a nice private moment.

And the fond pet nicknames 'Pumpkin' and 'Cinderella' seemed entirely appropriate as she turned up right on the stroke of midnight. She'd never forget the first time he'd come around to her house, asking if 'Cindi' was home. Her furious mother had gone after him with a millet broom, and it took a lot of explaining and fast-talking, but had ultimately turned out well in the end.

But Chris loved the word 'freedom'.

I'm looking for freedom. Searching for it. Obsessed by it.

Pinned down to what freedom actually represented, he would still include the cost of planning a heart-breaking move away from his family and land of his birth, to settle in America.

Having Heidi by his side and a successful and busy restaurant to run.

These were challenges that no-one would want under compulsion. Now he was going to pull one of the more crazy stunts she'd heard of in order to even glimpse his concept of freedom. Worryingly, it was also another one of those 'all or nothing' capers.

It was mostly Christian's fault, if you wanted to appoint one of them as ringleader, mind you. The two of them, one as bad as the other, egging each other on. Filling each other's heads with mad ideas and crazy schemes for achieving them.

A restaurant?

She had no doubts whatsoever that Christian would make a good manager, Chris a fine Maitre d' and operator, and she could cook up a storm.

No, she could cook up a hurricane.

Endeavouring to put it all together with their combined lack of experience and capital, well, that was not going to be easy.

Not fair – why should Christian get into Chris' head?

"I'm his girlfriend, getting into his head is *my* job." Thought Heidi.



CHAPTER 5

Sarah Martin's second round of blood test results had come back. She was no addict, did not sleep around and her only vices now were limited to an occasional social cigarette or celebratory beverage or three. Sure, she had a history, back at university, *everyone* experimented. That was the exact reason for which the phrase 'rite of passage' was invented.

But Sarah considered herself to be a 'spiritual' person and did not share herself around. Marriage – just meeting her soulmate, Bevan – had settled her. Anyone who claimed to know her well would swear there was no way that she would cheat on her husband or participate in some of the activities that seemed to pre-empt the onset of this new disease – the 'something worse' the San Franciscan doctor had alluded to.

They'd learned enough in the last few months, however, to realise that being HIV positive was a pre-determinant for what was called 'full-blown AIDS'; neither could be cured, and treatments were more or less still in their experimental stages. They also tended to maintain or slow the patients' deteriorating health, rather than offer any cure or prevent the disease's terrible onslaught.

It was not sure how or when, or what factors determined when this transition from HIV to AIDS occurred but it happened in all cases. And in all cases diagnosed so far, this transition was ultimately untreatable and irreversible.

The link between HIV and AIDS had been established and one preceded the other, like a warning beacon. It promised to be the end to life as we knew it, and many of the clergy had gleefully jumped onto the bandwagon, with hack and respectable journalists alike, in hot pursuit.

'God's judgement against sexual deviancy, depravity or needle-sharing drug users.' Screamed the tabloid headlines, as if willing an awful and tragic epidemic to emerge. More infections meant more contrite sinners, repenting of their heinous sins.

More viewers, larger congregations, and higher collections. All in the name of healing by faith, and "there but for the grace of God go the rest of you – er, us".

Those who had contracted it were pariahs of society and often became reclusive, hermits. Rock Hudson was the most famous name yet to have died from complications stemming from this terrible disease, and people would furtively look around, before whispering to one another in hushed tones, brandishing limp wrists.



"He was after all, you know, a *homosexual*."

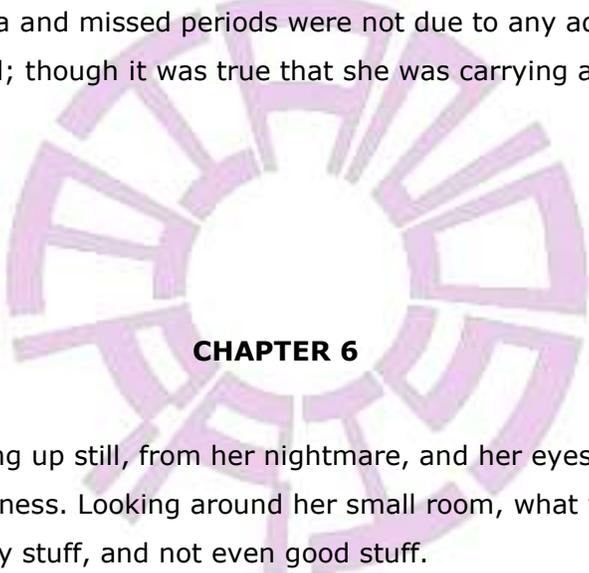
And since people – even experts in immunology and infectious disease – weren't sure about how it spread, even sharing a toilet seat was considered to be a great risk. Misinformation and paranoia, combined with wilful ignorance, always proved to be a natural catalyst to stir up fear.

Always had, always would.

Sarah and Bevan went home, relieved for now, that they had been given the negative.

For now.

Not meaning to be callous, their doctor reminded them they still needed to return in another three months. He also confirmed the results of a different test Sarah had done at home prior to heading out of the house. As she thought, the mood swings, nausea and missed periods were not due to any additional disease she may have contracted; though it was true that she was carrying a foreign body in her system.



CHAPTER 6

She was sitting up still, from her nightmare, and her eyes had slowly begun to adjust to the darkness. Looking around her small room, what would be missed? Anything? It was only stuff, and not even good stuff.

Whenever Heidi complained about queuing up for anything, the cold in winter with no heating, or how little they had, her mother would reluctantly talk about the old days. Never once referring to them as "the good old days"; just time that had gone by and was now better left unremembered.

Of the literal war stories.

People 'fleeing for their lives with only the clothes on their backs'. To Heidi, it somehow didn't feel like that. Anyone mentioned in stories like these – in particular, the heroes – were famous people, or remarkable people who'd overcome some amazing odds against them. They were people like Chris. People like Christian. The dreamers, the thinkers and the people who plain got the job done, no matter what it took. People with charisma, and character. Memorable.



Larger than life.

Not anyone like *me*.

"Heidi Gorke? Who would ever read *my* story in a book?"

Freedom fighters always had networks of people, with cool secretive nicknames. She knew all of Chris' friends. But Christian... he seemed to always have more going on than he was willing to admit to. He had strange tastes and stranger friends he'd associate himself with. Christian would be liable to go missing, often for weeks at a stretch. Chris wouldn't mention him then all of a sudden she'd hardly see Chris because he'd be off somewhere with Christian at every possible opportunity, camping or fishing, or both. Off on yet another 'boys-only' expedition.

Were Christian a woman, she'd be worried for sure. Christian would probably have been jealous of her in turn anyway, but the naturally easy-going Chris Gueffroy made friends easily, and the three of them had great laughs together. But the spectre of tomorrow night still clung to them, like slimy moss growing on a damp rock.

Why were things so difficult? How could we make just living every day that little bit easier? Those were the two questions they'd asked themselves to come up with what was the basis and skeleton of their final plan. Every conceivable obstacle – why it was a barrier; how to get over, under, around or through it. Even to avoid it if possible.

What they were planning was still illegal and if anyone spotted them on their way out, before they'd even begun the operation, there would be no doubt that they were up to no good. It would be a hard sell to convince people they were tradesmen. They would give the impression of being shifty from the get-go. No matter how silly the laws seemed. The culture being what it was, people would be more inclined to thwart and report the young men or ignore them and leave them to their fate rather than assist them. Even if they were in imminent physical danger.

Especially if they were in imminent physical danger.

"We start off looking down the barrel of a gun – before we even set out."

Thought Heidi. "And things only get worse from there."

"And Chris was going to do it twice? For me? Forget it. I can't make him do it twice. *Twice*? I don't want him to do this at all – I can't and I won't force him to make the second run just for me. It would be like breaking into the Louvre, stealing the Mona Lisa, getting away to safety, then deciding to return for the Venus de Milo with the unsmiling, unimpressed Lisa still tucked underneath one arm."



She wondered what a psychologist would say about her thought processes. She'd just exhibited a great deal of preoccupation with arms; had compared Christian with the Mona Lisa and herself with the Venus de Milo.

And "I'm reasonably tall, blonde and get my fair share of appreciative stares and compliments from men. Why not?" She thought.

"Fair enough call for this ungodly hour of the morning. Now, where was I? I will go with them this time *so that* he doesn't have to come back for me. Who cares if he thinks I'm being irrational? I don't. I will not abandon him to his fate. I may be considered a liability in their plan; it's up to me to prove I won't be."

She thought of the following day, her subconscious mind telling her what she had to do. In the morning, she'd call Chris, then go over to Christian's house to try to reason with them to get them to take her along. They were going to cause some obvious property damage; they were crazy to think that pulling the same stunt twice in seven days wouldn't be fraught with danger – or more correctly, bordering on the suicidal. One riskier attempt was much better than two.

No matter what they'd try to have her believe, she was better off coming along with them the first time around. Taking the risk all at once. Then, by the time the damage was discovered, they'd be long gone. She'd keep talking until she convinced them both.

And with mind made up, Heidi fell back to sleep and dreamed. Of the future. Of life with Chris and proper holidays. Living like the princess of her nickname.

Overseas.

With her Prince Charming and without curfews. No-one her age went overseas where she was from. She didn't know anyone who had been on a plane on a vacation.

Hardly anyone went on a plane *or* a vacation. Nobody planned anything and nobody went anywhere or did anything. No-one talked about something so exciting that it would make your pulse race – or stick in your subconscious brain to wake you sweating in terror in the middle of the night.

No-one did anything?

After tomorrow – today, now – people would talk about the three of them and remember them. Remember me. Recall my name, Heidi Gorke.

She rolled over in her sleep, one hand falling, to rest on the thornless stem of Chris' rose. A smile came to her lips and she dreamed.



CHAPTER 7

"He's gone out already, I'm afraid. You haven't actually missed him by all that long at all."

Christian's mother, Anna Gaudian, said as she answered the door to Chris. Stretching out to see if her son was still within sight. The frail, older woman coughing as soon as the slight breeze blowing through the corridor hit her. Chris smiled at her benevolently and enquired about her health.

"Made it through the worst of the winter. Mind you, I'm always unwell when it rains and it'll definitely rain tonight. You can smell it in the air. It'll probably come down in buckets."

She hacked again, a great bout of phlegmy coughing, making her small frame shake, as if in anticipation that the impending cold weather would make her feel even worse.

"I hope not." Replied Chris, absently.

Surely Christian would have prepared a poor-weather plan. It was February. It always rained; hell, it sometimes still even snowed in February. It was the worst month, weather-wise all year. No matter. Chris knew where Christian would be given he wasn't home. His plans were always meticulously detailed and researched. It could rain a plague of frogs of Biblical proportions and Christian would probably have some kind of contingency plan against it. A legion of French chefs, armed with baguettes and bread-knives, packing garlic butter and snails as backup. Or something.

"You boys are always up to something, aren't you?"

"Oh, the backpack? We're sourcing materials and possibly a site for our restaurant", replied Chris, truthfully. Well, half-truthfully, anyway.

"We have a few meetings in the next few days to set things up. As a matter of fact, I think Christian must have already gone to his friend Gunter's house. I thought I was meeting him here this morning, but we must be there instead. I'm five minutes later than I said I'd be here and he told me to keep going if I missed him. Christian gave me Gunter's address, just in case. See you later." Chris gestured with a thumb, somewhere behind him, and over his shoulder.



Anna Gaudian closed and re-locked the door and a shiver ran down her spine that was not related to her chronic and on-going poor health. Short, squat and olive-skinned, she was Hungarian-born and claimed to anyone that would listen that she had gypsy blood in her. She saw death in that young man's eyes.

Chris, of course, did not feel a thing except anticipation. Any shivers he was experiencing were from sheer, unbridled excitement. As he walked to the old, foreboding drab apartment block where Gunter lived, he noticed the way it contrasted with the delight and defiance exhibited by the trees. They seemed overjoyed to be sharing the same earth with these concrete monstrosities.

If you judged seasons purely by the inexorable march of the calendar, spring had sprung and the crisp air made Chris' breath visible. He was happy in a nervous way and he stepped up the pace, jumping and swinging a hand at a low branch. He tore off a new green leaf and laughed in glee, backpack swaying from side to side as he ran.

Christian was sitting on a low wooden paling fence outside Gunter's run-down apartment block, smoking a cigarette. Muddy boots and tattered jeans, with a well-worn t-shirt of a rock band peeking out from beneath his half-zipped battered black leather jacket. Another band Chris had heard Christian raving about their latest release but he couldn't immediately place any of their songs.

Messy, unwashed collar-length black hair, unshaven chin cupped in one hand; five o'clock shadow that always seemed closer to bedtime, and that he never seemed to shave completely clean. Christian never seemed to pay too much attention to his appearance. He had a faraway stare in his brooding dark eyes, the kind that male models seem to universally adopt, though it was a natural look for Christian.

This was probably the most familiar of poses one would find Christian in. He smoked a lot, thought a lot and generally did both simultaneously. Chris walked between the hazy morning sun, struggling to penetrate the clouds, and Christian, so that the shadow fell across his face.

"Look!" Chris enthused. "Shadows. Sun. Tonight will be clear!"

"Tonight will bucket down." Deadpanned Christian, glancing at his watch with a frown. "At least you're *here* on time."

"Spoilsport." Said Chris.

Christian waved the comment away with a shrug, adding, "Don't worry, that's all fine – we can cope with rain. And we're still running to time. It doesn't change the plan one iota."



"How about we go over the plan again?"

Christian gestured to the half-finished cigarette in his hand.

"Let me finish this off, and we'll go inside. Walls have ears, you know." He waved vaguely into the ether.

He had a level of paranoia that was probably suitable for the task they were to embark on. Christian dragged slowly on the cigarette, as though it were an aqualung and he, a dozen fathoms underwater. Finally, to Chris' relief, he flicked the dying butt into the street and the two ventured up to the fourth floor to visit Gunter, a man who would apparently help them.

Christian knocked on the door to apartment seven, loudly, once.

"A secret knock? Doesn't seem that secret to me." Said Chris, an eyebrow arched.

"How often do you knock on a door with precisely one knock?" Asked Christian.

As Chris was trying to ponder this, he heard a heavy metallic *thunk*, and a security chain rattling on the other side of the fortified-looking door with numerous keyholes. As it opened a crack, Chris was surprised to find himself eyeballing the slim barrel of a pistol pushed through the narrow resultant gap. The fish-eye peep-hole lens mounted in the middle of the door obviously did not reveal all. Trying to make out the figure within, all Chris was able to see, was a thumb pulling the hammer back on the gun.

The sound alone froze him to the spot.